

God's Gift of a Beautiful and Bountiful Land

Introduction

*And Jesus withdrew himself
into the wilderness and prayed*

- Luke 5:16

THE FOLLOWING INSIGHTS DERIVE FROM EXPERIENCES AND REFLECTIONS THAT participants acquired over five days of hikes and discussions in the Bald River area of the Cherokee National Forest. They are extracted from notes that were recorded around campfires and during reflection times in camp and along the trail. We acknowledge redundancies, overlap and missing elements. Wilderness is too vast and too rich to report all of its many spiritual values.

Nevertheless, for our churches and for Tennessee, we see this statement as important. As the speed of society quickens, the pressures and stresses of urban life become more intense. People need the experience of wilderness more than ever to slow down, to restore spiritual sensitivity and especially to find God. Wilderness holds solutions to the modern predicament that are more important than ever before.

At the same time the Cherokee National Forest is unique in America. It contains remnants of the ancient forests that existed prior to the last Ice Age. One result is that this area is one of the most biologically diverse regions in all the world. It is estimated that over 20,000 different plant and animal species exist in this forest.

Biologists and economists have thoroughly examined this forest area to understand its potential in scientific and financial terms, but crucial moral and ethical considerations remain unaddressed. This is partly because churches have forgotten their historic voice on wilderness and partly because citizens have difficulty expressing what they intuitively feel and know. To remedy this failure we call the churches and citizens of Tennessee to a recovery of their appreciation of spiritual values in wild areas.

The following statement represents basic Christian themes about wilderness and our human spiritual need. We have added Scriptural citations to show that these insights are not new, but elaborations on Biblical principles that have often been overlooked.



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

Psalm 10:24

Principles of Wilderness for Churches

Wilderness helps us to learn about God

Wilderness declares the eternity and the infinity of God. When we leave the crowds of city and town and enter the peace and quiet of wild places, the deep questions of human life rise to the surface. Away from cell phones and computers and the commotion of hurried lives, we find solitude and sense intimations of eternity.



In the quiet of wilderness we more readily sense God's presence. We realize that spiritual insight is available through wilderness. Christians have always taught that "the heavens declare the glory of God and the earth reflects His handiwork." Without wilderness, humans are impoverished in their ability to know God.

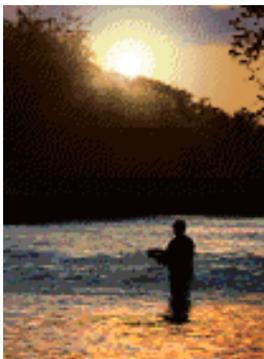
For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that all people are without excuse.

Romans 1:20

Wilderness teaches us in solitude

Wilderness fosters quiet which cultivates reflection. Solitude, by definition, is a quiet condition of space, place and mental pace that allows the soul to awaken to awareness of its interior connection to the cosmos. In solitude the prophets encountered that which was far greater than the human.

If we go into wilderness to find solitude, we may learn to know ourselves. We wonder why we have been away so long – from the peace that quiets soul and spirit. Solitude encourages a spirit of prayerfulness, peace and reverent receptivity within which we may hear the still, small voice of God.



Solitude in wilderness serves as a framework for self-knowledge. God isn't silent. In solitude we may connect to God and know a communion with all living things. In wilderness, God's love is always pouring forth, always shining, always present. We realize that it is we who have not been receptive and listening.

The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose.

Isaiah 35:1

Wilderness fosters opportunities for spiritual

renewal

Wilderness connects us to the processes of renewal and restoration. Wilderness embodies the natural rhythms of life and death and new life – if we are intentional in seeking to learn from its examples.

Wilderness can also slow us down, and so bring deep rest and restoration. Tensions are released because we encounter a natural system in harmony with the pulses and purposes of life. A natural therapy for mind and spirit results that is re-creative, regenerative and revitalizing.

When combined with prayer and a striving to know God, it nurtures deep thought, even inspiration and spiritual awareness.



O Lord, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all: the whole earth is full of your riches... Thou sendest forth thy spirit... and thou renewest the face of the earth.

Psalm 104:24,30

Wilderness tells us about humility

In wild places, we experience God's creation as immense in its majesty and endlessly intricate in its uncountable details. Under a vast canopy of stars and surrounded by mountains and forest and one of the world's most biodiverse plant and animal communities, we are astounded at the many unique forms of life, the unusual 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 our human creations. We develop new respect and awe for what God has created in these woodlands. Surrounded by all of these wonders, we realize our smallness.

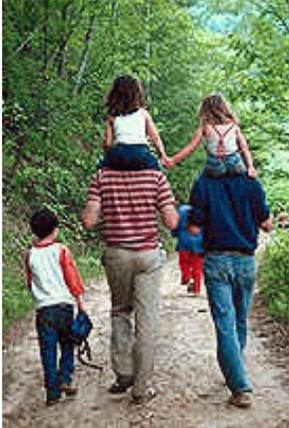
As the Prophet Job was anciently taught of the greatness of God and the smallness of human life, in wilderness we are reminded of this same lesson.

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

Job 37:14

Wilderness imparts lessons about relationships and values

Wilderness teaches through living parables. It speaks of beauty and balance, austerity amidst abundance, subtle spiritual presences, and challenge with opportunities that lead in many directions.



In contrast, the language of money or number calculations has little ability to reflect the spiritual and inspirational values of wilderness. The blessings of wilderness stretch far beyond what can be quantitatively measured.

The qualities of wilderness, because of their spiritual and therapeutic dimensions, cannot be bought, sold or even found in urban settings. The peace and the quiet of wilderness knows nothing of the marketplace, or buying and selling, or political boundaries.

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

Wilderness cultivates community

In wild places, people cooperate to overcome the challenges of the world. Our needs are reduced to the essentials for living. We pare our requirements down to the simplest of necessities to sustain our lives. We bring only what we can carry. We learn frugality, simplicity, moderation, even austerity. We waste nothing.

When gratefulness to God is added to the wilderness experience, what we have becomes sufficient. Out of the need to cooperate, we learn to help and serve one another. A fellowship of respect and necessity forms.

Young people learn essential lessons of cooperation and community. Adults and elders teach the lessons of life. We pray together and share spiritual experiences. The bonds of fellowship grow deeper and stronger between us. Deep and enduring personal connections are formed. Old bonds are renewed. We become rich in our enjoyment of the simple but essential things of life.



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

Psalms 55:14

Wilderness offers 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 creatures. All of the plants and animals depend on other living forms that complement one another in a grand network of living harmony. Even the soil, the flows of water, and the seasonal turns of weather participate in this vast chorus of abundant life. An interdependent and interconnected network of relationships and connections flourishes.

Wilderness demonstrates organic wholeness, yet it is far more complex than any human design. Biologists report that a forest wilderness is not only complex, it is more complex than we can comprehend. In its intricacy and harmonious wholeness wilderness provides a living example of how cities and businesses might be designed so that society can flourish in harmony with the land and the justice of our Lord. Wilderness teaches healthy wholeness. Wilderness can also provide answers to questions that we have not yet learned how to ask.



*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

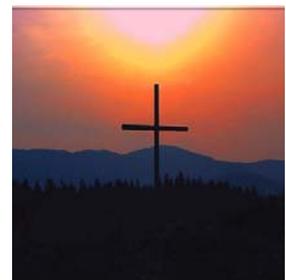
Wilderness as tithe and a form of Sabbath

If we enter into the quiet of wilderness, we may sense the touch of eternity in the present. Wilderness shifts our human consciousness from doing toward being. Clock time seems to slow down and in special moments one may sense timelessness hidden in the moment.

We recover a deeper sense of rest and peace. The meaning of Sabbath as a dedication of place, space and time back to God becomes more apparent. Everywhere in nature there is intricacy, connectedness and the presence of the Spirit of the Lord.

We are reminded what it means to enter into God's rest (Hebrews 4:9-11). As we remember God and are thankful for many blessings, as our thanksgiving, we may offer all this back to God. Thus we may see wilderness as a tithe that we give back to God, that we preserve and protect for future generations.

*For thus says the high and lofty One that inhabits eternity,
whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place,
and with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit...*



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Recommendations for action

As a result of these insights about wilderness, and especially because wild places suitable for wilderness status are fast disappearing, we make the following recommendations for the care and keeping of the special wild lands in the Cherokee National Forest.

◆ Visit Tennessee's wild places

The spiritual values of wilderness cannot be properly appreciated from inside a town or city. Take time to visit a wild area. All wild areas can provide rejuvenation and inspiration, especially when approached with reverence for its Maker.

◆ Love what God has created

Respect for the land cultivates an attitude that is 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 earth, we are called to protect the integrity of creation.

◆ Discern the spiritual values of wilderness

Wilderness has many values. Time spent in wild places can become more rewarding and fulfilling when prayer and spiritual striving embellish time in nature. Clergy especially should learn how to enjoy the spiritual benefits of wild places.

◆ Bring children and youth groups into wilderness

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

◆ Preserve, protect and expand wilderness

Wilderness is a form of tithe, a setting aside of what is God's for the benefit of others yet unborn. They too will need to experience and enjoy the beauties of creation undefiled by the heavy hand of technology and development.

◆ Maintain the peace and quiet of wilderness

The quiet of wilderness lies at the heart of its ability to restore and regenerate visitors. This quiet requires the elimination of mechanical noise pollution. This includes off-road vehicles and mechanized transport and equipment.

◆ Expand wilderness in Tennessee

For wilderness to expand, we need to protect those public lands which are suitable for wilderness designation. There are numerous appropriate areas in the Cherokee National Forest.

◆ Wilderness protection is service to God and country

We honor the Creator and remember our nation's journey by preserving wild places. Our ancestors faced the wilderness. The challenge of the mountains shaped Tennessee and gave its people a strong, self-reliant character. This same experience imbued America and all her citizens with vitality and virtue.

A Prayer for Wilderness

“O Lord, our God, How majestic is Your name in all the earth!

You fill the earth with your presence,
All creation reflects your handiwork.

O God, thank you for Your wilderness
and for the many blessings which pour forth
from Your untrammelled creation.

In wild places, You speak, even to me, just as You did
with our Lord and the prophets and saints of old,
and You give me hope through the renewal
that You show in wilderness.

As I pray in this beautiful and bountiful place,
with its rushing river and the bright blue sky,
perhaps I glimpse something of the world
as You created it.

And here I know that You call on me
to protect and preserve what remains of wilderness,
to nurture and expand it, to find my own renewal in the wild.

You have made us to have dominion over all your works,
You have put all things under our feet (Psalm 8:6)
Please help us to treat your good earth as you would treat it!

O Lord, help us to be faithful to this lofty commission.
Help us to steward this gift of Your beautiful creation,
And to save some of this bountiful land
for generations of Tennesseans yet unborn.

“O Lord, how excellent is your name in all the earth” (Psalm 8:9).

Amen

Endorsements

I have read the foregoing statement on the spiritual values of wilderness. I



wish to support its Christian message and its call to the people of Tennessee to preserve and protect wilderness in the Cherokee National Forest.

Please sign your full name, the name of the church that you attend, plus the town or city where you live. If you can, please invite others also to sign. Thank you for your support of this special effort to save the best of what is left of Tennessee's wild lands.

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Permission is granted to copy, republish and circulate this statement.

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Thank you

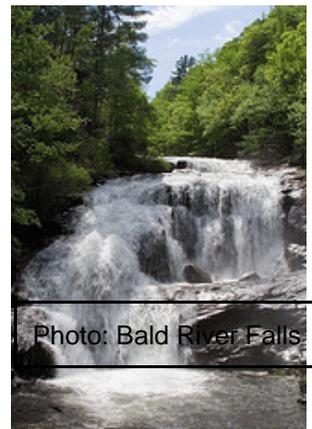


Photo: Bald River Falls

Background quotes

The visible world is like a map pointing to heaven... We learn to see the Creator by contemplating the beauty of his creatures.

- Pope John Paul II

We Christians have a responsibility to take the lead in caring for the earth.
The Reverend Billy Graham



*Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.*

Isaiah 43:19

*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



In wilderness I sense the miracle of life, and behind it our scientific accomplishments fade to trivia.
Charles A. Lindbergh

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

*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