

Nature is my sanctuary, but Jesus keeps dragging me back to church

**I blunder through life in selfish and stupid ways that no mountain scene—however inspiring—can heal, forgive, or reorient.**

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The Canadian Rocky mountains surrounding a lake. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Jim Nix / Nomadic Pursuits](#).

There's this mildly irritating phrase that I have encountered with some frequency over the course of the decade or so that I have been a pastor. I'm sure you've encountered something like it in your own circles, particularly in these post-Christian, post-church, post-everything times. *Oh, I don't mind church, but, you know, I encounter God best in creation. That's where I worship. Nature is my sanctuary.*

When I am on the receiving end of this phrase, I usually smile and nod in as gracious a fashion as I can muster. Inwardly, I am often thinking very un-Christian thoughts. *Of course nature is your sanctuary. A rather convenient justification for avoiding this one, I would say.*

Perhaps this doesn't surprise you. You might expect someone in my position—someone whose livelihood depends upon the ongoing existence of the institutional church—to have an opinion or two about people off encountering God in the mountains and rivers and lakes and forests and rarely darkening the door of an actual church. You'd probably be right to wonder about my motives. Perhaps you'd even say something like, *Well, don't knock it until you've tried it.*

As it happens, I have tried it. Rather recently, in fact. A few months of sabbatical provided me with the rare opportunity to skip church and encounter God on my own in the idyllic confines of nature. And you know what? It was glorious.

One Sunday in particular, at around the time I would ordinarily be scrambling through the usual last-minute sermon edits, I found myself paddling around a pristine lake on a glorious sun-kissed morning. There was hardly another soul out. The water was clean and clear—you could see almost right to the bottom of the lake. The birds were singing, the fish were darting here and there. The majestic Rocky Mountains impressively stood guard. It was a feast for the senses. A sense of calm and gratitude descended upon me, not to mention wonder at the beauty of all that God has made. As I paddled peacefully around the lake, I found myself thinking, *You know, I think I get why people say that nature is their sanctuary. I can think of any number of worship services that were quite a bit less inspiring than this.*

There's a lot to be said for encountering God in creation. You can get a sense of the power and the grandeur of God, of God's evident love of beautiful things, of God's creativity and the intricacy of the natural world. It's not hard to feel a sense of awe, even reverence, when you're standing at the top of a mountain or strolling along a beach, or enjoying some other glorious scene. I have to confess, as I was paddling around the lake on the Lord's Day, I wasn't really itching to get myself to a church to ratify or validate all of my holy and inspiring thoughts. Nature was indeed my sanctuary, and a beautiful one it was.

Having said all this (you knew the turn was coming, right?), I'm not sure these moments, incredible as they are, offer enough to address the totality of human

need. Of *my* need, at any rate. I was made for things like beauty and awe, certainly, but I was also made to be trained in the art of love. My soul was created for transcendent experiences and connection with nature, but it was also created for my fellow human beings.

And, regrettably, I keep on blundering my way through life in selfish and stupid ways—ways that no mountain scene is up to the task of healing or forgiving or reorienting. I need to encounter God, yes, but God in the specificity with which God has made himself known, namely, in Jesus Christ. The God of creation can inspire me, but creation cannot demand that I die to myself and become ever more alive and attentive to all the things that are ugly and easily ignored in the world—the parts and the people that don't show up in carefully curated Instagram posts or status updates.

So, yes, I can and do encounter God in creation. Nature is a glorious sanctuary, and one that draws forth my glad and grateful praise. But Jesus keeps on stubbornly dragging me back to church. To confess my sins, to encounter him in my neighbour (including my enemy), to be shown who I really am and who I ought to be, to be forgiven and set free, to worship the God who is revealed as Creator, certainly, but also as Redeemer and Sustainer. Jesus keeps showing me his hands and his feet and his side, reminding me of the cost and the duty of love. Jesus keeps ever before me not a sunset or a mountain peak or waves gently lapping upon the beach, but a cross.

It's not that Jesus doesn't love beautiful things. I think he does. But Jesus prevents me from loving the things whose beauty naturally attracts me to the exclusion of the many other things that call forth my love. He teaches me to look for beauty in places where I might not be inclined to look, and where I wouldn't expect to find it.

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