

“A Calm and Holy Religion”

Rev. David Gregory
September 26, 2021
Pentecost 19



Peaceful Rest
Gale Smith

Readings

Excerpts of Ecclesiasticus 50
from *Celtic Treasure* by John Philip Newell

By heaven’s word all things are created.
We could say more but could never say enough.
Let the final word be, “God is in all things.”

So bless the God of all who everywhere works great wonders,
who watches over our life from birth to death
and deals with us mercifully.

May there be peace in our days
and may there be gladness in our hearts.

An untitled poem by John Ruskin
from the book *Earth Prayers*
edited by Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon

There is religion in everything around us,
A calm and holy religion
In the unbreathing things in Nature.
It is a meek and blessed influence,
Stealing in as it were unaware upon the heart,
It comes quickly, and without excitement,
It has no terror, no gloom,
It does not rouse up the passions,
It is untrammelled by creeds . . .
It is written on the arched sky,
It looks out from every star,
It is on the sailing cloud and in the invisible wind,
It is among the hills and valleys of the earth

Where the shrub-less mountain top pierces
the thin atmosphere
of eternal winter,
Or where the mighty forest fluctuates before
the strong wind,
With its dark waves of green foliage,
It is spread out like a legible language upon
the broad face of
an unsleeping ocean,
It is the poetry of Nature,
It is that which uplifts the spirit within us . . .
And which opens to our imagination a world
of spiritual beauty
and holiness.

There is a theme that has been running through our experiences together lately, and it has less to do with a plan and more to do with what is emerging from our conversations, our meditations, and other spiritual practices. I think this is how it should be. If we're truly "living out the questions hand in hand" as our Covenant suggests, we don't always see that far ahead of us, and it means we are OK with that.

For decades in this place we've been living in "spontaneous response to the call of God." All of life is an experiment, and our experiment together here at the top of Rock Hill is one that attunes us to a way of living that does not yearn for a set of rules or doctrinal agreements. Instead, it grows from bringing our selves and our assumptions together in one place, hearing from one another, sharing with one another, challenging one another, and finally experiencing some moments together that provide fuel for our journey, until we meet again.

What we sometimes call the "church" is just a slow-moving train that together we hop onto and ride together for a time. We all hop on and off, freely, as we choose. It always comes around to pick us up again. The stations for now are called Healing Circle, Communion, Stone Soup, Friday Spiritual Practice, Sunday Meditation, Sunday Message, and monthly Taize. Those stations remind us of our roots in contemplative practice, and out of those practices grow our commitments to social justice, to the dignity of all people, to the healing of our environment, and our fellowship with one another.

The theme that has emerged in the last few weeks is that whatever it is that we call God, it exists everywhere in all people and in all things. The technical term for it is "panentheism," and there sometimes is confusion over the difference between panentheism and pantheism, or the idea that God is all things. For example, take the big rock in front of our building. One might say that God is in the rock, or one might say that God *is* the rock. It's a question we might live out together hand in hand—one of those things we might choose to discern instead of answer. In the end we might not all see it in the same way. It's just an example of this growing ability to exercise our Covenant together in new and interesting ways. There is a joy in the journey that does not rely on the destination. If someone wants to know who we are as a community, I guess we are the joyful sojourners, savoring the moments, seeing what we see, and growing our way through the storms of life that never really seem to let up.

This idea that "God is in all things" is woven into the wisdom literature appearing in the centuries leading up to the birth of Jesus, and the vines of its growth bear luscious fruit in later poets like John Ruskin in the late 19th Century and of course in Mary Oliver, who carried us into the 21st. Ruskin speaks of this "calm and holy religion in the unbreathing things in Nature," and Mary Oliver takes us deeply into nature, the earth, the streams, the wildlife. Biblical writers and theologians like to speak of "natural revelation," or that which may be known about God in the natural world. They see a much more detailed version of this revelation expressed in the "Word-Made-Flesh," that is, the incarnation of Jesus, but the poets see divinity incarnate in everything and everyone, including, but not limited to, Jesus. Ruskin says of this calm and holy religion,

*It is spread out like a legible language upon the broad face of
an unsleeping ocean,
It is the poetry of Nature,
It is that which uplifts the spirit within us . . .
And which opens to our imagination a world of spiritual beauty
and holiness.*

This language is visible and legible to us when we are ready to see it. If you've ever stared at a word search puzzle, you begin by seeing what looks like a bunch of random letters—that is, until you see one word and then another. Suddenly they're all jumping off the page. You could stare at the puzzle all day and not see a single word, or you can open yourself up and let them flow. Once the flow begins, you cannot begin to shut it off. This is a great metaphor, I think, for the way that God speaks to us.

Like Mary Oliver, I grew up in rural Ohio, in a farming community. My father grew up on a farm, and he owned a farm, though he had left the work of farming several years before I was born. As a pre-teen, *the* thing to do was to join 4-H. The best thing about 4-H was summer camp. The problem was that most 4-H clubs revolved around raising a hog or a cow, or showing a horse or a chicken at the county fair. The only animal I had was a cat, and there was no 4-H club for showing cats (nor would there ever have been a cat who was interested). Along with the other “townies” as we were called, I joined an ecology group, or a “conservation club” as it was called in those days. We named ourselves the Nature Nuts, and as a Nature Nut, for the four years leading up to high school, I went on hikes to identify trees, dug through gorges to find fossils, studied fish and wildlife, visited lakes and waterways, identified birds, and the like. What started out as a desire to be a cool kid and go to summer camp turned me instead into a nerd in hiking boots. And I never got over it.

I often refer to the Quaker influences in my upbringing, but my grandparents were also enamored with the Transcendentalists, especially Emerson, Thoreau, and Longfellow. You may think I look like an authorized minister of the United Church of Christ, but inside I'm just a nerdy preteen Quaker Transcendentalist, and it's taken me nearly 65 years to figure this out. All of that to say, that when Ben Sirah writes in Ecclesiasticus that

*By heaven's word all things are created.
We could say more but could never say enough.
Let the final word be, "God is in all things."*

Or when John Ruskin says,

*There is religion in everything around us,
A calm and holy religion
In the unbreathing things in Nature.
It is a meek and blessed influence,
Stealing in as it were unaware upon the heart,
It comes quickly, and without excitement,
It has no terror, no gloom,*

*It does not rouse up the passions,
It is untrammelled by creeds . . .
It is written on the arched sky,
It looks out from every star,
It is on the sailing cloud and in the invisible wind,
It is among the hills and valleys of the earth
Where the shrub-less mountain top pierces the thin atmosphere
of eternal winter,
Or where the mighty forest fluctuates before the strong wind,
With its dark waves of green foliage . . .*

Or when Mary Oliver paints us poetic pictures of wild geese or describes the fragrance of Ohio soil, I can begin to describe my own religion in terms that not only can I live with, but that resonate with me, that nourish me, that quench my constant thirst for more. It is then I can go to many sacred scriptures and find lofty phrases that manifest in front of me in ways that I've never seen before, leaping off the page and taking on new life. And when the Apostle says that the Word of God is living and dynamic, I can say a hearty *amen* to that, because that is my experience.



The Angel of the Divine Presence
William Blake