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Jesus and the Contemplation of Nature – A Primer*

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From Lake Wobegon to the Streets of Manhattan:
Behold then Follow

“And he said to them, ‘Follow me.’”

(MATT 4:19)

Behold the lilies, said Jesus. He also said many other things, of course. If I were to imagine him saying only *two* things, however, it would be this: “Behold the lilies, then follow me.” Behold the beauty of that holiness, then come with me and be holy. For Jesus, contemplation and discipleship are inseparable.

Such thoughts percolated in my mind as I found myself sitting in the middle of 52nd Street in Manhattan on the pavement, waiting for our street-full of a thousand or so stationary “marchers” to join with countless others, already underway, on Sunday, September 21, 2014 during the Peoples Climate March. A street vendor was tip-toeing in and around the crowd seated on the blacktop, trying to persuade men to purchase a rose or two for “their ladies.” Flowers! Just what we all needed.

But of course we did. Never mind the “flower children” of the nineteen-sixties. We all must be flower children these days, I thought to myself. How are you going to behold the lilies, if there aren't any lilies anymore?

Then there are the fireflies. When our children were young, we would sometimes get out a blanket when we were in Maine, and just sit there on the grass some evenings watching the fireflies amassed in brilliant clouds, hovering just above the back field. Now the fireflies are gone, by and large. The same is true for the barn swallows that used to flourish in and around the chimney of the church next door to our Maine house. They're gone. My wife and I imagine, too, that over the course of forty plus years in Maine we have experienced not only a silent spring, as Rachel Carson once did, but also a silent summer and a silent fall. As we sit on our screened-in porch, at various times during the year, we sometimes ask ourselves, where have all the birds gone? Of course, we hear some of their songs. But the sounds of silence can sometimes be depressing.

With that flower vendor moving out of sight and with nothing else to think about, it soon dawned on me that I was once again falling into an environmental funk. That's a constant temptation of ecological theologians such as myself, along with many other people of good will these days. Rather, heed the words of somebody's grandmother, who once said: better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.

Having rid my soul of that environmental funk, I then found myself slipping into a theological funk. It occurred to me that I was part of a small contingent of Lutherans. I was *a Lutheran protester?! An oxymoron*, if I ever heard one (Martin Luther himself was something else, of course). I knew this story all too well.

I wrote my undergraduate honors thesis on the German resistance to Hitler. There wasn't much, I concluded. Yes, the Resistance Movement itself was remarkable and, all the more so, the life and death of the German Lutheran Pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whom I discussed at great length in my thesis. But as soon as I began to do research about such matters, I learned that many, if not most, German Lutherans simply stepped out of the way as the Nazi Behemoth clambered on toward absolute power. Some Lutherans even cheered that Behemoth. Whether Lutherans in the U.S. have been much better, I'm not totally convinced. Historically, my own ecclesial Lutheran identity, born of rebellion by a Catholic monk, had not pushed *me* in the direction of protest, at least when I was growing up. I knew in my blood, in those days, that Lutherans after the time of Luther weren't given to protesting too much. But as I looked around me at my fellow Lutherans sitting on the blacktop with me, my theological funk began to subside, as I realized that something relatively new was going on here.

It must have been Garrison Keillor who observed that at the gates of heaven the Jews will carry a shofar, the Catholics a crucifix, and the Lutherans a bowl of Jello. I saw signs of that Lutheran sensibility on the streets of Manhattan that morning, all around me. Nevertheless, I celebrated that particular spiritual presence—in the form that I observed it at that moment.

Just about every group that I saw carried its own sign or banner or flag, announcing its identity and its presence and promoting its own commitment to this good cause: the Hare Krishnas, the Unitarians, the Service Employees International Union, 350.org, the Sierra Club, the Hindus, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, St. John's Sunday School, Harlem, and many more.

We Lutherans carried three-by-two foot green signs, with "Climate Justice: For All of God's Creation" in large letters. In tiny print, I mean really tiny print, down in the corner of our signs, I spied some other letters. If you held the sign close to your eyes, as if you were reading a newspaper, you could identify these words, "Evangelical Lutheran Church in America." Onlookers might well have wondered: who *are* those creation-justice people with those bright green signs?

I gently chided one of the Lutheran staff workers about this, a young woman from the church's advocacy office in the nation's capital. It turned out that she had had a hand in designing our signs. "It never crossed my mind," she said, "to put 'Lutherans' in big letters. We were looking for the distinct message we wanted to convey, and we thought that 'Climate Justice for All God's Creation' was it." I agreed. Bless her. Good Lutherans always strive to announce the Truth, never to announce themselves!

On the face of it, that approach makes sense. After all, as far as I could tell, there were fewer than a hundred self-identifying Lutherans participating in that march of some 310,000 souls. And *we* were then to make a big deal about *our* identity?! Be that as it may, I was proud (a non-Lutheran sentiment, I know) to be carrying my own modest sign. Why? Because we had got it right. We had left Lake Wobegon behind and had headed for the streets of Manhattan. With that thought, I felt that I was emerging from my theological funk. But not totally.

There are Lutherans and then there are Lutherans, of course. To be perfectly honest, I prefer to hang out with Lutherans like those sitting there on the pavement around me, whose Jello had been spiked with the energy drink of *discipline*. For me, this is a critically important theological point for my own Wobegone identity as I aspire to be a follower of Jesus in this, our era of planetary emergency. Let me explain.

Martin Luther held that people coming together can be identified as “church,” that is, as followers of Jesus, when two things are evident: *first*, when God’s message about Jesus (God’s Word) is truly taught and powerfully proclaimed; and, *second*, when the sacraments of the Church, above all Baptism and the Eucharist, are celebrated in a way that is faithful to that message.

John Calvin taught the same, but he *added* a third “mark of the Church,” *discipline*. For Calvin, you can identify a group of people as Christians when, in addition to their faithful preaching and their faithful administration of the sacraments, they *also* exhibit signs that they are taking up their crosses to follow Jesus. In the words of that simple—some would say simplistic—hymn that was popular in the Christian counterculture during the nineteen-sixties in North America: “You will know that we are Christians by our love.” Calvin’s rendering of this point was much more sophisticated than my own interpretation here, as was Luther’s, but I think that the basic contrast I’ve drawn between the two Reformers’ views is correct.

Of more importance to me here, however, is this fateful theological fact. Calvin’s notion that the signs of the true Church are three—Word and Sacrament *and* discipline—was taken up in a fresh way, whether self-consciously depending on Calvin I do not know, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. This is what Bonhoeffer’s famous book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, was all about.⁹ If you don’t have discipleship, Bonhoeffer argued, you end up with what he called “cheap grace.” This kind of theological understanding of the Church’s faith then propelled Bonhoeffer to become a participant in the plot to kill the tyrant and mass murderer, Adolph Hitler, and eventually led to Bonhoeffer’s own death in prison, after that plot had failed.

How different is the situation we face today? It’s profoundly different in many ways. Yet there are some wrenching similarities. Climate change, which has been precipitated by the powerful and the wealthy of this world, is causing enormous disruptions of the Earth’s ecosystems and of the wellbeing of the poor of the earth, in keeping with the traditional African saying, “When two elephants fight, it’s the grass that suffers.” Rising sea levels will soon wreak devastation on the millions of mostly poor people who live in coastal Bangladesh. The exhaustion or poisoning of water resources, especially in places like the Middle East, will in all likelihood devastate vast regions of arable land and set in motion huge migrations of displaced persons, most of them poor, this, in addition to migrations already underway due to war. Globally, coral reefs are in serious danger, which threatens the wellbeing not only of a quarter of all marine species, but also the wellbeing of thirty million people around the globe who fish for a living.

Then there is the mundanely measurable, but undoubtedly monstrous, toll that climate change will take on all the creatures of the Earth, not just humans, but plants and animals and their habitats everywhere. Not to speak of the desecration of natural beauty all over the planet: the sublime glaciers of Switzerland and Glacier National Park, for example, have already begun to vanish. Forests are being weakened, many of them dying, in virtually all

regions of the Earth. Even the gracious monarch butterflies in North America are seriously in trouble.

Extinction may well become *the* code word to describe the horizon of every earthly creature in decades to come. This clearly is a planetary emergency of immense proportions, not unlike the European emergency that Bonhoeffer experienced, when he contemplated the ongoing German killing of Jews, Gypsies, gays, and the handicapped, the enormous destruction wrought by Nazi aggression more generally, and the prospect of a subjugation of the whole of Europe to Nazi brute force and perhaps areas beyond Europe, too.

Not every Christian is called to be a Bonhoeffer, to be sure. But every Christian is surely called to take with utmost seriousness the cost of discipleship in these times of planetary emergency. It will not do simply to preach and to administer the sacraments, and then to return to business as usual in our—to this point—relatively well-protected North American world. Nor will it do, as American “nature-lovers” are sometimes prone to do, to travel to wilderness areas, contemplate them in amazement, even see them as the handiwork of God, and then return to their safe and comfortable urban or suburban walled-in communities. Those who have ears to hear in this generation will hear that, to adapt an image from the Apostle Paul, the whole Earth is groaning. And Christians who are committed to bear the cost of discipleship, ought to be in the middle of many, if not all, the struggles to respond to that groaning and by laboring to “protect and serve” the earth (Gen 2:15, author’s translation) and all its inhabitants.

What heirs of the Lutheran Reformation are called to do today, I am convinced, is to join in a new kind of *procession*, with other faith communities which will surely want to take similar steps, predicated on their own traditions: from Lake Wobegon to the streets of Manhattan. And to do that Lutherans will have to be trained in a kind of non-violent alternative to the military’s training of its Special Forces.

Procession, then, is *the* word for Lutherans—and for other Christians in their own ways—today. Procession is the word for us to juxtapose to extinction. Liturgically we Lutherans know what procession means: recall Sunday’s Gospel procession, when the Gospel book is carried, led by the processional Cross, into the midst of the people. Now imagine that procession, once the Gospel has been proclaimed, not returning back to the sanctuary, but turning and heading for the door to the world outside the Church.

The Mass for Creation I attended at 8:45 a.m. the Sunday of the Peoples Climate March at St. Peter’s Church, Manhattan, was replete with processions, even though it was a low Mass that day: from the baptismal pool to the Table, from the Table, with the bread and wine, down into the midst of the people, from the pews moving to meet the ministers of the Eucharist, from that whole place of assembly—all together now, passing near the baptismal pool, making the sign of the Cross with the water along the way—to a meeting room, for instructions and coffee, of course. Then we continued processing out into the streets of Manhattan.

St. Peter’s does it all the more dramatically during the great Mass of the Easter Vigil. For a segment of the Scripture readings during that high liturgy, the whole congregation processes out of the sanctuary right on to the busy sidewalks of midtown Manhattan on a Saturday night. There, led by a processional Cross, vested clergy, and trumpets, the congregation sings Easter hymns as it marches to each corner of the block, from 54th Street and Lexington Avenue and back again. At each corner the Word of God is announced, with the help of a good electric megaphone.

Let's hear it for the Gospel Procession! Call the Gospel book a bowl of Jello, if you wish. But this is the Truth, typically unheard amidst the noise of our society, but a liberating promise for the crowds that walk such streets at any time or for those undocumented families that pick the apples in Washington State or for those nameless workers who wash the floors and change the linens in the high-rise hotels of Hong Kong or for those Inuit Lutheran parishioners whose families have lived on the island of Shismaref in Alaska for hundreds of generations, for the first time now being flooded by rising ocean currents, which have forced all to vacate their ancient island home.

This is what the Gospel procession announces. It's all going somewhere! There's hope for the whole creation! There's justice, finally, for every creature! It may not look like much now. What's a modest hundred, mostly waspish Lutheran marchers compared to a huge, incredibly diverse 310,000? What's a mere 310,000 climate justice marchers compared to the upwards of 13 million citizens who live in greater New York City and who are often preoccupied with other things? What's a New York City committed to reducing its greenhouse gas emissions 80 percent by 2050 compared to the whole nation of India now planning to add 455 coal-fired plants for electricity in the next five years?

The point is this. Behold then follow. Open the sanctuary doors and get that Gospel procession out on to the streets. Never mind if others think that you're carrying Jello. Never mind if you think that you're in an environmental or even a theological funk. In fact, by faith alone you're carrying the Gospel Truth. There's hope for every creature! That's what we've been called to announce, in the midst of all the other countless and likewise called groups and communities and organizations who also are struggling to care for the good Earth and all its inhabitants.

I saw one sign: "Atheists for Climate Justice." I have no doubt that they were called by God to be there. For us Lutherans and our fellow travelers, I say: whatever else others might be thinking or doing at this moment, start preparing now for the next Peoples Climate March. But without delay, do this: spike your Jello with the energy drink of discipline.