

**A SERMON GIVEN BY REV. PAUL KOTTKE
UNIVERSITY PARK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

Sunday, August 24, 2008

Title: Reflections on Poetry: “The Peace of the Wild Things” by Wendell Berry

Scripture: Psalm 124

Theme: When we are disconnected from our souls and from the “soul of the Creation,” we experience an anxiety that overwhelms us. But by turning to the wisdom of the earth, we can find a peace that allows us to live in the presence of today’s uncertainty.

This sermon brings to a close this sermon series that has taken us into a variety of poems, some by contemporary authors, some by explicitly religious authors both Christian and Muslim. With each poem, we have been invited to reflect on our faith relationship with God from perspectives out of the ordinary. You have been most receptive to these reflections and I believe they have touched each of us in some way of Beauty.

This morning, we read a poem by Wendell Berry:

Born in 1934 in Henry County, Kentucky, where both sides of his family have farmed for five generations, he is the author of more than forty books of essays, poetry, and novels. He was professor of English at the University of Kentucky and a past fellow for both the Guggenheim Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation.

In 1965, he purchased a working farm in the county of his parents. The name of the farm is Lane’s Landing, which he still works to this day. He and his wife, Tanya, are members of the Port Royal Baptism Church. Mr. Berry is a vocal critic of the Christian Church for failing to challenge cultural complacency about environmental degradation and for being open to other religious traditions.

For Mr. Berry, the “good life” to which our faith calls us includes sustainable agriculture, technologies that are not harmful to the

common good, healthy rural communities, connection to the land and place, and reverence towards the interconnectedness of life.

That which is a threat to the “good life” includes industrial corporate farming, ignorance, hubris, greed, and violence against others and against the natural world, including environmental destruction.

The author Wallace Stegner wrote of him, “It is hard to say whether I like this writer better as a poet, an essayists, or a novelist. He is all three, at a high level.”

Mr. Berry has written of himself, “My work has been motivated by a desire to make myself responsibly at home in this world and in my native and chosen place.” He also has said, “The most alarming sign of the state of our society now is that our leaders have the courage to sacrifice the lives of young people in war but have not the courage to tell us that we must be less greedy and wasteful.” An example of this disconnect to our style of living is with the current increase in the price of gasoline. Rather than use this as an opportunity to begin to wean ourselves off of gasoline onto more sustainable sources of energy, the loudest voice in the public square has been to increase the production of oil so that we can continue at our high level of consumption with the lowest price possible.

Let me read this poem: *The Peace of Wild Things*

*When despair for the world grows in me
And I wake in the night at the least sound
In fear of what my life and my children's lives
 may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
Rests in his beauty on the water, and the great
 heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
Who do not tax their lives with forethought
Of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
Waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*

This last week, I emailed out my journal of my wilderness experience in July. I began my reflections with acknowledging the anxiety I felt, to be sure, the anxiety of whether I was again prepared for the strenuous challenges of this year's hike. But there is that deeper anxiety as well, an anxiety that all of us experience because we live in an anxious time. Rather than trying to pretend that we don't know anxiety, in my journal, I suggested that we do well to acknowledge it and push through it – lest we allow it to control our lives.

So I suggested in the journal that one of the reasons that I do the wilderness backpacking is precisely to put myself in a position where I have to push myself beyond my anxiety but, as well, to gain that “grace of the world” of which Mr. Berry wrote.

I wrote:

*So I leave the Los Pinos River, Flint
Lake, and the Weminuche wilderness
with deep gratitude for having so deeply
blessed my life and soul yet once again.
To push myself so far outside of my
comfort zone, to hike up mountain sides
that are so daunting, to experience being
too wet, too dry, too cold, too hot – and
then because of all this to see the
majesty of the wilderness peaks after a*

*storm, to see a deer come wandering by
your camp site, to witness the
kaleidoscope of colors within the
mountain wildflowers – is to know that
life is more than just survival. Life is
more than some random acts which we
endure. Woven into the fabric of life is
beauty, awe, a sense that at its core life
is good, and creation is as it should be.*

The scripture reading this morning, Psalm 124, speaks to the experience of overcoming anxiety with the assurance of God's presence:

*If it had not been the Lord who was on
our side when foes rose up against us,
they would have swallowed us up
alive... Our help is in the name of the
Lord who made heaven and earth.*

[Psalm 124]

Yesterday, I attend Shabbat worship at B'nai Havurah Synagogue. Rabbi Steve Booth-Nadav will be preaching here next Sunday. At yesterday's Shabbat service, a nationally known Rabbi, Michael Lerner, founder of the Spiritual Progressives Movement, offered the Torah reflection which was based on Deuteronomy chapters 7-10. As you know, Deuteronomy is attributed to the words of Moses as the people were preparing to cross into the Promised Land. Through the voice of Moses, God is warning the people that they must live in harmony with God's order and the order of the land, if they do, they will be blessed; if they don't, then the land will dry up and cease to be a blessing.

Rabbi Lerner lifted up the same wisdom of which Wendell Berry writes – that there is a deep order of Creation, that when we live in harmony with Creation we will know “the grace of the world” and we will be free of our paralyzing anxiety, free from our brokenness.

If we believe that we can continue to live at the expense of our environment then we live in

peril of our brokenness. We live disconnected to the wisdom of Creation.

How many of us in our anxiety fall into a type of despair, a paralyzing belief that the issues are so large that no real chance will occur? The cynicism of our day.

Rabbi Lerner spoke of the name of God, of Yahweh, which can be translated as “the One who Transforms.” God, in this Jewish tradition then, is that Life Force which exists through out all of Creation, including the Indwelling Presence within us, [which we as Christians call the Holy Spirit] which transforms “that which is into that which can be.” The passages of Deuteronomy warn against idolatry as destroying the blessings of God. Rabbi Lerner suggested that the greatest idolatry of our day is that of Realism – you know the voice well, perhaps at times it has been your own voice that says, ‘Oh come on now that will never be. We simply have to come to terms with what is.’ Realism is thus embracing present conditions and declaring that no transformation will occur – that things always have been this way and always will.

According to Rabbi Lerner such a perspective denies the existence of God – the One who Transforms. The great gift of the various religious traditions is that as a people of faith we continue to believe that the Realm of God is alive and transforms into God’s dream of what can be, even as we live in the In-Between Time.

We live in an anxious time, an intense time. Over the next three months, the issues of the economy, the general election in November, the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, global warming, all of these will rise their intensity. Not to mention our concerns regarding our own physical health, mental and emotional well-being and that of our loved ones. While we are called as people of faith to stay engaged not

only as citizens of the U.S., but as well as children of the Global Village, we do well to keep ourselves grounded in that deeper wisdom that comes to us when we live in the sacred harmony of God’s Creation.

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And I wake in the night at the least sound
In fear of what my life and my children’s lives
may be,*

*I go and lie down where the wood drake
Rests in his beauty on the water, and the great
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