

Something about those wings like eagles

Do we see God not only in nature's beauty, but in its untamable power?

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Nature is a funny thing. We tend to observe its beauty and attribute it to the Creator. We experience God more readily in the woods, the mountains, at the beach, watching the sunrise, or standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon. We've all had that overwhelming sense of awe when confronted with the beauty and wonder of the natural world. What happens to that surety of God's presence and power when nature is not passively beautiful?

When I was a child, I thought that God was the ocean. I suppose only a child growing up in a coastal area could come up with this, but I believed this for quite a long time. Everything I heard about God matched what I knew about the ocean. God is always present, so is the ocean. God sustains life, so does the ocean. God is both known and a mystery, as is the ocean. God's power is limitless and uncontrollable, so, too, the ocean. God is both beautiful and terrifying, just like the ocean. My childish reasons made sense. As I grew older, I was reluctant to let go of my understanding of God as the ocean. This image of God as ocean remains a powerful metaphor for me, and the beach is still my primary sacred space. There is no place I'd rather be when a storm rolls in.

To watch a nor'easter or hurricane roll in off the ocean is to be reminded of humanity's finitude. Waves leap up with a terrifying grace and swallow all the humanmade boundaries—breakwaters, beach walls, and parking lot demarcations—with an insatiable hunger. When water spouts dance on the horizon, creating swirling funnels of water and wind, it's impossible to think that human beings are the most dominant force in creation. If any of those spouts make it to the shore, devastation and destruction will be the monument to its fleeting presence.

And in this time of superstorms, none of us need to be reminded of a hurricane's power to destroy all that human beings have created.

It's easy to see God's power in the beauty, but what of those times when creation rises up to demonstrate her refusal to be tamed and displays her capacity to wreak havoc? Do we see God's power in the less passive aspects of nature? Perhaps we should, then we would not be so arrogant in our use (abuse) of the planet. We like to think of the softer, more beautiful side of God. We like to think of God's love as a tender affirmation of our being, a gentle reminder of our true parentage. However, God's love is not always gentle, nor is it predictable or passive.

Many years ago I worked a summer camp in Wisconsin. Living in the woods that summer was the first time I'd experienced God's wonder and majesty away from the ocean. I was fascinated by the strange birds and creatures I encountered. It rained often that summer and I failed to take those mild storms seriously until one of them knocked me on my butt. I was enjoying my free time away from main camp when a rain suddenly started. I turned back toward main camp with every intention of enjoying a leisurely walk back to my tent. But the clouds darkened and the rain fell heavier and then the thunder and lightning began. I quickened my pace a little but let my poet's eyes wander around the path dreaming up lines to capture the imagery of the wet woods. Then it happened. A tree with a trunk nearly two feet in diameter was split by lightning. Before I knew what was happening, I was thrown back several feet to land on my backside, staring at the smoking tree with my hair standing on end. I bolted. I don't think I've ever run so fast in my life. I'd just seen a raw power unleashed and came within a few feet of being toast. I've had a healthier respect for lightning since that day.

To be clear, I am not saying that God causes any of these storms. I'm also not saying that nature is God. However, if we can see the beauty and wonder of God in the natural world, ought we not to be seeing the fierceness, the wildness, and the unfathomableness of God in the storms and the unexpected intensity nature can throw at us? The many aspects of the natural world can be an excellent reminder of the many aspects of God. We don't get to choose just the sweet, quiet moments of affirmation and say that there is nothing else in the world or in God's love. We must also accept the powerful, chaotic moments that point toward our finitude and the mystery that lurks in nature and in the fullness of the Creator.

The power that can raise us up on eagle's wings, cast out our demons, and heal our brokenness can also bring us to our knees, humble our arrogance, and reveal our fragility. Yes, there is beauty in the world that points toward its Creator. However, there is also untamable, unpredictable power that does the same. Nature is not ours to control. Harness her energy, learn from her mysteries, watch over her with careful, intentional stewardship for sure, but let's not delude ourselves into thinking we rule over all that is. God is not ours to control, either. We are meant to live in the love of God, strengthened by God's mysteries and presence, sharing in the abundance of life that God offers, but we are never to fool ourselves into believing that we have tamed the Holy One.

Maybe if we are paying attention to what the natural world is telling us with all of the superstorms, wildfires, earthquakes, famines, and more, we'd all find ourselves knocked back on off our feet with our hair standing on end, recognizing that we are not as powerful as we thought. So, too, with God. Isn't it time that we remember that the God we worship is not a warm fuzzy character from a children's book, but the mysterious power that created all that is and claims us as beloved in spite of our foolish, self-absorbed ways?

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