

“God’s Two Books”

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First Congregational United Church of Christ

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Texts: Romans 1: 18-23 and Job 12: 7-13

We sure do live in a beautiful place, don’t we? It’s exceptional to have an entirely beautiful Memorial Day weekend, but even when it’s cold and rainy, we still live in a beautiful place. I don’t know about you, but for me, if I hadn’t lived here with our miles of trails and open nature areas during COVID, I might have gone mad! The truth is, not only are we living in a beautiful place, but it may be truer than I ever imagined that God truly lives in Michigan – especially northern Michigan. I’ve argued that point for years living out of state, but perhaps it’s true. We’ll come back to that!

It’s hasn’t always been completely beautiful here. I joined my Leadership Otsego County class with a visit to several area natural sites on our “environmental day” last Thursday. Groen Nature Center, including some chance to see the presently “off-limits” areas, to the beautiful demonstration gardens near Gaylord High School. We ended our day in the Pigeon River Country State Forest Discovery Center. I learned a lot there about the history of the PRC,

including how at one point virtually every square inch of forest had been removed in the lumber boom. I also learned about the many dams that changed the flow of the rivers, and a host of other “historical facts”. On the one hand, I was so pleased to see how far we have come from those days, but I was taken aback when I realized that we have many more environmental challenges than we did in those days. We have weeks to talk about that...

Today, I want to introduce you to Daniel Cooperrider’s book *Speak and the Earth Will Teach You: A Field Guide to the Bible*. In this first chapter, Cooperrider takes us through history and teaches us how the Christian Church used to have two books, if you will, to study and draw closer to God. The first book you know well as the church has placed that book central to our Christian theological study. It is...as you imagine...the Bible. The Bible is a good way to get to know God, but it’s not the only way. There’s another way...a second book...the book of nature. Even the Bible itself speaks to this truth: From Romans 1, “Ever since the creation of the world, God’s eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made.” From our Job reading, “Speak with the earth, and it will teach you.” Famous theologians from Calvin, to Aquinas, to Augustine of Hippo, Hildegard of Bingen, Bonaventure, and

Meister Eckhart (to name a few) all saw a central place of nature in the search for faith, wisdom and the presence of God. Eriugena, rather than talking about two books, talked about Christ wearing “two shoes” in the world, scripture and nature.

“Eckhart and other medieval mystics speak of a world that is thoroughly ecosemiotic, wherein every aspect of the world – from the insects on the ground to the stars in the sky – is saturated with theological meaning, each thing bearing the Creator’s signature.” What if we were to imagine that everything in the world bears the Creator’s signature? I wonder if we would then treat nature differently? Would we take pause concerning what we kill, how we poison our rivers and forest, or how we use resources of the earth? Thomas Aquinas argued that “knowledge of creation and of the creatures was essential to knowledge of God.” Creation is essential to the knowledge of God...not a backdrop, and certainly not a location of evil or disorder like we’ve sometimes made it out to be.

Even John Calvin imagined it in his favorite metaphor, [Nature] is like a theater where God’s glory is constantly on display.

Cooperrider makes what I believe to be his most important argument when he reminds us that “not only do Christians and Christian theologians tend to seek

God primarily in the book of scripture, but in the book of scripture itself we tend to focus only on the human characters...We tend to look for ourselves in all things, even in God. To try to understand God by way of reading and reflecting on words written by humans about humans would be like trying to understand a forest by walking around Manhattan and staring up at the human-built canopy of skyscrapers. In doing so, we might learn something about human nature, but not about forest nature." The best part is that nature is everywhere...no matter where we live...and it's right outside our door. One doesn't need to go far to see the presence of God all around us – especially here. The aim of Cooperrider's book, and ours over the next several weeks, is to "reread the Bible in a living, breathing, yearning, determined search for God from the perspective of nature."

Augustine of Hippo put it this way:

Some people, in order to discover God, read books. But there is a great book: the very appearance of created things. Look above you! Look below you! Note it, Read it. God, whom you want to discover never wrote that book in ink. Instead, God set before your eyes the things that God had made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that? Why, heaven and earth shout to you, "God made me!"

Speak and the earth will teach you. Amen.