Psalm 19:1-2; Matthew 6:25-27; Mark 6:30-32 *Heart Applications: Nature*

***Lessons of the Shamrock***Today is St. Patrick’s Day. It’s not an official national holiday, but it has become an unofficial one. Whether you are Irish or not, Catholic or not, today has become a day for celebrating all things Irish, or at least celebrating Irish stereotypes. People wear green. Parades are held. Corned beef is eaten. Green beer is served.

But even though St. Patrick is remembered every year, what is probably missed more often than not is that Patrick was a real person who had a significant career as a missionary for Jesus.

A few misconceptions about Patrick: first, he is not officially a Saint with a capital “S”; the Roman Catholic Church has never formally canonized him. Second, he was not the first person to preach Jesus in Ireland; that was a man named Palladius who was sent by the Roman Catholic Church about 5 years before him. And third, Patrick isn’t really Irish. He was born into a Romanized family of British descent near what is now Dumbarton, Scotland.

Precise dates for Patrick’s early life are hard to come by, but when he was a teenager, sometime early in the 5th century, he was captured in a raid on his village and carried as a slave to the radically pagan island of Ireland. Even though he grew up in a Christian family, he had not considered himself very religious; but during the six years of bondage he looked toward God and found great comfort in prayer. After a dream in which a voice told him his “ship was ready”, he escaped his slavery and caught a ship back to Britain.

Once back in Britain, he began training as a priest and dedicated his life to Christ. Then he says he had another dream. In this one, he heard a voice speaking in Irish, saying: “We beg you, Holy Boy, to come and walk among us.” So, in his early 40s, he sought permission from the Pope to begin a mission to Ireland and returned to the place of his captivity.

The Irish were deeply pagan, practicing a form of polytheistic, Celtic religion; and Patrick was under constant threat of martyrdom. And yet it appears that his earlier stint as a slave in Ireland gave him an understanding of the culture, and he employed a strategy of converting chiefs first, who would then convert their clans through their influence. For the next four decades, or so, Patrick became incredibly influential in Ireland as much of the island converted to Christianity. He is believed to have died on March 17, thus today is his day.

Over the centuries, many stories and legends have been associated with Patrick. For one thing, he is said to have driven all the snakes out of Ireland. Biologists tell us this is not true, as Ireland never had any snakes. But some have suggested that symbolically, snakes were associated with paganism and so Patrick’s influence for Christianity drove paganism out of Ireland.

Another story, with perhaps a little more grounding in reality, is that Patrick used a three leaf clover—a Shamrock—to teach the Irish about the Trinity. Just as a single plant has three leaves, but is still one, he taught that God is one being with three persons. We have just two short writings by Patrick, and they never actually mention the Shamrock, but he does talk about the Trinity a lot. The doctrine was clearly important to him.

One more thing I want to share with you about Patrick, and it comes directly from his writings, known as his Confessions. It is his account of a conversation he had with the daughter of a local chief. She asked him **a series of questions:**

"Who is [God](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06608a.htm)?"
"And where is [God](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06608a.htm)?"
"Where is His dwelling?"
"Has He sons and daughters?"
"Is He rich in silver and gold?"
"Is He everlasting? is He beautiful?"
"Are His daughters dear and lovely to the men of this world?"
"Is He on the heavens or on earth?"
"In the sea, in rivers, in mountains, in valleys?"
"Make Him [known](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08673a.htm) to us. How is He to be seen?"
"How is He to be [loved](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09397a.htm)? How is He to be found?"
"Is it in youth or is it in old age that He may be found?"

**This is Patrick’s recorded answer**:

"[God](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06608a.htm), whom we announce to you, is the Ruler of all things."
"The [God](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06608a.htm) of heaven and earth, of the sea and the rivers."
"The [God](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06608a.htm) of the sun, and the moon, and all the stars."
"The [God](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06608a.htm) of the high mountains and of the low-lying valleys."
"The [God](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06608a.htm) who is above heaven, and in heaven, and under heaven."
"His dwelling is in [heaven](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07170a.htm) and earth, and the sea, and all therein."
"He gives breath to all."
"He gives [life](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09238c.htm) to all."
"He is over all."
"He upholds all."
"He gives light to the sun."
"He imparts splendour to the moon."
"He has made wells in the dry land, and islands in the ocean."
"He has appointed the stars to serve the greater lights."

I tell you all this for a couple of reasons. One is because it is St. Patrick’s Day, and it doesn’t hurt to know a bit about the person everybody is talking about. And the second is because I think his story illustrates our topic for today, which is connecting with God through nature.

That’s the thing that stands out to me about Patrick: how much he used the things of nature to teach about God. In the snake story, which probably is not true; the Shamrock story, which might be true; and the answer given to the clan chieftain’s daughter, we can see how the elements of nature made a bridge to explaining Christian truth.

***Heart Apps***We are in a series we are calling Heart Applications. We’re talking about how a one-size-fits-all approach to the Christian life doesn’t really work. We have different temperaments, different personalities, and we don’t all connect to God in the same way.

If you look at the people in scripture, and Christianity over the centuries, you will see several different styles of connecting with God. Whether that is the high church, highly ritualized worship of some denominations or the low church, highly celebrative style of other denominations. Whether it is the very hands on, service driven approach of Mother Theresa’s Sisters of Charity, or the more set apart and contemplative approach of the Benedictine monks.

The point is, there are different, acceptable styles for connecting with God. Some have called them pathways, we are calling them Heart Applications, sort of like the different communication apps on your phone. During the season of Lent, leading up to Easter, we are going to look at six different Heart Applications during our sermons and our small groups are going to be talking about them using curriculum you can find under the Media/Resources tab on our website.

And today we are going to talk about the heart application of Nature. Today we are going to talk about how some of us connect to God best when we are out-of-doors, surrounded by His creation. We are going to talk about how nature can teach us things about God. We’re going to give some suggestions for how you can use nature to love God better.

Today I listed three scripture passages in the bulletin. We’ll look at each of them in turn to talk about three spiritual lessons that can be learned through nature.

***Nature Shouts***First, **nature proclaims “God is.”** Creation practically shouts that God is real. The first text is **Psalm 19:**

**1**The heavens declare the glory of God;
    the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
**2**Day after day they pour forth speech;
    night after night they reveal knowledge.

King David, in the Psalm, imagines nature as a sort of town crier. Day after day, night after night, he sees the vastness of the night sky--and the brightness of the sun--standing up to declare that God is glorious. “Hear ye! Hear ye!” they shout, “God is here and God is big and God has made amazing things!”

Go outside on a cloudless night, somewhere far removed from the lights of town or city, and stare up into the vastness of the cosmos. Consider all the stars, and then consider that these stars are just one galaxy in a universe that contains thousands upon thousands of galaxies, and then try to convince yourself that it is all here by accident.

In 1998, seventy-seven-year-old John Glenn returned to space. Almost immediately, he was overwhelmed with the presence of God. “To look out at this kind of creation,” he stated in a news conference from space, “to not believe in God is to me impossible.” (Gary Thomas, Sacred Pathways, p. 48)

It’s not just the vastness of space. It can also be the delicate complexity of the most mundane part of nature. Theologian Wayne Grudem writes this:

For those who have eyes to see and evaluate the evidence correctly, every leaf on every tree, every blade of grass, every star in the sky, and every other part of creation all cry out continuously, “God made me! God made me! God made me!” If our hearts and minds were not so blinded by sin, it would be impossible for us to look closely at a leaf from any tree and say, “No one created this: it just happened.” The beauty of a snowflake, the majestic power of a thunderstorm, the skill of a honeybee, the refreshing taste of cold water, the incredible abilities of the human hand—all these and thousands of other aspects of creation simply could not have come into existence apart from the activity of an all-powerful and all wise creator. (Systematic Theology, 142-143)

Grudem singles out the leaf of a tree in particular, so I spent a little time this week trying to understand how a leaf works. It is simply amazing.

Consider a **leaf.** There are few things more commonly found in nature. It is estimated that a single large oak tree contains somewhere between 1.25 million to 2 million individual leaves. If you have trees on your property, come summer you will probably be in possession of millions of leaves and your block will probably hold tens of millions.

Leaves look deceptively simple, but their existence is vitally important to our continued life on this planet. Here’s a **simplified cross section** of a typical leaf. What we see when we look at a leaf is a waxy coating over a layer of skin known as an epidermis followed by a layer of sturdy cells known as the palisades mesophyll. All of this protects a layer known as the spongy mesophyll, which is where the action happens. In addition, leaves contain a vein, which appears to us as the spine of the leaf, as well as thousands of tiny, microscopic holes known as stomata.

Now, I’m going to simplify all this a great deal, partly because we don’t have a ton of time and partly because there is a lot of stuff I don’t understand. But here’s how a leaf works: the veins are connected via twigs and branches to the trunk of the tree which connects to the roots. These veins literally defy gravity to draw water out of the ground, up through the trunk, and out to the leaves. At the same time, the little stomata in the leaf are drawing carbon dioxide molecules out of the air. The water and the carbon dioxide meet up in the spongy mesophyll, which contain chloroplasts. These chloroplasts are filled with a substance known as chlorophyll, which is what gives a leaf it’s green color.

Chlorophyll absorbs energy from the sun. When precisely six water molecules and six carbon dioxide molecules encounter one another in the presence of light absorbing chlorophyll, a chemical reaction known as photosynthesis takes place. The formula looks **like this:**



The resulting byproduct of glucose is the fuel the tree needs to live. These molecules are fed back into the tree to help it continue to grow. The 6 oxygen molecules, meanwhile, are considered a waste product by the tree and fed back out through the stomata into the atmosphere. That’s a waste product for the tree, but of course, for us it is vitally important. We breathe oxygen and expel carbon dioxide. So, what are bodies consider waste, tree leaves find to be an essential component of life. What tree leaves consider waste, is the very air we breathe.

One average tree will produce about 260 pounds of oxygen in a year. One acre of trees produces enough oxygen in a year for 18 people.

All of this is profoundly amazing. The more you learn about a leaf, the more intricate and complicated you will find it to be. The more it will shout at you that our God is profoundly wise and creative and powerful. Nature declares the glory of God.

***Nature Teaches***Second, **nature helps us visualize spiritual truths**. Nature is an excellent teacher of how God works. The Bible is filled with references to nature to help us learn important lessons. Perhaps the most famous example would be **Jesus’ words from the Sermon on the Mount**:

**25**“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? **26**Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? **27**Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

Birds don’t have savings accounts. Birds don’t have pantries or closets. And yet, birds don’t worry either. They head out in the morning and they do the work of hunting and pecking, and the heavenly Father sees to it that they have what they need. If birds don’t worry, why do you? If God takes care of the birds, won’t He also provide for you?

You can imagine Jesus pointing to the birds flying over head as he said these words. So much of Jesus’ teaching and ministry took place outdoors. He used metaphors and analogies from nature again and again in his parables. Likewise, you can find references to nature in the books of Moses, in the prophets, in the writings of Paul, and throughout the Psalms. Nature teaches us about God.

This is the lesson of the shamrock: something in nature that helps illustrate how something can be three things, while at the same time being one. It is not a perfect analogy for the Trinity, but it does help to foster understanding.

Jonathan Edwards, a famous American preacher from the time of our nation’s founding, kept a page in his journal in which he wrote down spiritual lessons as he observed them in nature. His entries included things as diverse as the thorns on a rose teaching us that temporal joys are often mixed with bitterness; watching a spider devour a fly and being reminded that the devil is always seeking to destroy us; or observing rivers running to the ocean as a symbol of all things tending towards God.

Bernard of Clairvaux, a famous twelfth-century monk, wrote: “You will find more laboring in the woods than you ever will among books. Woods and stones will teach you what you can never hear from any master.”

When you have the eyes and sensitivity to see it, nature can teach you much about God.

***Nature Recharges***Third, **nature can help us to restore and rest.** For most of us, but especially for those of us who have nature as a primary heart application, being out in creation is a way to recharge our batteries. We can see this in Jesus’ life. Take **Mark 6:30-32** for example:

**30**The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. **31**Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.”

**32**So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place.

This was just after Jesus had learned about John the Baptist’s death. Just after the apostles had been sent out two by two to preach the good news on their own. They were tired, they were stressed, and they had crowds all around them. So Jesus invited them to draw back, to head across the lake, to find someplace quiet.

This is why mountains and beaches and lakefronts are so popular as vacation destinations. There is something restorative, something re-energizing about being out in the midst of God’s creation. Creation is God’s cathedral. As inspiring as it can be to enter into a magnificent church building with vaulted ceilings and stained glass windows and beautiful statuary—or even as calming as it can be to enter into our sanctuary—it can be even more so to enter the cathedral of God’s own making:

* A canoe ride down a quietly flowing river;
* Lying on your back under a cloudless, starlit sky;
* Standing at the top of 12,000 foot mountain, looking down at the wide-open spaces;
* Splashing on a beach as waves that started halfway around the planet come rolling in;
* Taking a walk through quiet meadows filled with spring flowers;

All this and more are ways that we can be renewed and refreshed by nature. If this is your primary heart application, you will find that it is in settings like these that you have your best conversations with God.

***How to Love God Outdoors***Now, let’s talk about process. Here are some guidelines for loving God well in nature. Gary Thomas, in the book Sacred Pathways, uses the words: believe, perceive, and receive.

**Believe.** Loving God in nature only works if you have a right relationship with God. Nature cannot save you. Meditating on nature will not automatically connect you with the one, true God.

For that to happen, you must believe in God’s Son Jesus Christ. It is only through His mediation and atonement that any of us are saved. It is only through Jesus that we can have a right relationship with the Creator of the universe.

But if you do have a relationship with Jesus, then that can profoundly influence the things you learn and experience in nature. Martin Luther wrote:“Now if I believe in God’s Son and bear in mind that he became man, all creatures will appear a hundred times more beautiful to me than before. Then I will properly appreciate the sun, the moon, the stars, trees, apples, pears, as I reflect that he is Lord over and the center of all things.”

Similarly, we must always keep in mind the relationship between God and nature. God is the Creator of nature; nature is not God. The Bible consistently calls on us to give praise to God because of the things we find in nature. The mountains call on us to worship God for His grandeur. The beauty of a flower prompts us to worship God for His grace. The flash of lighting and rumble of thunder calls us to fear God’s wrath. But, at no point are we called to worship the mountain, or the flower, or the lightning.

Creation is a teacher that prompts us to worship the Creator. Believe in Him.

**Perceive.** In order to benefit from the lessons nature has to teach us, we must be looking through the eyes of faith. We need to be intentional about connecting with God through nature.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning once famously wrote: “Earth’s crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God; but only he who sees takes off his shoes, the rest sit round and pick blackberries.”

Her point is that you can go for a walk in nature and just be overwhelmed with the magnificence of God. You can perceive Him in every leaf and caterpillar, be in awe of Him in the brightness of the sun and the billowing of the clouds; or, you can just take a walk.

Sometimes I will hear somebody say that they would rather be fishing on the lake on a Sunday morning than in cooped up in church because, the person will say: “The lake is my sanctuary. The lake is where I meet God.” And I can accept that, to a point. The question is about intentionality. Are you being intentional about using that time to connect with God? Are you worshipping Him in the gentle breeze and in the complexity of the walleye? Or, are you just fishing?

Be intentional about connecting with God in nature.

Which leads to: **receive.** When you go into nature, be listening for what God has to tell you. Gary Thomas writes:

We cannot receive unless we set aside time for God to speak—and then let him set the agenda for our discussion. I’ve found that my agenda is frequently different from God’s. He must be the initiator in my spiritual walk. He knows what I need to hear. When I’m consumed with my temporal problems, I miss the blessing of being outdoors.

When you come to the woods, come to receive. Leave your worries at home. (55)

An important part of this, again, is making sure what you hear from God in nature lines up with what God has said in the Bible. He is not going to contradict His own word. And we must make sure that we are not simply finding the answers we already want to hear. Just because you think you heard it while on a walk around the lake doesn’t mean God really wants you to rob a bank, and so on.

***Suggestions***Finally, let me give some suggestions for how you can explore the heart application of nature. I’ll suggest three, obviously the possibilities are infinite:

1. **Combine reading passages which learn from nature with time spent outside.** Passages such as Genesis 1; Psalm 19; Psalm 148; Job 38; Matthew 6; Romans 1 and Revelation 4 are just some suggestions.

2. **Take a vacation to a place of natural beauty, and make a point of worshipping God while there.** Maybe you will go alone to a cabin for a weekend, or go with your family to a National Park. But in addition to posing for photographs and shopping for souvenirs, take the time to stop and huddle with those you are with and worship God. Say a prayer. Read an appropriate Psalm. Have everybody say one thing the place you are in teaches them about God. You can do this on a beach, on the edge of the Grand Canyon, on a roadside turnout on your way through the mountains, and virtually anywhere else on the planet.

3. **Do a deep dive into the science of some natural phenomenon.** This is one of my favorite ways to be reminded how big and how creative and how wise God is. The several hours I spent this week learning about leaves and photosynthesis and chlorophyll just left me in awe and wonder. Sometimes I like to check a science book out of the library—a book written at a layman’s level, not a real science book—and just learn about things like the human eye or the digestive system or how storms are formed. Even if the person who wrote the book doesn’t believe in God, I still have the eyes to see God’s hand in work in the intricacies of His creation.

Nature is one of the ways God is declaring His presence to the world. There are all kinds of spiritual lessons to be learned in nature. Being in nature can renew and refresh our souls.

So explore the heart application of nature. Believe, perceive and receive.