



A Christian Reflection and Declaration on the Spiritual Values of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness

And Jesus withdrew himself into the wilderness and prayed.

Luke 5:16

Background

At the invitation of the Friends of the Boundary Waters, a diverse group of Christians journeyed into the Boundary Waters Canoe Area during mid-September, 2005. Our purpose was to discern and articulate the spiritual values of this popular region of wilderness lakes, hills and streams. During our sojourn into this North Woods area, we encountered warm, balmy days and days filled with cold rain and blustery winds. Thunder and lightning, the dark clouds of a forest fire and the buzz of insects marked our week-long stay as well as the bright yellow, gold and green colors of the forest, the howls of wolves, the songs of loons, and the lulling background of lapping waters.

As we began this exploration, we revisited Biblical and historical Christian commentaries about nature as a witness to God. We read the Scriptures declaring His eternal power and glory reflected through those things which He has made (cf. Romans 1:20). We began every day with prayer and we employed reflection themes such as thanksgiving, wonder, the love of creation and beauty to expedite experiences and cultivate a deeper understanding of the spiritual qualities of this area.

The result of this process was an inspiring series of insights and realizations, first about our own spiritual lives, but also about the value of wilderness in religious and social life. We learned, for instance, that the more wilderness is approached with a sense of God, the more its spiritual values become transparent and discernable. Most significantly, we found that all of the values of wilderness relate in some manner back to God as its Author and Creator.

Throughout this exploration wilderness was the constant framework through which we sought to explore and identify a means to reconnect to God and the land, and especially a place where our Christian foundation might be recalled and our faith strengthened. Most importantly perhaps we sought to restore an experiential awareness of the presence of God that always overarches our lives, but is more easily discerned in wild places. The insights and experiences which this event cultivated cause us to tell others about what we have found. For these reasons we seek to promote these findings as a reminder to our churches and to society of the spiritual values of wilderness.

Introduction to this Commentary on the Spiritual Values of Wilderness

The following insights and commentary derive from the personal experiences and daily reflections that participants acquired while in the BWCA-Quetico wilderness. They are extracted from our rough notes as they were recorded. They are not presented as precise divisions and they are certainly not fine prose. We acknowledge overlap, redundancies and missing elements. Wilderness is too vast to articulate all of its spiritual meanings. Nevertheless the following ten points represent core concepts about wilderness and our human spiritual needs that emerged from our experiences and discussions. We have added Scriptural citations to show that these insights are not new, but elaborations upon ancient but often overlooked Biblical themes. We submit this statement for general reflection and comment by churches and other concerned organizations.

1. Wilderness is a place to learn about God

When we leave the city with its mental confusion and enter the quiet and peace of wild places, the deep questions of human life float to the surface. Away from crowds and hurried city lives, we find solitude and sense intimations of eternity – even immortality.

In wilderness we encounter opportunities for deep reflection. We more readily focus on questions of meaning and human purpose that are easily obscured when our lives are surrounded by superficial distractions. All around us, wilderness screams the eternity and the infinity of God. Wilderness nurtures reflection and spiritual formation.

For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

Romans 1:20

2. Through natural parables, we begin to understand God's purpose in creation

Every animal, every leaf, every stone and facet of wild creation has meaning and purpose. The sun and the rain, falling evenly on all nature, show God's justice – His Providence that treats equally all people and all parts of the land. The streams and lakes flow and imply laws of motion and gravity, nurturing this unique area and implying the Holy Spirit's overarching of creation. The loons, the beaver, and the many other animals obey survival instincts and set examples of obedience for humans. If we examine its features and creatures with discernment and quiet reflection, God soon communicates to us through wilderness.

*Through the grandeur and beauty of the creatures,
we may by analogy, contemplate their Author.*

Wisdom 1:31

3. The Beauty of wilderness nurtures spiritual refinement

A deep and satisfying beauty dwells in wild nature – in contrast with the often superficial efforts of humans to put on glamour. Wilderness – because it represents that part of God’s creation which remains undefiled – allows the inquiring disciple to sense God’s presence in the world. This is why Jesus, the prophets and the saints went to the wilderness. The Beauty in nature is the endless touch of the Creator Lord and an invitation to discern God’s presence within all things. When we return to our lives elsewhere, we are fortified in our sense of God and His goodness.

*One thing have I desired of the Lord, and that will I seek after;
that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, and to
behold the beauty of the Lord...*

Psalm 27:4

4. Wilderness cultivates community

People must cooperate to overcome the challenges of life. Our needs become simpler. We pare our requirements down to the essentials of what we can carry. We learn frugality, moderation, even austerity. When gratefulness to God is added to the wilderness experience, what we have becomes enough. Out of the need to cooperate, a community of necessity forms. We share spiritual experiences and the bonds of fellowship between us grow deeper and stronger. Deep and enduring personal connections are formed. Old bonds are renewed.

*We used to hold sweet converse together; within God's
house we walked in fellowship.*

Psalms 55:14

5. Wilderness helps us to cleanse our minds and spirits

The clean air, cold water, and quiet of wilderness help us to clarify our thinking so that we can open to the nature of God and creation. Our senses awaken and come alive. Attitudes change. The rhythm of our days and nights, our work and rest, take their cue from the natural surroundings. Through the cultivation of silence, Unexpected realizations often emerge. Wilderness holds a myriad of surprises for the person who seeks God in emptiness. We are renewed by God’s presence and a peace that transcends understanding.

*And be not conformed to this world, but be you transformed by the
renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and
acceptable, and perfect, will of God.*

Romans 12:2

6. Wilderness teaches humility

In primal wildness, we experience God's creation as immense in its majesty and the intricacy of its details. Under a vast canopy of stars and surrounded by an endless stretch of lakes and forest, we are astounded at the designs, the beauty and the unexpected marvels of creation. We realize how great is the Maker of all these things and how small in comparison are human creations. We develop new respect and awe for what God has created.

Hearken unto this, O Job. Stand still and consider the wondrous works of God.

Job 37:14

7. Wilderness is God's gift of creation undefiled

Without the witness of wilderness, we lose reminders of what creation is like in its pristine state. In the beginning God called creation good – even very good! Without some wildness, humans are impoverished in their ability to know God. We learn of the attributes of the Creator through the things which God has made. To experience the depths of wilderness, we have to let go and relinquish control. The witness of creation is also a witness of the Lord through the things that he has made. A natural therapy for tired bodies and parched spirits shines forth through natural places. Nature's therapy brings restoration, re-creation, even regeneration. These are among God's gifts to humanity through wilderness, a gift which needs to be preserved and protected. This is a duty that we all share.

The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose. It shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing..., and they shall see the glory of the Lord and the excellency of our God!

Isaiah 35:1-2

8. Wilderness provides models for human imitation

A timeless symphony of birth, death and renewal underlies wilderness. The sun vitalizes the trees; trees nurture birds and insects; insects pollinate plants and feed many creatures. All of the plants and animals depend on other living forms and complement one another in a vast network of harmonious shapes and designs. Even the soil, the flow of water, and the seasonal turns of weather participate in this grand chorus of life. An interdependent and interconnected network of relationships and connections flourishes. Wilderness provides a living model for how humans might design the interconnected structures of cities and commerce so that our own society might flourish in harmony with the land and the justice of our Lord. Healthy wholeness emerges.

But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee; and the fowls of the air, and they shall tell thee: Or speak to the earth, and it shall teach thee: and the fishes of the sea shall declare unto thee.

Job 12:7-9

9. Wilderness veils contrasting visions

The simple pace of wilderness quiets our hearts and minds. We peer more acutely, more perceptively, into the issues of God, creation and human cultural constructions. Our priorities are called into sharper focus. We are reminded of the choices anciently presented to Adam and Eve. We can choose to obey the Creator and enter into a sacred vision in which God enlivens all creation. This vision carries a responsibility to respect what God has made, to treat all things with love, care and a nurturing touch. In this vision God is the center of creation. Nature is a teacher and a healer. In contrast there is another vision – a darker, fiercer, more utilitarian way to see the world. In this view, nature is reduced to a storehouse of natural resources, of beaver pelts, timber, metals and raw materials. The choices before Adam and Eve are still the choices that we face. The way we choose between these alternative ways of seeing and being shapes who and what we become.

I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life that both you and your children may live.

Deuteronomy 30:19

10. Relationships and interactions are the language of wilderness.

Wilderness teaches through living parables. It speaks of beauty and balance, qualities and subtle spiritual presences, austerity amidst abundance, and challenge with opportunity. In contrast, the language of economics does not have the capability to reflect the spiritual and inspirational values of wilderness. The blessings of wilderness stretch far beyond the quantitative measurements of the marketplace, of transactional values, and political boundaries. The qualities of the BWCA-Quetico wilderness, because of their spiritual and therapeutic dimensions, cannot be bought, sold or found in urban settings.

O Lord, how wonderful are your works! In wisdom have you made them all. The whole earth is full of your riches

Psalm 104:24

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Recommendations

As a result of these experiences, but also because wilderness is being threatened from a variety of developmental forces, we make the following recommendations regarding the care and keeping of this Boundary Waters Canoe Area wilderness, the adjacent Quetico wilderness and the surrounding area:

*** Take the time to visit wilderness**

You cannot appreciate the spiritual values of wilderness from the city. The Boundary Waters Canoe Area wilderness is not the only wild area that has value. All wild areas can provide rejuvenation and inspiration when approached with reverence and remembrance of its Maker.

*** Love what God has created**

Respect for the land brings an attitude that is at once thankful to God and careful in its use of the good earth. All things can be used, but nothing should be abused. As stewards of God's creation, we are called to serve and protect the land.

*** Encourage others into greater respect for wilderness**

Teach others to enter into a caring regard for creation. Tell clergy about the many reasons to care for wilderness.

*** Bring young people and youth groups into wilderness**

Young people especially need the formative experiences that wild places can provide. They will learn the importance of discipline, cooperation, community and right attitude through experiences in wild places.

*** Seek to preserve, protect and expand wilderness**

Wilderness is a form of tithe, a setting aside of what is God's for the use of others still to be born. They too need to experience the beauties of creation undefiled by the heavy hand of technology and development.

*** Promote sermons about the spiritual values of wilderness**

People need to be encouraged to experience for themselves the spiritual benefits of wilderness. For many people personal experience can be a stronger teacher of religious principles than a Sunday sermon or many classes.

*** Learn how to discern the spiritual values of wilderness.**

Time spent in wild places can become more rewarding and fulfilling when nature is joined to prayer, spiritual striving and awareness.

*** Expand our wilderness lands**

A preliminary step should involve preserving America's remaining roadless areas. For wilderness to expand, we need to protect from development public lands which are suitable for future wilderness designation.

*** Encourage the protection and expansion of areas surrounding wilderness.**

Large protected and connected areas are necessary for healthy wilderness so that larger animals may roam and flourish.

*** Maintain the peace and quiet of wilderness**

The quiet of wilderness is at the heart of its ability to restore and regenerate visitors. This quiet does not depend on a lack of wind or natural sounds. However, it does require the elimination of mechanical noise pollution. This includes the elimination of ORVs and all mechanized transport and equipment.

*** Apply the lessons of wilderness to home and city**

Self-sufficiency with cooperation; discipline against adversity; perseverance in challenges; reflection of the diversity amidst the unity – these are among the qualities that wilderness experience imparts to those who visit her unspoiled regions.

*** Encourage clergy to seek out the spiritual benefits of wilderness**

Wilderness has many values. It is a place for family bonding; for teaching young people; for learning about animals, plants, and the ways of the natural creation; for teaching self-reliance and innovation; and for integrating all of these lessons into the spiritual strivings of daily life.

*** Wilderness protection is service to God and country.**

We honor the Creator and remember our national journey to the present by preserving wilderness. The experience of wilderness shaped America and imbued her citizens with vigor, vitality and virtue.

*** Spread the message of spiritual values in wilderness**

Wilderness is more than a place for hunting, fishing and outdoor recreation. It is a place for spiritual reflection, renewal and increased awareness of God and our religious heritage. Let us preserve and protect America's few remaining wild places and seek to expand them wherever possible.

Without enough wilderness, America will change.
Democracy, with its myriad personalities and increasing sophistication, must be fibred and vitalized by regular contact with outdoor growths – animals, trees, sun warmth, and free skies – or it will dwindle and pale.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803 - 1882)

Endorsements

I have read the foregoing religious statement on the spiritual values of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area wilderness. I wish to support its message and its call for Minnesotans and all people of good will to preserve and protect this area and the areas surrounding it.

Please sign your full name, the name of the church or synagogue which you attend, plus the town or city where you live. Thank you for your support.

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Permission is granted to republish and circulate this statement.
Please return completed endorsement sheets to

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Thank you.

Photos from the Boundary Waters Canoe Area wilderness

