

Dear Friends,

Sometimes I think I'm a glutton for punishment. Three weeks ago Virginia and I finished a week of hiking in the Holy Land. Much of our hiking was either up or down one of the mountains in the Holy Land. As I mentioned before, they were often strenuous hikes, and many of them were two to three hours long.

I had a free afternoon on Saturday, and so I went hiking. I am staying about 30 miles from Rocky Mountain National Park at Estes Park, Colorado. I drove to Estes Park so I could go hiking in the Rockies. I hiked up (and down) one of the mountains at the Lumpy Ridge Trailhead. My hike lasted for about three hours. After all that hiking in the Holy Land, in my free time I took a three hour hike. I must be a glutton for punishment.

Joking aside, the hiking during this clergy leave has been a real joy – even the strenuous hikes. One of the positive aspects I find about hiking is the time for reflection, especially when I am hiking alone. On Saturday I had plenty of time for reflection. While I spoke to a number of people while I hiked – and even walked along with two couples for a while – I was alone most of the time. Some of my thoughts went back to the beginning of this clergy renewal leave. This leave began with looking at Celtic spirituality in my reading and in my time in Scotland and Wales.

One element of Celtic spirituality that is important to me is the closeness to nature that expressed. The Celtic people were a rural civilization and close to nature. Mary Calvert in *God to Enfold Me* (one of the books I was reading at St. Deniol's Library) noted that the Celts, before they were Christian, expressed a unity with the world around them. After they were converted to Christianity, this unity with nature continued through a strong belief in one God – the Father as creator, the Son as the redeemer and the all powerful Spirit. They were conscious of the truth of the presence of God in the great phenomena of nature. This consciousness of God as creator was especially present in their prayers, hymns and poetry.

I believe the Scriptures also reflect this closeness to God in creation – and the consciousness of “the presence of God in the great phenomena of nature.” The Wisdom literature, particularly the Psalms, are abundant with references to creation. Likewise, some of the prophets use references to creation to talk about God's relationship to Israel and all the world. I am especially thinking of the later chapters of Isaiah in this regard.

As I hiked on Saturday, I was reminded of the wonders and greatness of God's creation. I identified with the Celtic – and the Biblical – closeness to God in creation. Over the past three months I have hiked in the mountains of Scotland, Israel and now Colorado. All these mountains were beautiful. They were all different. And, they all turned my thoughts to God.

The sturdiness of the mountains reminds me of the strength of God. As the Psalmist says in Psalm 65:6, “By your strength you established the mountains, you are girded with might.” Looking out over the Rockies, I could also reflect on how the mountains caused me to think of the glory of God – or as the Psalmist says in Psalm 76:4, “Glorious are you, more majestic than the everlasting mountains.”

The place of creation in drawing me closer to God is a very real part of my spiritual life. Yet, there is another element of my spiritual life that is more important – an element that I must return to no matter how fulfilling I find my time in nature. The community of faith, and my relationship to that community, is more important than time spent drawing close to God through creation – or as I sometimes have said, with communing with God in nature. It is through my relationships in the community of faith that I am able to share in the worship of God, to share with others the joys and sorrows experienced in life, to share my faith with other people – and hear and be renewed by their sharing their faith with me.

Being part of the community of faith is essential in a spirituality that is Biblically based – as well as in the Celtic expression of that spirituality. Yesterday (Sunday, November 2<sup>nd</sup>) I was able to share in the community of faith that is Calvary Episcopal Church in Golden, Colorado. The experience of being a visitor in another parish is not the same as being at Nativity, but it did connect me to the wider community of faith that is the whole Body of Christ. Whether in our own parish or in the wider church, we need that connection to other Christians and the community of faith that is the Body of Christ in the world.

I am looking forward to being back with you in the community of faith we share at Nativity.

Bruce +

P.S. And, I am a glutton for punishment. I expect I will spend some time hiking in the desert of New Mexico during my retreat that will be the final week of my clergy renewal leave.