Theme: Christian Appreciation of Nature.

Scripture: Romans 8: 18-25.

Text: Romans 8:21 - "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God."

Proposition: Christian appreciation of nature involves seeing God's beauty in nature to the extent that one enjoys nature for its own sake, and so that one wishes to protest and preserve it rather than exploit it for personal or social gain.

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Aug. 12, 1959, Sheridan, Wyo. - 9:30 & 11:00 a.m.

Introduction:

1. Some ~~months~~ time ago Wyoming Wildlife magazine had in it a story centering around a young doctor living and practicing several decades in the future ~~yet~~. By the time the story took place practically all the forests of the country had been destroyed, for wood was no longer needed as a raw material for building or other uses. The forests had been cleared to make way for expanding domestic and industrial housing in an ever-growing population. As the forests had disappeared so had the birds, insects, animals, and fish which inhabited them.

This doctor and his colleagues at the time of the story were particularly concerned and baffled by a peculiar disability affecting several people in widely-scattered parts of the country. Because the physician was in charge of a government health service the reports on this matter were all channeled to him. The disease seemed to be a mental one, of the general classification of catatonia, in which folks escape from reality of the present by going into a sleep-like, dream-like trance, which is sometimes interrupted or preceded by uncontrollable spells of weeping. The common element in all the cases of this type which came to the attention of the young physician of the story was that each victim was overwhelmed with the chief symptom at a park or museum wherein was a glass-enclosed diorama or other replica or picture of a forest. Frequently one would break the glass surrounding the exhibit, run into the fake forest, sit on the man-made grass by the artificial stream and cry uncontrollably before going into the trance or coma. The doctor was particularly upset when word came that his secretary, whom he was to marry soon, had been overcome by the malady. He and his staff became convinced that the trouble was that people need the sooth-

Romans 8:18-25

ing relaxation and refreshment of spirit which can be had only by being close to natural beauty. After the conference was over in which this conclusion was reached, the doctor was reading his desk-top news machine when suddenly he, too, was stricken by the catatonia. The item he had just read was that the last forest in the country had just been cut down to make way for another housing development.

2. It is true that in nature there is something needed by the average person if his is to be a balanced and sane life. That something is more than the food obtainable from nature. It is more than quickly-passing scenery glimpsed from a speeding car, train or plane. It simply is not something which is obtained by exploiting nature or making use of it. It is, rather, a reaction to and an appreciation of nature so that one sees God in it, and wants to be close to and protect the natural beauties. It is almost the reaction of reverence, respect and appreciation of the primitive or aboriginal man which causes him to see in nature the living and powerful gods whom he must respect. Though we do not see God as nature, or gods and spirits in objects of nature, we do see, hear and feel God better as we are near nature.

3. It is this matter of the Christian appreciation of nature that we think about today. To help, let us turn to

Romans 8:18-25

I. <u>Paul's idea of nature as presented in our Scripture</u>. Here is a good place to start in our exploration of this idea of Christian appreciation of nature. To understand the thought and feeling of the great apostle Paul, who wrote our Scripture, we need to think briefly about the attitude

toward nature commonly held in the Jewish religious thought of his day, for Paul was a devout Jew before becoming a Christian.

1. The idea was common that when Adam disobeyed God, ate of the apple, and was cast out - or fell from glory - all nature fell with him. Genesis 3:17-18 says, when quoting God as saying to Adam, "Because thou...has eaten of the tree,...cursed is the ground for thy sake,...thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee." The Jewish book Esdras, not in our Bible, has these words of God about Adam and Eve, "I made the world for their sakes, and when Adam transgressed my statutes, what has now happened was decreed; and the ways of entering this world were made narrow, grieveous and toilsome, and few and evil, full of dangers and burdened with great ~~hardships~~ hardships." One of the later Jewish rabbis has been quoted as saying, "Although things had been created in their fullness, they were spoiled after the first man sinned."

2. That nature will be restored to its primeval, or original and best, character when the long-hoped for new age dawns was a common view in the Jewish world in which Paul grew up. Isaiah (65:17) tells of "the new heavens and a new earth." Such sayings are scattered throughout the writings of the prophets. Some of the apocalypses, or imaginative and unfactual writings, often interpreted this renewal of nature in rather crude terms. One is worth quoting because it is typical: "the day will come in which vines shall grow, each having ten thousand shoots, and on each shoot ten thousand branches, and on each branch ten thousand twigs, and on each twig ten thousand clusters, and on each cluster ten thousand grapes, and each grape when pressed will yield twenty-five measures of wine....Likewise also a grain of wheat

shall produce ten thousand heads, and every head shall have ten thousand grains, and every grain ten ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~ pounds of fine flour...."

3. In the words of our Scripture, Paul was not thinking of what the fall of nature from a previous more desirable state or its restoration to that state of being might mean to man. His words show a very marvellous and somewhat suprising sympathy with nature itself for its own sake. It is sometimes said that Paul had no interest in or understanding of nature. Certainly one cannot find in his writings the appreciation of nature which is so familiar in Jesus' teachings. Only very occasionally did Paul draw an illustration from nature, and generally they were not very good ones. There is no evidence that he was vividly aware of the beauty of nature, found joy in it, or saw in it the continuing work of God. This failure of Paul left its mark on his theology, or thought, about man and God, and suggests that his theology needs to be corrected by reference to that of Jesus.

4. This passage that we read today, however, reveals that he did have a certain true feeling for nature. He feels the pathos of nature, which is as real as the joyousness and beauty of it. He is aware of the futility, the meaninglessness, of nature, as felt, as it were, from within nature itself -- the ceaseless round, the dreary circle, the endless repetition of existence. The whole universe around him seems to Paul to be waiting restlessly -- waiting for that which will fulfill it and give it meaning. This fulfillment will take place when the final "revelation" takes place and we finally secure our sonship. In the words of our text, he wrote, "The

creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the sons of God."

5. Paul thought, too, about the sorrow of nature, and thinks of the sufferings of animals - the weak devoured by the strong - -, of the ruthless destruction of plant life, of natural catastrophes of all kinds; he listens, it seems, to the cryings of the wind and the sea; and he receives an impression that all of nature is groaning in travail together. The whole created world is crying for release from pain, as a woman cries in childbirth; but it does so in hope for that which will give meaning to all the pain and turn it into joy. We, as well as nature, groan, Paul says, but we and nature shall share in the joy and perfection of the new day when we become sons of God.
(All of above excerpted and adopted from pages 518-522, Vol. 9, The Interpreters Bible.)

II. Though this idea of the past and future perfection of nature may be exaggerated, it is certain that a feeling ~~and appreciation~~ for and appreciation of nature does bring very worthwhile rewards; as a concern for nature in Paul's thinking suggested the inevitability of the coming of the new day.

1. Though man must feed off nature and be clothed and sheltered by nature or from her products, these are not the only important values which nature has for us. We should see in nature a greater good than just the things gained by exploitation.

2. One of the greatest values of nature appreciation is of the type described in a sermon once by Clarence E. Macartney in these words:

"On a hot summer afternoon or evening, worn with the burdens of the day and weary of the noise and grind and dust and odors of the city, you may have gone out into the beautiful country which lies like a lover's arm around the smoking and distraught city.

"What a new and different world it is! As you enter it the soul seems to come to its own once more. Like great billows of the ocean after the storm has subsided, the hills rise and fall and roll way to the distant horizon as far as the eye can range. On the summits, and extending down the sides of these hills, are the oak forests with their deep green; and in the valleys, the fields sweet with new-mown hay, or here and there the tender green of winter wheat, or oats or rye; in the meadows, knee-deep in daisies, the cattle graze, and here and there sheep rest under the shade of the trees; even black, unpainted barns look not unsightly in this sea of green.

"On some hilltop there is the tower and spire of a church; and, here and there, with a pine tree or two in front of it, a square brick house facing the world as honestly as did the godly pioneers who once dewelt there, and whose industry and piety made this country great. Over all is a veil of blue haze, soft as God's mercy -- a symbol of infinity. Here the soul comes to its own. Here it is easier to forget the injury, to dry the tears of sorrow, to face our troubles and temptations and to hunger and thirst anew after the Kingdom of God."

3. There is even a greater approach than this to nature for the Christian, for

III. <u>Christians see in nature their God himself. In this sense, nature is an agent of God, of the order of a son of God.</u>

1. Paul in our scripture gives the idea that he perhaps thought nature and the things of nature had a choice once upon a time, as Jewish theology says man did, between good and evil. This we cannot accept, nor can we accept the idea of nature as a whole groaning for better days. However, we can consider seriously the idea that nature, like Christ, reveals to us something of God. In the beauty of nature and even in the grimness we can come to know more of the nature of God.

2. When one goes up into high mountains, ~~like our own Wyoming Big Horn Mountains,~~ he sees the great, towering rock peaks, which suggest the majesty, stateliness and permanence of God. As one sees the color changes that take place on the peaks and on the forests during the course of the day, he can be reminded of the great variety of beautiful ways in which God reveals himself to man. As one fishes in the mountain lake or stream, perhaps catching enough fish for a meal or two for himself and his family; as one gathers wood for the fire at which to warm and cook; as the warmth of the sun on the hills subtly causes one to remove his coat or jacket, while the sharp coolness of night in the high country forces him to put back on his warm outer garment; as the deer is startled by the approach of the car, yet is so curious that she stands close to you there and looks at you, nose trembling and big ears straight up; as one has these and many other experiences in the natural glory close to us at this time of year, he is almost forced to reflect on the cause and meaning of it all. This leads him directly to God, and to definite truths about God.

3. As Christ revealed God, so nature, like the Son of God, tells of God's love and concern for each human, and of God's

matchless wisdom, power and resources.

4. Such a reaction to and understanding of nature leads one who finds God in nature to want to protect and preserve the natural order of things, that he might return again and again to such a fountain of understanding, refreshment, strength and perspective; that others might know the joy he finds in the wonder of the outdoors; that nature itself might be cherished and cared for, as he attempts to do for the God, the Christ, and the people he loves. This is to protect and preserve nature for its own good, rather than for ones own use.

5. This is a concept that is coming to the forefront more and more now and in the future. It is shown by state game and fish commisions, forest and park service leaders, and others who deal with our great fields and forests as they plead for a policy which will preserve, not stamp out, such animals as the grizzly or the coyote, which would help nautre return nearer to its original balance from which in many places it has been jarred by man.

Conclusion:

1. The idea of Paul about nature, as given in our Scripture, Romans 8:18-25, that nature awaits a better day may be true after all. As man comes to realize how necessary to his environment is real natural beauty, how much God can be felt and known in the grandeur or the simple beauty of the outdoors, he will do his best to keep nature as it was when people first knew and loved it.

2. Then, indeed, the day will be approaching which Paul described with the right spirit, if not too accurately, in these words, which are today's text,"the creature

itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God."

3. Our setting of ~~this~~ an hour ~~as a time~~ for Christian worship reminds us that we as Christians have a responsibility in all areas of life, and not the least in the area of nature appreciation and preservation, wherein so many great lessons of the spirit have originated. Our study today, our outlook, tells us that Christian appreciation of nature involves seeing God's beauty in nature to the extent that one enjoys nature for its own sake, and so that one wishes to protect and preserve it rather than exploit it for personal or social gain.