

Do You Hear What I Hear?

Luke 16:19-31

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I will gladly admit to you that I am in love with the National Parks. I know, from talking with you, that many of you value the parks as well. Even before Ken Burns and Dayton Duncan presented their television series about the parks last fall I could declare that there are few places I would rather visit than our National Parks. The spectacular ones in the west call me back again and again. So too, the calm vistas of the Smokies along the Appalachian ridge, and the glorious coastal expanse of Acadia in the north-eastern corner of the nation are among those I visit again and again.

Many of us were introduced to the parks by our parents during trips in the family car. Some of us are old enough to have done the same for our children. I love the idea that the parks belong to all of us in America. This idea is a great equalizer among us. Rich or poor, native-born or immigrant, hiker or sitter, climber or rafter, these parks are yours for the taking, embracing and stewardship. They are vast and wild in places, intimate and tame in others.

They are also fragile. We know a quiet place in the Great Smokies that is at the end of one of those trails less travelled. It is a forest of native, virgin Hemlock, many well over a hundred feet tall. To enter Albright's Grove is to enter a cathedral in the forest. Many who visit there call their time among those fragile trees akin to a religious experience. The grove is also a reminder that if it had not been for leaders with vision, who knew how precious these areas could be to future generations, the wilderness and the beauty of the parks would have been lost to logging, mining and development. Frederick Law Olmsted, John Muir, Theodore Roosevelt, Stephen Mather, Horace Albright, John D. and Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, Jr., Mary Coulter were among the prophetic voices that lifted awareness about the value of the parks. It was their vision, and the vision of others like them, that captured the attention of people in leadership roles and convinced them, for both noble and self-serving reasons, to establish and protect

our National Parks. When they made their case for the parks they made certain that they were heard. I believe there is a metaphor here in our nation's experience of advocating for the parks, preserving them and maintaining them that gives light to the role we have as God's people to advocate, preserve and maintain the gospel story for this and future generations.

This chapter in our nation's history with the parks has theological implications for those of us in the church. It is a story about people recognizing a greater good and doing whatever they could to share it with generations that follow. That is, also, precisely what we are about in the church. We discover a greater good, God, and we immerse ourselves in all that this good God has to give us. We look to God, we listen to God, and we tell the story of God's journey with us to our children. If we do not do that, this precious story will be lost within a generation or two. Even so, some will ignore the story when it is told them. They will do with their lives what they were going to do anyway, living as far from a connection to God and God's offerings and expectations as possible. Humanity's story is the story of this struggle between the way of light and the way of darkness. As the parable of the rich man, Dives, and Lazarus shows us, some people are never going to hear the story of God's salvation. Even if someone is raised from the dead, they will not hear it. There is no reaching them. They are so busy accumulating their possessions that they have no energy or interest for worshipping, much less listening to God.

This is not unlike the behavior of some in America who will not, or cannot see the National Parks' as a rich resource for discovery, reflection, and recreation in an unmarred wilderness.

If you visit the Yosemite valley, gazing up at the granite heights of Half Dome on the one side and El Capitan on the other, it may be difficult to believe that there once were people who wanted only to cut timber and dig mines in that valley. There were plenty of others who wanted to own it for themselves, building cheap hotels and providing minimal concessions for tourists. And it was only because enough other people, some of them in Congress, some of them like

Director, Stephen Mather from the business world, saw the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity the parks presented and made the case for saving the lands that mining and cutting and exploitation in Yosemite was avoided.

And just as the temptation to hear only the voices of those who promise an undemanding Gospel are ever before us in church and culture, so it is for stewards of the parks as the continuing threat to the integrity of these lands never stops, hitting on some front, generated by greed, power, personal ambition or vanity. Indeed, as the prophet Jeremiah implies in today's Old Testament text, why can't we recognize that we have enough of what we think we need? Why not spend some time celebrating the abundance that is ours? (Jer. 32: 6-15).

This summer I was going through some books in my library in Maine, deciding which ones I would like to revisit, discovering others I had forgotten were there. Sorting through that library is one of life's dearest and least-expensive pleasures. On this occasion I found a book of essays about Yellowstone written more than twenty years ago by Jim Carrier, a journalist with the Denver Post who spent a summer and fall in a log cabin in the park. He wanted to find out what Yellowstone means to us. He did it by observing and listening and talking with people he met along the way. In a series of "letters," several each week published in the Denver Post, he tried to capture his experience in words. It was, in his view, a dream assignment.

Here is his letter from August 29, 1986 after he had visited Grand Teton National Park and the area just to the south of the park. Grand Teton is a short drive below Yellowstone. Consider what insight this letter may offer, again metaphorically, for our task as stewards of the story God has given us to preserve and share.

Mosquito Creek runs through a pretty valley south of Wilson, WY, little known and little used despite a fairly good dirt road that climbs with the stream away from the Snake River west to the Snake River Range.

The day I drove it, I saw one tent in a meadow and two people on horseback. The road had been washed by a thunderstorm, and the flowers and trees stood out sharp and fresh in the sun.

So pristine is this place that Congress has designated it a wilderness study area.

I tried to imagine an industrial complex here: pipelines, gas wells, power lines and traffic. I couldn't.

The Anschutz Corp. can, however. Its application to drill a test well for gas along Mosquito Creek is creating a stir in Jackson. Opponents say the well is another threat to the Yellowstone area.

There is so much untouched land in the Yellowstone area; I questioned whether it was truly threatened.

An ecologist with the Wilderness Society answered this way: Imagine Yellowstone as a giant tapestry, rich and colorful—a mosaic of scenic beauty, wildlife and wilderness.

For every animal killed, he said, remove a thread. For every gas well, remove another thread. For every development or timber road, another thread or two.

The tapestry will remain, he said, but over time become threadbare. I tucked that image into my head as I drove counterclockwise around the park.

On the north side, I talked with gentleman rancher Len Sargent, who owns a corner of paradise bordering the park and the Gallatin National Forest. He is fighting a Forest Service proposal for road access across his property to the public woodlands.

Hunters from Billings want to hunt elk there. The feds want to get at their land. But Forest Service roads are notorious routes for poachers.

Several of Sargent's neighbors have drilled small geothermal wells for heat, drilling allowed by Montana. But they may be tapping the same system that plumbs the Mammoth Hot Springs.

A proposal to develop a major geothermal field in Idaho, adjacent to the park, was tabled for fear of what it might do to the park's geysers. That's a threat I can picture clearly.

Near West Yellowstone, a man is proposing a ski area in bear country. The town, struggling for year-round survival, would like to see it. But bears who roam there would have to move, or die.

West of there, on the Henry's Fork River, world famous for its trout and fly fishing, developers have proposed six hydroelectric dams. I can't imagine a river with such a tradition being damned, but to prevent the dams, someone in Washington may have to outlaw them.

According to the Sierra Club, oil and gas leases have been issued on half the public land around the park, including sites at four of Yellowstone's five entrances. Several gas wells are proposed within sight of the Grand Tetons.

Most of the 160 wells drilled in the Bridger-Teton National Forest have been dry, but there is geologic promise, and oil companies are not giving up.

At the Triangle X Dude Ranch north of Jackson, John Turner, one of three brothers who runs it, jerked a thumb toward the back of his ranch, to logging clear-cuts and roads that riddle the area.

Hunters now have easy access to what once was a trophy herd heading south to the Jackson Hole Elk Refuge. Turner, a biologist, says that hunting has reduced the size of the herd and forced it to change migration routes.

On the east side of the park, near Gardiner, a gold mine may crank up again, raising concerns about pollution from chemical processes.

There is a saying I hear often from people who love the parks and forests: "Once it's gone, it's gone."

They don't mean the whole tapestry, I now realize. Their concern is with each thread, being pulled one at a time.

There will always be a Yellowstone. The question is, how rich and beautiful—how valuable—will it be? 1.

And we thought the brothers of Dives, whom Father Abraham says are beyond reach, presented a challenge. The threads of God's tapestry, sometimes called the emerging Kingdom of God, are gradually being pulled by forces that often seem beyond our control. What can be done to restore us to being the people God has called us to be? Who will speak for God in our time? And who will hear? How can we insure that the Gospel's tapestry is not lost?

What about us? I wonder if we will hear anew what God has declared is good and beautiful and possible for us? I wonder if we will turn our full attention, our energy and our devotion to the rich resources that God alone can provide. Or will we live a life of indulgent indifference, protecting our interests above all others, ignoring our covenant with our creator and sustainer?

Notes: Jim Carrier, *Letters from Yellowstone* (Boulder, CO, Roberts Rinehart, Inc., Publishers, 1987) p. 101-103.