

Selected passages from Thomas Starr King's Writings on God, Humans, and Nature

Rev. Thomas Starr King served as minister of the Unitarian Church in San Francisco from 1860-64. He was an important missionary of Unitarianism on the Pacific Coast during the Civil War period, and he worked tirelessly to keep California within the Union. King loved nature and loved to travel, and he put these interests to good use during his brief time in San Francisco. He traveled extensively throughout California and the Northwest, and, fortunately for us, he wrote about his travels. These selections from King's sermons and letters are provided here as a resource to show the ecological sensibility of a 19th Century Unitarian minister. The first selections are from a sermon Starr King preached about Lake Tahoe, and they fit our theme of Water in California. We couldn't resist including the rest of the selections, as well. We are providing them selections because Starr King's works are long out of print; these excerpts were discovered during the course of research in the archives of the library of the Graduate Theological Union, in Berkeley, CA.

Passages from Starr King's Sermon "Living Water from Lake Tahoe"

I read under the pines of Lake Tahoe, on that Sunday afternoon, some pages from a recent English work that raises the question of inspiration. Is the Bible the word of God, or the words of men? It is neither. It is the word of God breathed through the words of men, inextricably intertwined with them as the tone of the wind with the quality of the tree. We must go to the Bible as to a grove of evergreens, not asking for cold, clear truth, but for sacred influence, for revival to the devout sentiment, for the breath of the Holy Ghost, not as it wanders in pure space, but as it sweeps through cedars and pines.¹

Never since the creation has a particle of that water turned a wheel, or fed a fountain for human thirst, or served any form of mortal use . . . Has there been any waste of its wild and lonely beauty? . . . If not a human glance had yet fallen on it, would its charms of color and surroundings be wasted charms?

No, brethren; we must test uses in this universe by a higher thought. Though no form of secular service could be won out of Lake Tahoe, it would fulfil a noble and glorious purpose if it gave sacred pleasure to human visitors. And though no human eyes should ever look upon it, it would serve a holy purpose, as a gem of the Divine Art, by giving pleasure to the Almighty . . . It is to express the fullness of his thought, the overflow of his art, the depth of his goodness, and to enjoy the expression of it, that God compacts the globes in space, and adorns them with splendors like the Himalaya and the Andes, and sprinkles upon them the brilliance of lakes and seas, and binds them into mighty harmonies, and beholds them obey his central will.²

Brethren, this question of color in nature, broadly studied, leads us quickly to contemplate and adore the love of God. If God were the almighty chiefly, -- if he desired to impress us most with his omnipotence and infinitude, and make us bow with dread before him,

¹ "Living Water from Lake Tahoe," in *Christianity and Humanity*, 316-317.

² *Ibid.*, 322-323.

how easily the world could have been made more sombre, how easily our senses could have been created to receive impressions of the bleak vastness of space, how easily the mountains might have been made to breathe terror from their cliffs and walls, how easily the general effect of extended landscapes might have been monotonous and gloomy!³

I love the Quaker simplicity and calm But God is not an infinite Quaker, though he is the infinite Friend. The world is not clothed with russet, and the flowers are not gray, and the winds are not forbidden to play on the forest harps. I bow to the strength of the Calvinist character, and its service in the education of the human race in the rugged resistance to tyranny and the rugged assertion of the holiness of God. But nature is not Calvinistic in color, . . . ⁴

On an earthquake in San Francisco:

We were waked about two o'clock by a spasm of our two-story wooden house. It seems as though the ghost of Samson was making a spirit-rapping movement in it, shaking all the doors and thrilling all the timbers at once. And such a roar! *I tell you it was sublime!* We don't have any spitting thunder in this climate. We roll it into one seventy-four broadside, load up the old earth and fire her. *I mean to move to a country where they have them every week.*⁵

On a comet in 1861:

A modern French atheist has ridiculed the exclamation of David, "The heavens declare the glory of God!" He says that the heavens declare the glory of Kepler and Newton and La Place. David is right, and so is the Frenchman right in what he affirms, though he is insane in what he denies. The magnificence of the sky ought not to abase human nature with a feeling of worthlessness. The greatness of man is written in star-type as well as the infinitude of God. Nothing less than an intellect kindled from the Perfect Reason could have discerned the reach and detected the laws, and foreannounced the motions of the heavens.⁶

On his first view of the Sierras:

This is my first view of the mountain chain which, next to the Himalaya, bears the most beautiful name of any ridge on the planet – the Sierra Nevada. And it lies out there, eighty miles on, under clouds that mimic its pinnacles and swells, like the street and wall of the New Jerusalem. Only the colors are in reverse order, as befits the reflection of heavenly glory in an earthly medium.⁷

On his theory of "Mountain Principles:"

All pure genius, brethren, is beneficent as the mountains. It invites up. God gives its capacity to very few There are such things as mountain principles and mountain thoughts in individual life. That soul is in a lamentable condition that lives only on the flats of worldly and mercenary customs or on the wretched level of paltry pleasures There are many souls in which God creates mountains anew every year. He stirs the deeps of their hearts by some

³ Ibid., 308-309.

⁴ Ibid., 309.

⁵ Unpublished, typed letter of January 22, 1863 (GTU Archives) (emphasis added).

⁶ "The Comet of July 1861," *Christianity and Humanity: A Series of Sermons by Thomas Starr King*. Boston: James R. Osgood & Co. 1877. 329.

⁷ "A Journey in California – Visit to a Cave," letter to the Boston Transcript, August, 1860.

pungent visitations of the Spirit, and straightaway they send up aspirations for something better .
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On his first encounter with redwoods, at the Mariposa Grove in Yosemite:

The Mariposa grove stands as the Creator has fashioned it, unprofaned except by fire, which, long before the advent of Saxon white men, had charred the base of the larger portion of the stalwart trees . . .

Why will not the old patriarch take advantage of that ripple through his leaves and whisper to me his age? Are you as old as Noah? Do you span the centuries as far as Moses? Can you remember the time of Solomon?⁹

On nature and its purposes:

This is the exhibition in one picture of the munificence of the Creator. All this is for man, for his education, for his delight, for his food, for his equipment, for his coronation, through the comprehension and the right use of it all, with glory and honor.¹⁰

Whatever enlarges our conception of the opulence of nature, and makes us connect its affluence with the Creative Spirit, increases the possible force upon our hearts of the central doctrine of Christianity, -- the love of God.¹¹

Is not part of the object of this opulence to lead those who see or contemplate it to bow before the riches of God's art and goodness? What if the earth had been sombre in its drapery? What if the eclipse had been our common tone of light? Ah, brethren, let us recognize the Father's goodness in the cheer and joy of the natural beauty, and let us think of the nearer presence of our maker with solemn delight. He asks us to think of him, not as robed in thunder and awe, but as hidden in light and glory.¹²

⁸ "Lessons from the Sierra Nevada" in *Christianity and Humanity*, 299-300.

⁹ "A Vacation Among the Sierras, No. 4," letter to the Boston Transcript, November, 1860.

¹⁰ "A Vacation Among the Sierras.—No. 4, Ibid.

¹¹ "Lessons from the Sierra Nevada," 290.

¹² Ibid., 294.