

# “All Things Being Equal”

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**To the reader:** This sermon was only part of a service of worship with many components working together, all of which were designed to be experienced in a community context. In our "free pulpit" tradition, its concepts are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thought and faith.

# “All Things Being Equal”

READING – Psalms 19 1-6

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.  
Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.  
There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;  
yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

\* \* \*

Emerson, on nature.

The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines to-day also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.

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Undoubtedly we have no questions to ask which are unanswerable. We must trust the perfection of the creation so far, as to believe that whatever curiosity the order of things has awakened in our minds, the order of things can satisfy. Every man's condition is a solution in hieroglyphic to those inquiries he would put. He acts it as life, before he apprehends it as truth. In like manner, nature is already, in its forms and tendencies, describing its own design. Let us interrogate the great apparition, that shines so peacefully around us. Let us inquire, to what end is nature? - Emerson  
Now, nature, as I am only too well aware, has her enthusiasts, but on the whole I am not to be counted among them. To put it rather bluntly, I am not the type who wants to go back to the land – I am the type who wants to go back to the hotel.

– *Fran Lebowitz*

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SERMON

All things being equal – the nature of nature

We think we are rationalists, but in fact we are romantics. Oh, I know we deride the sentimentalism of popular religion, cringing at its literalism and emotional ex-

cesses. But the facts are unforgiving. Liberal religion rose up on the wings of Rousseau more than Voltaire, and exploded in the American flowering called Transcendentalism.

Our patron saint is Emerson, whose essay on Nature is one of the great epistles of the church of natural religion. And as he said, "Let us inquire, to what end is nature." When he did, he found himself saying, "Let us demand our own works and laws and worship."

Few things are as dear to religious liberals as nature. I sometimes wonder why we build churches at all, since almost all of us confess that we have had more spiritual experiences in nature than at church. What we mean, of course, is that fulsome experience, that sense of everything being connected and alive – the unity of the platonic trinity of goodness and beauty and truth.

The equinox is this week, the change from summer to fall, and our Emersonian soul likes to note such occasions alongside the hoary feasts of Christmas and Easter. Around here we delight in Halloween, a pagan practice tied to the Celtic new year that comes halfway between the autumnal equinox and the winter solstice. We bring our animals to church around May Day, also a pagan thing halfway between the vernal equinox and the summer solstice. Why not the equinoxes themselves, then?

I have a sneaky plan in mind. In NYC the solstices are the occasion for Paul Winter and his consort (with which Jim Scott here worked) to put on a fabulous observance at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. I saw it back in 2004. Very cool, with elements of Russian, Inuit, jazz, African and other cultures deftly blended with lights and other visuals. When I learned Jim was part of Winter's Consort, I wondered if there could not be a similar festival at the equinoxes. This is hardly the production they have in New York, but you gotta start somewhere.

But then I had a second thought. Proclaim the power and place of nature in our faith, lift up our longstanding reverence for nature as a moral and spiritual power. It's getting some traction now, you know. Rising energy costs, global warming, climate change in general with droughts and floods and hurricanes, are making even diehard libertarians and fervent Adventists incipient tree huggers. Have you heard about Creation Care? Evangelicals who have gotten religion about global warming? What about the news from California? Its Republican governor is working with the UK on greenhouse gas issues, despite the federal dogma that it's junk science.

So now would be the time to raise the green banner, right? Well, maybe not yet. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that we religious liberals and otherwise enlightened folks do to nature what we decry in other religions. Consider that when someone says they have a personal relationship to Jesus, just to cite an easy example, we get all itchy about the simplistic emotionality of it. But how different is that from Wendell Berry when he says, "when despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the night and the least sound in fear... I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds." Beautiful, I agree, but hardly scientific. Or what about Mary Oliver when she says, "You do not have to be good... you only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves..."

The feeling is the thing, the feeling of being at home and safe and serene in some-

thing larger than yourself. And it is the same feeling of those folks who rest on the bosom of Jesus. But, you say, nature is real and actual. God is not, or at least not so demonstrably so. Granted. The reality of God versus Nature is not what I am thinking about. It is the emotional connection.

The late Jane Jacobs, in her book "The Death and Life of American Cities," saw this problem almost fifty years ago. "There are dangers," she says, "in sentimentalizing nature. It is no accident that we Americans, probably the world's champions sentimentalizers about nature, are at one and the same time the world's most voracious and disrespectful destroyers of wild and rural countryside." I think that's because our hunger for the emotion of nature has led us to exploit it. We each want, nay deserve an original relation with the universe, by which we mean the right to lay down beside the still waters, bask in the shadow of great mountains and commune with the boundless sea. The pursuit of that spiritual feeling has ironically led to imprison nature as surely as people put songbirds in cages so that they might always enjoy their song.

Our relationship to nature can be as one-sided and incomplete as the sentimental love of Jesus with his rosy cheeks and chestnut hair. So I think that before we become too fond of our environmental nobility we should pause at this equinox, a time of balance between night and day, to ponder what a balanced relation to nature would be.

The problem as I see it, is that we define nature aesthetically. We love it for its beauty, its serenity, its elegance and economy. The same thing the psalmist says declares the glory of God we admire in nature itself. But where does it say that beauty matters to nature itself? This is a human value, and to see beauty in nature is only another form of dinging the image of the Virgin in clouds or rocks or baked goods.

Thinking beauty is the role of nature is ultimately condescending. Nature does not exist for our sake, even as a teacher. We overrate our importance to think nature has even a passing interest in what we think or even that we exist. Ancient folks knew, and we are reminded when hurricanes and tornados and heat waves come, that we are not the center of the universe. Despite all the cocoons we have created against the elements of nature, they do not tame it so much as they protect us.

But aren't we despoiling the land, polluting the waters and skies, killing species, and otherwise ruining the planet.

Yes and No. Those things are happening, absolutely. But to think we are killing the planet is a little arrogant. We forget they have happened before with ice ages and extinctions and volcanic disasters and other turbulent occasions. Nature does not care for species or habitats. The land where we stand was not here eons ago and will vanish again. It lay beneath glaciers once and shall be desert in the future. Like Ol' Man River, it just keeps rolling along. Whether the earth is green and fragrant, frozen, barren, lush or a pool of lava, is of no matter to the earth itself. It has created and destroyed for millennia and continues on into the future.

What we are doing, friends, is killing ourselves. The earth will endure, but we may not. Our actions today are essentially holding a gun to the head of our descendents. Whether snail darters or polar bears survive is really not the matter. Whether the temperature rises or falls is beside the point. From a geologic and astronomic point of

view, these are blinks of an eye. But whether we survive, which seems to be the one universal law of nature, is now up for grabs. Consider global warming as a planetary fever, which as any physician knows is how an organism fights off a hostile pathogen. It may be miserable for the host, but it is fatal for the pathogen. In this analogy, we are the pathogen – the bug or the germ.

I know this sounds harsh and unpleasant, but we have to give up our blithe self-importance, which is simultaneously sentimental and condescending. If we are saving the earth so we can have a giant backyard with warm and fuzzy creatures and fragrant and pretty flowers, we are as self-absorbed as those who are sure heaven is a place that looks either like a well-mowed suburb or an upscale cemetery.

Let's do all we can to stem global warming and preserve the rain forests and stop strip mining and filling the water and air with chemicals and crud. Let's slow down, cool down, and otherwise lighten our weight on the planet, but not because we are killing the earth. We are killing ourselves here, and if not ourselves then our children and our grandchildren. The heavens are telling, indeed. They are telling us there are real limits to human power and terrible costs for human arrogance.

The challenge for us, more than any generation, is to find an original relationship with nature – which challenge is as moral and spiritual as it is scientific and rational. So maybe our romantic souls are not wrong so much as immature. We do need to feel connected to nature, but in a new way not yet seen or known. "Behold I create new heavens and new earth," says Isaiah. Not a new physical world, but a new moral world in which we are part and partner, sharing in a life larger than us now, larger than humanity then or in the future, "the life that maketh all things new."