

Christianity in the Age of Spirit
Series 1: Pilgrim's Progress
Part 6: The Spirit Speaks to Our Soul in Creation

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Scripture: John 1:1-5; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-32; Romans 1:20

*We live in a time of profound anxiety and turmoil. Many are led to
despair.*

*Some even believe that the end of the world is near.
But others believe it is not the end of the world we are experiencing,
but the beginning of a new one –
a world marked by closer connection to God, to our community, and to
the earth.*

*According to these believers, our present chaos
is but one of many signs that the birth of this new era is immanent,
which
some call the **Age of Spirit**.*

*If this is true, then I want to be one of those people of Spirit
who welcome the Spirit's work among us and help bring God's vision to
fruition.*

*And if not, then I hope at the very least to be found faithful to the God
who
inspires in me the desire to be one of these people of Spirit.*

How about you?

- Eric Elnes

I. In the beginning

On this final Sunday of our series, I want to return for a moment to the quote I cited on the first Sunday by one of our prominent Congregationalist ancestors, the Rev. John Robinson. In his final charge to the Pilgrims before they set sail to America, Robinson openly lamented how unrevolutionary even the most revolutionary branches of the Reformation had become. According to Robinson,

the Lutherans acted as if God had nothing more to reveal to humanity beyond what God had revealed to Martin Luther. The Calvinists thought similarly about God and John Calvin, and so on. Rev. Robinson knew God as a “still speaking” God, asserting, “... *for I am verily persuaded that the Lord hath more truth yet to break forth out of His Holy Word.*”

If God is “still speaking,” one wonders if anyone is listening anymore! Throughout this series we have asked how we modern-day spiritual pilgrims may hear and respond to God’s continuing revelation in our world. In this regard, we have highlighted five classic ways of listening for God’s “still, small voice”:

(1) By reading and reflecting on the ancient testimonies of faith, which we call Scripture; (2) By looking to the person of Jesus, whose life, ministry, death, and resurrection reveal the face of God in such a way that our actions may be judged in relation to how closely they reflect Jesus’s own face; (3) By connecting to the ongoing Presence of God, which is called by many different names in different faith traditions but whom we call the Holy Spirit; (4) By keeping silent, turning down the volume of our lives so that God’s “still, small voice” can speak to our hearts; and (5) By bringing together both our hearts and our minds to the process of spiritual discernment, trusting that God desires to take away our sins, not our brains.

This final week of our series, we turn to the most ancient source of knowledge of God – a source that pre-dates Christianity, Judaism, indeed all forms of organized religion. We will consider how God is revealed in God’s Creation, or Nature.

This being the Fall Season, otherwise known as the Season of Pumpkin Everything, I can’t help thinking about pumpkins when considering God’s Creation ...

When I was young, I could hardly wait for that single day in October when mom and dad would spread newspapers on our dining room table, break out the sharp knives and scooping spoons, and assist my brother and me in the annual ritual of pumpkin carving.

The big question they asked us each year was: “Do you want to carve a scary pumpkin or a happy one?” If I chose a scary one, then my hope was always to create a face scarier than the last one I’d carved. The same went for happy faces, which morphed over the years into goofy ones.

As I grew older, I employed a wider variety of tools and techniques to produce a whole range of expressions. Simple triangles and squares became circles, ovals, and rectangles; straight lines became wavy ones. Sometimes I would use a black marker to sketch mustaches or hair. I would attach ears, noses, and other appendages with toothpicks. Whatever I did, I would stare at my finished product in wonder at how a plain ordinary pumpkin could seemingly “come to life” with personality.

Michelangelo used to say that, as a stone sculptor, he wasn't creating human figures from stone so much as freeing the human figure already within the stone. We children were like miniature Michelangelos. We considered carefully each pumpkin's height, width, circumference, stem, and blemishes before choosing the pumpkin, then went about “freeing” the happy, angry, goofy, or horrifying personality that was waiting to be released from its orange-shelled bondage.

Of course, the pumpkins had no true personality to them. What their carved faces really revealed were our own personalities. They revealed a broad range of the *human* psyche, not the pumpkin psyche!

I wonder if this same process applies in some way to God. If we want to know what God looks like, feels like, thinks about, and desires, good clues to all of these questions find a response in God's Creation. This is what the apostle Paul knew when he wrote in his letter to the Romans, “Ever since the creation of the world, God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made.” (Romans 1:20)

Paul shares much in common with the ancient Stoic philosophers – who had a prominent school in Paul's hometown of Tarsus. The Stoics believed that each part of God's Creation reveals something of God's will and intention for the world. Therefore, they spent a lot of time observing Creation and reflecting upon how one element in Nature was related to others, and how the processes by which plants and animals lived and thrived in community with each other might reveal God's will and intention for human communities as well.

The Stoics had a specific term for that part of God's will and intention that can be discovered by observing God's Creation. They called it God's *Logos* (pronounced law-gaws). In Greek, *logos* literally means “word, reason or plan.” When used theologically by the Stoics to refer to God, however, it meant “God's will and intention.”

Of course, this term, *Logos*, is a familiar one to Christians. In the very first verses of John's Gospel, we read, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (John 1:1-3a)

The word for "Word" here is *Logos*. In Christian understanding, God's *Logos* not only refers to "God's will and intent," but also to Jesus Christ – who is "God's will and intent *incarnate*, in human form."

Yet just because we understand Jesus to be an incarnation of God's *Logos*, it has never meant that Jesus is the sum-total of God's *Logos*. After all, John's Gospel not only identifies God's *Logos* with Jesus, the human being who walked this earth 2,000 years ago, but says that "all things came into being" through God's *Logos*, apart from which "not one thing came into being."

In other words, while Jesus is the embodiment of God's *Logos* in human form, God's non-human creations are also embodiments of God's *Logos* in non-human form. A rock is the embodiment of "God's will and intent" in Rock form. A tree is an embodiment of "God's will and intent" in Tree form, and so on.

This is why, for Christians, issues of environmental sustainability can never be merely political issues. They are *theological* issues. When we work against God's non-human Creation, we work against God's *Logos*, or "God's will and intent." We literally destroy God's Word for us and for the world.

II. Seeds, Seeds, Seeds

Given that God's nonhuman Creation is an incarnation of God's will and intent in Nature, it is little wonder why Jesus, as the incarnation of God's will and intent in humanity, spent so much time observing Nature. If you have any doubt that Jesus studied and reflected on God's revelation in Nature, just read the Gospels and count how many of Jesus's parables take their cues from Nature. Nearly all of them!

All three parables in today's Scripture, for instance, arise from Jesus's careful observation of something quite simple: seeds (Matthew 13:1-9, 18-32). There's the Parable of the Sower, which is really a parable about seeds that fall on various types of soil, which Jesus used to teach us about how God's "will and intent" can grow or die inside us. There's the Parable of the Harvest, which is about seeds that sprout as wheat and weeds, by which Jesus taught about God's judgment

and mercy. And then there's the Parable of the Mustard Seed, which Jesus used to teach about how God's Realm grows and spreads on earth as it does in heaven.

If you read in one sitting all of Jesus's teachings and parables that have some connection to the natural world, it is hard not to pick up on the fact that Jesus understood each and every part of Nature as capable of revealing something of God – from something as small as yeast and mustard seeds to larger things like birds, fig trees, and even mountains. The whole world is like one great Gospel, which may be opened and read by anyone who pays careful attention and honestly seeks to discover God's will.

With this understanding in mind, we may see how modern scientists are actually opening parts of God's Gospel in Nature in ways that were heretofore hidden from our view. It's like they are adding page after page to the Bible! Of course, some scientists may act as if scientific inquiry is revealing all there is to really know about the Universe, and in this respect they could not be further from the truth because the potential knowledge that may be revealed is as infinite as Time. Yet when we combine what is revealed of God in Nature with what God has revealed in Jesus and what God continues to reveal to the human heart in relationship with the Holy Spirit, we have a much fuller view of the Book of God before us by which we may discern God's will and intention for our lives. We have more of what Rev. Robinson referred to as "truth yet to break forth out of His Holy Word." Now, if we would only read and act on what we find ...

III. #PUMPKINEVERYTHING

If God's will and intent is deeply embedded in all things, then we should be able to find parables of God's Realm in all things, not just the ones Jesus spoke of. This being the season of #PUMPKINEVERYTHING, we should, for instance, be able to find parables of the Kingdom in pumpkins just as Jesus found them in other things. So let's test our assumptions, shall we?

Perhaps if I get you started, you can think of many more.

- (1) The Kingdom of God is like a pumpkin. Children are particularly fond of them.
- (2) The Kingdom of God is like a pumpkin. If you believe that all there is to it is what you see on the outside, you're mistaken! A whole world exists within it, and worlds within the world.

- (3) The Kingdom of God is like a pumpkin. It appears to be a humble squash, but those who know its secrets may enjoy pumpkin pie, pumpkin ice cream, pumpkin ravioli, pumpkin cheesecake, pumpkin soup, pumpkin-spiced lattes. Indeed, from the pumpkin comes #PUMPKINEVERYTHING!
- (4) The Kingdom of God is like a pumpkin. The main purpose of its body is to provide nourishment for its seeds, which bear many more pumpkins.

This being Commitment Sunday, in which our congregation has been invited to turn in their financial commitments to our faith community, it might be appropriate to add a couple more parables to the mix:

- (1) God's people are like pumpkin seeds. The world thinks only of the individual seeds, but within the Great Pumpkin, the seeds are all connected to each other by life-giving sinews that are attached to each other and to the pumpkin itself, and through the pumpkin, to the soil and waters of God's earth itself.
- (2) God's people are like pumpkin seeds. When God's life is within them, they cannot help but grow abundantly.
- (3) God's people are like pumpkin seeds. By themselves, they have only a little flavor, and not an especially good flavor at that. But if you wash the seeds in pure waters of baptism, subject them to the roasting fire of the Holy Spirit, and salt them with acts of faithfulness and justice, the seeds provide nourishment for the body and pleasure for the soul.