

A Place for Peace and Renewal: The Spiritual Values of the Mt. Hood Wilderness

September 29, 2006



Background

In late September, in the peace and quiet above Upper Salmon River Meadows on the flanks of Mt. Hood, a group of Christian clergy and lay leaders met to pray and reflect on the value of wilderness. Their day of retreat into the wilderness afforded a quality of reflection and encounter seldom attained in urban life. One member of the group found it an opportunity to confront questions about death and dying. Many found relief from personal and professional constraints, enjoyed a sense of renewed energy, and reveled in the quiet space to just be themselves. Another wrestled with the dissonance between his business persona and his ecological values; in the process, he saw more deeply into his own ethical challenges, and grieved the trade-offs generated by worldly success. Others found solace in the quiet beauty and fresh air, and comfort in the companionship of new friends.

After a short hike, most of the day's activities unfolded on the side of a hill surrounded by old growth larch and firs. The group sat amid moss covered branches and rocks. The birds and squirrels joined into the discussions with their chirps and chatter. These sojourners went out into the woods with prayer, reflection and a striving for discernment, to begin to articulate what the spiritual entails amidst that expanse of wilderness. Their gathering gave rise to the following statement, based on the experiences of those present.

Observations

The pristine landscapes surrounding Mt. Hood inspire us to celebrate and witness to the following spiritual values of wilderness:

So Jesus often withdrew into the wilderness and prayed. Luke 5:16 (NKJV)

- 1) **Wilderness preserves peace and quiet.** Away from the competing cacophonies of our daily lives, and surrounded by the beauty of nature, we can be truly still. Wilderness is the “quiet place,” *eremos* in Greek, where we can withdraw for prayer, rest, and reflection. Quieting ourselves removes barriers to perception, both physical and spiritual, and in the silence we find peace.

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. Psalm 19:1-2

- 2) **Wilderness is a place to encounter God.** The Psalmist encourages us to “Be still and know that I am God,” (46:10). In the wilderness, we can see God’s creation, God’s abundance, God’s profusion of life, and God’s profligate beauty. God’s invisible qualities and divine nature can be understood through what God has created (Romans 1:20), and in the solitude of wilderness, we more easily hear, see, and understand these lessons.

Lord, you have made us for yourself, and our souls are restless until they find their rest in you. St. Augustine (354-430)

- 3) **Wilderness allows self-discovery.** All life is a gift from God. The magnificent beauty of wilderness renews our awareness of this gift; it reminds us that we are part of a wonderfully diverse and interdependent network of life on a uniquely beautiful and life-giving planet. As Christians, we acknowledge Christ as the center of this universe, and see ourselves as members of Christ’s body. Christ is the one by whom and for whom all things were created, in whom all things hold together, and through whom all things are reconciled to God and renewed (Colossians 1:15-20). In wilderness, the heightened attention we have to God and to the integrity of God’s creation reminds us who we truly are.

I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her... Hosea 2:14

- 4) **Wilderness cultivates relationships.** When our sense of place in the community of life is awakened, our relationships are deepened. Wild and pristine natural systems instruct us regarding relationships and interdependence in God’s creation. Just as God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—exists relationally, our spiritual lives

also derive from relationships, with God, others, and nature. Like the Israelites, our experiences in wilderness instruct us in the fundamentals of community life.

Do you know how the clouds hang poised, those wonders of him who is perfect in knowledge? Job 37:16

- 5) **Wilderness fosters humility.** In wilderness, the vastness of creation and God's glory reflected there reminds us that we are small; we learn about humility in the face of the immensity of the world. Our increased awareness of all of the life around us deepens our respect for the integrity of what God has made. As we see through creation to its Creator, we rediscover the need to see the holy beyond appearances. As we stop and consider the wondrous works of God, and revel in their variety, the impulse to exploit or control is replaced by our ability to delight and enjoy. Respect for God's creation, as seen in the designation of wilderness itself, involves restraint. Wilderness fosters this moral virtue.

And God saw all that he had made, and indeed it was very good. Genesis 1:31

- 6) **Wilderness cultivates appreciation of beauty.** In its spectacular beauty, wilderness reminds us of our deepest values. We remember that life is good and beautiful. This cultivates in us a deeper appreciation of traditional spiritual values, focusing our minds on what is good, and beautiful, and true. Noticing the beauty in things leads to a deeper sense of their God-given goodness – we come to appreciate beauty both large and small. We also discern that once we log, pave, or develop a place, we cannot bring it back to its original glory. Natural systems in their time-honed beauty show us the completeness of life that abides God's ways.

And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel. Luke 1:80

- 7) **Wilderness is a crucible for spiritual refinement.** For all of the reasons noted above, wilderness experience can generate in us a renewed perspective, and instruct us in wisdom. Wilderness solitude also provides excellent contemplative space for prayer, reflection, and devotional reading. The challenges of wilderness can test us, the purity of wilderness can inspire us, and the remoteness of wilderness from the distractions and temptations of civilization aids our spiritual vision. It is no wonder that so many prophets and religious heroes in our biblical tradition found God and took spiritual sustenance in the wilderness.

And the leaves of the trees are for the healing of the nations... Revelation 22:2

- 8) **Wilderness provides restoration and renewal.** Like lying down by still waters, time with God in the wilderness restores our soul, and we are renewed and refreshed. In wilderness we come face to face with God, and can rest in God's open arms Wilderness experiences bring healing, restoration, and regeneration.

Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the Lord is God... Psalm 100:1-2

- 9) **Wilderness inspires praise.** The abundant gifts gained in wilderness lead us to praise God. With the chorus of creation itself, we exalt our maker. This spontaneous gratitude enriches our practice of worship, and fuels a desire for service.

The Lord God took the man and placed him in the garden to cultivate and care for it. Genesis 2:15

- 10) **Wilderness fosters stewardship.** Wilderness protection benefits both humans and non-human creation, and helps preserve the fruitfulness with which God has blessed the earth and its creatures. By protecting wilderness, we act as good stewards of God's earth, and we also preserve special places where we can nurture our faithfulness to the human vocation of stewardship. Wilderness protects the essential qualities of both the world itself in its natural processes and the infinite possibility of human nature.

Therefore, following upon these ideals and values, we make the following recommendations:

Recommendations

As a result of these insights about the spiritual values of wilderness, but also because wilderness is being threatened from a variety of developmental forces, we make the following recommendations regarding the care and keeping of the spectacular wild places around Mt. Hood:

Take time to visit wilderness. You cannot fully appreciate the spiritual values of wilderness from the city. Wild areas can provide rejuvenation and inspiration when approached with reverence and remembrance of their Maker. The Mt. Hood wilderness is not the only wild area that has value, but it is a cherished landscape for Oregon's most populous community.

Love and respect 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.

Remember that 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.

Preserve as much wilderness as possible. Twenty years have passed since any new wilderness was designated on Mt. Hood. The legislative proposals currently being negotiated in Congress for Mt. Hood Wilderness reflect the vision, cooperation, and political commitment of the members of the Oregon congressional delegation, and we encourage them to persevere in bringing a strong wilderness bill to passage. Qualifying wild lands in addition to those currently proposed could be designated wilderness in the future; we believe it is wise to protect as much as possible now.

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 wilderness. I wish to support its message and its call for Oregonians and all people of good will to preserve and protect the areas proposed as new wilderness in and around Mt. Hood.

Please sign your full name, the name of the congregation 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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