

Augustana College
Chapel of Reconciliation

It's Still Good

Christy Hallenbeck

January 20, 2006

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” Well, folks, I’m here today to tell you that the Word is *still* flesh, and it *still* lives among us...full as ever of grace and truth. In the beginning, the *Word* was God. Today, the vast South Dakota prairie is God. Our ever-hopeful sisters and brothers in Pine Ridge are God. Selfless members of the Commons dining room staff are God. The foaming oceans are God. The innocent children of Iraq are God. Patient Granskou desk sitters are God. God, my friends, is everywhere. The face of Jesus Christ is everywhere. The Holy Spirit is all around us.

I scheduled my senior sermon for the day before my senior voice recital. In dealing with the aftermath of this lapse in judgment, I was forced to write this sermon over Christmas break so as to avoid the pain procrastination might have caused under these circumstances. As I marveled at the Christmas season’s frequent symbols of hope and love, I decided to plan a worship service devoted solely to the beauty of God’s creation. It’s a topic that has been frequently presenting itself to me throughout the past few years.

When I was much younger and only slightly more naïve, I appeared in numerous middle school show choir concerts and other world-class productions. Following performances I would always cringe in embarrassment upon glancing at my mother, who never failed to have proud tears streaming down her face. The idea that anyone would be brought to tears by the Edison Middle School Inventions’ choreographed rendition of “Blue Moon” was completely beyond me.

However, now that I’ve reached the ripe age of 21, I’ve been hit hard and fast by unfortunate attacks of female hormones. I get weepy just thinking about things to which I would have once rolled my eyes. Yes, I’ve become a regular Nancy Hallenbeck. [Sorry, Mom.] Yes, perhaps it’s the hormones, for which I will forever be indebted to biology. But more interestingly—and more relevant for the sake of this sermon—is my growing recognition of the sheer majesty of this creation we’ve been given. There have been countless moments in recent years when I have found myself completely overcome by the beauty of this world. This beauty, I’m starting to realize, can literally take your breath away when you allow yourself to really see it. My experiences on this earth, with its people, and specifically among this Augustana community have taught me all I know about beauty. These people and places will undoubtedly continue to teach me and will continue to inspire my love for and service to God’s creation.

So there I was, diligently planning ahead over Christmas break. My topic was settled; my hymns were chosen; my sermon was all set to be written. Then I remembered that I would be delivering this sermon after three weeks of sitting in my Interim course, a Capstone focused on the sociological and historical study of genocide. I wondered how I could ever dare to speak

of beauty in the midst of studying the despicable capabilities of humanity. How could I present Scripture in which God said “it was *good*” in the midst of learning about how *bad* it has become? How could I ever be so naïve and so insensitive?

Then I decided that under these circumstances, recognizing the beauty of creation is more important than ever. We *must* do so if we truly seek healing in this broken world. God saw that it was good, and we must believe that it still is. How can it not be? How can there be no good in this world when nonprofit organizations stand up for the inherent rights of nature and its creatures? How can there be no good when women and men devote their lives to serving HIV/AIDS patients in Sub-Saharan Africa? How can there be no good when perfect strangers smile as you pass them on the Campus Green?

As a child I never saw much beauty in nature. Much to my dismay, however, I was born into a family that *ooed* and *ahhed* over every nook and cranny of this earth. This practice of *ooing* and *ahhing*, combined with my family’s deep love for road trips and my father’s clinical obsession with taking pictures, was lethal. We saw it all: every mountain, every lake, every tree. I kid you not: We once went from Sioux Falls to Orlando, Florida, by way of Denver...and then back to Sioux Falls by way of Detroit. (That trip helped Harold’s Photo Shop open another branch.) Considering that my older sister and I were forced into nearly every frame of the flipbook-like depiction of this trip, a few pictures came out with full-out scowls from the younger of the Hallenbeck daughters. I didn’t see any beauty in the Teton Mountains and furthermore couldn’t see why my awkward middle school body would enhance any rendering of this already-mundane image. To me, driving through mountains made my ears hurt. That was about all I thought of nature.

Something must have changed between the time of that story and the time last summer when I was riding on a Swiss train heading east out of Geneva, where I was living and working, to a small village in the Alps. This time, I didn’t *wait* begrudgingly to *arrive* begrudgingly at a seemingly unsatisfactory destination. I relished my every breath, my every glance out the window. I relished how small I felt sandwiched between incomprehensibly dramatic mountains. I relished knowing that *God* made those mountains. And now I, too, saw that they were good...that it was *all* good.

In his praise of God’s majestic earth, David writes in Psalm 65: “By your strength you established the mountains; you are girded with might.” David continues, “You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it. You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth.” Perhaps David was speaking abstractly, using water as a metaphor for some other aspect of God’s reign. But I’d like to think he was speaking literally because he, too, experienced silent awe while sitting beneath a tall mountain or bathing in flowing waters or letting grain slip through his callused fingers.

I’d also like to think that David experienced breathless awe in his encounters with the beautiful *people* of this earth. I hope, for his sake, that he lived in a world as full of saints as our world is today. I have interacted with several hundred of God’s children in North America and in Europe, which I realize is a minute scope from which to judge all of humanity. If the rest of the world is anything like the world I’ve seen, though, which I imagine it is, its people are more beautiful than any words could reflect.

In my fourth grade classroom at Spartan Village Elementary in East Lansing, Michigan, I was one of only five American children. While my family lived in married student housing on the campus of Michigan State University, I galloped around the apartment buildings with my playmates from Bangladesh, Brazil, India, Russia, Ethiopia, and countless other nations. I thought nothing of it. Our family and friends would gasp in wonder at our apparently rare opportunity to live and learn with people from all over the world. *I* gasped in wonder at why people thought that setting was anything out of the ordinary. On some level I deeply believed—and still believe—that we are *all* God’s children and as such, we should embrace and learn from each other.

As I sat on a bus in Geneva last summer, amidst Non-Governmental Organization workers from every corner of the earth, I felt like a student at Spartan Village again. I heard languages I couldn’t understand...or even define. I heard *my* native language in dialects I couldn’t understand. I heard conversations on levels my thoughts had never reached. But despite my apparent separation from my brothers and sisters on the bus, I had never felt so unified with the people of this world. There were times in Geneva when I felt completely overcome by this unity. There were conversations and even wordless interactions that left me utterly dumbfounded by the way God speaks through the people of this world, dumbfounded by the embodiments of Christ sitting all around us, and dumbfounded by the overwhelming presence of the Holy Spirit in every speck of our existence.

This awe does not – and should not – occur only when one finds herself surrounded by persons of visibly different colors. This awe should occur in every interaction because the people with whom we walk this world are *worth* that awe. One of the most beautiful sentences in the Bible is in Hebrews: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” We entertain angels and saints and God and Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in our every encounter, verbal or silent, because this creation is just that awesome. It is *worth* entertaining and loving and praying for and serving because ***God made it for us!*** If I didn’t have so much Norwegian blood in me, I probably would have shouted that last sentence and pounded my fists on the pulpit. But hey, I did add an exclamation point at the end.

So how can we do it? How can we *show* that we recognize the beauty of God’s creation and its abundant goodness? First of all, we can pray. We can pray for healing, for peace, for justice, for love, for beauty, for mercy, for hope, and for kindness. We can learn about each other. We can empower one other by lifting up each other’s gifts. We can tell a colleague how he shows God. We can tell a friend how she has the face of Christ. We can tell our parents or our children how they embody the Holy Spirit. We can worship. We can study. We can question. We can fellowship. We can serve. We can dish potatoes at the Banquet. We can wash the feet of a homeless man. We can clean churches in Pine Ridge. We can play games with children. We can sing. We can write. We can offer our gifts.

I pray that you and I might be empowered to serve this creation every day of our lives. Now before I start pounding my fists *or* uncontrollably weeping, let’s join in singing “He Comes to Us As One Unknown.” I encourage you to be stirred, as the hymn says, by the pulse and vitality of creation...and by the ways God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit come to us in earthly forms.

In the words of Psalm 115, “May you be blessed by the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” Amen.

Sermon “It’s Still Good” Christy Hallenbeck
Majors: music, journalism; minor: French
Hometown: Sioux Falls, SD

Hymn “He Comes to Us as One Unknown” WOV 768
accompanied by Mallorie Hansmann

Prayers *For the earth:* Liz Kaspar
For the people of the world: Jaime Munsch
For Augustana: Kim Sonnichsen

Lord’s Prayer

Special Music “God of Wonders” Ginny Hughes, Jon Larson

Benediction Allison Girtz

Dismissal

L: *(first in French)* Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

C: Thanks be to God!

Postlude “This is My Father’s World” Ginny Hughes, Jon Larson

CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS

SPRING BREAK SERVICE LEARNING SIGN-UP HAS BEGUN!

Spring break trips are offered to Ocean Springs, MS [hurricane Katrina relief], Pine Ridge, SD, and New York City. Each group is limited to 12 participants; sign up on a first come basis:

Ocean Springs, Mar 24-Apr. 1, cost \$600

New York City, Mar 24-30, cost \$600

Pine Ridge, Mar 24-27, cost \$100

Sign up and bring a \$100 deposit to the chapel office SOON!

ARE YOU PASSIONATE ABOUT MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN THE WORLD?

Campus Ministry is building a Lutheran student advocacy team! The team would attend the Ecumenical Advocacy Days in Washington, D.C. in March for training. Then, in collaboration with the ELCA's Washington office, the team will advocate with representatives on the state and federal levels of the government about issues relating to hunger, world poverty, AIDS, and many other domestic and international social justice issues. This team will also seek to raise awareness about these issues and what we as students can do to impact them. **If you're interested in being a part of this advocacy team, please contact Kari Lenander or Ellie Kunkel.**

PRISON WORSHIP - St. Dysmas, the ELCA congregation that worships behind the walls of the state penitentiary has invited us once again to join them on Thursday, February 9, 2006. **Clearance forms are available on the Narthex table and must be filled out and returned to the chapel by Jan. 23rd.** For further information, contact Carol in the chapel office.

CHAPEL CALENDAR

Sunday (22)	Worship, 11 am - Prism Outreach Team
Monday (23)	Worship, 10 am - "Light for the Darkness" prayer
Tuesday (24)	Network Prayer, 10 am
Wednesday (25)	Holy Communion, 10 am - Carolyn Down, Banquet
Friday (27)	Worship, 10 am - Matt McDougall, Sr. Speaker