

Spiritual Pathways: Loving God in Creation

Introduction at beginning of Service:

Hands up if you want to experience God in your life more powerfully!

Seriously though, I want you to think about that question. Do you want to experience God in your life more powerfully? Would that describe you?

Last week we started a new series called 'Spiritual Pathways: Worship as a Way of Life'. The aim of the series is to help us to worship God not just on Sundays but with our whole lives.

Last week we looked at this scripture verse:

Romans 12:1 which the Message paraphrases like this:

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life - your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life - and place it before God as an offering.

Each week, we're going to look at a different aspect of everyday life: things like nature, relationships, our minds, our senses, our time and resources. Each area is a spiritual pathway, a road to journey down so that we can connect more deeply with him.

Today we are exploring loving God out of doors, or loving God in creation. How might the world around us in all its wonder help us to experience God? We seem to get this idea that God is watching from a distance, not wanting to get too involved, but God's story shows God intimately involved with his creation.

If you haven't experienced God as powerfully as you would like in your life, it could be that God has been showing himself to us all along in all sorts of ways - we're just not paying attention.

That's what these spiritual pathways are for: They provide ways for us to recognise God's loving presence in our day to day lives.

I'm not on a mission to burden you with extra spiritual disciplines. This series is more about expanding your vision of God and inspiring you to activate what may be lying dormant within you. It's about tuning in to what God is up to and being willing to respond if God prompts you to try something new.

Sermon:

Stories are tremendously powerful. It is stories that give shape to civilisations and communities. They give you a regular pep talk about your origin, about who you are, and where you are headed. Story is deeply spiritual and central to life. The Jewish people knew this because God told them. He told them to bind their stories on their foreheads, to wrap them around their arms, to put it on their door posts and to tell their children over and over again.

God set up feasts to tell the stories again and to have a party around the telling of it. And when Israel went astray it is because they ceased telling the story and they ceased letting the story inform their identity and vision.

Alasdair MacIntyre says 'humans are essentially a story-telling animal. I can only answer the question 'what am I to do?' if I can first answer the prior question, 'of what story do I find myself a part?' This is the key question for humans.' So stories are not just for entertainment. They are a universal thing and they lie at the heart of things. They help us make sense of our selves, of our world and what we are to do in it.

So what story are we following and what stories are shaping our lives?

As I take you on a brief tour of a Christian spirituality for loving God in creation, the place to start is a quick reminder of our Christian story. Don't underestimate how important your story influences your outlook.

The story of creation from Genesis gives us context in which to see our world, how we see our place in it.

God is our loving creator. Out of the nothingness, God speaks creation into being, powerfully and joyfully. He brings order and rhythm. Sky and water, day and night, water and land, plants and animals, work and rest. We're his creatures along with every other creature and plant, the world and the entire cosmos around us. But we are also set apart - we are made in God's image, we are in God's likeness, able to relate and respond to Him, and we're given the task of care-taking over creation. All the works of God's hands matter greatly to him and are very good and cherished by God.

We are at the centre of God's attention within all his creation. How can we not pay attention to him? This story points in every way for our worship to involve the whole of our life.

Ps 8 - the psalmist express the joy, honour and humility that our story brings!

It begins: O Lord, our Lord, your majestic name fills the earth!

- God's character and presence is embedded in creation.

When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers—

the moon and the stars you set in place—

what are mere mortals that you should think about them,

human beings that you should care for them?

Yet you made them only a little lower than God

and crowned them with glory and honour.

You gave them charge of everything you made,

putting all things under their authority—

the flocks and the herds

and all the wild animals,

the birds in the sky, the fish in the sea,

and everything that swims the ocean currents.

O Lord, our Lord, your majestic name fills the earth!

Genesis 2 & 3 provide a second account of creation, straight after the first one.- this time it is more earthy and intimate than the first account, another deeply relational picture.

'Then the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground. He breathed the breath of life into the man's nostrils, and the man became a living person. Then the Lord God planted a garden in Eden in the east, and there he placed the man he had made.'

But in Adam and Eve's act of rebellion that follows, the intimacy, joy and trust shared between God and humankind turns to fear, shame and hiding. This story represents the human condition to us. We sense the truth of this story when we experience that the world is not the way it was intended to be and as something lacking in ourselves too.

But then the entire story of the Bible shows God's unstoppable pursuit to restore people to himself and to restore creation fully, the climax of the story being when God enters into creation as one of us, in the person of Jesus Christ, that we might find restoration through him.

Romans 8:19-23

For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day ... For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. And we believers also groan, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory...

These texts (and many more that we haven't covered) are powerful for dealing with life as it comes to us each day. They remind us of our story, of who we are.

- know your story, celebrate your story!

Worship in creation begins with recognising it as God's playground.

Psalm 8 O Lord, our Lord, your majestic name fills the earth.

Wonder is a launching pad to worship

Wonder is the only launching pad for exploring a spirituality of creation.

By wonder I mean keeping open eyed, expectant attitude, not assuming we've got it all figured out, appreciating that God is so big we can never cease to be surprised. God will always exceed our calculations, he is always beyond anything that we can put in a box.

Wonder is natural and spontaneous to us all. When we were children we were in a constant state of wonder - the world was new. We staggered through each day - touching, looking, tasting.

My daughter Tessa is 8. I love the way she is captured by things. Just this week, at school her teacher announced that students can start trying out for their pen licence. They also watched a short video about a young man who is one of 15 pen masters left in the world. These are people who have mastered penmanship to an extraordinary level of skill. Tessa showed me the video when I got home and then went to her desk for the next 30 minutes trying some detailed drawing.

Words are wondrous for her, running is wondrous. Touch, taste, sound. It is a world of wonders.

As Christians, we find to our delight that all of this wonder is confirmed in Genesis - we are part of a creation that is very good.

But gradually a sense of wonder gets squeezed out of us. There are so many reasons why. We don't live in a world that promotes or encourages wonder. Mostly the lessening of wonder seems to happen as we develop in competence and mastery over ourselves and our environment.

How do we recapture that wonder?

- spend time with children - they can teach us a lot.
- Have you ever heard the phrase 'thin place'?

A 'thin place' is a metaphor with Celtic Christian origins. A thin place, in this tradition, is a physical place where we have experienced God more directly. The Celts used to say that heaven and earth weren't far apart from each other, in fact, only three feet apart, separated only enough that we can't see it, but God is still close. But some places on earth were seen to be thin in the sense that the separation between heaven and earth is narrowed. Thus, people sense God's presence more readily in so-called thin places. These are not always pleasant experiences - but always transforming and re-orienting. Can you think of a time you experienced a thin place?

For me, on holidays, Kiama rock pool.

Read White Crane story from 'Have Heart' - Steve Berger

Gratitude is where wonder takes you:

When God restores our sense of wonder in these ways and many more, gratitude wells up within us.

God has made us to bring honour to him and to each other and to our world. A key step in our worship is to turn to God and say thanks as we experience life.

I believe gratitude is built into our bodies. Its how God made us to be.

It seems science agrees with me - In the last 20 years or so a lot has been researched and proven using scientific methods to learn about gratitude. It turns out it is very good for you in a whole lot of ways! Professor Robert Emmons.

Physical:

boosts our immune system, increases blood supply to our heart, increase our alertness, enthusiasm, and energy, improve our sleep.

Psychological:

tend to suffer less stress and depression, tend to care for themselves by eating well and exercising. tend to be more resilient in hard times - Reframe situations to find how it can be ultimately beneficial.

Social:

Focused attention beyond themselves - seen as friendlier. Less dissatisfied - more content with what they have, enhances empathy and reduces aggression

For Christians - gratitude is not just a good idea:

- it is essential part of worship of God.

1 Thessalonians 5:18 - give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

- Gratitude photo journal - Gratitude 365

- Start of day / End of Day

Deep Belonging to our Place

What follows from a life of gratitude, open to wonder, is we develop a lifestyle of responsible care and reverence for the place we live around and the ecology of life around us. We learn to be mindful of how our lives affect each other and the world at large.

Our society doesn't make it easy to become like this. Most people believe they have some sense of how their actions affect others, but technology and transport and a myriad of other factors keep us from having an awareness of the cause and effect relationships going on around us. For example, you have probably experienced buying groceries without any idea where the food originated or who was involved in the production and delivery process.

But I have seen this sort of maturity in a few places: Usually they're pretty interesting characters:

When I was a teacher, I went on a camp which involved a farm visit in South Gippsland. I was moved by my conversations with Sam, who ran the farm. He had such a keen awareness and vast knowledge of the inter-relationships of life within the soil, attentive and sensitive to his animals. Complete commitment to his place.

But you don't have to be a farmer - I've seen it in a few very grounded local Darebin folks too. - volunteers and councillors.

We can learn a lot from aboriginal culture too - their connection to the land.

- restoring things to a right relationship - lobbying politically, investing in friendship.

- Prayer walk - walk around your neighbourhood. Ask God to help you love your neighbourhood and care for right relationships within it.

Listen as I describe the following scenes. What do these actions have in common? Did any of the scenes of worship surprise you?

Joe and his brother Alex loved playing in the fields of long grass near the river. On the long summer holidays they would play there for hours making tunnels and cubbies, having all sorts of fun adventures in the grass.

When Ray started volunteering down at the community garden, he made new connections, not only to the new friends he made there, but also with the land, the soil, the plant life, the food he eats. Getting his hands dirty has enlivened Ray in ways he can't even explain.

Maggie lives a busy life. Too busy in fact. The rush of tasks and travel has left her feeling off kilter with the rhythms of life. God is leading her to put her feet back on the ground. She is getting more sleep. Three mornings a week she goes for an early morning walk around her neighbourhood. New rhythms to get in sync with the natural rhythms of God's good world.

Maria has lived in Preston her whole life. She remembers when it was mainly paddocks. She has seen a lot of change over the years. She takes an active interest in the changes because this is her place, its where she belongs. This is where God has placed her. There's always time for neighbours to have a cuppa around her kitchen table. She a keen volunteer and is involved with groups who lobby the council for good outcomes for her neighbourhood.

These are all worshippers who are moving down the spiritual pathway of loving God out of doors.