

## A Leader We Can Trust

By: Meagan McLaughlin

April 25, 2021. Scripture is filled with images of nature, and one thing evident in all of the stories, and all of our own experiences in God's creation, is the theme of connection of God to nature, and connection to God through nature.

Readings: [1 John 3:16-24](#), [Psalm 23](#), [John 10:11-18](#)

\*\*\* Transcript \*\*\*

One of my favorite places in Minnesota is Gooseberry Falls, on the North Shore. From the parking lot, you pass by the Visitor's Center and make your way toward the water, the splashing of the water against the rocks growing louder with every step, along with the sounds of voices and laughter on warm, sunny days. I've always loved water, especially running water, and one of the best parts of Gooseberry is that it is really three waterfalls in one, with the water pouring down each rocky cliff, one after the other, on its way down the river.

The river is surrounded by rock — all colors, all shapes, all sizes, some set like stairs to climb as you make your way to the Upper Falls, some smooth and flat and perfect for sitting on, some rising out of the river itself like stepping stones allowing the courageous to cross from one side to the other in search of new paths. And edging the stone are thousands of trees, with paths running through them, like so many veins, carrying air, light, animals, and people deeper into the woods, and back again.

And then, of course, there is the water itself. I recall one year sitting by the edge of the Upper Falls, listening to the water colliding with the rocks and then rushing over and around them, when I noticed something I hadn't before. As Gooseberry River makes its way down the Upper Falls, it doesn't go down all in one rush, but divides and flows around the rocks in the cliff, forming hundreds of mini waterfalls as it goes. I became fascinated with how different they all were, in size, shape, direction, even speed, and I could have spent hours watching them.

I took pictures of course, but that hardly does justice to the beauty that can be experienced when you are sitting there, so close you have to raise your voice to be heard over the roar of the water, and can feel the mist off the rocks a few feet away.

Moments like this connect me with the presence of God in profound ways, because with stone, dirt, water, trees, sunlight, and air all around, I feel grounded in the Spirit of the one who created it all.

Scripture has so many images of nature, starting with the story of creation where God spoke and breathed all things into being, as Miss Alena talked about. The psalms described the created world singing and praising the creator, bringing solace, healing, strength, and rest to all of creation, like we heard in Psalm 23 today. Moses finds sacred space in a burning bush, and removes his sandals so that he can touch the holy ground with his feet. Elijah, when he is exhausted, afraid, and completely empty, is nourished, rested, renewed, and reassured by God in a hidden cave on a hill, far from the city he'd fled. And so many stories tell of God speaking to creation and even controlling it, as when he parts the Red Sea for the Israelites, and brings water from stone for them to drink.

And in the gospels, Jesus often teaches in fields, and mountains, and gardens, and even from boats, and uses images of grain, water, and trees, among other things, to explain the kin-dom of God to those who

follow him. And he also reveals creation responding to the creator in stories like the calming of the storm. Today, Jesus describes God's connection to God's people using the image of a shepherd, guiding and caring for us, the sheep.

One thing evident in all of these stories, and all of our own experiences in God's creation, is a theme of connection of God to nature, and connection to God through nature. In our gospel today, Jesus tells us that just as the shepherd knows the sheep, he knows us, and we know him. He knows our voice, and we know his voice, just as Mary knew Jesus' voice when he said her name in the garden outside the tomb. The truth of this knowing is revealed in the world around us. Anyone who has seen the documentary "March of the Penguins," narrated by Morgan Freeman, may have been struck, as I was, by the description of young penguins hatched while their mothers are on a months-long journey to bring food to their families, who nevertheless know one another's calls and can find each other out of hundreds of penguins despite never having heard each other's voices before. Jesus knows us, and we know Jesus, out of all the millions of people on earth.

This feels especially profound this week as the verdict for Derek Chauvin in the murder of George Floyd was rendered, and as I reflected afterwards that George's cry to his mother was heard. This time, in this moment, justice was served.

There is still so much evil and brokenness and sin in this world, so much healing to happen, as we wait for justice to roll down like waters. Reverend Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas, in her book *Stand Your Ground*, describes how black theology speaks to this lived reality: God is by nature free, transcendent of all the brokenness and sin of this world. And, God's work in us and in the world is about freedom. Freedom to be who we are as children of God.

This, Douglas says, is what gives people who are not yet truly free the courage and endurance to proclaim boldly that wherever people are in bondage, oppressed and marginalized, God is there, and hears their voices just as surely as God heard the cry of the Israelites in Egypt. God heard George Floyd's cry, and the cries of all who suffer. Our second reading, from 1 John, speaks of this boldness, promising that in this beautiful and broken world of now-and-not-yet, God cannot help but be faithful to who God is. And we cannot help, being created by God, to continue the work of transformation, justice, and shalom.

We don't often think much about sheep and shepherds, but when we do, if you are like me you probably envision fluffy white cuteness, wandering beautiful countryside, with a shepherd dressed in pristine, flowing robes to follow them. Reality is much different from that — sheep are dirty and smelly, they get lost sometimes, and there are so many dangers that threaten that the shepherd must guard against, sometimes taking the brunt of the damage on themselves in the process. In Psalm 23, the shepherd leads us beside still waters, providing rest and renewal, but also guides the sheep through the inevitable valley of the shadow, walking with them no matter what is happening. In a world where finding leaders that we can truly count on, leaders that know us and hear our voice, can seem nearly impossible, Jesus the good shepherd is a leader we can trust.

We who were created, shaped, and formed in the image of the God of freedom follow Jesus the shepherd, and we're reminded with every step that we are intimately connected with the created world around us. Grounded in the created world of earth, trees, animals, birds, air, sun and moon, we're renewed and reminded that no matter what happens, we always know God, and God always knows us. We can stand against evil, knowing that we can trust the shepherd, who has never failed us yet. Guided by the shepherd, we can face the valley of the shadow, the brokenness and evil of this world and even

our own sin, and boldly claim that the God of freedom, creativity, and life means for all of creation to be free, even if we are not there yet.

Thanks be to God.

\*\*\* Keywords \*\*\*

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