

“Springtime In My Soul”

Rev. David Gregory

March 1, 2020

Lent 1



First reading

Psalm 139:1-6

from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

God, investigate my life; get all the facts firsthand. I'm an open book to you; even from a distance, you know what I'm thinking. You know when I leave and when I get back; I'm never out of your sight. You know everything I'm going to say before I start the first sentence. I look behind me and you're there, then up ahead and you're there, too—your reassuring presence, coming and going. This is too much, too wonderful—I can't take it all in!

Second reading

from *Six Recognitions of the Lord*

by Mary Oliver

I lounge on the grass, that's all. So
Simple. Then I lie back until I am
inside the cloud that is just above me
but very high, and shaped like a fish.
Or, perhaps not. Then I enter the place
of not-thinking, not-remembering, not-
wanting. When the blue jay cries out his
riddle, in his carping voice, I return.
But I go back, the threshold is always
near. Over and back, over and back. Then
I rise. Maybe I rub my face as though I
have been asleep. But I have not been
asleep. I have been, as I say, inside
the cloud, or, perhaps, the lily floating
on the water. Then I go back to town,
to my own house, my own life, which has
now become brighter and simpler, some-where I have never been before....

I want to begin by saying how grateful we are for all the cards and messages, the hugs, and the outpouring of love and prayer that we have experienced from all of you, and from friends and family all over the country. My sister's illness was becoming apparent just as we moved here two years ago, and it formed a threshold or a liminal space that has been particularly difficult for all of us. It has been hard to know what to do with it, sort of a spiritual discipline to stay in it, to accept what was going on, knowing that the only way past it was through it.

It's clear to us now that we have been grieving for the entire two years, so her passing at the age of 69 has been something of a relief, and after I paid my last visits to her a few weeks ago, this release was something for which I longed and prayed. I also found the energy of it stored inside my own body in ways that are hard to explain. Let's just say that we live in a universe where everything is connected, or to use some New Testament language, when one member suffers we all suffer. When one rejoices we all rejoice together.

Recently in this place, we explored Advent as a season of thresholds, but we have come to understand that this is not just an Advent theme. It's not a seasonal thing. We do not pass through these liminal spaces to arrive at some new normal. Somehow we've gotten the idea that success in life is achieving a sort of overdrive, where our problems dissolve and everything runs smoothly. It'll be great *when* I'll be happy *if* It's as if we're waiting until the threshold of the present moment is over, and we finally overcome *the* obstacle that enables us to get on with our future. But the future then becomes another present moment, and we find ourselves in yet another threshold, a waiting place, a liminal space. We then become consumed with another circumstance, with the next awareness of what we lack, the next goal to be accomplished, and it may tempt us to think that we're not getting anywhere. I'm here today to tell you that this is absolutely not true.

You see, the whole point of the threshold is living co-creatively in the present moment. It's not focused in regrets of the past or anxieties of the future. It's the beauty of *now*. No matter what is going on around us, the "naked now" (as Richard Rohr calls it) is where the Divine dwells. And the degree to which we can stay plugged in to the present moment—in the terminology of the ancient Hebrew poet—we will find God there.

There are any number of reasons that I continue to think of myself as a Christian, and one of those reasons is that it helps me to live in a way that is rhythmic and universally connected with what is divine in the earth, the sea, and sky. In the darkest time of the year we maintain our gestation, culminating in the miracle of birth. And suddenly the days begin to lengthen ever so slightly. The word "Lent" is just a shortening of the old English word *lencten*, which—just like it sounds—means to lengthen. Lent means "spring," the time of lengthening, when the days get ever brighter, when the sun begins to rise a little higher, and signs of new life begin to show up in ways that seems sudden or unexpected, though in reality they are exactly on schedule. This is why I begin this season of Lent with the words of Mary Oliver who says, "I lounge in the grass. That's all."

Some time ago, I think it was for his birthday, I gave Tripp a book entitled *The Art of the Wasted Day*. I didn't know much about the book, and I haven't really read it, but the title caught me as something I wanted him to have. It's also something I want *me* to have. As I child, I was such a daydreamer. In the side yard of our family home in southern Ohio was a huge buckeye tree, and from that tree hung an old rope swing with a wooden seat. Kids love swings, but I was drawn to it perhaps in other ways. I wasn't always swinging. Sometimes I was just sitting, listening to planes flying over from a nearby Air Force base, and

when their sound got lost in the distance, I could hear the birds who nested high among the eaves of the house next door, or the sound of the phone ringing in the library, the familiar voice of my grandmother as she answered it. Sometimes I just daydreamed. Some might say I wasn't a normal child, that I should have gotten busy and done some chores or gone and played ball. I didn't come from that kind of family, though. Nobody gave a thought to David sitting in that swing day after day. There was a sense of space without judgment, a timelessness in which I think my spirit was truly born, a sense of the present moment that became my familiar home, an ability to feel unhurried and to just be. This is one of the great gifts of my Quaker lineage.

Mary Oliver calls me to this memory as she lies back in the grass and enters the cloud that is high above her head, the place of not-thinking, not-remembering, and not-wanting. It is reminiscent of the 14th century Christian mystic who wrote *The Cloud of Unknowing*. It is echoed in the words of the Hebrew poet who said that it is too much to take in, or to explain in words. Mary Oliver says that in this state she crosses a threshold, back and forth, back and forth, between this world with its chirping blue jays, and this other world of not-thinking, not-remembering, not-wanting. And when it is over she goes back to her house and feels like it's a brand new place, one where she has never been before. She says that her life has become brighter and simpler. She is seeing it with new eyes, because she has become fully infused with the present moment.

The art of the wasted day is the spiritual practice of daydreaming. The practice of daydreaming is a form of meditation. Meditation brings us into the present moment, and if we can go deeply enough, returns us to a place of greater consciousness, to a more profound sense of peace, to a place of health, and wisdom, and co-creation. In these lengthening days, we remember the story of Jesus going out into the wilderness for 40 days for prayer and fasting, spiritual disciplines that were obviously his blessed obsession. And I know that the gospel writers needed to throw in the back and forth with the devil, but what if we don't have to make it a devil at all? What if the back and forth is just between the world that we feel and see and touch, the one that keeps begging for our attention (read our tweets, listen to our talking heads, the world will collapse if you don't pay attention) and the world of our daydreams where we can for a time inhabit a world that is in the process of creation, a world that feels like home because we are the ones co-creating it. And what if we come out of the wilderness, or get up out of the grass, or come down out of the cloud, or off the old rope swing and see everything in a new way—see our lives, our homes, our loved ones with completely new eyes, as if we've never seen them before? In these "Lenting" days of springtime, let's waste some time together.

