

Meeting Christ in Creation

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Over the years I've led many retreats on encountering God in the natural world, but one prayerful exercise¹ never fails to surprise me with its power to disclose the divine in unexpected places.

One morning in May a group of parishioners gathered for a Quiet Day in an old farmhouse in Ashfield. Beside the coffee table I'd assembled a haphazard array of natural objects – clippings of willow, birch, and wild cherry, sprigs of white pine, some flowers, and a few hunks of bark. I invited everyone to come forward and choose something.

Each of us examined the object in our hands. We felt it, bent it, and ran it through our fingers. Did it have a smell? Make a sound? Have a structure or sections? Using all our senses, we observed everything we could, giving the twig or leaf our complete attention. A hush settled over the room. After several minutes we put our objects down and sat in silence to think about what we'd noticed and what God might be saying. In pairs and then as a whole group, we shared our discoveries. Out of simple observations, all sorts of meanings emerged.

One woman held up a battered stick. "See the lichen on the bark? Lichen is one of the oldest forms of life; it knows how to endure. That's the message I got: endurance."

Another woman dangled a frond of birch. "Twirl it, and the leaves dance. What a community they are, and how responsive to the breeze! And look – the leaves are transparent! That's what I'd like to be: more transparent."

A man showed us a white narcissus. "I noticed the long stem, and how it bends at the top and becomes a flower. I wondered how the cells know what to do next, and whether they're surprised by where life takes them."

What humble things these were -- bark, twigs, leaves -- but what a wealth of meanings they evoked! I asked how many people felt affection for the object they had explored. Shyly or boldly, everyone raised a hand.

How close to the surface is our affection for the natural world! How much the natural world has to give us if we take time to pay attention. In just twenty minutes of prayerful, patient observation, we had begun to re-awaken our direct personal contact with the life around us. As Martin Luther observed, "God writes the Gospel not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars."

We live in a time of environmental devastation, when nations devour resources faster than they can be

1 Avery Brooke, Learning and Teaching Christian Meditation, Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1990, pp. 33-57.

replenished and burn fossil fuels that release excessive greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. According to a new report, global biodiversity has been reduced by 30% in just forty years.² I can't think of a better time than now to take part in the healing of Creation and to turn for help to the crucified, risen, and ascended Christ who fills all things (Ephesians 1; Colossians 1).

Christ is urging us to move from a spirituality of alienation from the natural world to one of intimacy with all Creation. The natural world is ready to interact with us if we meet it not as an object to exploit but as a subject to encounter. You never know how God will show up in the next breath, the next leaf, or the next openhearted conversation. Get ready to be surprised.

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2 World Wildlife Fund, 2012 Living Planet Report:
<http://www.worldwildlife.org/science/LivingPlanetReport/index.html>