



The Religious Campaign for Wilderness

East Texas "Wilderness Cathedral" Statement

Peace With God: Peace With the Land

A Reflection on Religious Responsibility for Wilderness

On the Trinity River, Waterwood, Texas

March 3 - 5, 2005

I will plant in the wilderness the cedar, the shittah tree, and the myrtle & I will set in the desert the fir tree and the pine and the box tree together, that they may see and know and consider and understand together, that the hand of the Lord has done this, and the Holy One of Israel has created it.

Isaiah 41:19-20

And Jesus withdrew himself into the wilderness and prayed.

Luke 5:16

Care for the Lord's good earth is fundamental to believing Jews and Christians.

Native Americans as well as the faithful from the world's great religious traditions are unanimous in striving to respect the earth. A caring and benevolent relationship to the land is integral around the world to right religious belief and behavior.

Wilderness is that portion of God's creation that remains similar to how it was originally created. Such lands, by definition, are pristine and untrammled. Yet only small portions of this uninhabited and undisturbed form of creation remain. These portions of wilderness are valuable because wild lands hold insights and important lessons for humanity. They reflect God's evangelical witness and his pure nature in this world. For this reason they have special religious value.

The Psalmist sings how *the heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows his handiwork* (Psalm 19:1). The Apostle Paul declares a similar relationship when he writes, *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).

Locations where creation remains intact, such as are found in wild places, recapitulate in

microcosm the depth and immensity of the cosmos. Such places remind us of the greatness of their Maker. The poet William Blake artfully captures this relationship in his famous work *Aphorisms*.

Everything that lives is holy.
If the doors of perception were cleansed,
Every thing would appear to man as it is infinite.
He who sees the infinite in all things sees God.

Wilderness is also where we find solitude and spiritual renewal. It is a place that we humans may set aside and protect so that we may experience creation as the Lord made it.

In centuries past, Jews and Christians possessed a strong understanding of spiritual values in wilderness. The Hebrew prophets were in the wilderness. Jesus went to the wilderness to prepare for his ministry. The early saints went to the wilderness to find a more profound experience of God's presence. To those who cultivate an intentional and deep love for God, wilderness comes alive as a sacred garden filled with mystery, majesty, wonder, inspiration, even powerful spiritual experiences.

When God is sought in wilderness, it becomes a place of blessing for the practice of faith. History shows that great servants of God were converted in the wilderness. The Book of Genesis tells how Jacob awoke from a dream and declared that he did not know that his place was sacred. Moses found the burning bush in the wilderness. Jesus was transfigured atop Mount Tabor, not down in a city. The Apostle Paul was converted on the road to Damascus. In the nineteenth century John Chapman, popularly known as Johnny Appleseed, was converted in wilderness. So was Charles Finney who had an experience of brilliant light and blessedness in a grove of poplars. The pioneers of wilderness preservation, people like John Muir and Henry David Thoreau, were shaped by an understanding of the spiritual blessings latent in wilderness. As children of God we share in a profound need for the refreshment of wilderness. People need wilderness to heal the sickness of souls deadened by consumerism, individualism and materialism.

*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 as the Birthplace of Holy Experience

*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

Then was Jesus led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness.

Matthew 4:1

Christianity and Judaism trace their origins to sacred events in wilderness.

Great spiritual experiences are more readily found in wild places than in cities. Religion is always born out in wilderness. Significantly, religion never begins in urban settings.

In our own experience, we find that the spiritual blessings of wilderness are many. When visitors to wild places feel the presence of holiness amidst towering trees and tumbling streams, they are connecting through the Holy Spirit to a living presence sustained by our Creator God. When this experience is coupled with remembrance of God, it imparts wonder, admiration and humility. In this way one can progress through creation to awareness and appreciation of the Creator. Spiritual formation begins.

This progression occurs because the qualities and attitudes that open nature are holy attitudes. More precisely, it is those qualities called the virtues which open the spiritual dimensions of nature. By definition, the virtues are attributes of the Lord in human behavior. Therefore, as we grow in the virtues, we also grow in godliness and goodness.

Spiritual Values

The spiritual values that we discern in wilderness include at least the following

Thankfulness

Through thanksgiving, we enter into right relationship to God and the land. Thanksgiving as a spiritual practice leads to worship and praise; it transforms wilderness into a holy cathedral uplifted with the presence of God. Without thanksgiving, we fail to acknowledge the Creator of creation; the land then seems empty and barren.

Wonder

Wilderness evokes a powerful sense of wonder. This sense derives from the immensity of creation and its intricacy of detail; it leads to an intuition of God through the substances of created reality. Through wonder we are humbled. Like children we then become open to learning; we are willing to be taught.

Mystery amidst Majesty

In wilderness we are not the center of the universe. The majesty of wild creation shows us, just as it once showed Job, the greatness of the stars, the complexity of the cosmos, the vastness of the deserts, even the fierceness of wild animals. Believers experience a world far greater and grander than human creations. A special communication emerges and we sense it. In this holy place we discern the presence of God. We let go of control and plunge into the great mystery of being.

Obedience

Wild creation operates according to laws and principles. Even the stars move according a divine order and purpose. Wilderness teaches obedience to its Maker because each part of creation demonstrates fidelity to its purpose (cf., Isaiah 1:3).

Renewal

Wilderness demonstrates regeneration, health, healing and wholeness. Wild places connect us to the processes of renewal and restoration. Wilderness teaches renewal because it embodies the rhythms and principles of life and death and new life. Wilderness also brings relaxation. Tension is released because

we encounter a system in harmony with the pulses and purposes of life. A natural therapy for mind and spirit results that is restorative, recreative, regenerative and revitalizing.

Integrity and community

All the facets of wilderness fit marvelously together. Wilderness demonstrates the natural harmony of an integrated and interdependent community. The harmony of the created order witnesses to human society of a yet higher divine harmony and so provides a test for the spiritual-ecological suitability, sustainability and integrity of human actions. In this manner wilderness urges humanity to design a similar wholeness and integrity into its society. Wilderness by its example silently calls us to integrate our structures into the great economy of creation.

Solitude

Wilderness fosters solitude and solitude cultivates reflection. In wilderness we may sort out our lives and gain perspective on our values and activity. We learn to know ourselves. In solitude we, like the prophets of old, encounter a presence far greater than ourselves. We sense the touch of eternity and perhaps the presence of God. Our actions and thoughts are tested in the divine presence. We gain perspective and sometimes inspiration; we are drawn deeper into appreciation of the Creator through creation.

This statement of the spiritual values in wilderness are just a beginning. Examination shows that many additional spiritual values exist in wilderness as well as a variety of other values.

Human Values

Wilderness holds additional sets of values beyond the above-noted spiritual values. Another set might be identified as human values.

The values in wilderness which we call human values are derivative values. They reflect the manner in which wilderness touches the heart, mind, soul and spirit of people and the way these influence our self-awareness, our social assumptions and understanding. These values are not innate to wilderness, but reflect the way that wilderness interacts with the human person and provides enrichment, therapy and quiet instruction in our quest to live rightly on the land. A few of the human values of wilderness include the following

Wilderness brings relaxation

Tension is released in visitors to wilderness because people connect to the processes of nature which are in harmony with the processes of life.

Wilderness offers rejuvenation

People feel revitalized in wild places because the purity of life in the wilderness lifts the spirit and frees them from artificial cares and concerns.

Wilderness facilitates spiritual insight

When time in wild places is combined with prayer, the presence of God comes into better focus. This brings inspiration and a deeper connection to life itself.

Wilderness cultivates sensory awakening

Exposure to the abundance of life in wild nature stretches the senses and awakens people to a range of perceptions beyond what one encounters in urban settings.

Wilderness allows for outdoor recreation

People need opportunities for hiking, camping, fishing and retreat from the complexities of artificial living.

Wilderness offers experience of animals and plants

This imparts a sense of the kinship of life. We realize that they come from the same Source as we do, and this extends our awareness and respect for their Creator.

Wilderness brings a natural therapy

Time in wilderness requires activity that in turn requires alertness and attention. These qualities aid the development of a robust constitution which is healing.

Just as with the spiritual values of wilderness, there are many more blessings or values which wilderness imparts to humans than shown on this list of human values. This is but a quick and introductory tour of their many faces.

Natural Values

A further category of wilderness values includes what we might call natural values. These are attributes of wilderness that are rooted in its character, function, order and composition. These qualities of wilderness are embedded into its very processes. They describe the way nature interacts with itself and the larger world.

Wilderness is obedient to its nature

The creatures are fiercely uncompromising in following their purposes, but they remain vulnerable to human action. Only humans disobey. Every species is a sacred manifestation of a unique aspect of the will of the Creator.

Wilderness is a pattern of cycles and circular movements

These demonstrate the connectedness of nature's parts and show the circular systems which human society must imitate if it will survive over centuries.

Wilderness is a coexistence of life, death and renewal

Wilderness demonstrates the fundamental processes of life. These teach us to think beyond our own generation and to see the effects of our actions beyond the span of our individual lives.

Wilderness is a form of music

The sounds, tones, tunes and melodies of wild nature are like a great orchestral composition. This music of creation strikes a great harmony which floats over the land and permeates all its features and creatures.

Wilderness embodies peace and quiet

Alongside toughness and resilience to extremes of wind and weather, wilderness is also delicate and fragile. The peace of nature comes from the harmony of its outer shape with its inner nature.

Wilderness reflects the divine economy

In wilderness there is balance, order and symmetry. The human economy comes into focus as a wholly owned subsidiary of the natural economy (i.e., the environment). For long term stability the human economy must be rooted in the principles and processes of the divine economy. This means that the economy must function in harmony with the principles of God's creation or it will not endure.

Wilderness echoes the Gospel

The lessons of the land are in harmony with the lessons of the Gospel. This is because both derive from the same Word (or Logos).

This collection of the spiritual, human and natural values of wilderness are but a small beginning. The more one spends time in wild places, the more these qualities emerge as a commentary from Gods creation upon human society.

Restoring Right Relationships

*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

RELIGION IS NOT MERELY A SYSTEM OF BELIEF ABOUT GOD, nor is it only a pathway to salvation. It is also a system of accountability and responsibility for human actions in the world.

As we explore the spiritual values of wilderness, we are struck by the extent to which our society has forgotten God. This is not so much evident in its words, but it is glaring in the failure of its actions to match its words.

The Scriptures are clear here. God accounts humans to not only accept His authority outwardly, but to live inwardly according to His precepts. Words are not enough. Our actions speak so loudly that our often words are drowned out in the contrast.

In light of our experience in wilderness as well as the testimony of Scripture, the following guidelines constitute a beginning set of requirements for Christians and Jews and all people of goodwill in regard to wild places.

- * Clergy and members of churches and synagogues, and all citizens should seek God in wilderness. This can allow recovery of an ability to teach the potential to learn key spiritual lessons from wild nature.
- * Churches and synagogues should take youth groups into wilderness. This will help young people appreciate the lessons of life.
- * Religious groups and all citizens should advocate for the preservation, protection and expansion of formally designated wilderness areas. Our spiritual traditions come alive in wilderness.
- * Churches and synagogues should encourage the maintenance of peace in wilderness areas. Without the intentional protection of quiet and the potential for solitude, wilderness becomes violated and no longer serves as intact or genuine wilderness.
- * Government should respect the spiritual values of wilderness in addition to the social,

psychological, therapeutic and ecological values of wilderness.

- * Church and synagogue members should inform their elected representatives about the importance of preserving and expanding wilderness areas.
- * Human society should learn from the design of wilderness and seek to integrate its social and economic order into the ecosystem of the planet. In wilderness is the preservation of the integrity of the world as it was originally created and an example of right relationships between all of its parts.
- * People of faith must recover their largely forgotten wilderness traditions. Most Christian and Jewish organizations have left an understanding of the spiritual values of wilderness in the past and must exercise a keen intentionality to restore what has been eroded, and in some cases even lost. Through wilderness can emerge a restoration of theological wholeness.
- * Religious, civic and environmental organizations should work together to preserve a fading wilderness heritage. There is strength in cooperation that is greater than what individual churches, synagogues, or environmental organizations can generate. In unity is the preservation of wilderness.
- * Citizens of East Texas should unite to oppose the power lines proposed by Sam Houston Electric Power Company (SHECO). They should call their elected representatives and write letters to newspapers, to legislators, and to the power company calling for the protection of wilderness before the construction of new power lines, especially because alternative routes are available.

As citizens and friends of the great State of Texas, we submit these recommendations, first that our religious traditions might be strengthened and reinvigorated to fulfill the biblical mandates to love God, to love our neighbor and to care for the Lord's good earth. And second, we submit these recommendations that wilderness might be preserved, protected and enlarged. This is our duty to both God and country.

This statement with its several recommendations represents our prayer for this special parcel of wilderness. We invite you to enter into this prayer and to share it with many others that it might spread across this land and inspire others into a more vigorous and effective protection of the land which God has given into our dominion and stewardship.

Please sign this statement (see below), and then circulate it to others. Share it with clergy and members of your congregations; send it to legislators; circulate it widely that it can be brought to the attention of church and civic publications. In this way this religious message about the care and keeping of the land might be spread far and wide.

At the same time, the health of our nation and its strength into the future depends first on integrity at home and especially integrity with the land.

An Invitation for Your Support

