



Faith and the Land: Conversations about Spirituality and Wilderness

January 18, 2009
Community of Grace
Presbyterian Church

Introduction

On January 18, 2009 about two dozen members of Community of Grace Presbyterian Church gathered together to share their perspectives about why Utah's wild places are important to them spiritually, and to talk about how the teachings and traditions of the Presbyterian Church call on us to care take the natural world.

This morning of dialogue was part of an exciting new effort sponsored by the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA) to create an interfaith statement about the importance of wilderness preservation to Utahns of all faith traditions. As a first step in that process, SUWA is convening conversations between members of different faith communities. Later, SUWA will bring people together across faith traditions to craft a compelling statement that weaves together the reflections, perspectives and ideas captured in these conversations.



The "Faith and the Land" initiative is based on the belief that Utahns from all religious traditions, as well as Utahns from no particular faith tradition, value Utah's wild lands as places of spiritual inspiration, connection, renewal and solace. It is also based on the belief that coming together to share what is important to us individually and collectively will reveal collective wisdom that can help guide the wild lands we love.

Below are highlights of the conversation:

How are Utah's wild places important to you spiritually?

> Wilderness keeps me in awe of God's greatness.



> I worked as a camp counselor in college, and on my one day off a week I would walk down five miles of dirt road to meet my boyfriend. It was so beautiful and quiet walking through the woods that I would just break into hymns: "How great Thou art!"

> When I was fifteen, I went down to Mesa Verde National Park for the first time. For me, it was this very spiritual place. I just felt this awesome sense of God's presence all around me.

> I went hiking recently in the Narrows of Zion National Park. You pass through this narrow canyon with 1000 foot walls on either side and see this amazing diversity of plant life. Although you are in the desert, there are pine trees growing along the rim of the canyon, and ferns sprouting from the canyon walls. It just made me think of the power that created all this.

> My first time at the Grand Canyon humbled me and reminded me of God's creation and majesty. I thought, "How is this possible without God?" It made me wonder and think about the mystery of creation.

> When I am in wild places, I feel the profound love of God.

> When I go camping in the wilderness and lie on my back looking up at the stars, I am reminded so clearly – I am living on this enormous amazing earth that is traveling through the universe and it is not me who made all this. It was all made by the grace of God.

> I moved to Utah when I was in junior high but later left for 14 years to go to college and work. I was always missing the mountains. Now I will just be driving home, and there will be an amazing sunset and I will get this feeling of being really close to God.

> Wilderness always offers surprises that open my eyes to the wonder of creation. Once I was out backpacking with my husband and we stopped to rest for a while, sitting on the ground and leaning back against this big log. We were sitting there in silence when suddenly a deer came bounding right over us!

> Spending time in wilderness can bring out our spirituality, even when we didn't consider ourselves spiritual before!

> For some people, wilderness is the primary place where they experience a sense of spirituality in their life.

> When our children were young, our family would go to visit the ancient ruins in Nine Mile Canyon. We would look at the petroglyphs and think about the old civilizations that once lived there. We were all by ourselves. It was a peaceful place. It seemed as though I could feel the ancient Native American spirit.

> There is something about the scale of wilderness that puts me in touch with my spirituality. Usually, our perspectives are so small. But I can go hiking and arrive at these vistas that are so vast. It reminds me that we exist in just a nanosecond of time. Yet, I am there! The fact that I am there and have the ability to experience the majesty of what is around me reminds me that I am part of that majesty.



> The vastness of the wild wilderness gives me a perspective on the magnificence of God. It reminds me how majestic and wonderful our earth is. It reminds me that everything is related and connected.

> Time in wilderness gives us a sense of where we are in creation -- especially when we see something like the Milky Way.



> Spending time in wild places keeps us humble before God.

> When I look at the mountains, I feel so small. They have been there for years and years and years. It gives me a different perspective from my day to day view of things. It gives me an appreciation of the power of God.

> When I go alone into wilderness, when I am out by myself, the world seems so much bigger and other matters not so big.

> I have experienced the most humbling experiences in my life in wilderness. I have had to give up control, to realize that Mother Nature or God is really in control. Without those experiences, I might think that I can overcome anything with my own intelligence and the use of technology. I might not have the mindset that it is not ok to build over nature.

> Wilderness grounds us in the present, not in our memories of the past or imaginings about the future. This gives us peace, inspiration, nourishment.

> Wilderness opens us up to commune with God. Being in wilderness starts the conversation with the Divine.

> One of the gifts of wilderness is the immense quiet that is there. The silence can make the buzz in your head go away.

> It is so quiet in wild places. Nothing interrupts your thoughts. I find myself more attuned to listen to God.



> For me, wilderness is a place that is devoid of manmade stuff. It is easier for me to remember there that everything I am looking at is God's creation. In those moments, it strikes me so clearly – this is truly God's creation, and I am part of it. And I find myself enjoying a dialogue with God.

> I find that in wilderness, I lose my usual sense of identity. Normally, people come along all day and say, Hi, how are you? But in wild places, you get away from all that. You are free to discover attributes about yourself that are more important. Or to just rest in the knowledge that I am part of all this – part of God's creation.

> Wilderness is the great equalizer. It is my experience, that when people we go into the wilderness, their preconceptions and prejudices often melt away. They discover that fundamentally people are people. They discover that at the core we are all the same.

> A huge part of spirituality is surrendering one's self to a higher power. Wilderness opens us to that experience. It reminds us that we are not in control, that we are at the mercy of nature and of God. It is a place where we let go and relinquish control to God.

> Wilderness often presents difficult challenges that we don't face in our citified lives. We are reminded that we are not in control, that we are at the mercy of nature and God.

> When I go camping in the wilderness, I carry everything I need on my back. It makes me strip down to my most basic needs and reminds me how little I really need. It makes me realize my strength is in God.

> Wilderness provides lessons in gratitude. I take my boys out backpacking where we carry just the basics on our backs. It makes all of us appreciate what we have, and to realize what we really need.

> I think about my blessings, and I am grateful that I can experience the wild lands of Utah.

> We took a horseback ride down to Calf Creek Falls. It was so quiet. There's no greater peace than being in a wild place by yourself and your friends. We sat our chairs in the stream and soaked it all up. I try to find a balance and be a part of nature the best that I can.

> The wilderness makes me aware of my responsibility to the Earth's spirit.

> I'm noticing that many of the words we use when talking about our experiences in wilderness – immense, beautiful, powerful, uncertainty, mystery, awe, trust – are words we might use to describe our experience of God.

> I sometimes think of the people who never have the chance to get out into wilderness – people who live in places like Gaza, or New York City. And I think they are missing a huge piece of spirituality.



How do the teachings and traditions of the Presbyterian Church call on us to care take the natural world, including our wild land heritage?



> As Presbyterians, we are called to honor all of God's creation, to act with love in response to all parts of creation.

> As Presbyterians we are taught that our lives are a gift, and we must honor our gifts. We must teach our children to be good citizens and to be generous through service to our fellow citizens.

> Presbyterians believe that the earth and all that is in it is the Lord's. And that we have a responsibility to exercise stewardship over creation.

> I think of Ecclesiastes 1.4: One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh, but the earth abideth for ever. To me, this means we have a responsibility to care for the earth and all its creatures.

> A fundamental call for environmental stewardship within the Presbyterian tradition arises from the two main commandments: Love God and love thy neighbor. Creation comes from God so to love God one must care for creation. Loving your neighbor means acting in ways that care not only for people who are alive today, but also people who will be alive in the future. And that requires care taking the earth.

> Presbyterians take an expansive view of stewardship. We believe that it means more than doing good for other people. We also believe it means taking care of God's natural gifts to us.

> In the creation story, we are taught that man was given dominion over creation and all the creatures of the earth. That means we must be the care-takers of this wonderful gift that God gave us.



> The relationship of love that God has with us -- and all creation -- calls on us to love and honor and respect every component of creation. We need to use part of creation to nourish ourselves, but we need to remember to honor all the parts. That means being respectful, remembering that we are not more important than other parts of creation. It means not taking more than our share, not over-consuming. We are called on to be conscientious, mindful of how we treat and use other parts of creation.

> For me, the Presbyterian view of environmental responsibility is summed up in that famous sentence: We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children.

> The commandment “Love thy neighbor” does not just mean those who are here now. It also calls on us to think ahead to our grandkids and their grandkids.

> I was a Presbyterian for three years before I ever heard anyone mention our responsibility toward protecting the environment. I think Christian churches have missed the boat on this issue. Christian churches have been great leaders in social movements, but they have not have not shown much leadership on environmental matters. I’ve been puzzled why this is true.

> Respect is a concept that I hear Jewish people refer to a lot. They perform certain practices, wear a hat or whatever, out of respect for God’s presence. I think Christians need to adopt this concept more – that to be a good Christian, we need to show respect for God’s work, including nature. That would be a good lesson for us.

> I feel as though we some times forget about our responsibilities as Christians. It helps to have each other to remind us of our responsibilities.



> The church gives me a sense of community, so I want to support local businesses which can lead to lower energy costs and better protection of our environment.

> The congregation teaches each other and shares perspectives on ways to be good stewards of the earth. We let each other know the best ways to recycle and be environmentally minded. The church puts up subtle little reminders about recycling and efficiency.

> Being at church helps me to be mindful of how wasteful our

modern lives and conveniences have become. We are a throw-away society. When I am in church I think about how to find a balance between our modern conveniences and being respectful to our planet.

>When Presbyterians ordain someone, that person is asked to make a promise -- to use energy, intelligence, imagination and love in their leadership. This is a directive to be mindful, to think of the longer term consequences of our actions. To not just look at today, but to consider how our actions will affect others and the earth over time. At its core, this is a call for environmental stewardship.

> From: “What is stewardship, Presbyterian Beliefs, 1999 Witherspoon Press, Ministry of the General Assembly Council, Congregational Ministries Division, Presbyterian Church:”

Presbyterians, with other Christians, believe that we and the world in which we live were created by God and belong to God. . . We also believe that God gave human beings the responsibility to care for this wonderful creation. As stewards, we remember that this world is God's gift for us but is not ours to abuse or destroy.

Presbyterians believe stewardship is caring for *all* of God's creation every day. . . We are believe good stewardship means moving beyond ourselves and out immediate families to the wider communities to which we belong – from our church community to our cities, our nation and the world. . Good stewardship of God's world requires us to take an active role in caring not only for the earth's resources but also participating in the political process.

Presbyterians believe that all we have – our families, the earth, and all its resources – is a gift from God. Psalm 24:1 tell us that “the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.” We take seriously our assigned role as stewards of God's creation. When we lovingly treat the earth as a creature, and each other and all earth's creatures as part of God's family, we demonstrate both our love for God and God's limitless love for each of us.

A word or phrase that reflects what you are taking away from this evening



Community.
Collaboration.
Sharing.

Solidarity.
Unity.
Grateful that wilderness and our appreciation of it can bring us together.

Mutual appreciation for the joy we all share in wilderness.
Gratitude and humility.
Rededication.

Respect.
Accountability.
Education.
Responsibility.

Groundedness.
Inspiration.
Hope.
Optimism.

Vision.
Joy.
Comfort in knowing I'm not the only person who feels this way.