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Empty Spaces of the Word

Jesus Christ & the Pattern of Christian Manhood

by *Leon J. Podles*

The six million empty acres of national park, forest, monument, and public land in southern Utah appeal to me when I want to be alone, or at least to be away from the city. My son, his scoutmaster, and I went to Mormon land. After landing in a snowstorm in Salt Lake City, we drove six hours south and ended under clear skies in Boulder, Utah, population 200. Boulder has a country inn done in studied rusticity, with carefully and expensively rusted tin roofs and a hot tub next to a semi-natural wetland. It is a Bobo's (bourgeois bohemian) paradise.

We came to hike a little into the emptinesses. It had rained in the desert, so we soon discovered the joys of quicksand, in both its frozen and semi-solid state. Our guide tried to get us to remember the sandstone layers by the mnemonic Many Canyon Walls Know No Capitalist Exploitation (let's see, something, something, Kayenta, something something . . .).

We saw UFO crash sites. One iron formation when eroded looks like carburetors, distributors, lunch boxes, dashboards. No wonder they crashed—who ever heard of making a flying saucer out of iron?—titanium is the last word in saucer models. The petroglyphs clearly displayed non-humans, which must be aliens (what else could they be?).

Love & Madness

The population of the area is smaller than when the Anasazi lived here. They left in the thirteenth century and burned their village when they moved out. Something had happened there that they wanted to obliterate. The Hopi claim to be able to read the petroglyphs but refuse to tell anyone what they mean. They say they are addressed to Hopis, not to white men. We ate lunch in a cave that had dozens of petroglyphs; men have been eating lunch here for 500, 5,000, maybe 12,000 years, and chipping out animal

and human and other figures for centuries. The ground is littered with tools and shards left over from arrow-making.

After a day of tramping on the slickrock, we dined at the Hell's Backbone Grill, named after a local ridge that has a semi-maintained road on it. Geographic place names in the area are not welcoming: Death Canyon, Tarantula Mesa.

Somehow, two nice ladies, Anglo converts to Buddhism, ended up in this Mormon town and operate a five-star restaurant at the edge of nothing. We dined on trout, aged beef, gingerbread, and small-vineyard California wines as we gazed into the darkness, which went on forever. A corner of the restaurant had a shrine to Buddha with offerings of candles and flowers.

Outside, all was beauty and emptiness. The beauty can be loved passionately, but the emptiness can drive men mad. Edward Abbey loved the red rock but expected no burning bush or revelation in a universe devoid of all spirits but our own; he committed suicide. Others have gazed into the emptiness and seen evil: the demons that haunt the wasteland and that tempted Jesus in the desert. Yet the desert is where Moses found God.

The ancients envisioned the inhabited world as a small circle amid the wastes; they had no idea how small the inhabited part of the universe is and how vast the wastes of time and space that surround the little island of light in which humans live. Outside is emptiness and darkness, but the emptiness is not just terrifying, it is beautiful. In those silences the whisper of the Word is heard more clearly than in the din of crowded rooms.

The saints went out into the desert to wrestle with demons but also to find God. Skeptics suspect there is nothing to find, that God is just a phantasm with which we people the emptiness so that it is less frightening. Even an angry God would be better than nothing at all.

“Be still, and know that I am God,” we are commanded as the first step to wisdom. Man weaves his own world around him and forgets that he is not the Creator. The rocks have been shaped for purposes we can only guess at; the generations who walked and hunted and ate and died and became dust and blew away on the wind also have their own purposes, at which we can only guess. Guessing is mostly what we do when we try to understand the universe.

Why did the Buddhist ladies settle in a Mormon town? Why did the Anasazi burn their village? Why did the hunters spend hours on remote ledges chipping out figures we cannot identify? The small mysteries of life teach us humility, a humility that we need even more when confronting the bigger mysteries. Why the billions of years before life appeared, before man walked the earth, why the vast silences between the stars, which in dark matter hold 90 percent of the mass of the universe?

Hidden Purposes

To love and not to commit suicide is to affirm, however dimly, that there is a why to the universe, that there is a purpose that guides us and guides everything—a purpose we could never discern on our own. The Purpose must speak to us and begin to tell us a little of what it, of what he, is accomplishing, but he tells us only about the matters that concern us, not the reason for the endless red rock and the endless years.

Human beings can look at those only in wonder, in the double sense, both with awe and with the desire to know the wherefore of all these beauties, which seem to have so little to do with us but which fill our hearts with aching. One mountain range is named the Sangre de Cristo; perhaps the namer was hazarding a guess at the meaning of the iron that turns the rock red and that turns our blood red. For the Word that was crucified is also the Word through whom the mountains were made.

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