

2 / 18 / 2007

The Charleston Gazette

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© **Wilderness: God's greatest cathedral**

However much time you and I spend in our churches, my guess is that like me, you find that a particularly fitting place to commune with your God is in His own wilderness.

An Arizona pastor tells of asking his congregation, "When have you felt closest to God?" and reports that they rarely answer, "During your sermons." Like them, many of us here in West Virginia find some of our most profound spiritual experiences in the greatest cathedral of them all -- in solitude beside the still waters or in a deep forest lit by sunlight dappled through the forest canopy. Or, here in the Monongahela National Forest, beside the not-so-still waters of a gloriously wild, rushing mountain stream such as Seneca Creek.

As a Christian who reads the Bible regularly, I know that the greatest prophets sought the wildest places in nature for their most intense spiritual renewal. Moses convened with God on Sinai for "forty days and forty nights" (Exodus 24:18). And Mark tells us that Jesus sojourned in the wilderness for "forty days" (Mark 1:13). In short, wilderness is part of our Biblical heritage.

The Lord, I believe, did not place us in this earthly garden to see us despoil every part of it, or to turn every acre to our immediate needs for food, fiber and money. There is a deep inborn reason that our hearts respond with a joyous leap to great vistas of unspoiled nature. His Creation as He created it.

This is why I am working through my organization, Christians for the Mountains, and religious leaders in our state, including the West Virginia Council of Churches, to encourage our members of Congress to protect additional areas of wilderness. Thanks to the visionary and bipartisan Wilderness Act that Congress passed in 1964, we have the means through our democratic process to see that a reasonable sample of the wilderness solitudes of the Monongahela National Forest will be preserved for all time to serve many values, not least being our spiritual needs.

For us, this is an act of humility. Surely it would be immoral for our generation to deny future generations of West Virginians what the Wilderness Act terms "the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness." Our obligation to them, and to our Creator, runs deeper. Preserving wilderness areas such as Seneca Creek, Spice

Run and the Dolly Sods Expansion, is a form of tithing, setting apart some of the natural bounty given to us as a wild sanctuary, protecting it in its undefined natural condition for the benefit of generations unborn.

So, we ask our elected officials to take a political action in a nonpartisan way. We ask them to preserve more of the wilderness of the Mon. Far into the future our descendants in these mountains will lift their eyes unto the hills. They will need and treasure these quiet reserves of God's wild solitudes so much more in their crowded world than we can even imagine.

The great Republican Teddy Roosevelt spoke of our obligation to the future, railing against "the short-sighted men who in their greed and selfishness will, if permitted, rob our country of half its charm by their reckless extermination of all useful and beautiful wild things."

The "greatest good for the greatest number," Roosevelt reminds us, "applies to the number within the womb of time, compared to which those now alive form but an insignificant fraction. Our duty to the whole, including the unborn generations, bids us restrain" ourselves "from wasting the heritage of these unborn generations." I personally want to know that my four grandchildren, and their children, will be afforded the same opportunity to experience the awe-inspiring wild places we seek to protect.

Today, you and I bear this moral responsibility to those within the womb of time. Yes, we could develop the remaining unprotected wild places in our national forest if we chose to; that decision is in our hands. But in a very real way, all those yet unborn are watching us, praying (as writer Terry Tempest Williams so eloquently puts it) "for us to see beyond our own time. They are kneeling with clasped hands hoping that we might act with restraint."

We humans live only by grace, and Williams reminds us that it is within our legislative powers — held by our elected representatives — to take care that a good, big, generous sample of God's wilderness lives on as well. Wilderness areas such as Cranberry Glades and Dolly Sods that Congress has already protected in this way, offer places to play in, to be sure, for hunters, fishermen, campers and hikers, young families, and sturdy mountaineers who remain young at heart.

And, for many of us, wilderness offers the very best places in which to pray.

Marshall, of Kenna, is a native West Virginian, avid fly fisherman, hunter and a practicing veterinarian. He co-founded Christians for the Mountains, and helps lead the Religious Campaign for Wilderness. For information about citizen wilderness proposals, visit www.wvwild.org.