

## Column

Nature is a funny goddess. On one hand, she is charged with beauty, grandeur and power. Who has not seen a brilliant sunset, a range of purple-headed mountains or a light show created by lightning striking a body of water and not had his breath taken away? At such moments, even folk who would not describe themselves as ‘religious’, in a momentary flash, get a tingle of the Transcendent. To borrow a phrase from poet-pilot John Gillespie Magee, Jr., it is as if they have reached out and “touched the face of God.”

But on the other hand nature is not safe, predictable or always benevolent. Hurricane Helene has left a path of destruction in many areas of Florida and Georgia. Such storms remind us of her capricious and cruel nature. For this reason, we dare not make a goddess out of her. To do so would be to make a pact with death. For as much as she is charged with beauty, grandeur and power, she is also charged with change, decay and disillusionment. How then are we to view the natural order?

The Bible offers four important pointers. First, it teaches that nature – the created order – is not co-terminus with God, that is, the two mustn’t be wadded up in the same ball of wax. If somehow, creation ceased to exist,

the Creator would remain. Hence, what is known as pantheism – ‘all is god’ -- is not an option.

Secondly, while God and the created order are not the same; the Bible teaches that the latter is the work of God’s hands. “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handywork” (Psalm 19:1).

Thirdly, it teaches us that there is a problem that needs to be fixed. This problem is identified in Genesis 3 where God’s image bearing creatures charged with caring for God’s Garden, rebel against their Creator. As a result, there is a fracturing of man with God, of man with his fellow human beings, and of man with his environment. Creation itself is affected and becomes subject to death and decay.

All of this is bad news, but there is hope. Fourthly, the Bible teaches that help is on the way. God does not leave His creation to go to rack and ruin. Rather, right from the start, He sets in motion a plan whereby it may be rescued, redeemed and reclaimed. This plan, according to the writers of the New Testament, culminated with the coming of Jesus the Messiah, who is seen as the victorious new head of the human race. What Adam got wrong; Jesus got right.

The Apostle Paul, moreover, sees Jesus' victory as extending not just to God's human creatures, but to the whole created order. And so, he affirms in Romans 8:21: ". . . creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God."

Nature may foster a desire for the Transcendent and perhaps on occasion provides a glimpse of the same but is unable to take us all the way. In that sense, she is a false goddess. But the God we meet in Jesus can.

*O ALMIGHTY and most merciful God, of thy bountiful goodness keep us, we beseech thee, from all things that may hurt us; that we, being ready both in body and soul, may cheerfully accomplish those things which thou commandest; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

*(Collect for Twentieth Sunday after Trinity, Book of Common Prayer)*

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