

“Naturalists: Loving God Outdoors”
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Eighth in a Series *Loving God Many Ways*

Psalm 148

June 14, 2015

I divided this reflection into parts, which I delivered at various points in the worship service.

Invitation to Worship

I was deep into winter, and it was night, and the road was empty. Highway 631 drops down from the Trans-Canada to Hornepayne, the small northern Ontario town that was my home. I'd been away at some meeting, and couldn't wait to get back. First, though, I had to stop.

I pulled over, turned off the engine, and got out. The cold bit (it was about minus 30). But there was no wind, and I was dressed for it. It was quiet. No other cars. I imagine the only wildlife nearby of any size were moose, and maybe a sleeping bear. And there was no light. None. My car lights were off. No street lights. No light from houses or towns. Even the moon was hiding.

I went to the front of the car. I lay back on the hood, and looked up.

Stars. The Milky Way was spilled across. Hundreds and thousands of stars I could see.¹ And, I knew, millions and billions beyond my eyes. I peered into the depths of the cosmos, and caught but a tiny glimpse of the wonder of God's creation. The glory of God.

As we start our worship, take a quiet moment to imagine yourself outside somewhere. And in your mind's eye, see the glory of God in that place.

¹ <http://earthsky.org/space/how-many-stars-could-you-see-on-a-clear-moonless-night>

Loving God Outdoors

Song: *God Sees the Little Sparrow Fall*¹

We hear the sparrow sing, and see the flower bloom, and we know God loves us too.

We've been looking at different ways, different styles, different pathways by which we love God. I've listed them in your Sunday News.² The idea is that each of us has ways to show our love to God. Our ways are shaped by our personality and our experiences. So you might show love to God differently than the person beside you. That's good! Their ways of loving God might not speak to you at all. Yet we are all blessed and our community is richer because of this diversity.

This year, we've already looked at the first six pathways. Today, our focus is the seventh: **Naturalists**. Naturalists love God in the outdoors.

Naturalists love worshipping in churches. It's just that, for them, creation is God's greatest cathedral. From the tiniest water bug to the most massive galactic cluster, the cosmos is the cathedral God himself has crafted.³ What better way, then, to experience God! Of course it far surpasses anything we can make. The loftiest steeple is a shadow of a mighty redwood. The gold-gilded altar is dull beside the riot of colour in a rainforest. The most impressive pipe organ is mute beside the morning song of a chickadee.

Bernard was a 12th-century monk in Clairvaux, France. He is known for his profound theological learning and insight, but listen to what he said: *"You will find more laboring in the woods than you ever will among books. Woods and stones will teach you what you can never hear from any master."*⁴

² Gary Thomas, [Sacred Pathways: Discover Your Soul's Path to God](#) revised edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010). Here are his short definitions of each.

Caregivers love God by caring for others.

Traditionalists love God with our ancestors.

Activists love God by confronting injustice.

Contemplatives love God through adoration.

Ascetics love God in solitude and simplicity.

Enthusiasts love God by engaging mystery and celebration.

Naturalists love God outdoors.

Intellectuals love God with their minds.

Sensates love God by engaging their senses.

I've changed the order Thomas presents them, to fit my planned order for this series. I've also modified some of the descriptions.

³ Thomas, 43-44.

⁴ Ibid, 47.

John Milton wrote this line in his poem *Paradise Lost*: “*In contemplation of created things / By steps we may ascend to God.*”⁵

Is this you? Do you worship well when walls are not around you? Is immersing yourself in creation how you ascend to the Creator? Are you a Naturalist?

Psalm 148

We’re going to read together Psalm 148. It’s a Naturalist poem, that calls on all of us to worship God within the wonders of God’s creation.

Hallelujah!
Praise the Lord from heaven!
Praise God on the mountaintops!
Praise God, all of his messengers!
Praise God, all of his multitudes!
Praise God, sun and moon,
and bright stars too!
Praise God, highest heavens
and waters that fill the sky!

Everything, praise the Lord’s name
because God gave the command
and you were created!
God set you in place
always and forever.
God made a law
that will not be broken.

Praise God from the earth,
you sea monsters
and all you ocean depths!
Praise God you fire and hail,
snow and smoke,
stormy wind that does what God says!

Praise God,
you mountains, every single hill,
fruit trees, and every single cedar!

Praise God,
you animals —wild or tame—
you creatures that creep along
and you birds that fly!
Praise God,
you kings of the earth
and every single person,
you princes
and every single ruler on earth!

Praise God,
you young men and women
you elders and you children!

Everyone praise the Lord’s name.
Only God is high over all.
Only God’s majesty
is over earth and heaven.

God raised the strength of his people,
the praise of all his faithful ones—
the people of Israel
who are near to God.
Hallelujah!

Psalm 148
Common English Bible (alt)

⁵ Ibid, 48.

Temptations for Naturalists

Any of the spiritual pathways bring temptations. We can take anything good too far or distort it.

You can be tempted to think your pathway is the best. You get so much out of it. Shouldn't others! A Naturalist might say, *"I don't need to worship God in a building or a worship service."* That's fine. But they can say it with a tone that looks down on those who do. The Naturalist pathway is no more authentic, truthful, free, or mature than the others.

Naturalists can be tempted to go on too many walks in the woods, alone. Many embrace the solitary experience. Being alone with God is precious. But so is being with your sisters and brothers in Christ. Jesus calls us to follow him together, to love God together. So resist the temptation of individualism.

Resist also the temptation to idealize creation. We sing about birds and bunnies, meadows and streams, and mountains. But creation is also the hawk snatching a bunny in her talons, and the steam flooding the meadow. One explorer, George Vaux Jr., described the mountains of British Columbia as, "cold, severe, beautiful, grand, unapproachably majestic."⁶ When I lived up north, I learned that creation is dangerous. God is not safe either. Still, God is good.⁷

The most dangerous temptation is idolizing nature. That is worshipping the creation itself, instead of the Creator. Nature is not God, and God is not nature. Nonetheless, exploring creation stirs me, more and more, to know the Maker. Also, to tend, protect, and use well what God has made.

Being cautious of these temptations can help us truly and joyfully walk the Naturalist pathway of loving God. So let's sing together "God of Wonders."

⁶ Mackenzie Funk, "Canada's Little Park of Wonders" National Geographic [???](http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2015/06/yoho-national-park/funk-text) (June 2015), [PP](http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2015/06/yoho-national-park/funk-text).

⁷ See Mr. Beaver's description of Aslan, who is the Christ-figure in chapter 8 of C. S. Lewis's The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.

Cultivating the Naturalist Pathway

Gary Thomas says we can cultivate the Naturalist pathway by believing, perceiving, and receiving.⁸

First, **believe**. We need to be spiritually awakened to God, to see the fingerprints of God in creation. When John Glenn went back into space in 1998, he said, *“To look out at this kind of creation, to not believe in God is to me impossible.”*⁹ Impossible for him, and for me too, I imagine. But John already knew God. Others have gone into space as atheists and returned as atheists. Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote, *“Earth’s crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God; but only he who sees, takes of his shoes [knowing he is on holy ground], the rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.”*¹⁰ Creation does not prove the existence of God. But for those who believe, it strengthens their love of God.

Believing, you can **perceive**. You can consider the greatness of God’s creation. That’s what I was doing as I lay on the car hood, wondering beyond my eyes into the stars. Consider the tiniest particles and forces being explored with the Large Hadron Collider. Consider the distant reaches of the cosmos being probed by the Hubble telescope. Then, look at the multitude of God’s creation. How many species are there? How many came and went long before humans wandered out of Africa? How many stars? How much diversity? Then, examine the beauty of God’s creation. It’s wild beauty. It’s stark beauty. It’s lush beauty. It’s weird beauty. God makes beautiful things.¹¹

Believing and perceiving, then you can **receive** God’s creation. You can delight in what God has made. God has fashioned us with curiosity, with a drive to explore and understand. We can wonder. We can praise. This is God’s wonderful world!

⁸ Thomas, 52-55.

⁹ Ibid, 48.

¹⁰ Ibid, 51.

¹¹ Ibid, 53, following the teaching of St. Bonaventure.