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SUSTAINING ALL THINGS BY HIS POWERFUL WORD

Norman Hughes

The author of Hebrews describes God's relationship to the natural world in this eloquent language:

... in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. (Hebrews 1.2-3)

This intriguing passage makes two profound assertions. First of all, it asserts that God is the origin of the universe; and secondly, it asserts that he continues his participation in the creation as its sustainer. It also raises a number of questions, especially since God's presence in the natural world may not seem obvious. One such question may be: "Where is God?" Many persons would quickly answer, "God is in heaven." This is an appropriate and biblical answer, of course. After all, when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he told them to address God as "Our Father, *who is in heaven*." Others, however, may answer a bit differently. There are some who would say, "God is everywhere." This too, is a biblical answer. The psalmist wrote:

Whither shall I go from thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there thy hand shall guide me, and thy right hand shall lead me. (Ps 139.8-10)

These two answers may seem at first to be quite different. How can God be everywhere if he is in heaven? I suggest that these answers may not be as inconsistent as they seem. After all, heaven is not a specific, physical location in our three-dimensional universe, some thousands of light years away from the earth. In addition to the physical universe, which we perceive with our senses, we believe that there is a spiritual realm as well. Although the spiritual realm is not detectable with our human senses, its existence is consistent with our experience. We sometimes become aware of its existence when unique circumstances seem to pull the veil from our eyes temporarily. All of us have had such epiphanies—perhaps on a mountaintop at night when the thousands of stars are so awe-inspiring that we feel our own insignificance in comparison to the cosmos. Most of us will recall particularly moving worship experiences when God's presence was very real. At such times, the sacred seems all around us. The spiritual realm somehow coexists with our familiar physical universe, and permeates the whole of the universe. Thus, we exist in both the physical and the spiritual realms at the same time although we are often oblivious to this profound fact. God's being fills the spiritual realm and "heaven" is simply another name for this spiritual realm where God resides. When a believer prays or worships, he can commune with God in a very intimate way, because God is nearby!

Sometimes we forget about the intimate closeness of God, because he and the realm in which he resides are not discernable by our physical senses. In addition to the limitations of our human senses, there is another human foible that interferes with our awareness of the fullness of God's presence. It is easy for us to forget

that the same operating rules that work in our physical universe often do not apply in the spiritual realm. In our experience, if something is spread over a wide area, then there may not be very much of it in any one place. Imagine a person who attempts to paint a large house with only one gallon of paint. In order to cover the entire house, he or she must dilute the paint with such a great amount of paint thinner that there would be almost no paint on any particular spot on the house. Unfortunately, we sometimes unconsciously apply this same idea to God and think that if God is spread over the entire cosmos, there can't be very much of God right here with me. Not true! God's fullness fills the cosmos, and this means that his fullness is in every part of that cosmos. When believers commune with God in prayer or worship, they can be confident that God is not only near, but that he is nearby in full measure.

I must confess to a personal element in this essay. I have spent most of my life teaching the life sciences and I have a deep love of the natural world. Because of my love of nature, I find my conviction that the presence of God fills the cosmos to be more than a mere theological abstraction. If God is present in the natural world, then as we interact with nature and study the phenomena we observe there, there is a real sense in which we are interacting with God himself. The text from Hebrews with which we began says that God is sustaining all things by his powerful word. If God were to choose to withdraw his word, the natural world we know would not merely grind to a halt, it would cease to exist. Process theologians may have gone a bit too far in proposing that the natural world is a part of God's being, but they have a valid point in reminding us of the close intimacy with which God inhabits his creation.

For many years, I taught courses in Developmental Biology and, as a part of the laboratory work in those courses, I often observed newly fertilized eggs of various organisms, especially those of frogs and sea urchins. It was always a moving and exciting experience to watch a single cell majestically divide into two cells, then into four, then eight, and this remarkable process continued until there were thousands of cells. Each of these new cells has a phenomenal potentiality, and the cells that developed from them became all the tissues of the developing embryo. Each cell had all of the developmental instructions (in its DNA) to form a whole organism, but the astounding fact is that in those cells which were forming eyes, only the information relevant to eyes was used; in developing muscle tissues, the muscle-specific instructions were used; and only nerve cells utilized the information concerning how to make a nerve cell. How an embryo knows where to put each organ, and then be able to turn "on" the DNA appropriate for that organ's development while leaving the remainder switched "off" is one of the most intriguing unsolved problems in all of the biological sciences. Recent research has revealed the presence of segments of DNA which act as switches to control other genes, but how a cell knows which switches to use in each developing tissue is almost entirely unknown. As a biologist and a believer, I never tired of watching this remarkable process. I often felt that I was experiencing an epiphany—I was watching the natural world's sustainer at work.

In attributing the development of embryos to the actions of God, I am in no way advocating that we forego our scientific investigations into that process. It is a part of my credo as a believer that God is acting in the development of embryos as surely as he is acting in all the other amazing things we observe around us in the natural world. In addition, however, it is a part of my credo as a rational being with a scientific bent that there is, in principle, a naturalistic explanation for every natural phenomenon, including the development of embryos. This, I think, is a valid case in which we can have our cake and eat it too: there is both a supernatural explanation (God's sustaining power) and a natural explanation (scientific conclusions) for each of our observations in nature, and while scientific conclusions are always tentative, the discovery of naturalistic explanations in no way eliminates God from the phenomenon being studied.

Since the days of the Enlightenment, skeptics have argued that when a natural explanation is discovered, the need for God is eliminated. Believers then tried to counter their arguments by pointing out those many phenomena for which there were no naturalistic explanations, and the development of embryos was a favorite choice in these arguments. I believe this strategy on the part of believers was unfortunate, because as science made tremendous progress over the years, and with more and more naturalistic explanations forthcoming, the list of phenomena without explanations may have seemed to get shorter and shorter. Skeptics continue to use the apparent ability of science to explain so many phenomena as a rationale for their unbelief. It is my opinion that much of the so-called

conflict between science and faith would simply go away if we remembered that God is active in all natural phenomena, and whether we do or do not understand the phenomena in naturalistic terms is irrelevant.

Let's explore two very familiar phenomena for which there is an easily understood natural explanation, but which also are cases in which believers can see the hand of the Creator/sustainer. A sunset is surely one of the most wonderful and beautiful displays in all of nature. We marvel at the striking colors on the clouds and often remark that such a display is a manifestation of the glory of God. Giving God the praise for such beauty is entirely appropriate, even though there is a very simple and rational explanation for the vivid colors we see. Dust particles in the air reflect the different wavelengths of light in opposite directions—longer waves (red and orange) go up and short wavelengths (blue and violet) go down. Then, to our delight, we see the longer red and orange waves reflected from the bottoms of clouds. Stars provide another familiar example of how both a natural and a supernatural explanation can be held simultaneously. Astronomers have discovered many amazing truths about the stars—they are formed from accumulations of cosmic dust and debris, then as this material coalesces under the attraction of gravity they develop sufficient heat from the gravitational energy to begin converting hydrogen into helium and this thermonuclear reaction provides the energy for starlight. Depending upon the mass of a particular star, it will pass through a predictable life cycle, and finally, perhaps after billions of years, it will die. We accept these scientific conclusions and at the same time, can exclaim with the psalmist, "The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows his handiwork" (Ps 19.1).

Sunsets, the starry skies and developing embryos can be reminders of the closeness of God, and of his loving mercy. But not everything in nature is pretty. There are some things like slime molds and tapeworms that seem repugnant to us, and some other things like earthquakes and cancer which are not merely ugly, they cause massive amounts of suffering and death. Is God in these phenomena as well? It is my conviction that God is in all of nature, including both the things we like and the things that we do not like. When we think about catastrophes like earthquakes and cancer, it often becomes apparent that the causes of such phenomena are usually the unfortunate side effects of phenomena that are generally beneficial. Earthquakes are the result of movements of the huge tectonic plates that make up the earth's crust. The plates are largely granite, which is less dense than the molten mantle on which they rest and so they literally float about, colliding and slipping past each other. Where the plates meet, the juncture is called a "fault," and an earthquake happens when one plate rubs against another. It is important to remember, however, that the colliding plates do more than cause earthquakes. When the plates push against each other over eons of time, the pressure causes the massive wrinkles in the earth's surface that we call "mountains." We believe that mountains are beautiful, and their beauty and majesty remind us of the glory and power of God, but the fact is that both mountains and earthquakes are the result of the same basic process. Without sliding plates there would be no mountains, but with sliding plates, the earth will continue to suffer from earthquakes.

Similarly, cancer is another example of a "good thing gone bad." Earlier, we mentioned the process of cell division and its role in the development of embryos. Cell division is a remarkably complex phenomenon, involving a balancing act between genes that speed up the process and others that slow it down. When mutations occur in these controlling genes, then the cells may begin to divide in a malignant fashion. Cancer cells are not merely dividing too rapidly; they are also dividing without control. Cells in a healing wound are also dividing very rapidly but, fortunately, they are usually under control and when the wound healing is complete they revert back to a maintenance division rate. We certainly want our wounds to heal and we rejoice in the growth of a child, both of which depend upon dividing cells. Cancer seems to be the inevitable price we pay to enjoy these blessings from God.

As believers, we can and should rejoice in the fact that the beauty we see around us in nature is a reminder of the glory and grace of God. At the same time, we hope for progress in our scientific knowledge that may enable us to allay the effects of natural disasters such as earthquakes or to find ways to prevent or treat diseases like cancer. We need have no fear that increasing our scientific knowledge of the natural world will in any way decrease our assurance that God is present in nature and acting as its sustainer. New discoveries do not reduce the degree to which God sustains his creation. Instead, with each discovery, we can exclaim, "So that is how God is doing it!"

Clearly, most of the readers of *Leaven* are not scientists, and some may not share my enthusiasm for scientific progress. On the other hand, all of us can enjoy the beauty of natural phenomena and recognize the glory of God that they demonstrate. In fact, recognizing the presence of God in nature may often lead to an attitude of worship. Most of us have felt overwhelmed at the beauty of a sunset, the array of stars in the night sky, or a majestic vista seen from a mountaintop. At such times, worship seems the only appropriate reaction. After all, we seem so puny in relation to the grandeur of the natural world and its Creator that we may be driven to our knees. At such times, we share the sentiments of the psalmist who wrote,

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, or the son of man that you care for him?
(Psalms 8:3-4)

Finally, remembering the presence of God in nature should remind us of our stewardship of the natural world. The earth is in an increasingly serious crisis with pollution, global warming, extinction of species, destruction of habitats and more threatening the quality of our lives and perhaps even our lives themselves. Some ecologists have attempted to place the blame for much of this crisis on the Judeo-Christian doctrine that man was placed on the earth with a mandate to have dominion over the earth and the species which dwell within it. While as believers we need to take our fair share of the blame for the world's current problems, there are many factors involved, and placing the blame solely on the biblical concept of man's dominion is much too simplistic. The causes are many and complex, most of them growing out of human greed and carelessness. In fact, recognizing the presence of God in nature can be a strong motivation for us to protect and preserve our environment. We can all do our share by, among other things, minimizing our consumption, recycling and encouraging others to live responsibly in God's world.

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