

# **Jim Hall: Building an Ark for Earth Scripture: Tending God's Wilderness Word**

Jim Hall, 11/22/98

## **Building an Ark for Earth Scripture: Tending God's Wilderness Word**

I bring you greetings from Dayspring Church, from Alice Fenn who, at age 94, is embarking on a new venture of becoming a writer; from Bud who grows stronger every day following his illness, and from the whole community of life as it enters this season of squirrels putting away the harvest of acorns and seeds seeking quiet resting places for the winter ahead.

When I was last here I spoke about God's vision for today in the context of Community Medical Care, the inner city health mission where I work. That was a vision about the healing of the human. Today I want to speak about a different vision that has to do with healing of the earth and the relationship of the human to the earth, especially at Dayspring. I want to speak about, "Building an ark for earth scripture; tending God's wilderness word."

In the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 3, verses 1, 2 we read:

*"In the fifteenth year of the emperor Tiberius, When Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, when Herod was Tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip Prince of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias Prince of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to*

*John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness."*

This passage from Luke has been echoing in my ears for the past six months since I heard Walter Bruggemann read it on a videotape of a talk he gave at a Ministry of Money Workshop last spring. In this one sentence, Luke captures the essence of two different worlds and lays them side-by-side. One is a world of power and prestige, of human kings and priests, where man reigns. The other world is a world of wilderness, where the human is a stranger, with the exception of John, known only for his eccentric father, his rough coat of camel's hair, and his diet of locusts and wild honey. And the word of God came, not to those in the world of power and prestige, but to John in the wilderness.

In commenting on this passage, Bruggemann compares the kings and priests to today's money managers – the people who run the central bank. "We've had our names on the registry of the ordered ones," Bruggemann says, "But what we find is a word from the wilderness – undomesticated. What the Gospel wants to say is that all the managers couldn't stop the wildness. If that wilderness energy ever got a first cubit in our bodies," Bruggemann goes on to say, "It's going to blow the whole thing open. The Gospel is about how the managers conspired to eliminate the wilderness word."

Where have you heard this wilderness word, this God-inspired voice crying out from the wild earth? This past summer my wife, Cheryl, and I listened to God's word in our canoe in the wilderness where the ancient Precambrian rock of the Canadian Shield meets the largest freshwater lake in the world – Lake Superior – the wild shore of an inland sea. We were on an eight-day canoe trip along the coast, during which we saw only one other human being. Unlike the desert, this wilderness is a world of wind and waves, storm clouds and bright sun, of rock gardens and boulder beaches, of arising with sunlight, getting breakfast, of waiting to see what lake and sky would allow for

the day. But like all wilderness, all wild land still open to the wildness of God, this world was God's world – a world where God reigns.

The word that came to me in this wilderness time refreshed in a very physical, embodied way my understanding of who I am and who God is. When I sit in my canoe and head out into the open lake overwhelmed with the vast beauty of wave after wave crashing on rock cliff, of fir and spruce marching along the mountain ridges, overwhelmed with the grace that allows me to be here on this good earth, I know something about who is the creator here and who is the created one. When I sit in my canoe paddling hard into waves and wind and sun till we can go no further upwind and I finally concede that we will not get to Otter Cove this trip, I know something about who reigns in this world, and it is not I. And when at last we safely reach a restful harbor for the night, I know how it is that I live, how it is that I only live, by grace through faith. It is for me a lesson in Christian doctrine that no book alone can teach. I call it by its name – earth scripture – the word of God in the wilderness.

Where have you heard this wilderness word, this God-inspired voice crying out from the wild earth? My recent experience, like some of yours I know, came from a remote, uninhabited place, but each of us, myself included, can tell such stories of encounters with God's wild word at nearby places such as Rolling Ridge and Dayspring. What guest at Dayspring Retreat, or Wellspring or the Farmhouse has not caught a glimpse of the wildness and mystery of God – in wind rustling the past year's oak leaves, in the effortless gliding of the hawk, in the promise of acorns. How fortunate we are to have known the undomesticated wildness of God. At places like Dayspring I am reminded of that oft-repeated phrase in C. S. Lewis' *Narnia Tales*, "Aslan is not a tame lion."

Experiences of God's wilderness word, though increasingly rare today, have played a major role in our faith tradition. All

through the sweep of Biblical and post-biblical history prophets and peoples have left the unreal world of man's reign and entered the world of the wild presences of God. Recall Israel in the wilderness of Sinai, in exodus from empire into a harsh and fierce landscape where dependence on God was absolute. Remember Jesus, who was also driven out into the wilderness at the outset of his ministry, and thereafter kept heading off to the desert, the mountain, and the stormy sea. As Belden Lane in his recent book, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, puts it,

*"Jesus repeatedly leads people into hostile landscapes, away from society and its conventions, to invite them into something altogether new. The recipients of hope are drawn geographically to the edge; an eschatological community takes shape on the boundaries. Jesus is ever dragging his disciples away from the familiarity of home, to disclose the power of God's reign in the alien landscapes of another land."*

All through Christian history – the desert fathers and mothers – Benedict, Francis, Julian of Norwich, Hildegard – all have made the journey into the undomesticated wildness of God. It was in these early years that Christians first spoke of the two books of scripture – written scripture and earth scripture. All through Biblical and church history prophets journeyed to the places where God reigns and where God's word is manifest. But that journey will not happen much longer on this planet unless we restore and preserve the wild places where God reigns.

As we listen to God's voice in the earth around us, among the things we hear is a great cry of distress. This cry arises from all the physical degradations taking place to the atmosphere, the water, and the soil and at the decline of fish in the sea, birds in the air, and forests on the land. These are very real concerns for those charged with keeping the earth. But we wonder about the spiritual dimensions of these

degradations. Where will the prophets go to hear the wilderness word of God when there is no more wilderness? Where will any of us go when the final pages have been torn from the book of earth scripture?

This is not the first time in history that scripture has been in danger of being lost. In the Middle Ages – the Dark Ages – the written scriptures faced a danger similar to that of earth scripture today. Only by the efforts of monks over the centuries were the written scriptures preserved. The way in which the scriptures and tradition of Christianity were carried through those Dark Ages by the monastic tradition is captured in the image of Noah's ark, by Ester deWall in her book, *The Way of Saint Benedict*. She describes Benedict as a man who

*"in a troubled, torn apart and uncertain world – a world without landmarks... built an ark to survive the rising storm, an ark not made with hands, into which two by two human and eternal values might enter, to be kept until the water assuaged, an ark moreover which lasted not only for one troubled century but for fifteen and which has the capacity to bring many safe to land."*

In former centuries monasteries were great "arks" for written scripture; in our day we need an "ark" for earth scripture, which today is threatened as much as written scripture has ever been.

How do we build such an ark? It is not as simple as it might appear, for our ark is ever part of the larger landscape – the water we sail in may become polluted, the rain acidified, the air a smog. But isn't this exactly what it is to be a Christian in the world, to enter into earth's distress, as Bonhoeffer said, "to drink our earthly cup to the dregs?" So we build an ark for earth scripture by restoring, preserving, and illuminating the manuscript of wild meadows and woodlands,

of ponds and creek valleys, of bluebirds, fox and deer wherever we can, and we tend God's wilderness word preparing a way in the wilderness for people to listen to God's word, a way of retreat, a way of silence, a way of Sabbath rest.

As we retell the story of John proclaiming God's wilderness word along the Jordan River, we might also remember the story of the Jordan River itself. As Dick Austin reminds us in his book, *Hope for the Land*, for nearly a thousand years since King Solomon of Israel and King Hiram of Tyre had begun intensive logging of the Cedars of Lebanon, the Jordan watershed had been deteriorating. This deforestation, along with other overuse of land in the watershed, left the river drier in most seasons and prone to floods when the rains came. It was to John and the Jordan, to this crazy prophet, his following of marginalized, impoverished people, and this degraded landscape that Jesus came to immerse himself in preparation for his ministry – a ministry that proclaimed, in Dick Austin's words, "redemption for the landless, the landed, and the landscape."

We must understand the connection implied here between these redemptions. There is no redemption for any one – landless, landed or landscape – that does not include all three. The deforestation in Honduras that magnified the disaster there cannot be redeemed apart from redemption of landless and impoverished people living there, and the people cannot be redeemed apart from redemption of the global economy of the rich, which feeds on exploitation of foreign labor and landscape.

When we are building an ark for earth scripture and tending God's wilderness word in the midst of all that is unredeemed in the human and natural community around and within us, we meet our liberator. We discover we are with Jesus in the garden, as our Gospel reading today suggests.

Let us listen to these verses from today's lectionary

readings. Listen. Behold. "The Dayspring, the dawn, the uprising from on high, hath visited us (Luke 1:78)." Listen. Behold. "Through Christ all things, in heaven and on earth, will be reconciled (Col 1:20)." Listen to the words of Jesus, "Today you will be with me in paradise (Luke 23)." Paradise? Yes, paradise! Paradise – in Persian the word meant "walled garden," in Hebrew it was, "The king's forest, the king's orchard;" in Greek, "park, garden, orchard." Behold, today you will be with Jesus in the garden of God, in the forest, in the orchard of God Remember the Garden of Eden, if you will. Dream of the Garden of Glory, if you will. But today be with Jesus in the wild garden of God, in the wilderness world where God reigns.