



GOD SAW THAT IT WAS GOOD

Let's deepen our faith by connecting afresh with the natural world, a place where God might be seen and met. Are we looking?
By Dave Gregory

'Perfect Planet.'
'Green Planet.'
The latest offerings in a long series of nature programmes featuring Sir David Attenborough stretching back to the 1970s.

Awakening people to the beauty and wonder of the natural world, with an increasing slant in recent years highlighting the environmental and climate crisis. There can be few people who have not at least glimpsed an episode through the years and marvelled at the stunning imagery used to inspire an awareness of how precious life on the planet is. For those of faith in a creator God, a gift of grace.

Yet do we look? Really look? At the images presented, at

the natural world around us to which we are connected and embedded?

God 's temple... on our doorstep?

Morning Prayer from The Northumbria Community begins with lines from Psalm 27:
'One thing I have asked of the Lord, this is what I seek: That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life; to behold the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple.'

A familiar passage; yet reading God's word in different seasons and settings of life highlights different things. Over the past year, on most days, I have taken time to encounter God watching my garden, either on the patio or on more inclement days through the patio doors. As the year progressed it was the word 'temple' that stood out. A word describing a building, a place where people gather for worship, to encounter God. The Psalmist expresses the desire of many through these Covid years of being able to gather with God's people in familiar places and ways. Yet, as I looked at the garden, I began to wonder whether an opportunity might be missed. Could the garden be looked on as God's temple? A place through which God might be seen and met.

Visiting the temple, one of Jesus' disciples declared: *'Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!'* (Mark 13:1). How we imagine the temple is perhaps shaped by our experience of the majestic, magnificent cathedrals across the cities and towns of our land. Places of stone, inside and out, walls unsoftened by the paintings that graced their interior in the medieval era. Solomon's earlier temple too was made of stone, but inside it could not have been more different:

'Solomon ... lined its interior walls with cedar ... carved with gourds and open flowers ... no stones was to be seen.' (1 Kings 6:14ff). Some have suggested that the interior of the temple was a depiction of the Garden of Eden, calling people back to a time when they might encounter God *'walking in the garden in the cool of the day'*: (Gen 3:8)

Have we lost a sense of encountering God within the wonder of creation? A diminished sense of transcendence through the natural world because we have forgotten how to look, really look?

The transcendent in everyday life

I wear glasses and I know when it's time for me to get a new pair - when the branches of distant trees no longer appear sharp. I am always amazed at the transformation of my sight when I put a new pair on! If we are to look, really look again, and seek God within the temple of his creation, then we need new glasses. Whether we are people of faith or not, we live in an age stripped of a sense of the transcendent in everyday life. If it is being sought, we assume it is contained within organised activities, such as worship or within retreat centres shaped by faith or none.

It has been so for a long time. Fifty years ago, in the small but significant book, *A Rumour of Angels*, Peter Berger asked how people in our technological age might be reconnected with this sense of the beyond in their experience of everyday life. He suggested several experiences which he named Signals of Transcendence. Among them the wonder that people commonly experience in the face of the natural world, the human enjoyment of play and our desire for the security of order.

This lack of awareness, an inability to look, has not always been so. Looking back further into history, to a more sacramentally shaped age of faith, the Franciscan Bonaventure taught that encountering God begins through the created world. There, God's creative power and creativity found in the vast diversity of life speak of the divine artist's work, while the connectedness of all things expresses God's heart to bring things to unity. Themes that reflect the shaping of creation by the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.



My garden through the seasons | Dave Gregory

‘The experience of wonder connects us with God’s creative intent and power’

For much of Christian history, art and imagery have played a significant role in our worship. It has been rediscovered in our lifetimes using video projectors, and within worship the use of images like those in natural history offerings on TV that reflect the wonder of creation. Images of nature we take beyond our church buildings and even homes through our mobile phones. Yet too often this visual encounter with creation is superficial and all too transitory. The backdrop for the lyrics of a worship song. Neither do they open a wider valuing of the created world beyond that which we see on our screens.

Combining Berger’s and Bonaventure’s ways of seeing enables us to look in a deeper, longer way to experience transcendence through the natural order. The experience of wonder connects us with God’s creative intent and power. The sheer overwhelming diversity of life that we see around us expresses God’s playful joy over what he has made, each part precious and playing their part. And the connectedness of life that science is increasingly showing us, including our reliance and responsibility to the whole community of creation, hints at God’s desire to bring *‘unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ’*. (Eph 1:10).

See creation afresh at this year’s Baptist Assembly

At the Baptist Assembly in Bournemouth this year, BUEN - The Baptist Union Environment Network - is providing an opportunity to look afresh at creation through new glasses.

‘God saw that it was Good’ is an exhibit of large images around themes of sky, trees, coast and seas and life, each linked to reflections shaped by themes of wonder, playfulness and unity that can be streamed from the internet onto mobile phones. Following the Assembly we hope it might be made available for churches and associations for use in local events within their church or to share with their local communities.

Offering a chance to begin to look at creation through new glasses. Training us to find the presence of God in the wonderful world he has gifted to us: in those wonderful images of documentaries streamed into our homes and phones; or while walking around our neighbourhood and wider afield, or just sitting, looking at your garden. Reclaiming a sense of transcendence through the natural world, seeking God in his temple. And renewing care **about** creation that might inspire in a time of changing climate a deeper desire to share in God’s mission to care **for** creation.



See this photo and others in the BUEN photography exhibition at this year’s Baptist Assembly

Photo from Martine Liu 58 | shutterstock.com

CONVERSATION

Have we lost a sense of encountering God within the wonder of creation?

What helps you connect with the beyond in your every day life? Is it nature - or something else?

STARTERS



Dave Gregory is a former President of the Baptist Union and convenor of BUEN, The Baptist Union Environment Network and chair of the John Ray Initiative. He recently stepped down from local church ministry to focus on mission around science, faith, and the environment.

For more on BUEN, visit baptist.org.uk/buen