

The Sublime
Genesis 2:4b-9, 15-17
by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
First Central Congregational Church
14 October 2018

Note: Part of our *Inspire* series in collaboration with the Joslyn Art Museum.
This sermon inspired by [Mountain Scene](#) by Thomas Hill.

Today our worship is inspired by the painting *Mountain Scene* by Thomas Hill. The materials from the Joslyn Art Museum inform us that this painting is of Hill's favorite subject—Yosemite Valley. Thomas Hill is described as “one of the earliest and most accomplished painters of California scenery and became the leading practitioner of its grand-scale panorama.” What drew him to Yosemite Valley were the “vistas which because of their towering rock formations, deep chasms, and dramatic scenery, provided a most magnificent display of nature's wonders.” In this particular painting, which is quite large if you visit the museum to see the original, the viewers are “dwarfed by a sublime yet benign nature.”

This is a gorgeous painting, and these types of American landscapes are among my favorite art. I think that's true for many Americans. We are drawn to these images of our land, of mountains, and forests, and hills, and valleys, and rivers, and streams. And images of Yosemite Valley in particular from Albert Bierstadt through John Muir to Ansel Adams inspire us with beauty.

Michael and I visited Yosemite in the summer of 2008. It was a beautiful July day with clear skies. We walked through the valley, clambering over boulders and soaking our feet in the cold waters of the river. We gazed in awe upon the towering rocks of the canyon. We were dazzled by rock climbers and waterfalls. We laid upon the bank of the river watching the ever-shifting shadows. And we took our pictures of Half Dome and El Capitan and Bridal Veil Falls. Our own attempts to create art from this marvelous, sublime place.

A visit to Yosemite is a religious experience. Because our culture has already defined it as such.

In his magisterial book *Landscape and Memory* the historian Simon Schama writes that Yosemite is America's “first and most famous . . . Eden.” He continues, “It was an act of Congress in 1864 that established Yosemite Valley as a place of sacred significance for the nation, during the war which marked the moment of Fall in the American Garden.”

During our greatest national crisis, the Civil War, when we feared for the ideals of the nation, we created this wilderness park that would be an “antidote for the poisons of industrial society” and a place of healing within the “imagined garden.”

And Yosemite became precisely that, through the writings of naturalists and the most importantly the landscapes of the great painters and photographers. Yosemite became “the holy park of the West,” to quote Schama. “The site of a new birth; a redemption for the national agony; an American re-creation.”

He points out that Yosemite of all the grand places of the West lent itself for this spiritual purpose. “The strangely unearthly topography of the place, with brilliant meadows carpeting the valley flush to the sheer cliff walls of Cathedral Rock, the Merced River winding through the tall grass, lent itself perfectly to this vision of a democratic terrestrial paradise. And the fact that visitors had to *descend* to the valley floor only emphasized the religious sensation of entering a walled sanctuary.”

Schama’s point is that nature itself doesn’t do this. We have a spiritual experience of the place because human culture has decided that we will. We have learned to see and experience nature in this way because of our cultural conditioning. And these paintings played a huge role in shaping how we see and experience and understand.

Thomas Hill is less famous than some of the other great American landscape painters like Thomas Cole, Frederic Church, Alfred Bierstadt, and Thomas Moran. Our museum owns some of their works as well, though none of the giant canvases that draw us to these painters. I plan to visit the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa this week, and they do have a grand collection of these painters. I’m looking forward to it.

This American landscape tradition that helped to capture the American West actually began in New York along the Hudson River and in the Catskills. Three years ago, Michael, Sebastian, and I were fortunate to visit the town of Hudson, New York for Desi Fortina’s weddings. The day before the wedding we drove along part of the Hudson River School Art Trail. We visited Olana, the glorious mansion of Frederic Church which sits high atop a hill overlooking the Hudson River with the Catskills in the background. The view from that hill having appeared in Church’s paintings.

From there we crossed the river to the charming village of Catskill and visited Thomas Cole’s home. Then the trail leads up into the Catskill Mountains with stops at various vantage points made famous in American landscape painting. Unfortunately we didn’t have time to hike the trail to Kaaterskill Falls made famous in Cole’s painting and the poetry of William Cullen Bryant.

In 1828 Thomas Cole painted *The Garden of Eden*. Theologian James McClendon writes, “Many critics believe Cole meant to represent America as a new Eden where unspoiled nature could return humankind to a state of innocence.”

These Hudson River School painters eventually traveled in the American West and began to paint these grand, sublime, beautiful images of American wilderness as this pure space. America was a new Eden where we might begin again and create something new.

My favorite theologian is the Baptist James William McClendon. His three volume *Systematic Theology* has deeply shaped me, as I read it early in my full time ministry career. Volume Three is entitled *Witness* and is his theology of culture in which he helps us to understand how our Christian worldview intersects with the world, giving us the ability to interpret it.

And so there are chapters on philosophy and science but my favorite is the chapter on art, where he explores American painting, literature, and music. By the way, he thinks Jazz is the greatest American art form and the one that resonates most closely with the Christian gospel.

This week I reread his theological reflection on the history of American art, and I felt again some of the wonder I experienced the first time I read it. I didn't know that theology could engage in such things. Reading McClendon opened my eyes to the way our religious faith helps to shape our interpretation of the world and how we can view anything as a theological text. During this series I've heard from one of you wondering how I can look at these paintings and get such deep ideas from them, it is because the theology of James McClendon taught me to do that.

As you can probably tell, the Hudson River School and the landscapes of the American West, is art I relish. I seek out these paintings in American museums. I enjoy them and their beauty.

But. And there is a but. These paintings are theological texts. And the theology they express sadly has devastating political implications.

McClendon writes that their basic flaw is that they train us to look backwards "to Eden rather than forward to the kingdom of God." He writes that these artists,

sadly perverted the Genesis creation narrative: they revised the story of an earth created by God for purposes best unfolded in the prophets and in Jesus of Nazareth into a story of Eden revisited by a new Adam, the pioneering American, whose industrial mills (and by extension, whose territorial conquests) perfect God's plan.

These paintings were the "artistic rendering of Manifest Destiny." And so they helped to shape a vision of the West as this empty place. But it wasn't empty. There were people living here. They had been here for millennia, with their own cultures, economics, and art. These landscapes helped to empower the military conquest of the West.

And they distract us from the real work of the Gospel, which is to bring about God's reign upon the earth. Our spiritual fulfillment is *not* to be found in escapes to wilderness, however much we enjoy that. Our spiritual fulfillment is to be found in the formation of a better world shaped by God's vision of justice and fairness and peace. Our spiritual fulfillment will come about through the long, difficult work of serving one another, creating community, overcoming social divisions, making a better society.

The Christian gospel isn't a set of propositions to be believed. It is a way of life to be lived. And that way of life—its stories, its traditions, its rituals—teach us how to see and experience and understand the world according to the way God loves it. Our faith teaches us how to witness the world and witness to the world. So we can interpret paintings and nature itself according to God's love and God's vision. "Be now my vision, O God of my heart" we will sing at the close of this worship.

Art, James McClendon writes, teaches us one more thing, something we also learn in the Christian gospel—that a new world can be created. These American landscapes helped to create a new vision of the American West, with devastating consequences. But we can create a new world that is the peaceable kingdom of God.

Good art can inspire us to "'a whole new world' of unrealized possibility." May we open our eyes to see, experience, and understand, that we might be so inspired.