



Mike and Sandy Sigmon C3 Sermon Challenge



Runner-Up

Katherine Smith

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About Katherine Smith

Katherine Smith is the Co-Founder and Executive Director of Baptist Creation Care Initiative. She is currently the Vice-Chair of the Baptist World Alliance's Creation Care Initiative. She received a Master's degree (MPS) in ecology and theology from Loyola University. Her time working as a missionary in a developing country left her with a profound sense of responsibility for the poor and marginalized, especially those who are adversely affected by climate disruption and environmental degradation.

Katherine attends First Baptist Church in Winchester, Virginia and enjoys the natural setting of her home in the mountains of West Virginia where she resides with her husband, Darrell.



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It is the goal of this program to raise awareness of climate issues by nurturing the development of meaningful sermons and encouraging dialogue and discussion.

"The Singing Stones"

Katherine Smith

Every year around Easter, I take time to watch one of my favorite musicals - Jesus Christ Superstar. If you haven't watched this musical lately, I highly recommend it! At the climax of the movie, on Palm Sunday, Jesus is entering Jerusalem with the crowd joyously singing and praising his name. The strains of 'Hosannas' fill the screen. Of course, the Pharisees don't like this at all, so they insist that Jesus tell everyone to be quiet and go home. Jesus replies (I will not be singing – you'll need to watch the movie to get the full effect!)

Why waste your breath moaning at the crowd? Nothing can be done to stop the shouting. If every tongue were stilled the noise would still continue. The rocks and stones themselves would start to sing...

In case you think this is just artistic license for the musical – remember this passage from Luke 19:40? Jesus tells the Pharisees that, if the people keep quiet, "the stones will cry out." For years, this song – and this very line – have stuck with me. I'm not sure I realized why until the last year or so.

You see, I have a secret to share with you – I’m a tree hugger! I don’t mean I actually hug trees – they have way too many spiders and bugs! But I love trees. I’m the ‘tree hugger’ variety that is usually used in a derogatory manner - such as “someone who works to protect the environment from destruction or pollution.” Apparently, I’ve been a tree hugger most of my life and didn’t even know it.

The first clue I had that I might be a tree hugger was when I was in college about 10 years ago. I was studying Theology and Biology at the same time – and I can’t tell you how many times I was asked “how does that work?” I had no idea what they meant. Every science class I took just drew me closer to God - from the Big Bang in astronomy class to the replication of DNA in genetics. God’s fingerprints were there wherever I turned. Apparently, having profound faith in God wasn’t supposed to go hand-in-hand with being a scientist.

Just before my husband and I moved to New Orleans, I started on a seminary degree, first at McAfee in Atlanta, then at Loyola in New Orleans. My major: Theology and Ecology! Guess that should have been the second clue that I might be a secret tree hugger. In my classwork, I started taking a look at the Bible from the perspective of the rest of the world – the non-human part. I can say - I was truly surprised! Passages I had read countless times suddenly took on new meaning.

For example: Take the story of Noah. How many of us know the story of Noah by heart? The animals coming aboard two by two. A few special animals in larger quantities. Noah taking years to build the ark. The rains coming. The family saved. Then the raven and the dove looking for dry land. God promises to never flood the earth again and seals the deal with the rainbow. Nothing new here – except that the covenant that God makes is not just with Noah. Not once, not twice, but six times God mentions that the covenant he is making is between God, Noah, **AND ALL CREATION. Six times!**

Genesis 9:9-17

9 “I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you 10 and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth.

More and more I began to consider the natural world from God’s perspective. Of course, I know that God created the world, but there is so much more to be discovered in the pages of the Bible and the world around us.

Through many of the Psalms, God is praised by creation, just as today we still use images from nature in much of our music to express our feelings about God. I once looked in the Baptist Hymnal and did a brief count of the songs that contained something about the natural world in them – almost half, and that was just a quick count!

Surprisingly, God uses images from nature to get the point across as well! Job is a famous example. You remember Job – his faithfulness is tested in almost unimaginable ways. His family, lands, and health are all taken from him. In chapter after chapter, Job repeatedly addresses God, asking him why he is being made to suffer. If he could only talk to God face-to-face, Job is sure he could find out his answers. And then, near the end of the book, God finally speaks. And what a speech it is!

Where were you when I created the earth? Tell me, since you know so much!

Who decided on its size? Certainly you'll know that!

Who came up with the blueprints and measurements?

How was its foundation poured, and who set the cornerstone, while the morning stars sang in chorus and all the angels shouted praise?

And this is just the beginning. God takes Job on a whirlwind tour of God's power – from the creation of the ocean depths to the stars in the heavens. God brings the rain, hail, snow, and thunderstorms.

“Do you send the lightning bolts on their way? Do they report to you, ‘Here we are?’” God asks? And then God throws in the lions, ravens, mountain goats, oxen, donkeys, horses, eagles, whales, and even ostriches!

And yet God asks, “Do you have an arm like God’s, and can your voice thunder like his?” Wisely, Job weakly offers an apology in the face of God’s strength and majesty!

As good Baptists and Christians, we frequently turn to Jesus as our model in life, as we should. What did he think about the created world? Reading through the Gospels, you’ll find that Jesus was found more often on a hillside or at the lake than in the synagogue or a house. Several times it mentions that he went to the mountains to pray. And we know his parables were filled with examples from nature. Lilies of the field, birds, sheep, houses built on rocks, floods, storms, and the lowly mustard seed. Except for pigs and sometimes fig trees – the natural world was a vital part of Jesus’ life and ministry.

Before you claim that this was just because Jesus lived 2000 years ago and there weren’t computers or cars or phones or FaceBook, just remember that even the very symbols of our Baptist life are based on nature – the dove represents the Holy Spirit; wheat makes our bread and grapes for juice in our Lord’s Supper; and water is used in Baptism.

**Nature surrounds us, permeates us, refreshes us, feeds us.
Just as it did Jesus.**

There is one verse in the Bible that has become extremely important to me personally, however. One that I didn't notice until a couple of years ago. The more I thought about this verse, the more I came to realize that I had some of my own priorities wrong. I needed to pay more attention to the created world. The verse is Romans 1:20:

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

Since the very creation of the world, God's invisible qualities can be found in the natural world. First of all – what are God's qualities? I think of love, wisdom, power, creativity, justice, forgiving. There are so many! Maybe that's why we have so many plants and animals around us! What qualities of God do you see as you view a mountain? Or a platypus? A frog? Or the waves of a seashore? What about a roach?

Many of you laughed and cringed when I got to the roach! And yet, roaches are pretty resilient and manage to keep going and going! Maybe they're an image of God's eternal nature? What qualities of God are we losing when part of creation is destroyed or lost? What divine nature of God is hidden under pollution, the destruction of species, or the overuse of the land.

The dodo bird is just one of thousands of species now extinct – not due to natural causes but as a direct result of our abuse. Every day, more and more species of plants and animals are lost – 82 species every day – 4 just while we're at church this morning. How can people come to know God if God can no longer be "clearly seen"? I came to understand that the way I care for creation affects more than air or water or food. It affects the ability of people to come to know God. Aren't Baptists supposed to "go into the world, teach, and baptize"? Then we, I, better care about creation!

Prior to a few years ago, I was happily a secret tree hugger. No one knew. No one cared. Slowly, God has drawn me in a new direction.

I am a scientist. And I have a profound faith in God. Instead of ignoring this unique combination, I find myself in the role of 'creation translator'! I help translate the scientific world for people of faith. Words such as climate change, environmental degradation, and deforestation are often misunderstood and cause confusion, anger, or fear.

As a scientist, I can tell you that climate change is absolutely real. As a Christian, I must speak out against injustices in the world. I must spread the love of Christ and be Christ's presence in the world. And I must spread hope for the future.

I want to help others see God's qualities once again throughout creation and re-ignite a sense of wonder and responsibility toward the world to which we are intrinsically bound. Why is this important? Because not only are trees dying due to the harm we have caused, but more importantly, people are dying. People that don't know about Jesus the way you and I know him.

Now – back to this rock. I don't want to be told by the Pharisees to quit singing God's praises. And I want nature to be able to sing, too. As Psalm 148 tells us –

Praise the Lord from the earth,
You great sea creatures and all the depths;
Fire and hail, snow and clouds; Stormy wind, fulfilling His word;
Mountains and all hills; Fruitful trees and all cedars;
Beasts and all cattle; Creeping things and flying fowl;

Kings of the earth and all peoples; Princes and all judges of the earth;
Both young men and maidens; Old men and children.

Let them praise the name of the Lord, For His name alone is exalted.

Maybe this rock is singing too!