

Lectio Divina: Reading the Book of Nature

Experiencing the sacred in the midst of God's creation

"All things must come to the soul from its roots, from where it is planted"-Saint Teresa of Avila



LECTIO DIVINA

"Lectio divina means 'holy or sacred reading.' It is an ancient Christian prayer-form being rediscovered and reclaimed in our time. *Lectio* is a slow, contemplative praying of the scriptures, which leads us into union with God. It is an invitation to listen deeply for God's voice in scripture and then to allow what we hear to shape our way of being in the world."¹

GOD'S TWO BOOKS

It has often been said that God has given humanity two books: the book of scripture, and the book of nature. This formulation as used today originated in the 16th and 17th centuries during the ripening of modern science, although the notion goes back much further than this. *"For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities-his eternal power and divine nature-have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse"* Romans 1:20

Paul, in the introduction of his letter to the Romans is making it clear to the people of Rome that God has revealed himself in nature. Although Christ is the full manifestation of the truth of God, nature too has something to reveal to us. His conclusions are harsh and startling: Men are without excuse because God has revealed himself! Nature is a manifestation and witness of God's truth in the world. We read in the Creation account of Genesis that even God in observing creation admires it. Creation then is an object worthy of attentive observation and delight. Just as for nearly 2000 years Christians have delighted and meditated on scripture, it is also a worthy endeavor to read the book of nature in a like manner.

The Bible leaves no doubt at all about the sanctity of the act of world-making, or of the world that was made, or of creaturely or bodily life in this world. We are holy creatures living among other holy creatures in a world that is holy

- Wendell Berry

If we are careful to read scripture, we will discover that many of the most well known stories of the Bible take place outdoors. There is Moses and the burning bush, where the holy ground is atop a mountain. There is the story of Ruth and Boaz, which primarily takes place in a field. In the New Testament we discover that Christ's favorite places to commune with God were outdoors. Often times he is slipping away from the disciples to go to a quiet place and pray; preaching to great crowds on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Right before the crucifixion Christ goes to a garden to pray and weep. After his death Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb weeping at the loss of her Lord. She is then met by one whom she mistakes for the gardener, only to be surprised that it is the Lord himself. When we reach the

climax, the very end of our scripture, we are surprised by hope just as Mary had been, at the renewing of all things; the descending of the heavenly city upon the face of the earth for the restoration of all things.

No one has captured this reality more succinctly than Norman Wirzba "God has been gardening from the beginning of time, looking after all creatures and cultivating the conditions in which life can flourish. God is also gardening at the end of time in the new heaven and new earth. In the New Jerusalem there is a river of the water of life, and on each side of the river is the tree of life providing fruit for the feeding and the healing of all nations (Revelation 22:1-2). God continues always to look after the life he creates. That is what gardeners do."

¹ Paintner, Lucy. *Lectio Divina*

LECTIO DIVINA: THE BOOK OF NATURE

"Praise be to his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen." Psalm 72:19. Perhaps the hardest part of doing Lectio Divina is deciding on where to go. The natural world is so beautiful, and there are so many place that we have to choose from. Perhaps the best place to start is in your own area. Whether this be the rolling hills of the prairie, the rich farmland of the Midwest, deciduous forests, the mountains of the Appalachia, the marshlands of Florida, or the desert of the southwest. Each of these ecosystems are a unique creation of a creative God worthy to be meditated upon.

1. Lectio

When we come to Creation, we immediately recognize that the natural world does not move at the same pace as does the modern world of cars, cell phones, and various business appointments. The time of Creation is subversive to our unabating system of restlessness. We must be attentive to this reality that is a part of the natural order of things.

Paying attention might simply include observing the beautiful colors of trees during fall, or the animal life of the area. The best way to do this is to quite oneself so that the distractions of daily responsibilities and worries fade. When this occurs it is

I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with
forethought of grief. I come into the
presence of still water. And I feel
above me the day-blind stars waiting
for their light. For a time I rest in the
grace of the world, and am free.

-Wendell Berry

In Lectio Divina, God is teaching us to listen to him, to seek him in silence. He does not reach out and grab us; rather, he gently invites us ever more deeply into his presence.

much easier to be attentive to the intricacies of your natural surroundings. Generally during this part of Lectio Divina you mull over one specific text several times so that it can sink deep into you. The same can be done when reading nature. Often times focusing on one specific aspect of the natural setting is helpful in being attentive to what God might say. Others have spoken about this in terms of finding the underlying spiritual rhythm in which God can speak and act. It is creating a space in which this can happen.

Use a journal to write down your observations can be helpful in organizing all of the thoughts that you may be having.

2. Meditatio

Ponder what you have observed, being attentive to what this means in terms of your relationship to God's creation. Continue to allow God so speak to you while pondering what you have seen, felt, and heard while outdoors.

3. Oratio

Respond spontaneously as you continue to listen to a phrase, sentence or word. Lift up your voice in praise to God. In Oratio, we allow ourselves to enter into dialogue with God, thanking and praising him. It is in this that we can lift up our hopes, fears, and pains to God. Perhaps we have witnessed the pain that the physical world has experienced, and we lift this up to God in prayer. In Oratio, we are invited to hold up all of life's pains, inconsistencies, and hurts to God, allowing him to touch us and change us and his world by his word.

4. Contemplatio

Contemplatio is characterized by simply loving and focusing on God. It is a joyful rest after all of our needs and problems are lifted up to God. In Contemplatio, we rest in God's presence, assured of his hearing our needs and confessions.



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