

LIFE IS A MIRACLE

JOB 38:1-7, 42: 1-5; LUKE 12: 22-31

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Physicist Niels Bohr liked to tell the story about the young rabbinical student who went to hear three lectures by a famous rabbi. Afterward, he told his friends, “The first talk was brilliant, clear and simple. I understood every word. The second was even better, deep and subtle. I didn’t understand much, but the rabbi understood all of it. The third,” he said with great excitement, “was by far the finest, an unforgettable experience. I understood nothing and the rabbi didn’t understand much either.”ⁱ

It is Spring time, Environmental Sunday today. Earth Day tomorrow.

I want to talk with you this morning not just on my behalf but on behalf of our Earth Matters Committee – a group of dedicated church folk deeply committed to education about the fragile, wonderful ecosystem we call Planet Earth and to taking action to protect and honor this holy gift.

I start with the Niels Bohr story because it underscores this point: life is a mystery, a miracle we cannot reduce or explain, but only experience and celebrate. It is interesting that one of the foremost physicists of our time – Niels Bohr – loved to tell this story.

If a rational scientist can understand that life is a miracle, then surely people of faith can too. Indeed, we have lots of resources at our disposal to help us grasp the mystery and miracle of life.

The Book of Job for one. What happened to Job through his suffering is that his premise for living gets blown out of the water. The debate at the heart of Job’s story is whether you can reduce life to a formula. Satan makes a deal with God. Takes away all God has given to Job – good health, beautiful family, prosperous business to test Job’s faith. Satan is betting Job’s faith is based on the notion that if I am nice to God, God will be nice to me and I’ll get what I want. The modern version of which is: “O Lord if you take away this disease or fix this relationship or get me that promotion I’ll do anything you ask.” We reduce God and life to a formula, a quid pro quo. Yet, by the end of the story Job discovers no formula can contain God; no formula can contain the mystery of life.

Environmentalist, farmer, poet Wendell Berry calls the notion that life is reducible to a formula a “modern superstition.” Secular society, says Berry, has stopped worshipping God and now worships not science per se but the belief that science can quantify and explain anything – given enough time and government grants. But, says Berry, this is a violation of the very principles of science. Turning science into a religion in defiance of its own laws.ⁱⁱ

We seem to have conceded to scientists, to the extent of their own regrettable willingness to occupy it, the place once occupied by prophets and priests. Real science leads to a sense of wonder and awe as people like Niels Bohr and Albert Einstein or more recently Steven Hawking and Lewis Thomas have shown us. But the cult of science, says Berry, takes away our sense of wonder and awe.

In the universities, scientists proceed from promotion to promotion and grant to grant, leaving few recorded moments of conscience or professional self-doubt. Those who teach the humanities defer to the certainties and values of their scientific colleagues. Journalists think it chic to stand open-mouthed before any wonder of science whatsoever. The media, seem comfortably unaware that many of the calamities from which science is expected to save the world were caused in the first place by science – which is meanwhile propagating further calamities, hailed now as wonders, from which it will later undertake to save the world.ⁱⁱⁱ

My goal this morning is not to disparage science but to point to the flaw in the thinking perpetuated mostly by non-scientists. Thinking that robs us of seeing the mystery and miracle of life. Thinking that supports irreparable harm to the earth.

I searched my library the other day for a book we read in college that speaks to this point. The title of the book says it all, “Apology for Wonder.” In the book, Sam Keen talks about the need in this techno-industrial age to cultivate a healthy sense of wonder and awe.

The kind of awe, for example, that stopped my friend in his tracks when he was twelve years old. My friend grew up in southeastern Ohio. His father and his grandfather were bird hunters. At an early age he was given a pellet gun. One day, he says, he went out the back door of his house and into the woods with his dog and his pellet gun. As they stalked through the woods, he noticed a red-winged black bird perched in a tree above him. Slowly, quietly he pumped his rifle, took aim and shot the bird. When it dropped at his feet lifeless and dead, he says he saw for the first time how beautiful it was, how brilliant the red, how striking in contrast to the jet black feathers. Then, he says, he started to weep and wept all the way home. It’s the last time he picked up a gun.

What my friend realized, what is at the heart of the mystery of all of life is the realization beyond the ability of words or mathematics to explain it that life is one. It is where our sense of awe and wonder come from. But we are increasingly disconnected from this awareness. We are believers not in the oneness and sacredness of life but in the ability of technology and science to produce the kind of life we want, to defy the laws of nature if need be, to control and manipulate life as we please.

We are no longer stewards of the earth but conquerers, dominators, dictators.

Little gods willing to allow the environment to be raped if it serves our purposes.

The proposed drilling for oil in the Alaskan wilderness the most recent example.

Sam Keen is right. We have lost our sense of wonder and awe. We have become disconnected from the natural world. And we are suffering.^{iv}

Paul Hawken, a leading environmentalist makes this point too. He has been writing about environmental concerns for the past decade. His new book “Natural Capitalism” says we are at a critical juncture in world history. The industrial revolution, says Hawken, that gave rise to modern capitalism greatly expanded the possibilities for the material development of humankind. It continues to do so today but at a severe price.

“Since the mid-eighteenth century more of nature has been destroyed than in all prior history. While industrial systems have reached pinnacles of success, able to muster and accumulate human-made capital on vast levels, natural capital, on which civilization depends to create economic prosperity, is rapidly declining...all the resources used by humankind: water, minerals, oil, trees, fish, soil, air and grasslands, savannas, wetlands, estuaries, oceans, coral reefs, riparian corridors, tundras, and rainforests....

It is not the supplies of oil or copper that are beginning to limit our development but life itself. Our continuing progress today is restricted not by the number of fishing boats but the decreasing numbers of fish; not by the power of pumps but the depletion of aquifers; not by the number of chainsaws but by the disappearance of primary forests says Hawken.

Humankind has inherited a 3.8 billion-year store of natural capital. At present rates of use and degradation, there will be little left by the end of the century. This is not a matter of aesthetics and morality, it is of the utmost practical concern to society and all people. Hawken’s thesis is that industrial capitalism violates its own laws. While it uses natural resources it does not account for them on the books so to speak. It just uses them up. But natural capitalism keeps both sides of the ledger. It proposes sustainable production and living to prevent depletion of the very assets that keep human life viable. We now have, says Hawken, the technology we need to be a sustainable planet. All we lack is political will. And, I would add, this morning a sense of wonder and awe.”^v

But it is not just the systems of the earth or human community that suffer from our lack of wonder and awe. Our disconnect from nature affects our individual lives as well.

Nature writer, Gary Ferguson, tells about the first time in modern history we documented the profound connection between human life and the natural world. It was 1901, Dr. A.E. Macdonald, of the Manhattan State Hospital found himself in the position of having 40 men and women with tuberculosis who needed to be isolated from the rest of the patients and nowhere to put them. Out of desperation he erected a small village of tents around the beautiful grounds along the East River, put the patients in them and got a big surprise.

Not only the physical but mental state of the patients improved dramatically. The same people who’d been lying in their beds in near vegetative state were soon walking on the grass, playing games, smiling, and waving at the excursion boats cruising up the East River. Macdonald put up more tents this time for non-tubercular patients, some so ill they could not get out of bed. It worked for them too. They gained weight, showed increased control over their compulsions, incontinence ceased. Several, thought to be lost-causes two months earlier, were by autumn walking out the front door. Everything continued until the coming of the cold, winter months when the patients were brought back inside. At which point they withdrew again, lost weight and became incontinent all over. Until the following summer when the tents went up again and their progress resumed.^{vi}

When we connect ourselves to the rhythm of life and the pulse of the planet deep healing occurs. It's what the present resurgence in gardening and gardening books is about. Or, for example, the national movement using wilderness camping for troubled teenagers.

"In truth we may never know why eating beans out of a billy can or making a bow-drill fire can bring comfort, says one counselor, why on a particular rainy morning a carpet of desert phlox or the sound of a mourning dove, would bring a kid to tears. Why a stray comment made on the side of a mountain can change a life and root and grow in what a month before seemed like sterile soil."^{vii} But it does.

D.H. Lawrence once wrote, "the sense of wonder, that is our sixth sense. And it is the natural religious sense." For the religious quest is the quest to discover the oneness, the wholeness of life. When Jesus was talking with his disciples in today's story from Luke he said, "consider the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. Why be anxious when you see how God cares for these which are far less important to God than you are."

Jesus is inviting his disciples to open their eyes for the first time, to look at the natural world around them, to see the beauty and miracle of nature, to see the connectedness of all living things.

Job saw the oneness of life after he had journeyed through his suffering and loss. My friend saw life's oneness when that red-winged black bird dropped at his feet. Thousands of teenagers experience in the wilderness the sheer and awesome beauty of creation and the fact that they are part of something much bigger than they are. Something true and good when they seem to have lost any sense of truth or goodness in their confused world and strained relationships.

Norman Maclean in his story "A River Runs Through It" captures this oneness of life and unity of all things perhaps better than anyone at the conclusion of his autobiographical tale. It is the story of a Montana born and raised flyfisherman. Maclean tells his story when he is an old man remembering his parents who died long ago and his brother with whom he fished and whom he loved but was killed by loan sharks as a young man.

Maclean ends his story this way, "Like many fly fishermen in western Montana where the summer days are almost Arctic in length, I often do not start fishing until the cool of the evening. Then in the Arctic half-light of the canyon, all existence fades to a being with my soul and memories and the sounds of the Big Blackfoot River and a four-count rhythm and the hope that a fish will rise.

Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs. I am haunted by waters."^{viii}

You see life is a miracle. We cannot reduce or explain it. But only experience it, suffer it, accept it, celebrate it. For God created life and saw that it was good and so it was. The gift this Environmental Sunday is the opportunity to step back, consider miracle of life and the deep joy with

which the Creator made it and invites you and me to experience and honor creation. Amen.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, The Luminous Web: Essays on Science and Religion (Cambridge: Cowley Press, 2000) 77.

ⁱⁱ Wendell Berry, Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition (Washington, D.C.: 1999) 18ff.

ⁱⁱⁱ Berry, 21.

^{iv} Sam Keen, Apology for Wonder (New York: Harper and Row, 1969) 117ff.

^v Paul Hawken, Amory and L.Hunter Lovins, Natural Capitalism: Creating the Next Industrial Revolution (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1999) 2ff.

^{vi} Gary Ferguson, Shouting at the Sky: Troubled Teens and the Promise of the Wild (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999) 86.

^{vii} Ferguson, 91.

^{viii} Norman Maclean, A River Runs Through It and Other Stories (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) 104.