

It was a dark and stormy night... And it really was!

I had ventured to go *camping* with my college roommate and a friend, who were both experienced in such matters. So we drove from Durham to a far mountain in western NC, and we pitched our tent on that mountaintop as evening approached. *In the night, we awoke to a heavy rain...hard wind...and lightning.* It was dangerous to stay...and dangerous to try to leave...and yet...we quickly pulled up our tent...stashed our stuff back in the car...and...soaked to the bone...safely headed to my roommate's home about an hour's drive away...in the deep darkness of that night. |

You have likely had some similarly hair-raising experience...of some such encounter with nature...in all its...chaos and violence. It is one thing, of course, to know about the possibility of something like that... but experiencing it for yourself...is a whole different thing. Ever since, I have had a keen respect for storms. |

From a scientific point of view, of course, nature is just that: *impersonal chaos and order.* Nature is such an interplay of physical forces—many understood...and many not. We are very familiar with all that. But what has gotten layered onto our scientific knowledge of nature...in our common experience...is something actually quite *non-scientific—a metaphysical assumption that pretends to be science...a conviction that what we see...is all we get. And that there is nothing beyond these brute physical forces...and there is no meaning to any of it.*

However, it has long been possible...to exercise a great deal of reason and science *without that metaphysical assumption,* just as did generations of earlier scientists and observers of nature. As Christians, we are just as familiar with the realities of nature as anybody else. In our biblical tradition we have sacred stories of storms...like I experienced...and you have experienced...full of threat and danger. But...we also have sacred stories of storms...*stilled—and of a personal divine reality beyond the storms.*

It is true that in the *Old Testament* there was a tendency...inherited from the cultures of that time...that whatever natural disaster there was—a great flood or whatever—it was assumed that such a thing was the direct action of God...*and* often seen as an expression of God's *displeasure.* But there are also biblical stories which are reluctant to make such a direct connection between acts of nature and acts of God, such as the remarkable story of Elijah on the mountain (1Kgs 19). There the great prophet Elijah...was also caught up in a terrible mountaintop storm. But the story goes on to insist...that God was *not* in the *wind*...and God was *not* in the *earthquake*...and God was *not* in the *fire*...but instead...God came to Elijah...in a *still small voice*...in the midst of the storm. And today there is the Psalm and the Gospel lesson where the *stilled storm*—and not the storm itself—*is a revelation of God.*

It is also true that by the time of the *New Testament*...a more complex perspective on God and nature had emerged. Nature was then seen as “fallen” from its original goodness...and groaning for redemption by God...and yet...nature still has the capacity to be transparent...to the goodness and glory of God...its Creator...for anyone to see. [Jesus stilled the *storm* from his boat...Jesus was transfigured in *physical light and clouds* on Mount Tabor...and even Jesus' *physical death* became transparent and transformed by the goodness and glory of God.]

*Which is all to say*...that as Christians...I think it is increasingly important that we become more familiar with knowing and speaking our truth in the modern era. We increasingly live among friends, family, and neighbors who are unfamiliar with Christianity *and who may easily assume that our physical, natural world is the only thing that is real.* And Christians too can be dispirited by the same cultural assumptions. But we do *not* have to agree that...*what we see...is all we get.* We do not have to agree that *everything ultimately means nothing.* Instead, it is just as reasonable to say...that *what we see...can also point to the reality of the unseen.*

*It is, I believe, increasingly important...for us to be expectant and alert...to the endless potential for nature...even with its chaotic and violent possibilities...to also become transparent to the goodness and glory of God. | [Of course, there is a kind of modern thinking which believes that any such thing is just wishful thinking. And sometimes it can be...but only because we have also learned...that often...such expectancy for the revelation of God through nature is justified.]*

Two years ago, Jennifer and I went to *Iceland*...in great part because...I was looking for such a revealing of the goodness and glory of God. As I recall, we were only able to go inside two *churches* there. And I do have to say that the large, iconic, Hallgrímskirkja church in downtown Reykjavik is a very moving sacred place. But by far, it was the utterly foreign and mysterious *landscapes of Iceland*...that made the mystery of God...so tangibly real...and such a healing tonic...for a weary priest. Of course, Iceland has regular periods of volcanic activity...and the land...and the weather...can be dangerous. So there is still that other side to nature there...and it is best to not be foolish in the presence of such things. But I also found there in Iceland...moments of a glorious transparency...a “still small voice”...I could say...that was there. And I can imagine that you know of other such places. It can of course happen here too. |

Right here, right now, there is an especially auspicious time...already happening...of a great natural cosmic occurrence. Can anyone think of what it is? It is the summer solstice and as tradition has also come to call it, today is *Midsummer's Eve*—well this *evening*, that is. This is the traditional time in very many countries in the northern hemisphere...when the *summer solstice*...is acknowledged and celebrated—or at least it *used to be* acknowledged and celebrated. Even *very ancient peoples* knew about the solstices and observed them with considerable attention. But nowadays we are more likely to have to google it...to recall...*just what they are*. So, in case you need the reminder: the *summer solstice* is when a hemisphere of the earth, in the earth's long journey around the sun, has *the most daylight*...and the *winter solstice* is when there is *the most night*. So maybe you have been noticing how late the days go into the evenings and how early the days come in the morning—that's the summer solstice. We have now arrived at its peak in the earth's cosmic journey.

[When Jennifer and I were in Iceland... approaching the summer solstice...the days were very long...and even what little bit of night there was was more like a very cloudy day. To be able to sleep at “night” we had to pull black-out curtains across our windows—which every hotel had. Like so many other features of nature in Iceland, there was no possibility of overlooking the summer solstice.]

But do most modern people even think of these pivotal cosmic events anymore? Don't we often seem to have so many other things on our minds...that mostly have to do with human affairs? And how in the world did Keswick ever manage to lose an opportunity for *merrymaking!* :) For thousands of years before us, both solstices have been times for bonfires (even in the summer), family gatherings, feasting, and, yes, *merrymaking*—and it still happens in many other places of the world. But even more important that...is the sacred biblical sensibility...getting lost...of paying attention to the natural world...as a place where God... can be experienced...as tangibly real?

This new *playground* which will start to appear in July...this is not only an opportunity for joyful play among friends...but an opportunity for sacred childhood memories of a spiritual home. This new *trail* that is already being built...is not only an opportunity for our parish and community to enjoy a deeper reach into our land...but an opportunity for a sacred experience.

Every one of us rises and sleeps under the same sky.

Every one of us thirsts for water and hungers for food.

Every one of us needs a physical home to be sheltered within our earthly home.

Every one of us has the potential to be moved by an awareness...of the many incredible extravagances... powers...and surprising intimacies...that can come to us in nature.

And it is those very same moments...and so many more...within the world of nature...that can call any one of us...out of ourselves...out of our distraction...into the wonder...and the tangible reality...of God.