

“Making Life”

Rev. Bill Eichhorn

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First Reading

Matthew 17:1-2

New Revised Standard Version

Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John, and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.

Second Reading

Nest Filled

by Kim Stafford

Use your whirling wings to find the right tree.
Use your pert eye to choose the level limb.
Use your nimble feet to cherish the hospitable fork.

Use your fearless beak to gather twigs, leaves,
grass and thistledown to weave your basket house
open to the wuthering sky.

Use your body to be the tent over tender pebbles,
lopsided moons. Then wait – warm, alert, still,
through wind and rain, hawk-shadow, owl night.

Use your life to make life, spending all you have
on what comes after. And if you are human, a true
citizen, fully awake, then learn from the sparrow

how to build a house, a village, a nation. Use instinct
to find the right place. Use thought to know the right
time. Use wisdom to design the right action.

In the era of stormy weather, build your
sturdy nest, and fill it with the future.

Our granddaughter Abby recently asked me to send her some “birdy” poems. She is in the first year of her doctoral program at the University of Washington and framing her thesis proposal. Her research centers on the threatened streaked horned lark, and she plans to start each chapter with a bird poem. She had found Mary Oliver’s poem “The Lark” and wanted to know where it was published. Not a bad start! I sent her the publishing information on Oliver’s poem, and after a bit of searching, I sent her some “birdy” poems: “At the Feeder” by Jane Kenyon, “The Early Bird” by Ted Kooser, and “Nest Filled” by Kim Stafford. After reading the Stafford poem, she sent an excited text exclaiming she loved the Stafford poem: “It is Perfect.”

When I heard Kim read this poem at a writing retreat last spring at Santa Sabina, I found such inspiration in it that I often go back to it. In typing the poem I emailed to Abby I made a typo. In the last stanza at the line that begins “In the era of stormy weather,” I had written “In the *ear* of stormy weather.” Kim Stafford called my attention to the typo, saying “the ear of stormy weather gives the poem a surreal twist.” We undoubtedly are confronted with more than enough twisted surrealness each and every day without having it erroneously appear in a poem. In Kim’s poem, we need to get the full impact of his use of the word “era,” i.e., that the stormy weather we are living through constitutes an era, a long period of time characterized by a daily assault on our democratic norms, on our Constitution and on individuals (to be exact, three years and thirty-four days).

Use your life to make life, spending all you have
on what comes after.

In the era of stormy weather, build your
sturdy nest, and fill it with the future.

In these stormy times and on the hard days for our democracy, I make life by baking two golden-brown loaves of sourdough porridge bread. I take Eli and Siena for their daily walk around our hill, when Eli will exercise his Sheltie patience each time Siena stops to fulfill her Yorkie curiosity by sniffing at all the usual places. I look up into a “true blue dream of sky” (e.e. cummings) and breath in gratitude for this incredible earth, for the amazing people in my life and the nest that is home.

I train and prepare with Red Cross to be ready to provide shelter when floods or an earthquake or a wildfire drive people from their homes. In the coming summer, Ann and I will again be campground hosts at a Washington State park in the Northern Cascades where I will let the beauty of the Skagit River, the snow-covered mountains and magnificent hemlock, cedar and Douglas Fir bathe me with their beauty. We will gather with family at a small Oregon farm to relax, tell stories, and try to outdo each other with our culinary skills. I will be faithful to my daily writing practice and self-care.

Your list of how you will use your life to make life will be different in specifics, but the essential ingredients will be the same: time with family and friends, serving our community and church, time in nature and in the garden, nourishing your body with good food and your mind by reading inspiring books and poems, listening to music, keeping up the spiritual practices that ground you and enable you to withstand the stormy weather of these times. Kim’s poem provides a helpful guide for making life while the storm rages about us. “...learn from the sparrow how to build a house, a village, a

nation.” He advises us to use our instincts to find the right places to build a sturdy nest, which is what draws us here Sunday after Sunday. CCC provides for us a sturdy nest, and we are trying to discern how to fill this community with the future, how to invest our time, energy and talents—not to preserve the way it has been, but rather to generate new Spirit-filled forms and practices that will reach out and draw in those battered by this era of stormy weather. As David reminds us from time to time, we don’t have a lot of time to get this done. The clock is ticking. There is, my friends, an urgency to our nest-building, to using our lives to make life so that what comes out of the nest we call CCC will be birth, new life, up to whatever challenges lie ahead.

“If,” writes Stafford, “you are human, a true citizen, fully awake, then learn from the sparrow how to build a house, a village, a nation.” I want to close with three “birdy poems” that I believe teach us how to use our lives to make life. The first poem by Ted Kooser is entitled “The Early Bird.” It is a poem reminding us to keep on keeping on, with the strenuous work of repairing a broken democracy, healing a divided nation, advocating for justice even when it is dark and raining hard.

The Early Bird

Still dark, and raining hard
on a cold May morning

and yet the early bird
is out there chirping,

chirping its sweet-sour
wooden-pulley notes,

pleased, it would seem,
to be given work,

hauling the heavy
bucket of dawn

up from the darkness,
note over note,

and letting us drink.

The second poem by Marty Royster (our daughter and Oregon gardener-poet) is entitled “The Senses of the Garden,” and reminds us to practice mindful noticing of the life-giving ritual of the seasons, to connect often and deeply with nature, be it in the garden or on a waterfall hike on Mt. Tam.

The Senses of the Garden

Spring replaces winter’s quiet with a symphony of sound.

The merry songs of returning birds

The tap, tap, tap of the red-headed woodpecker

The croak of the frog announcing his appearance on stage

The hum of busy bees gathering spring’s first pollen.

Summer upstages spring with a feast of taste and touch.
Plump sweet berries plucked carefully from beneath prickly branches
Perfect tomatoes, their smooth red skin nearly bursting with unforgettable flavor
The taste of a shiny, blushing apple delights the curious pup
The feel of the soft, warm grass beneath my feet.

Fall is spectacular colors.
The horizon filled with trees making their last costume change of the year
They briefly don scarlet, emerald, topaz and umber
Ducks proudly wear their magnificent fall plumage, iridescent greens, bright orange and blue.
The bright yellow glow of candlelight illuminates the carved faces in pumpkins.

Winter skies are a grey backdrop,
Sounds muffled by the wind and rain
The bountiful garden is at rest
And scent takes center stage for the last act.
Comforting wood smoke of a warm winter fire
Cinnamon, ginger and warm chocolate hint at baked treats
The warm yeast smell of fresh bread rising by the fire.

As the curtain falls on winter
The sound of wild geese can be heard high overhead
Carrying spring with them.

Mary Oliver has the last word here with her poem “The Lark” that Abby discovered. In this poem, I believe the poet teaches us how to handle defeat and disappointment; how to catch our breath when we have failed to accomplish a goal or reach some new height; how to heed the summons, the call, and launch once again. The last four lines of the poem hold an intriguing possibility, for in the Renaissance period some painters used the lark to symbolize Christ’s resurrection, possibly because of the way the lark often flies straight up out of the grass and then, when it can fly no higher, returns in a dive to its nest in the grass. In several well-known paintings of the Last Supper you can see larks diving and gliding outside through large arched windows behind the table.

The Lark

And I have seen,
at dawn,
the lark
spin out of the long grass
and into the pink air –
its wings,
which are neither wide
nor overstrong

fluttering –
the pectorals
ploughing and flashing
for nothing but altitude –

and the song
bursting
all the while
from the red throat.

And then he descends,
and is sorry.
His little head hangs,
and he pants for breath

for a few moments
among the hoops of the grass,
which are crisp and dry,
where most of his living is done –

and then something summons him again
and up he goes,
his shoulders working,
his whole body almost collapsing and floating

to the edges of the world.

We are reconciled, I think,
to too much.

Better to be a bird, like this one –

an ornament of the eternal.

As he came down once, to the nest of the grass,

“Squander the day, but save the soul,”

I heard him say.

How do we use our lives to make life in this era of stormy weather? By learning from the sparrow, the early bird, the wild geese, and the lark. By not being reconciled or resigned to too much of what we detest. By following the teachings and example of one who was an “ornament of the eternal” and came down to us once and said: “Squander the day, but save the soul.”