



ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

SERMON

9-4-16

Let's talk about God. After that gospel reading who would want to be a disciple of Jesus? Hating others and yourself? Selling all of your possessions? I think we'd better come back to those ideas and first talk about God and theology – our understanding of God.

Today I wish to share what I think is the Wyoming theology – the Wyoming way of understanding God. And to get us started let me first share my view of the Nebraska theology. When you cross the stateline into Nebraska the welcome sign reads: Nebraska – the Good Life. And I'd say most Nebraskans say they have a good life. We lived there for 17 years and what I observed is that nearly every piece of land is in production of some kind – farm land, ranch land and real estate land with homes on it. And all of that land is fenced and all of that land is private. And people regulate the use of that land – feeling pretty secure that they control what they produce. Oh sure, there could be inopportune hail or tornado come along – but your land is still there and most folks carry crop insurance. What do all these safeguards and boundaries do to their view of God? Well, I think they- and maybe most people in the mid-west figure they can put a fence around God and regulate God and keep close watch on God and not receive many or any surprises from God. They have tamed God. Even their only national park was hand planted years ago by the Conservation Corps workers.

But in Wyoming – oh my. We live with 50 % public lands. We have parks, forests, wildlife preserves, range lands, streams, rivers, lakes –we have the first National park whose 100 anniversary was celebrated two weeks ago. We are surrounded by wilderness and mountains and untamed lands and that fascinates and draws people to visit here and sometimes to live here. We, as a people, like to seek out pristine, preserved and wild experiences.

Now this is wholly metaphor – but let's talk about our understanding God and talk about our love of wild places. People flock to visit the national parks – they drive through, take pictures and feel impressed that these places exist. Then some folks camp in developed campsites and build campfires and fish in the lake or creek and return home refreshed. Some folks go off track and find their own campsites and hope to ignore or not see any other people around them. Some people put on backpacks and follow a trail for several miles and then pick a place to camp that they make their own and again hope not to see anyone else. Some people hike long ways on trails – the CDT hikers are covering 3100 miles of trails through the mountains. And I tell you what – they are carrying less and less gear every year. And some of us like to go off trail with our horsepacking trips or our backpacking trips and we explore new places to be.

I think that's why we have such a romance with Mountain men and pioneers and explorers. They went off trail, they explored the unknown, they struggled to learn about new places and situations. And we are drawn to imagine what it would have been like for us to do the same.

I remember the total nervousness I felt each time we got to a trailhead ready to start another trip. Would everything go OK? Were we prepared? What if I saw a bear? What if we struggled with bad health? And so on. I loved the experience once the challenge was over and we came back to our parked car and I felt stronger and more ready to go again. Slowly, slowly I grew in the confidence to handle any experience we might find while in the wilderness. So, we start by dipping our toe in the water of the wilderness lands – then we do a little more, a little more. We grow in confidence, in comfort, in our abilities.

Yet we know that never can we fully anticipate all that might come. Never will we see or understand or become comfortable with all the wilderness lands that surround us. And that leads to our Wyoming understanding of God.

We believe in a huge God, a wild God, a God that can't be contained or controlled. Our God is both an awesome and fearsome God. How close can we come to this God? How much can we trust this God? Our God is beyond us yet also the creator of us. Our God dwells in and all around us but remains unknown in so many ways.

And that I believe is good and right and healthy and respectful of our huge, beyond us, creator God. The more time I spend with this God - the more I explore, the more comfortable I become. What supports or walls can I shed this year? How much will I try to learn about this God? How much will I embrace, how much trust will grow within me?

It's all about deepening the relationship – closer and closer to the pure heart of God, to the God uncontaminated by us, unknown to us, uncontrolled by us, uncontained by us. We keep growing in trust and also in awe. Our God is so huge!

Now I have used the metaphor of our outside wilderness, our mountains and wild lands. But that same adventure awaits us in our interior journey into knowing God. You know- every time I return from a trip into the wilderness my spirit is renewed and I feel so alive and appreciative of the beauty surrounding me. I believe the same can be true traveling into meeting a huge, strong, amazing God. I find life in the outdoor wilderness. I believe a true life also dwells in the wilds of God's presence. And our comfort level with this God can keep growing until we say – “God, you matter more to me than family, friends, possessions, and my attempt to control my life – my attempt to make boundaries that just don't work if I am going to meet you in your wildness.

Keep dipping your toes in, keep shedding your comforts and restraints, keep taking new steps farther and farther into unexplored land, keep growing in your trust of your capabilities and in your trust of the God who made you and travels with you. We have so much exploring to do – it will keep us alive for the rest of our lives.

I close today with a poem called the Wilderness Prayer. It is written by Jan L. Richardson and it is about entering the wilderness of our souls.

“I am not asking you to take this wilderness from me, to remove the place of starkness where I come to know the wildness within me, where I learn to call the names of the ravenous beasts that pace inside of me, to finger the brambles that snake through my veins, to taste the thirst that tugs at my tongue.

But send me tough angels, sweet wine, strong bread: just enough.” Tough angels, sweet wine, strong bread: just enough.

Thanks be to God.