

## AN AMERICAN ICON: UTAH'S RED ROCK CANYONLANDS

Please join me briefly in prayer.

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you; please bless us as we consider today: body and soul; nature and humanity; spirit and action. Amen.

Today's reading from Acts (4:32-35) focuses on what we hold in common.

We often think of this passage as an anachronism – something that is largely a relic of the church's, and of human cultures', past.

As our topic today illustrates, this view is not accurate. America's public lands are held in common by all American's.

It's a misconception that the federal government owns these lands. It does not. The legal title holder to America's public lands are the citizens. We own them all – an equal share in 29% of our nation's land area – from the northwest corner of Alaska to the Everglades at the southern tip of Florida.

I bet you didn't know you owned so much land. The sharing of that ownership bespeaks a fundamental value expressed in today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles.

It is a portion of that common heritage – the red rock canyonlands of southern Utah – that I have come to speak to you about today. To start with I'd like to tell a small personal story.

Thirteen years ago my wife and I were hiking up a canyon just south of Arches National Park. "Negro Bill Canyon" -- named after the first non-Native American resident of the Moab, Utah area. The canyon is unusual in that area because it has a small perennial stream running in it – a tributary of the Colorado River.

It was a hot July afternoon. I had our eleven-month-old son, Luke, in a carrier on my back. The scenery was beautiful: a canyon the width of a football field, with red sandstone walls towering above us on both sides and

a small stream running through it. If you go all the way to the end you come to an Arch, but we didn't get that far.

We'd been walking a couple of hours when the stream curved back to the canyon wall and carved a small amphitheater into the side. It was quite inviting, for its beauty, but to me, mostly for its shade. I decided it was time to rest. So we walked underneath the rock to the sand next to the stream.

I took the carrier off my back, set it in the sand, lifted Luke out; stood him up... and Luke took some of his first steps, right there, in that spot.

It's a memory that I treasure. I have been fortunate enough to accumulate a list. I bet most of you worshipping here today have a memory similar that you treasure. An experience in a natural place that you've shared with your family, or friends, or maybe alone with God.

If we don't save those places, we don't have those memories.

Wilderness, is a family value.

Wilderness is also a spiritual value.

Several of today's scripture readings are from the books of John in the New Testament. I'd like to raise today another quote from John's Gospel. It's a famous one: John 3:16

“For God so loved the world that he gave us his only son...”

Note it does not say, “For God so loved Clayton” – though I'm sure he does – or that “For God so loved you” – though I'm sure he does – or that “God so loved people” – though I'm sure he does.

It says, “For God so loved the world”.

That suggests, more than suggests, that our personal and collective salvation is bound up together with the salvation of the planet.

It is no accident then that the central epiphanies, the core religious experiences of nearly all the world's pre-eminent religious figures occurred in the wilderness.

For Buddha it was under a tree in the foothills of the Himalayas.

For Mohammed it was in a desert cave near what we now call Mecca.

For Moses it was a burning bush in the desert of the Sinai wilderness.

Jesus was baptized in the wilderness of the River Jordan.

His transfiguration occurred in the wilderness atop a mountain.

What did Jesus do to prepare for his ministry after he was baptized?

He went backpacking for 40 days and nights in the wilderness.

Clearly, wilderness lies at the heart of the spiritual life of the human species.

To demonstrate how this fact of life has a direct impact on my action request for you this morning I'd like to refer us all back to the beginning – the second creation story in the book of Genesis – the story of the Garden of Eden where we find these words:

The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die’”.

Here we have one of the central stories of the Judeo-Christian heritage from whence we get the Christian traditions of “The Fall” and “Original Sin”. What is the original sin in this story – the sin that is so profound and repeated so often throughout history that it leads to the Fall of the entire human species?

The original sin is the failure to leave a part of nature alone to exist in its own right without being subject to human consumption. The original sin is the failure to recognize that as humans we are dependent upon God and God's creation for our own existence.

In the United States of America we are blessed with a heritage of public lands which we all hold in common. We are also blessed with a law, the Wilderness Act, which enables American citizens, through our elected

representatives, to set aside portions of our land as places where we can leave “a part of nature alone to exist in its own right” – a place where we do not eat of the fruit.

My request of you today is that you help make Utah’s red rock canyonlands one of those places. That you go to the back of the church after Mass today and pick up two pieces of paper.

The yellow one describes “America’s Red Rock Wilderness Act” and is stapled with a piece of paper telling you how to contact Senator Klobuchar and your Representative to ask them to co-sponsor this legislation.

The green one is a volunteer sheet. I ask that you consider staying involved by providing your name and your email address and some other contact information. Fill it out and leave it on the table in the back and you will receive periodic emails providing updates and information on other small ways you can be of help. You might also consider and check off some of the other options on that sheet for how you can help in this effort.

I will be in touch.

Thank you for listening and please keep the red rock canyonlands of southern Utah in your prayers.