

## On Earth as it is in Heaven

### Lessons from the Desert Fathers for Today

Fr. Athanasius Shaw  
Holy Resurrection Parish, OCA  
Portland, Oregon  
(abridged text)

Saint Nikolai Velimirovich says in the *Prologue* that the inner enemies of man, the passions and the manifold vanities, constantly flare up afresh in the city, while in the wilderness or desert, they wither and disappear.

Saint Jerome in the 4<sup>th</sup> century related something similar: The Saints, Holy Fathers and Mothers, monastics and pilgrims have gone out into the wilderness “to flee the corruption of cities, to wage war with the passions, but especially to encounter the holy.”

Our Lord Jesus Christ gave us a similar example of going into the wilderness to pray. In the Church’s Tradition, wilderness is a place where we draw closer to God.

When I was eleven years old I went on a fifty mile backpacking trip through the Olympic Mountains in Washington State. I experienced something of the holy, though at the time I was unaware of the source of holiness. I remember the great joy I felt as I hiked over a mountain covered with wild flowers surrounded by snow-capped peaks and a pure blue sky. I remember feeling a profound gratitude and love; and I can still hear the deep silence of the wilderness. I had a sense that this place was sacred.

I continued to drink from this fountain throughout my life – I couldn’t get enough of the mountains, streams and forests; the wilderness seemed to refresh and lift up my soul. However, it wasn’t until my participation in a *Christ in the Wilderness* trip in the High Sierras that I became aware that the experiences of holiness that I had in the wilderness throughout my life were encounters with the presence of Jesus Christ in Creation. The realization that my relationship with Jesus Christ can be enriched through my love of wilderness was a wonderful discovery.

“God reveals Himself through His Creation.” St. Paul proclaimed this in Romans 1:20: “*For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead...*”

St. Basil the Great writes, “*This marvelous creation*” is the “*supreme icon*” of Christian faith which leads to knowledge of the “*Supreme Artisan*.” Nature is a vast icon of Christ.

Icons are windows into heaven; they offer us access to Divinity, and therefore have to be approached with love and humility. The passions that manifest as anger,

arrogance and judgment of our neighbor are blocks to approaching the “supreme icon” of Creation and thereby touching the hem of Christ’s garment. My experience in the *Christ in the Wilderness* program has shown me that the passions result as scales over my eyes, blinding me to the beauty around me and within my brothers and sisters. Thus the practice of Orthodox spiritual life from the beginning has been to struggle against the passions and make real in one’s life the Godly attributes of Jesus Christ; to “put on Christ,” as we sing while circling the Baptismal font.

*Patriarch + Ignatius IV of Antioch writes,  
“Without the contemplation of nature, one never comes  
to the mystical side of Orthodoxy.”*

In *Christ in the Wilderness*, the focus is to “exercise ourselves unto godliness” (1 Tim. 4:7), as St. Paul tells us. This is done by practicing each day one of the virtues of thanksgiving, humility, seeing the beauty of the Lord in and around oneself, silence, or solitude, and love for Creation and one’s neighbor. Most participants afterwards express a commitment to continue the practice of these virtues in their daily life.

Wilderness offers the opportunity to learn spiritual lessons from nature. Once, St. Anthony the Great was asked how he got along out in the desert without books. He answered “*My book is the nature of created things, and as often as I have a mind to read the words of God, it is at my hand.*” St. John Chrysostom tells us: “*From the creation, learn to admire the Lord...He has made the mode of this creation to be our best teacher...*”

In our Theology, everything that God has created is a particular manifestation of God’s will through the Divine Logos; everything in nature has something to say about God, some lesson to teach us about ourselves and the spiritual life. St. Basil instructs us to learn from the ant, to learn from the bee, in order to become more productive disciples of Jesus Christ. Our Lord himself drew out lessons from nature... “*Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow...*” (Mt.6:28-29) and “*Behold the fowls of the air...*” (Mt. 6:26-27).

Most of us are constantly surrounded by distractions; our society pulls at us to turn away from God. Going into the wilderness to draw closer to Jesus Christ, practicing the virtues and learning spiritual lessons through His beautiful Creation informs our walk in Christ and therefore is a valuable experience for our parish life.

One participant offered this reflection of her experience in the wilderness: “*During the following days I practiced turning to God constantly, something I easily forget in my daily life. I learned how to address everything with prayer and how to quietly bless places and people. We faced our inner challenges. This time in the wilderness was indeed a pilgrimage.*”

His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius IV of Antioch and the East has stated “*Without the contemplation of nature, one never comes to the mystical side of Orthodoxy.*” *Christ in the Wilderness* puts these words into action.