



15 November 2015  
The Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Trinity  
Choral Evensong  
Isaiah 35 vv. 1–10  
1 Corinthians 13 vv. 1–13

## After Nature

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I notice that many vendors already have their Christmas decorations out, which I think a pity as it tends to close autumn rather too soon. Now, don't get me wrong, I love the Christmas season, but, whether grim or golden, late autumn has its own splendor: there is something in the festival of cloud and rain, the flight of red and yellow leaves, the stolen joy of surprisingly pleasant afternoons, and the aroma of bonfires. On those splendid days when the sun is out – today was one of them – I'm often struck by the peculiarly material quality of the light especially in the early mornings and the late afternoons, as if the daylight were growing thicker this time of year, even as the days grow shorter. There is both melancholy and beauty in all of this. I sometimes think that if Autumn were to have a patron saint, surely it would be John the Baptist, for now is the season when the whole of nature seems to say: I must decrease.

The whole of nature – what might that mean? And might we imagine nature saying, not just in autumn, but finally, ultimately, *I must decrease that he might increase*. Can we imagine an end to nature? And if so, what comes after nature?

Nowadays, of course, we pretend to imagine the end of nature all of the time and from a dizzying array of directions. From the perspective of deep time, we think about what some cosmologists call physical eschatology, the scientific study of the end of the universe. As you probably know, the Second Law of Thermodynamics formulates a general rule for all the various irreversible processes towards leveling that we encounter throughout the world: within any closed physical system, it states, the measure of unusable energy – what we call entropy – always tends to increase. Now if we think of nature as the entirety of the physical universe, and if we think we've got good reasons to believe that this is all there is, then the conclusion is nearly unavoidable. So long as the system remains closed, entropy will always increase, and the universe will grow colder and colder, less and less ordered, until its ultimate demise in the total equilibrium of heat death some immeasurably long future hence. At the end, so the story goes, the whole temple of human achievement, the whole world of nature and its splendors, will be, as Bertrand Russell puts it, *buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins*.

Russell thought this the nearly certain conclusion of modern science, but I suspect his confidence was misplaced – the laws in question apply to closed systems in thermodynamic equilibrium, and we can't empirically establish that the universe as a whole is such a closed system, though we methodologically assume so for the sake of doing physics. Besides, even if the universe were closed now, how would I know that it must ever remain so?



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I have been using the word nature as a word that refers to the totality of physical systems. Call this a comprehensive view of nature. But we often take a contrastive view of nature too, viewing nature not as everything that is, but as that which is *given*, that which exists on its own apart from human culture or apart from human willing. Nature, in this sense, is associated with wilderness, wild flora and fauna, untrammelled nature. If we use the word this way then, instead of imagining the end of nature as some distant cosmological event, we might imagine an end of nature much closer to home. For one thing, human influence is now so ubiquitous upon the surface of the earth that strictly speaking ‘untrammelled nature’ no longer exists, a situation that environmentalists have referred to as *the end of nature*, and geologists have christened the *Anthropocene*. We have transformed something like 50% of the land surface of the planet; we consume nearly a quarter of the biosphere’s annual production of biomass; and we catch and utilize more than half of all accessible fresh water. We have changed the climate. On this planet, at least, we seem to have become the gatekeepers of nature.

We know how dire the practical ecological consequences of all of this can be, but how does this inescapable human presence affect the way we understand, value, or experience nature? The writer and environmental activist, Bill McKibben, says that as long as environmentalists could view nature as something pristine, they could view it as sacred: nature was something given, it had an identity that was and should remain beyond our control, like God or justice. But we have brought that view of nature to an end: nature is now something we manage, *a category like the defense budget or the minimum wage, a problem we must work out.*

Then again, maybe nature has always been like that. C S Lewis once wrote that “*we reduce things to mere Nature in order that we may ‘conquer’ them. We are always conquering Nature, because ‘Nature’ is the name for what we have, to some extent, conquered. The price of conquest is to treat a thing as mere Nature. Every conquest over Nature increases her domain. The stars do not become Nature till we can weigh and measure them: the soul does not become Nature till we can psychoanalyse her.*”

What’s intriguing to me is that in all of these different ways of imagining the end of nature, we are not just imagining physical dissolution, we are also imagining **the end of the meaning of nature**, nature reduced to something brute and valueless.

Something similar can be seen in tonight’s reading from Isaiah 35. You might remember the words as part of the well-known alto recitative in Handel’s *Messiah*. They are words of extraordinary joy and hope but they follow quite suddenly upon a chapter of singular despair in which both nature and history are reduced to a kind of meaninglessness. Isaiah 34 begins by inviting the whole earth, and all that fills it, to watch as nature itself is brought to an end: *the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall wither like a leaf withering on a vine, or fruit withering on a fig tree.* The book of Genesis described creation as an act of ordering, of God bringing about life, flourishing, and purpose. But Isaiah 34 describes all of this being undone, creation falling away and leaving in its wake only a world bereft of God, an empty desiccated abode of monsters, horrors and pain.



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But how could God be absent from that which exists only because God gives it to be and calls it good? And so suddenly, like a sunrise, Isaiah 35.

*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;  
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,  
and rejoice with joy and singing.  
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,  
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.  
They shall see the glory of the Lord,  
the majesty of our God.*

Isaiah describes the natural environment itself actually transformed, flourishing because it now sees the glory of the Lord apart from which it neither flourishes nor even exists. He recalls Lebanon, Carmel, and Sharon, places of agrarian fertility and exquisite natural beauty. As earlier in Isaiah 11 and later in chapter 65, the prophet looks forward to the renewal of both the land and the people.

How does this happen? Isaiah shifts into terse declarative sentences marked by abrupt verbs: God will *come and save*, waters shall *break forth* in the wilderness, the burning sand shall *become* a pool. The imagery is that of God radically transforming creation, both what we call nature and what we call culture and history.

*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
then the lame shall leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.*

The land rejoices in verse 2; the blind, deaf, lame and dumb rejoice in verse 6. Finally, all of the redeemed rejoice with everlasting gladness in verse 10 *and sorrow and sighing shall flee away*.

Does some of this sound familiar? When I hear this I remember those passages from Matthew and Luke where John the Baptist, captive in Herod's prison, sends his disciples to ask Jesus: Are you the one who is to come? Jesus answers with the words of Isaiah. "*Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.*"

The end of nature is not nature left to its own devices, but nature caught up somehow into the life of God. Not just somehow, in fact, but very particularly caught up into the life of God through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Nature waits and groans with eager longing, as Paul says in that glorious 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans, while we ourselves groan inwardly awaiting the redemption of our bodies and the redemption of this world, the new heaven and the new earth brought together finally in all things as they are already brought together in Christ himself.

When we speak of nature as if it were only what we knew of it now, we often think of it as a system that can be known, enjoyed, managed, even manipulated, and to be sure we can do all these things. And yet know nature only in part, not least because we love only in part. But God loves us and loves this world too much to leave us and it fragmented and alone.

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Pope Francis calls the concluding section of his recent encyclical 'Beyond the Sun.' Quoting our epistle reading for today, Francis writes: "At the end, we will find ourselves **face to face** with the infinite beauty of God (cf. 1 Cor 13:12), and be able to read with admiration and happiness the mystery of the universe, which with us will share in unending plenitude. ... Jesus says: "I make all things new" (Rev 21:5). Eternal life will be a shared experience of awe, in which *each creature*, resplendently transfigured, will take its rightful place and have something to give those poor men and women who will have been liberated once and for all."

Meanwhile, the earth spins, the climate changes, species disappear, and horrors occupy the headlines. John the Baptist sits imprisoned. Winter comes. One wonders what these prophecies have to do with us here and now. Some might object, as many have, that this Christian focus upon the future keeps us from attending to the demands of the present. For me, at least, the effect is quite the opposite. The beauty I see in autumn, the wind last night that seemed like a god speaking through the trees, the faces of my wife, my children, my neighbors, the poor, the exiled, the refugees... not one of these is *mere nature*, not one of these is something simply to be managed like a budget or a wage. Everything, I believe, will be transformed in love and love can know it even now as more than its mere appearance, more than its measure and weight. We are called to be more than managers of this world, more than stewards, we are a company of creatures under God called together to become, by the grace of God, something that nature hitherto has only dared to dream.