

Creation IV Mountain Year B: 6 / 7 October 2018  
St. James Episcopal Church, Clinton NY  
The Rev. Gary Cyr

**“We are called as Christians to alleviate suffering, not be the root cause of it...”**

Isaiah 65: 17-25

At Tower Peak by Gary Snyder

Mark 16: 14-18

Psalm 48: 1-11

*“Revelation is more than words in a book. It’s a spiritual awakening to a lived life in Christ Jesus. It’s about a spiritual practice that honors and respects nature. It’s about faith, that through Christ, God is at work in the world renewing and restoring all creation. It’s about heading the words of Jesus that tells us to go out into the world proclaiming the Good News to the whole of creation. It’s about a spiritual revival.”*

When I lived in Calgary, Alberta, I had the privilege of being a short drive from the town of Banff, which is situated within Banff National Park. If you’re unfamiliar with Banff, it’s a small resort town nestled in the Canadian Rockies and surrounded by 6500 square kilometers of land teeming with abundant wildlife, glacial lakes, breath-taking vistas, and a vast array of hiking trails. Though I could see the Canadian Rockies from my apartment, it wasn’t until my first visit to the town and park that I understood the mysterious allure of the Rockies. There is one place, as you approach the park and town, coming around a low-lying hill, that you come face-to-face with the majesty of the mountains. There, rising from the ground and towering well above any city skyline, jagged ridges jet upward, glimmering in their cap of winter snow. The view not only took my breath away, it brought tears to my eyes. I had never experienced anything like that before. And the water, fed by the melting snow caps, was the clearest water I have ever seen or tasted. Whether 2 or 3 meters deep, one can clearly see the riverbed, as if the water were clear glass. It is the only time I drank from a stream without hesitation, knowing the very cool water was uncontaminated or polluted.

While living in Calgary, I was also reminded by the locals, that this water was the source of much that feeds the Colorado river and other tributaries in the West and Southwest United States. Something I recalled often while I lived in Tucson, AZ, which itself is surrounded by several mountain ranges: Santa Catalina, Rincon, and the Tucson mountains. Though less majestic, they too, supply water to the area towns that lie in their shadows. From living near the source of water, to living where it sort of ends, is an amazing thing to experience in one's life.

Gary Snyder's poem draws my attention to this vista of beginnings and endings – Calgary and Tucson. Driving from one city to the other in 2016, my partner and I saw firsthand the rugged beauty of the landscape as well as the deep wounds humanity has stamped up it. Granite peaks, ground squires, and almost-Mexican hills juxtaposed with clogged freeways and crowded housing developments. It is just one world and we are given to its care. Are we being attentive, or are we being dismissive of our Christian responsibility?

On this, the last Sunday of Creation Season, as I reflect on mountains and new beginnings – the theme of the reading from Isaiah – I'm reminded of Jesus being living-water; of the mountain being the metaphorical dwelling place of God from which the well-spring of life, living-water flows. In our Anglican tradition, it is said that God reveals God's Self in two ways: the Book of Scripture and the Book of Nature. Each reveal something about our relationship with God through Jesus Christ. How we hear what is being said remains the challenge.

In today's reading, Jesus takes umbrage with his closest followers for their lackadaisical behavior – a lack of faith and stubbornness. "Go out," he says, "proclaim the good news to the whole creation." It's almost a call to arms, to evangelism, to living into a new reality, not one based in denial or dismay, in apathy or acedia, but in joyous abandon and celebration for all God has declared Good.

And it is good. It is so good that we over indulge our glutinous appetite, never being completely satiated. Rather than a celebration of God's blessing, it's become a hedonistic celebration of self-interest. What will it take to awaken from our lethargy? Our complacency? From our indifference? Our complicity? Jesus is the one who takes umbrage with *us* for

remaining silent in the face of human exploitation and environmental degradation. Apathy *must* give way to a faith-filled Christian witness.

As an adolescent in the 1970s, I recall a commercial – entitled “Keep America Beautiful” – that was designed to draw our attention to how we pollute the air, land, and water. In the commercial, a Native American is first seen in a boat, paddling on the river through paper and plastic that litters the river as well as the shoreline. He then walks to the side of a roadway, watching copious amounts of traffic pass-by filling the air with exhaust fumes that appear to hang as a layer of fog in the background while trash is thrown at his feet. It is a poignant commercial, such that, all these years later, it remains for me an icon of spiritual acedia.

If El Shaddai – the Hebrew phraseology for “God Almighty” – **is** the mountain under whose shadow we live, and Jesus truly **is** life-giving water which washes over us, baptizing us into God’s covenant and thus adopting us as children, then the Spirit is the very air we breathe: that which sustains our life. Earth. Water. Air. Three primal elements that light the flame of passion within us for justice: social, economic, and ecological. Our passion **needs** to be awakened so we can morally and spiritually face up to our destructive behavior, to the devastation we participate in. Yet, we seem to suffer from collective amnesia.

Douglas E. Christie, ecologist and professor of Theology at Loyola Marymount University writes in his book about contemplative ecology, “[sic] we deflect responsibility because we cannot or will not acknowledge that the rapidly deepening erosion of the natural world has to do with us.” The pain and suffering we inflict upon creation is such that we realize how terrible it is to the point we numb ourselves into denial. So great is that pain that we choose **not** to see it, feel it, or recognize our role in nature’s degradation. I do believe Jesus would have as much umbrage with us today as he did with his disciples, chiding us to get out there and live the Good News, give witness to its enduring and merciful love. Act in ways that honor God and one another, forfeiting our unscrupulous desire for a larger share of our natural resources to satisfy our hunger for domination of all we survey. If there is an original sin, it’s our collective amnesia as regards the degradation of the environment and the exploitation of one another. Let us not be deceived: that is **not** good Christian stewardship.

The perspective of Snyder's poem is that of someone standing high up on a tower that overlooks the landscape. It's a three hundred sixty-degree vista that tells a tale of wilderness being taken and subsumed by humanity's seeming indifference spoken of as a modern-day ice-age. Shaving soil and paving fields; hewn rock and clear-cut slopes. It's almost a surreal portrait of endings, especially when compared to Isaiah.

The perspective of the reading from Isaiah also appears to come from a similar vantage point of being above the fray of an exiled people, living in a non-life-giving way. But here, the portrait is one of new beginnings; of a world living in harmony with its self and all that surrounds the people. A place where death and sorrow live no more. Rather than scarcity, there is abundance to which the people are called to deep gratitude for the blessing bestowed upon them from their God – El Shaddai – in whose shadow they – and we – live and move and have our being.

These two poems speak to each other in a way that fosters a life of faith. A faith that is more than words. It is faith in Jesus Christ, living water for our parched and barren souls that hunger for a spirituality where respect for one another and the natural world is the ground upon which faith is nurtured. Faith in Jesus Christ consists in the life we live everyday and the nurturing of life-giving relationships. We are called as Christians to alleviate suffering, not be the root cause of it (think about that in your own personal relationships). God reveals this essential truth in both sacred scripture and all of nature that surrounds us and upon which we depend.

As my partner and I traveled from Calgary to Tucson, it was with a deep realization that revelations about God occur in unexpected places in unexpected situations. Revelation is more than words in a book. It's a spiritual awakening to a lived life in Christ Jesus. It's about a spiritual practice that honors and respects nature. It's about faith, that through Christ, God is at work in the world renewing and restoring all creation. It's about heeding the words of Jesus that tells us to go out into the world proclaiming the Good News to the whole of creation. It's about a spiritual revival.

My sisters and brothers, do not harden your hearts. Do not despair. For we live in the shadow of El Shaddai from which Living Waters on high descends to cleanse and refresh our

souls while the Spirit inflames our passion for justice. Therefore, go out into the world rejoicing in the Power of the Spirit and give witness to God's grace and revelation by practicing a spiritually faith-filled ecology!!!