

**Sermon, The Rev. Canon Pam Hyde — Grace St. Paul’s, Tucson**  
**September 19, 2021**  
**Mark 9:30-37**

It was a beautiful sight last evening as I was driving south down through the Santa Cruz River valley from Green Valley to Tubac about an hour before sunset. A cloudburst to my left, obscuring part of the Santa Rita mountains, was lit up by the low-angle sun, creating a brilliant partial rainbow. As I continued south, my position between the sun and rainstorm changed, and the rainbow changed with it in wonderful, beautiful ways. I could hardly take my eyes off it to watch the road in front of me. But within minutes I was leaving the cloudburst behind, and the rainbow disappeared. In front of me, the skies were clear and the golden evening sunlight of mid-September draped softly across the desert in the valley and the mountains on either side. I had a delicious feeling of being part of a grand, comforting, and delightfully beautiful world, like a sublime painting come to life. I was overwhelmed with gratitude for being part of something so deeply beautiful. “Millions of years before us the earth lived in wild elegance,” wrote the Irish poet and priest John O’Donohue in his book, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*. “Landscape is the first-born of creation. . . . There is a poignancy in beholding the beauty of landscape: it often feels as though it has been waiting for centuries for the recognition and witness of the human eye.”<sup>1</sup> But as I drank in this view, I soon felt sorrow creeping in as I knew that this landscape was changing and might never be the same. The changes in the world’s climate lay heavy on my heart and I couldn’t help but think about what we might be losing. I found myself praying that humankind could wake up to what was happening and change the way it treated the rest of the natural world, so that we could hang on to this beautiful Earth and carry hope for its future in our hearts.

In 1972, a law professor named Christopher Stone wrote a game-changing law review article titled “Should Trees Have Standing?—Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects”.<sup>2</sup> His treatise galvanized a global movement to grant nature the legal status of per-

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<sup>1</sup> John O’Donohue, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace* (New York: Perennial, 2004), 42.

<sup>2</sup> Stone, Christopher D. “Should Trees Have Standing?—Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects.” *Southern California Law Review* 45 (1972): 450-501. Accessed at <https://iseethics.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/stone-christopher-d-should-trees-have-standing.pdf>.

sonhood. Within a well-reasoned and objective scholarly legal paper, Stone wrote this: “To be able to get away from the view that Nature is a collection of useful senseless objects is...deeply involved in our abilities to love....To do so, we have to give up some psychic investment in our own sense of separateness and specialness in the universe.... I do not think it too remote that we may come to regard the Earth...as one organism, of which Mankind is a functional part....”<sup>3</sup>

Most of us grew up in a world that had a very hierarchical and very anthropocentric view of the relationship between humans and the rest of the natural world. Humankind and the rest of creation were separate, and the natural world was just a collection of resources to be used by humans. The natural world served *our* purposes. But is this the way it should be? Do we properly understand our place in Creation? Do we really think that everything else that God created was just created for our use?

Let me ask you this: What do you think Jesus would say?

When I thought about our Gospel reading this week, and thought about how it related to creation care, that’s the question that came into my head. What would the Jesus that we see in this passage of Mark say about the way we treat God’s beautiful world? We hear Jesus teaching his disciples that greatness is not what they think it is and the hierarchy of God’s kingdom is the opposite of this world’s. This is the Jesus that is a real revolutionary in his time. What he said and what he taught was crafted to topple traditional hierarchies and turn the conventional wisdom of first century, Roman-occupied Palestine on its head. Very few could wrap their heads around what he was saying — even his own disciples — and his challenge to the hierarchies of power resulted in the most brutal form of execution he could have possibly experienced. But ultimately it ended in his victory over death. “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all,” he told the disciples. Welcoming a little child into their midst, he continued, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” Now, a child in ancient society had a different status than a child today. Rather than being seen as innocent and in need of protection, children in Jesus’ time were viewed as economic assets, able and expected to work, prop-

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<sup>3</sup> Stone, “Trees,” 496, 499.

erty of the parents. They couldn't speak for themselves, and they had no power, no rights, no influence, no standing in society. So Jesus' lesson to the disciples was that welcoming, in his name, those without status is what matters, not their own status. True greatness comes from servanthood — taking care of the vulnerable in the community, the powerless, those who are undervalued and ignored by the culture but still have value in the eyes of God.

So if Jesus welcomed and served the voiceless, powerless, and invisible of his society, how might he view the non-human elements of the world that God created? I find it hard to imagine that he would view them any differently. The scriptural tradition that Jesus came from is steeped in a somewhat different view of the relationship between humans and the rest of the natural world than the modern world has held. In the Genesis creation story, God gave humans authority within creation — *rada* in Hebrew, often translated as “dominion” or “rule”. But as biblical scholar and theologian Richard Bauckham points out, that authority must be understood in the context of the rest of the Hebrew Bible — from the clear ultimate authority of God, to God's covenant with *all* of creation after the flood, to the limited nature of kingship within the community of Israel, to the Sabbath laws that rest and rejuvenate the land and the wild creatures. Human authority, therefore, must be exercised:

- by caring responsibility, not domination;
- within a theocentric [or God-centered] creation, not an anthropocentric one;
- by humans as one creature among others;
- by letting wild nature be as well as in intervening in it;
- as much in restraint as in intervention; and
- only in such a way as respects the order of creation and the right of other living beings to live and flourish.<sup>4</sup>

Doesn't this seem to dovetail with Jesus' view of human-to-human relationships that we see in the Gospels? With his rejection of human power constructs that leave the powerless, the vulnerable, and those without voices on the outside?

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Living with other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2012), 7.

Throughout Scripture we see God’s creation portrayed as a community of creatures, with human beings as only one part of the interconnected community. Together with our fellow creatures we offer worship to God. All of creation, humans included, “belongs to God, exists for the glory of God, even reflects the glory of God.”<sup>5</sup>

If Scripture reflects a view of human relationship to the natural world that is more communal than hierarchical, why does Christianity today seem to remain silent, at best, on that view? For centuries, the Christian biblical view balanced a limited authority of humans within creation with the overall communal interconnectedness of creation — what Bauckham might call a vertical hierarchy balanced with a horizontal mutuality. Francis of Assisi in the late 12th and early 13th century lived the Christian life that perhaps best reflected the communal relationship of humans to the rest of creation. But only a few centuries later, Renaissance humanists in Italy began to change the balance and emphasize the idea of human beings as rulers over the rest of creation. “Humanity’s place within creation [was] abolished in favor of humanity’s exaltation above creation.”<sup>6</sup> In the early 17th century, on the heels of these Renaissance humanists, came the Enlightenment and the English philosopher Francis Bacon, who understood the notion of human dominion given in the Genesis creation narrative not as a limited authority but as humanity’s right and power to use nature for human benefit. “I am come in very truth leading you to Nature with all her children to bind her to your service and make her your slave,” he wrote. He saw it as the task of science and technology to subjugate nature to human use. At this point, “western attitudes to nature became exclusively anthropocentric rather than theocentric,”<sup>7</sup> and nature was de-sacralized. It was no longer seen as existing for the glory of God and to reflect the glory of God, but only as something given to humans by God to exploit for human benefit. The natural world no longer was seen to have intrinsic value, and humans had no ethical obligation toward the rest of creation. Modern Christianity, having lost its biblical doctrine of creation in the tidal wave of the Baconian ideology of domination turned to notions of stewardship to regain an element of moral responsibility toward creation. But it still retained a vertical relationship of superiority with

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<sup>5</sup> Bauckham, *Living*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> Bauckham, *Living*, 43

<sup>7</sup> Bauckham, *Living*, 52

nature. Only with the rise of the environmental movement in the past sixty or so years has humanity rediscovered a relationship of mutuality and reciprocity with the natural world. And the church is finally returning to its roots and its original understanding of the place of humanity within the created order. As Christians we have work to do to fully repair our broken relationship with the natural world and renew our respect for God's primacy over all creation.

We live in a hierarchical world. So did Jesus. But Jesus understood something that we so often forget. The Kingdom of God values in different ways than the world does. Jesus defined greatness as being last of all and servant of all. Jesus said that the way to gain honor and standing was to receive those without honor or standing. As disciples of Christ, how are we following the teachings and examples of Jesus in our relationship with the natural world? How can we examine the ways in which we treat the rest of creation as ours to use for our benefit instead of respecting the right of other living beings to live and flourish? Are we mindful in our habits? Our practices? Are we ready to put aside the ideology of domination our society espouses for the good of other species and the health of the Earth itself?

Christopher Stone, the law professor who argued for legal standing for the natural world, endured ridicule for his position. But "in Ecuador, the constitution now declares that nature 'has the right to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles.' In New Zealand, officials declared [in 2017] that a river used by the Maori tribe of Whanganui in the North Island to be a legal person that can sue if it's harmed."<sup>8</sup> And in 2017, an environmental group sued the state of Colorado not in the role of plaintiff, but as an *ally* of the *named* plaintiff, the Colorado River, claiming that "the state violated the river's right to flourish by polluting and draining it and threatening endangered species. If a corporation has rights," they argued, "so, too, should an ancient waterway that has sustained human life for as long as it has existed in the Western United States."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> New York Times, September 26, 2017. "Corporations Have Rights. Why Shouldn't Rivers?" <https://www.ny-times.com/2017/09/26/us/does-the-colorado-river-have-rights-a-lawsuit-seeks-to-declare-it-a-person.html?smid=em-share>

<sup>9</sup> "Corporations Have Rights. Why Shouldn't Rivers?"

Can it be that we're on a path to once again recognize the sacredness of the natural world? I pray that we are. I pray that soon we will all see ourselves not as separate and special, but as only one part of the interconnected community of creatures, created by God, belonging to God, and reflecting the glory of God. May we open our eyes to the wonder of Creation and its infinite beauty. "The beauty of the earth is the first beauty," John O'Donohue reminds us. And "everywhere there is tenderness, care and kindness, there is beauty."<sup>10</sup>

*Amen.*

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<sup>10</sup> O'Donohue, *Beauty*, 12.