

“Together in the Light”

Rev. David Gregory

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Scripture reading

Psalm 139:5-12 (Modern English Version)

*You put Yourself behind and before me,
and keep Your hand on me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is lofty, and I cannot fathom it.
Where shall I go from Your spirit,
or where shall I flee from Your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, You are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, You are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell at the end of the sea,
even there Your hand shall guide me,
and Your right hand shall take hold of me.
If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light shall be as night about me,”
even the darkness is not dark to You,
but the night shines as the day,
for the darkness is like light to You.*

Second reading

“When I Am Among the Trees”

Mary Oliver

*When I am among the trees,
especially the willows and the honey locust,
equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,
they give off such hints of gladness.
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.
I am so distant from the hope of myself,
in which I have goodness, and discernment,
and never hurry through the world
but walk slowly, and bow often.
Around me the trees stir in their leaves
and call out, “Stay awhile.”
The light flows from their branches.
And they call again, “It’s simple,” they say,
“And you too have come
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
with light, and to shine.”*

This morning I have allowed Mary Oliver to take me to a moment in time that I would say was about fifty years ago. It was a hot summer day in southwest Ohio, and unbearably humid as summer days generally are in that part of the world. Since my mother’s life was completely intertwined with her work as a librarian, I was enrolled in the summer reading program, whether I wanted to be or not (but I wanted to be). There was no air conditioning in our home, and the only way to escape the sweltering heat was to get out of the house and onto the front lawn, which was a perfect carpet of soft grass protected from the sun under a dense canopy of maple trees. Day or night, this lawn would become a living space where we would be still and wait for a hint of

a breeze which seldom came. There on a blanket in this deep shade, I reclined with whatever book was next on the list, but I wasn't reading. What I recall of that moment was how, lying on my back looking up through the branches, little bits of light made their way through to where I was. Light that felt unbearable in the empty lot next door, when tempered by the shadows of our shaded lawn became not only bearable, but beautiful as well.

It is this beautiful shadowy light that I want us to think about on this third Sunday of Easter. We continue in this Easter season moving toward this great swell of oneness we call Holy Spirit, and call down the sparkles of light that make this oneness known. It makes us not only one with each other, but one with the trees and branches, with the birds and the stars.

Light is the essence of God, flowing through everything. When I hear myself say that, it sounds terribly woo-woo, but I don't care, because we live in an era where we've also come to know scientifically, through our fascination with quantum physics, that all matter, be it trees or rocks or human flesh, is made up of energy. The deeper we dive into atomic structure, the greater our ability to read the universe, and the easier it is to know ourselves.

I think this energy we call life is what the ancients referred to as "light." The psalmist, for example, speaks of God as being present everywhere in everything, and says that with God there is no distinction between light and darkness. John's gospel opens with a discourse about "light" and "life." That light *is* life, and it exists in every person who has come into the world, including Jesus of Nazareth, who was of course the subject of that discourse.

This light or life is the energy that breathes us, that beats our hearts, and brings us consciousness. But life is more than light. It is also shadow. And here is a case in point. Last week I called us to express our oneness in the practice of compassion. I spoke glowingly of Aung San Suu Kyi and the nobility of her compassionate response to her captors in Myanmar, of her Nobel prize, her reputation with people all over the world, like John Philip Newell and Jack Kornfield, who have held her in such high regard. However, as a couple of you gently made me aware over the past week, the story is still being written, and the current chapter has a very different tone. This very week from the Wall Street Journal I read that after her eloquent expressions of compassion over the years of her house arrest, since her party came to power in 2016, and now that she is the civilian leader in Myanmar, Suu Kyi is facing harsh criticism—quite deservedly, it seems—for her inaction around the treatment of the Rohingya Muslims being shoved as refugees into Bangladesh. The international community is rightly horrified by what amounts to genocidal and ethnic cleansing. How can one so filled with compassion turn a deaf ear to the plight of hundreds of thousands of people?

There is no simple answer to that question, but there is no light without shadow. How could Thomas Jefferson pen a document as important and as beautiful as the Declaration of Independence, while holding slaves, and in some cases fathering their children? There is no light without shadow. How can one of the world's wealthiest, most powerful nations, rescue the world from Fascism in the twentieth century and turn such a blind eye to hunger and homelessness in

the twenty first? There is no light without shadow. How can cardinals or other religious leaders speak of peace and justice and look the other way as those in their charge abuse vulnerable children? There is no light without shadow.

King Solomon had his shadow side. Martin Luther King had his shadow side. Even Mother Theresa had a shadow side. Our spouses, our children, our grandchildren all have a shadow. You and I have our shadows as well. Well, I'm depressed now. There is a novel I read a year or so ago entitled *Mrs. Bridge*. I can't offhand recall the author, but it is the story of a white upper middle class family in the 1950s, whose matriarch acknowledges only the rosy-colored goodness of her husband, her children, her neighbors and particularly herself. It's the story of a "Father Knows Best" world where everything is cute and funny, where problems aren't problems at all, and everything turns to sweetness. But it wasn't real for Mrs. Bridge, and it isn't real for us.

As we look at the life of faith traditions and spiritual communities, most notably our own spiritual community, we'd like it to stay sweet and lovely. Could this be the moment where I bring up the subject of pastoral honeymoons? Now I'm not only depressed, but I'm uncomfortable too. I keep getting questions from all the people back east who think Tripp and I have achieved Nirvana. "How are things going?" they ask. "We absolutely love it!" we say. And we proceed to talk about sunshine and beautiful vistas, and what an amazing experience we have every day. What we don't talk about are the driving rainstorms, how we got sick with colds, and how the upstairs neighbor's plumbing leaked and ran down through our bathroom walls. The real answer to how things are going? There is no light without shadow.

This light, this life energy, this quantum field of all possibility is real. Its capacity for good is real. We have the capacity to live out our Covenant together, and celebrate the Spirit in all people, in all things, but we also have the capacity to grow bitter and divided over this issue or that one. Every church community has its glory days and its deep challenges. In that way, we are no different from any other. What can make the difference is when we fulfill what Mary Oliver says is our reason for being here, to be filled with light and to shine.

There is no formula for perfection, but in the words of Longfellow, "Life is real, life is earnest." We're just here to get real, to look at the world as it really is, to face the evil with the good, and to do all we can to let the light flow through us and from us. This is what makes for a beautiful journey.

Please join me on it this Easter Season.

Amen.