



Faith and the Land: Conversations about Spirituality and Wilderness

June 29, 2008
Saint Mark's Cathedral
Episcopal Church

Introduction

On June 29, 2008, approximately 35 members of Saint Mark's Cathedral gathered together after Sunday morning worship 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 Episcopal Church call on us to care take the natural world.

The 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 is an expression of the divine.

> Being in wild places fills me with a sense of the "beingness" that I believe is God.

> The spirit of God is everywhere. But I feel closer to it when I am outside.

> The first time I felt the presence of God was in nature. I was traveling through Glacier National Park on a bus tour, and we stopped on the side of the road. I walked away from

the group and just followed this little stream up the mountain side a bit. There were beautiful wild flowers all around. And then I had this experience. For the first time in my life, I just felt

God was there. I had grown up in a church, but I had never had this experience before. Eventually I walked back to the bus and there were my friends, standing around chatting with each other. I was in a completely different place. What had happened had such an impact on me, but I couldn't even begin to explain it. Now, every time I am in nature I can relive that moment. When I go to the mountains or to the red rock, I can always relate back to that experience. It was a conversion, a renewal.

> When I look at the orchid or the moon I think "Who could look at that and not believe in one greater than oneself?"

> God communicates through the beauty of nature.

> I feel a connection to God when I'm with other people. But it really hits me when I am by myself in the outdoors.

> I very much experience going to church and going out in nature in the same way. They are places where I can recover and reconnect with what is best in me.



> What I find in wilderness is a presence of the Divine. I guess since I was a little girl, I've believed not that the tree was God, but a way to reach God.

> I remember a time when we went to the desert in the spring. It was one of those years when everything was just exactly right, such a beautiful desert bloom. For me, it was the hand of God -- with his paintbrush.

> I feel my spirituality in the desert. It is where I feel most connected. I can be on top of a mountain and say this is where God is. I can be in the desert and say this is where God is.

> For me, this is kind of a heaven, the mountains here. For me, it is where God is in many ways.

> Where I grew up, wilderness was fields and swamps. There was an open-ness in these places, like the openness of the ocean. For me, going down into the swamp was a primitive experience of the divine. The swamp was a place away from people, a place where I could go deep.

> I took a trip to Flaming Gorge. All around me it was red – red cliffs, red rocks, red sand. I said, "I am going out on my deck." And I took my camp chair and sat it on this rock. My friends came over and wanted to chat. And I said, "I just want to be alone in this amazing place." I felt I had died and gone to heaven. Nature is God's art.

> I love it when I go camping in wilderness. I don't have a frig or a stove. I wash dishes in the same pot I cooked my dinner in. I let go of all the business, and live in simplicity. There's something about that experience of simplicity that makes God so much closer.

> Wilderness invites simplicity. When I am in the outdoors, I leave business and noise behind. I can hear other voices. I can hear God's voice more easily.

> Sometimes we have to go into the wilderness to hear our thoughts.

> One of the things that I value most about wild places is that it is so silent you can hear your own internal existence. And you can be alone in that creation. Silence and solitude – these are important things you can't find in other places.



> For eons people who are on a spiritual journey have gone into the wilderness, into the out of doors, and that's where they find their connection to the Divine. Just think of Jesus – he began his adult life by spending 40 days in the wilderness. Wilderness provides the space we need to gain clarity.

> In wild places, we are made aware of how we are both insignificant and significant.

> When I am in the wilds, I feel so vulnerable, so insignificant. But what's surprising is – that those feelings are freeing.



> I want to speak about the importance of the "unsafe" nature of wilderness. I think our spiritual journey shouldn't always be safe. It is important to have places that are not safe. Wilderness provides that.

> I was lost in the wilderness overnight once, and what I found is that I am very strong.

> I always find that I feel safest in wilderness.

> It is human nature to try and control and fix everything. Part of being in wilderness is being in a place where

there's nothing for us to do. This is part of our spiritual growth. We are of God, but not God. Relinquishing control — that's part of spiritual growth.

> Wilderness teaches us agape, not eros. Loving something for itself not for how it serves you.

> My spirituality is defined by moving in the outdoors. Some people pray, some meditate, some go to church. I walk in the outdoors. It is my place of spirituality.

> Every Sunday morning I go walking with my dog. I work in a cube all week and being outside regenerates me. My life is about being outside. I'm not much about ceremony. There's so much beauty and wonder in nature.

> When I go hiking by myself I feel this connection to God.

> We tend to talk about the beauty of wilderness as something we experience in vast open spaces. But wilderness also exists in little bits and that we can find in our backyards. Just touching a flower or identifying a seed can help you feel connected to creation.

> I had an opportunity to do yoga outside today. More than yoga, *it was the feeling of the wind* that felt spiritual.

> People who are looking for God often find him in the wilderness.

> I spent many years in meditation and prayer seeking my place in the world of religion. But the clearest manifestation of the divine for me is in the beauty of the natural world.

> I left organized religion when I was young, but I was always a religious person. So when I went to the ocean, or walked through the forest, it was my church. For me, these wild places



provided the easiest place to speak to God.

> For many of us, wilderness provides a substitute to church. That's one reason it is important to stop development and reclaim wild places where possible.

> We need to preserve wilderness because it reminds us of our part in the whole of creation.

> Once I took a trip where I walked deep into wild country. I felt like there was no one else around for 100 miles. It was like being in another world. It was amazing.

> The land is not ours. It is God's. It is not ours.

> Listening to everyone's stories, I realize that for many people the roots of their spirituality lie in an experience of nature as a child. Very early in life, they had an experience – perhaps by a stream or with a tree – that they would only later call “spiritual.” But this moment in nature was the beginning of spiritual connection.

> My mother was born and raised in Blanding and as a child I would go down there during the summer. It was before any of the power plants were built. The sky at night was unbelievable. The spirituality I experience is embodied in the sense of the created order of nature and my place in it.



> Some times I wonder, do the people in Utah know they live in such a wonderful place?

> I've lived in Utah all my life. Instead of being less appreciative of wilderness as I get older I become more appreciative.



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

> Being an Episcopalian is more than going to church on Sunday morning. Being an Episcopalian means extending your beliefs into the way you live your life every moment of the day. And that includes practicing a sense of universality that is inclusive of all creatures.

> Openness and inclusiveness have always been hallmarks of the Episcopal tradition. Our history has been to become increasingly inclusive and to accept diversity more and more. We've embraced women in leadership. We've welcomed gays as part of the community. I think we are on the road to consciously embracing and giving respect to the non-human as well. You can see it in our increasing attention to how we treat animals, to what we eat, and to how we take care of water, air, and land.



> Our belief in the simple but profound wisdom of the “golden rule” – “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” -- also calls on us to care take the natural world. We mostly tend to think of the golden rule as it applies to the relationship between two people. But really, it applies to the whole of creation. This teaching is found in every spiritual tradition.

> To me, the question is more how do the teachings and traditions of Christianity – not just the Episcopal Church – call on us to care take the earth. In the Bible, there’s an indication that God cares for *all* creation. Each sparrow, each blade of grass. A Christian is a servant of God. That makes us responsible to care for creation too, not to overuse or abuse it.



> As one of God’s creatures, I am part of the whole. If some part of the whole is missing, something is missing in me. When I get out of that harmony with the whole of creation, I don’t feel good. When we are out of harmony we’re out of touch with God.

> My view is if you are an Episcopalian, you are also a panentheist, because if you are an Episcopalian you see God in everything. We do not see God as separate and away from us. Rather, we see God in everything.

> Episcopalian theology has an incarnational, rather than a resurrectional focus. The emphasis is on the here and now of care taking creation, not on where we’re going after we die.

> An important part of our tradition, which dates back to the Church’s early days in England, is to care for those in need. We believe that Jesus was fully human and thus we focus on the full humanity of Jesus. Thus, care taking creation and humanity are important to us.

> Every time Christ needed to be renewed or refreshed, he went out into nature. This is a part of our tradition – a whole people being led out into a desert, moving into wilderness to be renewed by wilderness.

> The fact that Episcopalians honor our leadership as feminine reflects an inherent environmental ethic because the earth is also referred to as a “she.”



> Historically, the Episcopal Church has a strong Celtic tradition. And lately, many congregations have been reclaiming that tradition. I think it reflects a desire to express a stronger relationship to the earth.

> Our teachings call on us to be good stewards. We do not see the land as given to us to simply do with as we want. Rather, we have a responsibility to be good stewards.

> The land is God's and you have use of it, but it doesn't belong to you -- that's one interpretation of Genesis.

> The earth is God's body.

> There is an emphasis of taking care of "the commons" that also comes out of our English heritage. We believe no one can own the commons, and that we all need to take care of the commons. Air and water are part of it, but the emphasis is on land. This is part of our traditional English culture and it is being re-emphasized.

> So many other places have lost most of their commons. Here in Utah, we are so much luckier. We still have so much that hasn't been decimated. I wonder some times if the people who live here recognize that this is such a fantastic place for that reason. Or do they take it for granted? Do they realize that once the commons are gone, they can't bring them back?

> In the church we have stewardship teachings every year. During Lent, we talk about how we have harmed creation. God made enough, but we don't share.

> The scriptures say that we are co-creators with God, that we are participating in creation. We are given the ability to affect creation, and with this ability comes responsibility. In the creation story, Adam oversteps his bounds -- it is the sentinel sin.



> We need to honor the wisdom of God's creation and value creation for its own existence, not just for what we can extract from it.

> We believe contaminating the land is blasphemy.

> Part of being Christian is not polluting.

> There seems to be a prevailing attitude of consumption in our culture. Some Christians believe God gave them creation to use and abuse. But I don't see that in our beliefs.

> The Episcopalian Church makes a conscious attempt to be an institution with a natural aesthetic. The Cathedral and hall, for example, represent hospitality and openness. The way that structure uses wood and space and Celtic spirituality reflects a very conscious effort to create not just another institutional structure, but to be an institution with a natural aesthetic.

> Did you notice how the reverend was wearing green lined vestments with blue flowers embroidered along the edge? Or the baptismal font – it couldn't be more organic. A lot is communicated nonverbally. These kinds of things say a lot about who we are and what we value.

> In the rite of Eucharist, everything is brought in – the planets, the vastness of space, the earth.

> Episcopal leaders frequently speak out for the stewardship of nature. And people who speak out about the importance of wilderness. We have leadership and direction in the Episcopal Church that is very aware environmentally.

> There is a movement within the Episcopal Church – a growing recognition of the connection between environmental responsibility, sustainability and economic justice.



> The Episcopal tradition is founded on the “middle way” (or the “via media”). Compromise has been part of our tradition from the beginnings of the Church. We emerged in the place between the Christian and the Protestant reformations, and held both traditions and created one out of all of it. This means we are people who do not give up what we think, but hold our own counsel *and* listen to others to find solutions.

> As a Christian, I am committed to the principles of Christianity. It is important not to demonize people who have different perspectives. It is important to listen and extend care. Our goals of wholeness for the planet are not achieved by demonizing anyone.

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

Hope
Encouraged
Uplifted
Spiritual
Optimism
Life force

Open mindedness
Kindred spirits
Listening
Value of sharing the experience of others
Interconnectedness

Importance of taking the time to think
Working to find solutions
Remembering
Teach

Expanding "the golden rule"
Stretching hospitality
God's incarnation in the universe
Universality
Seeking balance and wholeness within the environment

Compassion
Caring and concern
Harmony
Peace

Gratitude
Gift
A walk in the woods
Communion

It's easier being green
Responsibility to future generations
Covenant



