SENSITIVITY TO NATURE

A sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
Wellesley College Chapel
Thanksgiving
November 22, 1970

I'm glad to be back with you all. My mind is still reverberating with the experiences which took me away from you the past two weeks: on the one hand, an intensive conference on religion and ecology; on the other hand, an intense week of sensitivity training in Washington, D.C.

Putting the two together is revealing. The ecology conference was very much in the midst of today's world, very much in touch with scientific, political, and theological problems; but the participants tended to speak by each other as people and to take refuge in a lifeless world of concepts. It was just the other way around in Washington. People met each other face to face and heart to heart, but there was little or no sense of the crises of our time, a lot of emoting, but little feeling for racism, poverty, pollution, and so on.

I'm too close to both experiences now to sort things out clearly. But I do want to begin this morning to bridge that gap. Taking my cue from the harvest festival theme--as we now think of Thanksgiving this week--I want to try to open up the whole area of sensitivity to nature. Our sensitivity trainers in this case will be the Psalmist and, toward the end, the apocalyptic visionary who composed the Book of Revelation.

I.

With the Psalmist's guidance, we can begin with the most immediate thing, <u>the bounty of nature</u>, upon which many of us will be feasting this Thursday.

At this point we are right in the midst of American folk religion. I still have a vivid picture in my mind of the story of the Pilgrims and the first Thanksgiving, which I learned early in grammar school. I suspect that I'm not alone here. Celebration of the bounty of nature is one of our most powerful civil rituals.

Now this folk religion can be blown full of holes by anyone with a social conscience who stops to think for a minute. So a number of our fellow citizens are fasting this Thanksgiving, in the name of peace in Vietnam or ecological sanity, or both. Just think of this one statistic: in America, with some six per cent of the world's population, we consume about half of the world's non-renewable resources. America is a bloated fat slob compared to most of the rest of the world. Add to that image the armor of our military technology, crunching little peoples under our wheels like weeds under a tank. Add to that our image, and the American folk religion of Thanksgiving can look weird, not to say demonic.

Okay. You may feel that way, and I may feel that way. But with the Psalmist's help we will still want to notice and wonder at the bounty of nature, and join in a festive thanksgiving for that fecundity. We will want to see what it feels like to make the words of the Psalmist our own:

> "Thou makest springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills, they give drink to every beast of the field; the wild asses quench their thirst . . . From thy lofty abode thou waterest the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of thy work."

I mean, don't knock the bounty of the Lord because man, particularly American man, is messing up the planet. Rather, feel free to celebrate the bounty of the Lord:

> "Thou dost cause the grass to grow for the cattle and plants for man to cultivate that he may bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the heart of man."

Then the Psalmist concludes:

> "I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being."

There may well be a time for public fasting for peace and justice, and in America Thanksgiving is possibly the most strategic time. Each of us will have to judge his or her own course at this point. But fasting or feasting at Thanksgiving, I hope we won't forget the bounty of the Lord.

In this vein, I want to teach my children that bread comes from grain nurtured by our brother, the earth, and our sister, the sun, and by the rain from our friends, the clouds. Bread doesn't come from the shelf at the supermarket. That's a heresy which has to be challenged again and again. The earth is the Lord's, and that's where our bread is from. And so I also want to teach my children to sing praises for the earth.

It may be necessary to de-Americanize Thanksgiving, in other words, but let's not de-naturalize it. Let's sing anew loud praises for the bounty of the earth.

II.

With the Psalmist's help we'll also see and feel the integrity of nature, as well as the bounty of nature.

Here we run head on into another heresy. It's not only wrong to think and feel that bread comes from the supermarket, it's even more amiss to think and feel that the reason why our natural environment is there is for the sake of my bread. Does this sound odd to you? I mean, to say that all the soil on this planet, all the clouds, the sun, the moon, the stars and all the galaxies are there for the sake of my bread! It may sound odd, but that, more or less, is what mainstream Protestant theology has taught for the last 200 years, down to this very day. Nature, we have been told again and again, is merely the scenery for human history. It has no integrity of its own. So why not trample it underfoot!?

That is precisely what many Protestants have done, in the name of God. In many respects our present ecological crisis, pollution and all the rest, is pre-eminently a Protestant crisis. Many in our churches today have little or no religious sense for the integrity of nature. To them nature is a mere thing, an "it," an object to be manipulated and exploited virtually for any human purpose. Modern Protestantism is characterized by a thoroughgoing ecological insensitivity.

Not so for the Psalmist. For him nature has its own integrity. To be sure, nature is there to bless man, with its bounty, of that there can be no doubt. But nature is also there just to be and to become by itself. Or, to use other words, nature is there, first of all, for the enjoyment of God. This is what the Psalmist is suggesting, I think when he prays, "May the glory of the Lord endure forever, may the Lord rejoice in his works."

And here we come to a point which I've tried to make before in a sermon and got some negative feedback. But I'll try it again. I want to talk with you about sea monsters. I don't know how many of you have ever seen a sea monster; but if you haven't, try to use your imagination. Maybe it might help if you try to recall the monster of Loch Ness, or Melville's white whale. Maybe you'd prefer to think of the sea monsters of our heavens, the galaxies, swimming through outer space majestically.

Now, you know why they exist? Why God created them? I mean really. Not for our sakes primarily. No. The Psalmist suggests that God creates these monsters to play with them. Hear what he has to say about the Leviathan, the sea monster par excellence:

> "O Lord, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all; the earth is full of thy creatures. Yonder is the sea, great and wide, which teems with things innumerable, living things both small and great. There go the ships, and Leviathan which thou didst form to play with it."

God, in the mind and heart of the Psalmist, is seen as a kind of playful cosmic artist.

This week in Washington, one of our sensitivity projects was to take some clay and model an image of ourselves. One of the women in the group decided rather that she was in a mood to play with the clay, or, as she put it, "to play in the mud." So she did. And, of course, her creation, random as it seemed, told us something about her.

I take that as a parable for us Protestants at harvest festival time. We have been so enamored with the thought that we have been created in God's image, that we've failed, by and large, to notice that God is also playing with all the cosmic clay out of which he created us on this cosmic speck of dust called earth. We've failed to see and feel that God rejoices in all the works of his hands, not just in us.

All of which is to say that nature has its own integrity, and that it's a travesty of reality to approach the whole of nature as only the scenery for human history.

III.

So we've tried to see and feel the bounty of nature and the integrity of nature. Now we must also consider the reality of nature. The reality of nature, biblically understood, is life and death, death and life. God makes it that way.

> "Thou makest darkness, and it is night," the Psalmist sings, "when all of the beasts of the forest creep forth. The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God."

God creates and cares for these horrible, yet majestic, beasts of the night, the lions as well as the lambs, the alligators as well as the goldfish. So nature is death as well as life, fall as well as spring. That's why it's good for us to talk about nature in the fall. Death, as well as life, is the reality of nature.

A few years ago a gentle man I knew quite well was walking with his son along the beautifully rugged rocky coast of Maine. If you've ever been there, particularly around places like Mount Desert Island, you'll know what I mean about the coastline's beauty and grandeur. This man and his son lost their footing and fell to their death below in the swirling tides and treacherous rocks. These were the very rocks and tides

that I myself had so often visited, with great passion for the seas and the crashing of the waves on the coast. This experience of death told me loud and clear as never before that I could not myself rest content with a simple faith in the bounty and the integrity of nature.

If you want to delve into this thing in a more literary context, read Aldous Huxley's little essay "Wordsworth in the Tropics." Wordsworth could only find solace in nature, Huxley argues, because he chose the safe, tamed lake country of England, in very selective doses.

Cruelty and destruction and extinction, as well as partnership, growth, and creation, belong to the inmost essence of our natural habitat. Or, if you want to use some other more traditional terms, nature is crucifixion, as well as resurrection. That is the reality of nature.

IV.

Which brings me to the last of the themes I hear the Psalmist singing to us this morning, the Spirit of nature. "When thou sendest forth thy Spirit," the Psalmist prays, "they are created; and thou renewest the face of the ground."

How shall we take hold of this theme in a contemporary way? Shall we say that the whole of nature is greater than the sum of its parts and that that wholeness is the Spirit of God--the Spirit of God hovering creatively over the cosmic evolution of this universe? Shall we say that the Spirit of God is the ground and source and power for unity of the vast cosmic ecosystem? Shall we say that the Spirit of God is the universal life force?

Finding the right language here is a task before all of us. Maybe this morning we can settle here tentatively on the image of the Spirit of God as the universal life force. This certainly has the feel of a biblical image. The Spirit, in both the Old Testament and the New, is the life-giver. The Spirit renews the face of the ground, according to the Psalmist. The Spirit lifts up and renews the very bodies of the faithful as they pray together, according to St. Paul. Life--that's the biblical nuance.

This motif is woven together finally, in the Bible, by the image of the new creation--"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth," says the Seer of the Book of Revelation. A fantastic dream of faith by a man struggling joyfully to reach out and touch the mystery of the final fulfillment of this universe.

Relax a minute, now, and dream as you are able; reach out as you can, with this man of vision. I mean really; close your eyes as you hear me talk--get in touch with your own pulse. Now let your mind soar, as you can: the mystery of the consummation of the universe, the moment, the day, the time of ecstasy in God himself, the fulfilment of all the renewing work of the Spirit of God throughout the ages and the epochs--a day when the bounty of nature will flow over the hills for all peoples, a day when the integrity of nature will be vindicated by its final redemption, a day when the reality of nature will be changed once and for all, when death will be no more, when the lamb will lie down with the lion.

Touch here only as much as you can. Don't force yourself to believe where you cannot dream. If this talk of cosmic consummation of the Spirit of nature boggles your mind, let it be, and reach out for what seems closer at hand. Keeping your eyes closed, put your hands on your chest--and breathe deeply. Touch your own body. Feel the Spirit, maybe, as the life force now, as the faithful force of nature's continual renewal, as the vital force of human transformation and celebration, as the ground of nature's continuing surges of new life, as the ultimate protector of nature's integrity.

V.

Now open your eyes slowly . . . That's our little sensitivity session with nature.

What am I saying? I'm saying: taste the bounty of the earth and rejoice in its integrity; see the reality of nature, death as well as life, while you hope in the Spirit of nature. Taste, rejoice, see, and hope--and praise the Lord! That's my invitation to you as we enter into our harvest festival.