

“The Beauty of Everything”

Rev. David Gregory
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Pentecost 26



The Girl Under the Waterfall
Miki De Goodaboom

Readings

Psalm 104:14-24
from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

God brings grain from the land,
wine to make people happy,
Their faces glowing with health,
a people well-fed and hearty.
God’s trees are well-watered—
the Lebanon cedars God planted.
Birds build their nests in those trees;
look—the stork at home in the treetop.
Mountain goats climb about the cliffs;
badgers burrow among the rocks.
The moon keeps track of the seasons,
the sun is in charge of each day.
When it’s dark and night takes over,
all the forest creatures come out.
The young lions roar for their prey,
clamoring to God for their supper.
When the sun comes up, they vanish,
lazily stretched out in their dens.
Meanwhile, men and women go out to work,
busy at their jobs until evening.
What a wildly wonderful world!
You made it all, with Wisdom at your side,
made earth overflow
with your wonderful creations.

“The Poet with His Face In His Hands”
a poem by Mary Oliver in the book *Devotions*

You want to cry aloud for your
mistakes. But to tell the truth the world
doesn’t need any more of that sound.
So if you’re going to do it and can’t
stop yourself, if your pretty mouth can’t
hold it in, at least go by yourself across
the forty fields and the forty dark inclines
of rocks and water to the place where
the falls are flinging out their white sheets
like crazy, and there is a cave behind all that
jubilation and water fun and you can
stand there under it, and roar all you
want and nothing will be disturbed; you can
drip with despair all afternoon and still,
on a green branch, its wings just lightly touched
by the passing foil of the water, the thrush,
puffing out its spotted breast, will sing
of the perfect, stone-hard beauty of everything.

Last week we began our season of giving and gratitude, and our focus was on giving; that is, how we give, why we give, and what it means to give of our essential self as well as from our substance. These questions have created some really deep conversations among us which I have found thought-provoking and emotionally moving. The whole process keeps unfolding, and it reminds us that with every cycle of the calendar we come around to the same time of year to dig a bit deeper than we ever have before. As yet another byproduct of the pandemic, there has been an interruption in the *status quo*. The benchmarks of the holidays have all been moved around. "This is how we've always done Thanksgiving ... This is what we do at Advent ... On Christmas Eve we always ...". What we've learned over the last couple of years is to gently release the word "always" from our vocabulary. Fewer things "always" happen, and though it can be disconcerting for many of us, this reality opens the door for some light to stream in from other directions ... unusual directions.

We call this the season of giving and gratitude, and today my focus is on gratitude, though not in the usual sense we've grown accustomed to. Here at CCC we enjoy our gratitude practices, and there have been times when we could have spent a whole day just sharing our stories of gratefulness. Doing that brings an energy to the room that is an antidote to despair. In a world that soaks itself in bad news, gratitude helps us regain our equilibrium and brings balance to our bodies, our minds, and our spirits. Today's psalm is probably one of the most joyful pieces in the Hebrew songbook, and I've chosen to share it in Eugene Peterson's words, because it captures the way I feel about all of it. It's more than God bringing the grain from the land, or the wine to make people happy, though that's not a bad start. It's the whole scene that's created for us. You have people who are glowing and well fed. There are healthy trees that are well-watered and providing shelter for the birds. Goats and badgers all have what they need. The sun and moon are in their predictable places, and with each cycle, the forest creatures get to have their night of feasting, clamoring to God for their supper, only to retreat in the daytime for a nice long nap.

People go about their daily lives, living, working, prospering, loving. It's a wildly wonderful world, overflowing with abundance, filled with wisdom, bubbling with joy. This is a beautiful song, celebrating earth, experiencing Eden, flowing with life, illuminated by Spirit in every rock and flower. I can get beautifully lost in a world like this, intoxicated with the aroma of the soil so recently awakened by the sudden abundance of precipitation. On these early mornings after the rains, as the sun begins to burn off the fog, I find myself drawn outdoors, hiking familiar trails and some new ones as always. I stand in a solitary place with my eyes closed and with a heightened sense of smell, and just drink in the experience of an earth that feels so much like the one in this psalm. This is not to minimize the damage that has been done to the ecology of our home, and the hard work that needs to be done to help it regain its health. But for one brief moment, I'm in the heavenly garden with the scent of pine and eucalyptus, listening to the creatures enjoying themselves, and in this moment, all is well. Today, our gratitude is for our Mother Earth, her wisdom, her loving care, her provision of everything we need for life. She makes us feel supported, and provides us with nourishment, quenches our thirst, and helps us to grow, just like all the deeply rooted trees around us.

Harvest brings us back to the ground as at no other time in the year, and the ancient Hebrew poets and song writers captured our relationship to the earth in a nearly idyllic way, pointing us to the God they believe to be behind that relationship. These songs ring in our ears as we walk along the trails and hills, and the beauty we find there becomes our passion for life. This may be one of the reasons that Mary Oliver’s poetry is so resonant for us. She celebrates the earth and its creatures just like the psalmist, but she does so in a way that is less idyllic, more accessible, and inclusive of the range of human emotion. In other words, she gives us permission to have a bad day, even in Eden. On any given day, you or I might long for that same permission. Perfection is not required in paradise. Life can be difficult, and I scarcely have to remind you of that. We find ourselves lacking, we grieve our losses, we find ourselves in pain or illness, and we live in a swirling tornado of conflict and hatred. Maybe we just need to have a plan in place when these things happen.

Sometimes I come from a morning walk and find myself in my apartment reading the newspaper. The headlines are troubling and the articles underneath them are even worse. The answer isn’t to ignore them, but to come at them from a solid ground underneath our feet. For Mary Oliver it isn’t about the headlines, though. She speaks of the regret one feels for past mistakes, and reminds us that the world doesn’t necessarily need more of our crying and groaning. But she doesn’t tell us to “chin up” or to look at things on the bright side. She describes a solitary flight into the natural world, across the fields, and into the dark valleys, to a private cave behind a roaring waterfall, where we can let it all fly. “Roar all you want,” she says. “Drip with despair all afternoon,” she says. That is when you’ll begin to hear the birds sing and be reminded of the beauty of everything. In this way, the earth is our comforter, our keeper, and our friend.

Some friends are good enough to let us vent. With a handful of people, we might be able to say anything at all, maybe the most heartless, heretical things we ever utter, and it does not alter their care for us. They are not scandalized. They are the listeners. They understand our frustration, and they never press the “record” button. With them, our words never come back to haunt us. And so it goes with our Mother Earth: unconditionally loving, unrelentingly loyal. We might say the earth is perfect even when the world is not.

When discussing those things which are less than perfect, we’re prone to preface our remarks with, “In a perfect world ...”. In a perfect world, no child is hungry, oppression has no place, and justice is always done. In a perfect world relationships work, bills get paid, and I don’t get sick. In a perfect world, people tell the truth, act with respect, and promote civility and cooperation in the public discourse. In a perfect world, everything works out. But the world—as we know it—is not perfect. So what on earth are we to do about that? I have one piece of advice for you today: Ask yourself, “What would Mary Oliver do?”

