

“My Dialogue With Life”

Rev. David Gregory

March 8, 2020

Lent 2



First reading

from *Six Recognitions of the Lord*
by Mary Oliver

Of course I have always known you are present in the clouds, and the black oak I especially adore, and the wings of birds. But you are present too in the body, listening to the body, teaching it to live, instead of all that touching, with disembodied joy. We do not do this easily. We have lived so long in the heaven of touch, and we maintain our mutability, our physicality, even as we begin to apprehend the other world. Slowly we make our appreciative response. Slowly appreciation swells to astonishment. And we enter the dialogue of our lives that is beyond all understanding or conclusion. It is mystery. It is love of God. It is obedience.

Second reading

Psalm 121

from *the New Revised Standard Version*

I lift up my eyes
to the hills
from where will my help come?
My help comes from God,
who made heaven and earth.
God will not let your foot
be moved;
God who keeps you
will not slumber.
God who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
God is your keeper;
God is your shade
at your side.
The sun shall not strike you
by day,
nor the moon by night.
God will keep you
from all evil;
God will keep your life.
God will keep your going out
and your coming in
from this time on
and forevermore

Welcome to the second Sunday of Lengthening. It's interesting that we are celebrating this lengthening by shortening a night's sleep, but of course when this evening comes, I'll feel just fine about that. There is a slight movement afoot to do away with daylight savings time, but somehow it feels like a rite of spring, and spring is Lent, and Lent is lengthening, and having some light a little longer in the evening gives us a little bit of a fast track in the process. And let's just face it. We can use a little extra light right now. Here on this first Sunday after Super Tuesday, at the beginning of my sixty-fourth year on the planet, my third year with you in this place, the world around us doesn't feel all that safe. With the spread of the corona virus front and center right now, with all of the violence being done to the planet, to the Constitution and to human rights, it feels like a little extra light is just what the doctor ordered. On this International Women's Day, it feels like a good time to lengthen our understanding of where things stand, and just how we are going to navigate our way through the world that is. The words of the Hebrew songwriter are at least hopeful.

God is your keeper;
God is your shade
at your side.
The sun shall not strike you
by day,
nor the moon by night.
God will keep you
from all evil;
God will keep your life.
God will keep your going out
and your coming in
from this time on
and forevermore.

The words are hopeful, but perhaps a little difficult to feel. They seem like a nice sentiment, but in terms of the fearful nature of what we see and hear around us, they don't quite go far enough to effect a change in my awareness; not unless we can go a little deeper and unpack more precisely what it means that "God is my keeper," the keeper of my life, my keeper from evil. Let's face it; the ancient Hebrews weren't exactly kept from evil. They didn't quite experience what this song was aspiring to. For them these things were not literally true. They are beautiful thoughts, and they go a distance in helping me understand that I am not alone and defenseless in a difficult world. But is that really true?

In Stone Soup, we are forever wrestling with all of the God-language, but notice how I'm the one who keeps bringing it in. My life, you see, has been devoted to the study and the application of Scripture, including—but these days not limited to—the traditional Hebrew and Christian scriptures, which I still find valuable and beautiful and helpful and sacred. They are nothing more than collections expressing the spiritual journeys of ancient people, but that alone makes them valuable. I don't always like the scriptures. I especially don't like some of the ways that they have been employed. I can't stand it when people make them into something that they're not, and I think much damage has been done to humanity and to the earth through their misapplication. But they do have something to say to us. The Vedic texts have something to say to us. The *Q'ran* has something to say to us. *The Course in Miracles*

has something to say to us. The poets always have things to say to us. And that's why I've chosen another section from Mary Oliver's *Six Recognitions of the Lord* as one of our texts for this morning—not because she requires any less wrestling than the psalmist does, but because she is less removed from us in space and time, and we know who she is. I actually saw her living and breathing and walking down the street in Provincetown years ago, and I cannot say that about an ancient Hebrew poet.

Mary Oliver is using God language. She speaks of the love of God and of obedience—obedience, that cringe-worthy word that smacks of surrender and control, nuns with rulers, unreasonable parents, or the major and minor injustices of life. But she isn't using the term in that way. She says it is mystery. It is a dialogue, not with a God who is separate from us telling us what to do; it is a dialogue with the divine within us, one that is beyond understanding, and certainly beyond conclusion. She finds this divine presence, yes, in the earth and in the clouds and in the creatures, but she also finds it in the human body, and this divine presence leads her to a place of incredulity and astonishment, and it is the ability to live in its inconclusiveness that opens the way for everything else. It's a lot like living the questions together hand in hand. And as she says, "We do not do this easily." We'd rather draw conclusions. We'd rather have the answers. We'd rather prove people wrong and win them to our viewpoint. We'd rather fix the world and enforce the justice that we so long for. But all that does is create yet another fundamentalism. We're right and you're wrong. And the last thing we need today is another fundamentalism to add to all of this conclusiveness. What we need is the ability to stay in the inconclusiveness. It's called mystery, the mystery of divine presence. And after all is said and done, the psalmist in his or her ancient way is expressing the same thing. This mystery of "God" was no more explicable to them than it is to us.

Every time the word "God" appears, think "divine presence." This divine presence will keep your life, will be your coming out and your going in. Divine presence is your shade in the day and your shelter at night. What does that mean? I don't know, but I want to keep hanging out with it and see where it goes. God lives in you. Holy Spirit indwells you. Creative energy is you. This is who you really are, this creative energy of the divine. In these lengthening days, let us not be looking for something beyond ourselves to come and rescue us. We are in a continuing dialogue with life, and it will talk to us as long as we keep listening.

*Of course I have always known you
are present in the clouds, and the
black oak I especially adore, and the
wings of birds. But you are present
too in the body, listening to the body,
teaching it to live, instead of all
that touching, with disembodied joy.
We do not do this easily. We have
lived so long in the heaven of touch,*

*and we maintain our mutability, our
physicality, even as we begin to
apprehend the other world. Slowly we
make our appreciative response.
Slowly appreciation swells to
astonishment. And we enter the dialogue
of our lives that is beyond all under-
standing or conclusion. It is mystery.
It is love of God. It is obedience.*

