

# The Mt. Lassen Christ in the Wilderness Experience

## A Personal Reflection

by Alyson D'Arms

San Jose, California  
June, 2014

The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;  
Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!"  
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;  
The winds that will be howling at all hours,  
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;  
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;  
It moves us not.

-- William Wordsworth

This poem, written in the early 19th century, probably has far more resonance today than with people living then. Nature is of little importance compared to just about anything: our work; our techie gadgets for everything we do: work, banking, everyday shopping, all forms of research, news and especially entertainment. You can even buy dinner and rent a movie with just your screen for an interface. We have no need to leave our homes: even work outs are more enjoyable with loud music and indoor weights and routines. We have given our hearts away to fantasy and countless surface level activities. But nature -- it "moves us not". Perhaps we are far out of tune!

I had been hoping to attend a Christ in the Wilderness excursion for the last three years, and finally the time was right. I always loved going to wilderness camps as a child and tenting with my family. Increasingly, it has been harder to get out and do this, and even to find others who value time out in the country. At the same time, my world becomes more trivialized and mechanized each year, encroaching on the peace readily found in my surroundings. It seems like the need for nature increases, while the openness to doing it

and time for it decreases. So, joyfully I embarked with eleven others this past June for a week camping along the ridge of majestic Mt. Lassen National Park and its neighboring mountains. I did not regret spending a whole week away from city life, my computer and especially my cell phone. In fact my 'take home' from this program convinced me that a regular diet of this, would balance things out for me a lot.

Our campsite was next to dozens and dozens of quiet-seeking neighbors, thankfully. Pine trees made wonderful canopies and small chipmunk antics added great comic relief. Every morning, we were greeted by a smiling person bearing hot tea and coffee, group prayer time and a hearty home-style breakfast.

We were blessed to walk out to Manzanita Lake several days (because we loved its serenity and soft banks which teemed with beautiful living things to observe). Also we visited volcanic hot spots and Mill Creek for hiking the other days. We would go out each day with a purpose for contemplation that morning or afternoon and then reflect, meditate, pray, take notes, draw, photograph or even paint what we wanted to capture.

The following is a compilation of reflections and commentary our various team members made during our discussions each day:

The hardest exercise was practicing genuine *Silence!* We lamented that after three full days in the wilderness, our brains were still too noisy to be able to use all these senses in an outward way and still be present. We experienced how much we had forgotten how to be in nature. It was hard to crowd out the noise in our heads. That's because leaving our wired lives behind is no easy feat. We must leave all our large and small tasks behind when we are used to having them done and fixed on demand! But getting away from the voices of supposed need, worries and work is essential. For some, we found that what we need is a way to hear and experience God Himself. His voice is simply hard to hear with the competing voices of loud umpires on TV, too much information at our finger-tips, endless demands and transactions enslaving our attention and action, and trivial drivel found combined with the usefulness in all media. I checked my cell phone for emails twice and both times regretted it. I should have kept that anxious world at bay for this designated time.

We diagnosed distraction as a disease of the modern world, knowing we need to get rid of whatever is distracting us from the One Thing Needful. The church is a place of solace and refreshment, where we can see God. But the doors cannot be open every moment. The monasteries are other respites from the world, but we live apart from them and so they

make great pilgrimage spots. But how do we hear God in the midst of our daily tug of war between man-made energy and the Holy Spirit?

There is a time for everything... "a time to be silent and a time to speak." The Prophet Elijah was told explicitly that God's voice could not be found in the tempestuous wind, nor the great earthquake and not the raging fire, but in the Still Small Voice (1 Kings 19:11-12). Perhaps the main place where one can find silence from noise and the mind today is the wilderness.

So when we sat long enough, listening to our busy brains run their courses, we made a hole in our worldly concentrations and let His creation seep in. And we were penetrated by *Beauty*, another of the contemplation topics in the week. Beauty is a great roadway to God (and inspiration) and it has endless forms. The bleating of a bird, the sound of a gushing stream. The Stillness, the calm and gentle breeze that feels like a father caressing the forehead of a child. And like children, we put our hands in the dirt, jumped in the lake to play and made crosses out of sticks to throw in and (in our own way), bless the waters.

We found beauty in intentionality: a creature giving all of its effort is truly being who it was created to be. "The glory of God is a human being fully alive; and to be alive consists in beholding God." - St. Irenaeus.

Persistence at one's intention is also beautiful: quiet maintenance of ourselves and of what we are entrusted with. I watched a mother duck with tufted head erect, guide her twelve young in a straight line away from danger. She gracefully glided toward the shallow areas along the lake to a wading log. She was the Day Care director, noting each move of the ducklings and proudly clucking one back into safety. She knows what she is about, what she is supposed to be and it was beautiful to observe her skills, her confidence, her very countenance.

One of us (Gail) encountered a squawking, cajoling chipmunk who refused to quit his loud argument that she was in his space - at the foot of his personal tree - and it violated his boundaries. For at least 15 minutes the creature persisted until Gail moved to a different tree! This relentless animal was giving all its effort to try and push around a creature about 100 times larger than himself.

Connie and I looked at ugly stumps of trees and pondered how nearby new sprouts took their energy and recycled it. We saw beauty in how elder and dead trees had to submit themselves to the order of living. Nature is about movement from one thing to the natural

next thing and then cycling back. The life cycle of Nature reminds us that if the natural world follows a tragic or inevitable course toward loss sometimes, then so must we submit to it. And yet the loss contributes to the regeneration of New Life. How in our lives we must encounter dying and dead parts and uproot to get new life from them.

On Day 5, Fred reminded us that the love of God infuses all Creation. It is God's painting whose beauty and order is a message of His care and concern for the needs of the universe and our lives. It inspires us to love all created things, showing ourselves to be integrated into them and how to become united to each other.

I thoroughly enjoyed the camaraderie of cooking under the stars (a special thank you to our cooks Molly, Connie and Bob!) and eating and sharing stories with others at wooden picnic tables daily. And of course the campfires every night where we philosophized, told tales and sang with a guitar. After having shared our deep thoughts during the day, it felt like we had become friends: a community of nature appreciators that relished our moments unencumbered together.

Being away from city life, made some of us want to become more simple. We wanted to pare down our lives and make room for certain things that were crowded out before. Less time with screens, more time for interactive experiences with others. More time in our backyards with a book, a journal and silence. I know I definitely want to carve a week out of my year to be recharged with others who think this way about loving nature. How it reforms us in a way, from an unrecognizable lump of clay that we have lost sight of to our identifiable souls reconnected with our purpose. Most of us who went on this program now see the need to actually devote a season in our lives to being aware of the still small voice of God.

"The purpose of our lives", said Gregory, "is to be amazed by God (observing His handiwork being one way) and then to develop a relationship with Him." We can seek out nature in our backyards or in a wild space near our home and practice using our senses to notice God again in His free open space art gallery. Doing this, we discussed, will certainly transform us (as we thank Him for His imagination) and may even fuel our own creativity.

As we converse with God, He might even say to us about our work (we joked): "Wow, what did *you* make today? That's cool!"