

“A Matter of Perspective”

Rev. David Gregory

July 8, 2018

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost



First reading

Wild Geese by Mary Oliver

*You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about your despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile, the world goes on.
Meanwhile, the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.*

Scripture reading

Isaiah 40:21-24 (New Revised Standard Bible)

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

Has it not been told you from the beginning?

Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?

It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;

who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,

and spreads them like a tent to live in;

who brings princes to naught,

and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

As most of you know by now, one of the things I most enjoy about this spiritual community is the freedom of choice when it comes to planning these times that we spend together each week. For many years I have worked in places where the expectation was that, like most Reformed Protestants, we would plan worship services around a three-year cycle of Bible readings called the Revised Common Lectionary. Each week there is an Old Testament reading, a psalm, an epistle lesson, and a reading from the gospel. It all comes from a committee of scholars at Vanderbilt University who hand it down to us from on high. My exercise each week was to find something in one of those four passages that inspired me enough to write a sermon, hopefully finding something fresh and exciting in ancient words, something relevant for my own life, and then to relate it to a congregation in an inspiring inventive way.

There are advantages to this system, especially for musicians who never have to wonder too much about themes. Most Protestant hymnals are organized according to the lectionary, and it's easy to just pick the hymns that go with a particular Sunday. It makes for predictable rhythms, tidy calendars, and a flow to the telling of a beautiful story year after year, again and again ... and again and again ... and again and again. Many preachers, by the time they're sixty, can wake up on any given Sunday and recognize that it's time to make the donuts once again, and just whip up a new batch from the same recipe and hopefully serve them up as freshly as possible. So you can imagine my sense of intrigue when about a year ago I began accessing this church's website where I could listen to things that were being spoken, read, and sung here.

What is this place? (I asked myself). Who are these people? How does this happen? And finally, I wanna go there! Some of my colleagues on the east coast would ask, "How are you going to decide what to speak about?" My answer was, "I'm not really sure, but I'll let you know." And after four months of this, I'm beginning to answer this question for myself, and I think there's some value in letting you in on it. It's really pretty simple. I go where the path of Spirit leads me, and then I invite you along.

These words might horrify a seminarian, and skeptical colleagues might shake their heads. I'm not without some general thematic ideas of where we might like to go on this journey, but I emerge from times of meditation and contemplation, usually on Monday or Tuesday each week, with a couple of readings in mind — one ancient, one contemporary. They have spoken to me in some sense, and at least in the moment, their relationship to one another makes sense in my mind, and by the end of the week I always seem to find out why. This energy of discovery is one of the greatest gifts I have received by being here. And though I have a deep appreciation for where I've come from, and though these rhythms and traditions have formed me, the hanging up of my robes and vestments has become the metaphor for a new phase of life and work, like when Mr. Rogers hung up his suit jacket in favor of a cardigan.

And speaking of Mr. Rogers: If I were creating a syllabus for this course called "A Vision Workshop for CCC," one of the requirements would be to view the movie, *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* Last Sunday in the late afternoon, we went to see it here in Tiburon, and as I mentioned in my blog post this week, I found myself weeping throughout the movie, desperate to keep myself from sputtering and sobbing for all the room to hear.

Mary Oliver says, "Tell me your despair and I'll tell you mine." Well, here goes. After the movie, Tripp and I walked down by the water and I allowed myself to let my feelings loose. The movie spoke to me of what is becoming lost in American culture. And when Tripp asked me to explain, all I could say was, "It all makes me feel so hopeless." And for those of you who struggled with this reading from Isaiah, wondering what on earth it has to do with anything ... here's what it means to me.

We're looking at an ancient prophecy growing out of something that was happening 2,600 years ago, a remnant of the Jewish people exiled in Babylon, their freedoms gone from them, their institutions dismantled, their temple destroyed, their land taken away. They are refugees living at the whim of tyrants, and for thirty-nine chapters of this Hebrew prophecy, we hear every hopeless thing: guilt, shame, judgment, recrimination. *How did we get here? Whatever shall we do? All is lost.* If you ever want to read the first thirty-nine chapters of Isaiah, I suggest you do so on a sunny day when you've had plenty of rest.

Beginning with the fortieth chapter, there is a complete shift of tone, which led most scholars to think there is also a shift in authorship. *Second Isaiah*, as it has become known, begins here, and it shapes their consciousness around a new day and time where everything that was lost is restored. This is where they hear that they will mount up with wings like eagles, soaring high above everything they've been experiencing. They shall run and not grow weary; they shall walk and not faint. There is a higher perspective that comes from riding on the wings of eagles. From that perspective, humans and their difficult plight appear as small as grasshoppers. Things that seemed insurmountable appear insignificant, and this is something that can only be seen from a higher perspective. Mary Oliver's wild geese also fly high above it all.

This is to say that I am not the hopeless soul I was last Sunday night in that movie theater. I still feel grief and loss over what I thought our culture was becoming. And as an avid reader of history, I have plenty of anxiety over the prospect of reliving some of the worst that humanity has to offer. But whatever our current reality, I know that we have our own Second Isaiah, and this time her name might be St. Mary of Oliver. “Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination”

Tell me, what would you imagine? If time, energy, and resources were without limit, what would you love? What kind of world would you create? What is out there in this field we call God that you would call forth in this world right now? Let’s just get into our places of prayer and call it forth. Let’s observe the energy of Holy Spirit and grab some of it every day. Let’s live in alignment with the Source of all life and see the world around us with new eyes. This is what we call spiritual growth, and it happens individually and collectively. The collective piece is what I like to call the *evolution of church*, a loaded term, but a good place to begin.

I believe the human race is in an evolutionary spiral. In two dimensions, it looks like we’re running in circles, but if can see it from an angle that allows for that third dimension, we’ll see that the balance of motion is ever upward. I believe that humanity is both growing up and waking up, as the evolutionary philosopher Ken Wilber likes to say. We’re learning more things, and our understanding is deeper and broader than it once was. But understanding alone doesn’t change anything. It is our experience of awakening that gives it the energy to fly, gives *us* the energy to fly, high above our problems. Hey guess what? From up here, the rulers of the earth are nothing much more than grasshoppers. Who knew?

