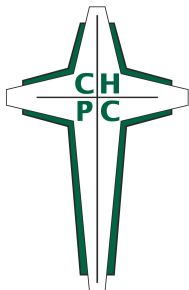
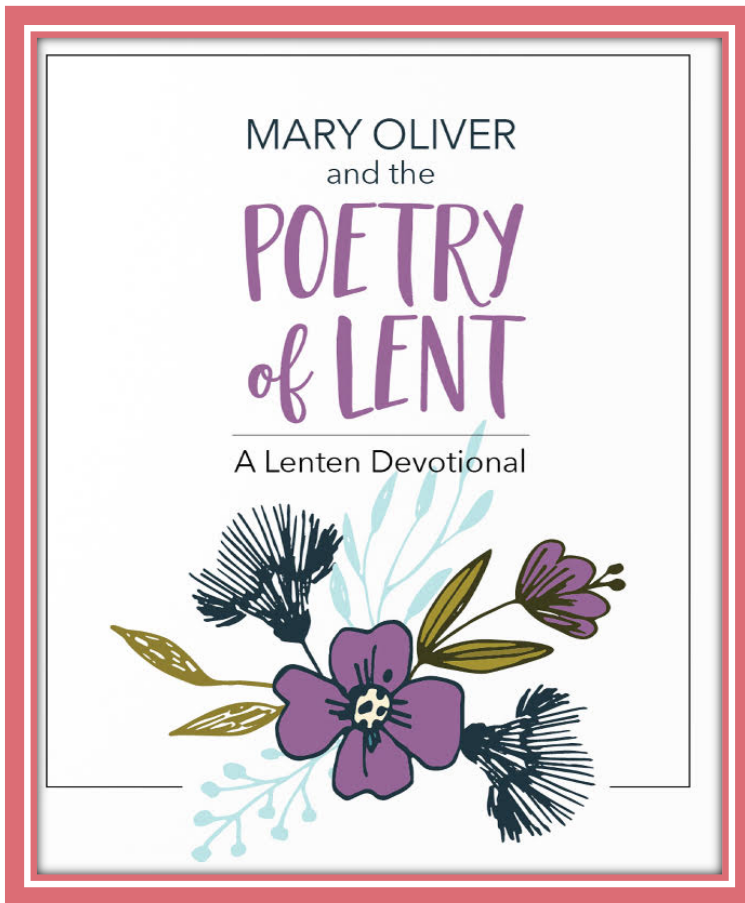


SEMON SERIES:
LENT – HOLY WEEK – EASTER
2018



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SERMON SERIES:

The Poetry of Lent

Rev. Todd Freeman



Based on:

Mary Oliver and the Poetry of Lent: A Lenten Devotional
saltproject.org, 2018

Table of Contents

- Part 1: Repentance and Wilderness Walks
- Part 2: The Ancient Rhythm of
Holding On and Letting Go
- Part 3: Defending ‘The Temple’
- Part 4: God Saves the Whole World – Not Just Us
- Part 5: Mindfulness – Being Aware of the
Present Moment
- Part 6: Calling All Donkeys (Palm Sunday)
- Part 7: “The light that can shine out of a life”
(Maundy Thursday)
- Part 8: Reflections on Good Friday
 - Terry Baxter
 - Marianne Stambaugh

AND:

EASTER SUNDAY

Pay attention! Be astonished! Tell about it!

Sermon Series : The Poetry of Lent

Part I: Repentance and Wilderness Walks

First Sunday in Lent



Mark 1:9-15

Rev. Todd B. Freeman

College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

February 18, 2018

Last December, when the Worship & Music ministry team first had a conversation about what we might use as a theme for Lent this year, the only real suggestion at that time was, "something lighter." That was primarily a reflection upon the feeling of darkness that seemed so prominent throughout last year. And I must admit, it has felt dark again this past week.

[Death of Bob Lucy, gun shooting massacre at high school in Parkland, FL.]

A few weeks ago, team member Rebecca Howard suggested that we might use, as individuals in this congregation, a short devotional booklet she found, **Mary Oliver and the Poetry of Lent: A Lenten Devotional**. The cover of today's worship bulletin is a copy of the devotional cover. We used this resource as part of the printed material for folks to use as a meditation guide during our drop-in Ash Wednesday service earlier this week. I decided, then, to use this as our worship theme throughout the 40-day Lenten season. For each of the five Sundays in the season of Lent there is a reading – both an excerpt from the assigned lectionary scripture passage and an excerpt from one of her poems. A meditation and selected practices accompany these readings throughout each week. I highly encourage you to take one home with you to use with your own times of devotion and meditation. They are on the Information Table in the Narthex.

The Gospel Reading assigned for this First Sunday in Lent comes from the 1st chapter in Mark. You may recall that this gospel, the first of the four to be written, begins not with Jesus' birth narrative, but rather with his baptism. After introducing John the Baptist, Mark simply describes the event this way. "Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'" (Mark 1:10-11). This was our scripture text back on January 7 on Baptism of the Lord Sunday.

But now we continue. "And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him (Mark 1:12-13). This is all Mark says about this experience. Notice there is no description of the specific temptations that Jesus faced. Those were added later by Matthew and Luke.

The typical sermon on the First Sunday of Lent often reflects upon the wilderness experiences we face in our own lives, those tough and difficult times, including times of temptation. But Mark quickly moves on to Jesus' first words of his public ministry. **"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."** We often tend to focus on Jesus' later teachings and proclamations, such as "love one another." We sometimes forget that Jesus begins his ministry with basically the same message as John the Baptist, the message that we are called to repentance.

From the Mary Oliver devotional booklet, the editor writes, "The baptism-in-the-wilderness by John was about repentance, and Jesus' preaching was, too. In Mark's original Greek, the word for repentance is *metanoia*, from *meta* ("change") and *noia* ("mind"); [literally, to change one's mind] today we might say, "change of heart," or "change of life." Mary Oliver claims that this kind of change doesn't flow from self-defeating guilt but rather from incarnate wild, imaginative love for the world." This comes from an excerpt from her poem, **"Wild Geese."**

*Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.*

The devotional continues, **"So: what 'change of life' is God calling you toward today, nipping at your heels like a wild goose, that ancient Celtic image for the Holy Spirit?"** If you were here on Pentecost Sunday two years ago, you may remember that the entire service centered around this ancient Celtic image of the Holy Spirit being like a wild goose. In that sermon, entitled *A Wild Goose Pentecost*, I quoted Hilary Ann Golden who writes that **the Holy Spirit, like "a Wild Goose, is always on the move, always doing unexpected things; it is loud, passionate, sometimes frightening, and certainly unsettling."** I added, "Maybe we need a bit more of that understanding of God in our journey of faith." Then I closed with a poem written by Sally Coleman, a Methodist minister, entitled *An Geadh-Glas* – the Gaelic term for Wild Goose.

I feel the
Beat of your wings
Stirring the air
Around me,
Awakening my slumbering spirit,
Calling me . . .
To rise
To follow . . .

I hear your call,
Behind me, and
Before me,
The call of adventure,
The call to fullness
Of life!



Free me O Wild One,
 From these chains
 Of complacency
 And the shackles
 of comfort I have made.

Free me O Wild One
 For I choose to Release my heart, and
 To follow you again.

Stir me,
 Call me,
 Free me,
 Release me.
 Come O Wild One,
 Come.

So perhaps you will find that God is chasing you around like an untamed wild goose this Lenten season, calling you to a change of mind, a change of heart, a change of life. Soon after that Pentecost Sunday, I purchased a small reminder of this image of the Holy Spirit. It's a small flying goose pin that I wear every Sunday here on my pastor's robe beneath my stole.

Also, within the devotional booklet are some practices you may consider incorporating into your own spiritual disciplines this week. One states, "**Schedule a 'wilderness walk' in solitude or with a friend, listening for how God may be calling you to change.**" Think about where you might take such a walk. Perhaps a nearby park. Heck, come out to my place, there's lots of space to take a walk in the forested areas.

Also suggested, "Reach out online or in person to an organization changing the world in inspiring ways, and learn more about their work, their impact, and how you can get involved." Here's another. "Power down, take a breath, look out a window, and experiment with journaling this week. What changes are you making (or would like to make) to be more in tune with God's good news? Explore this question with family or friends over a meal."

A final suggestion. For this and each Sunday in Lent, light a candle. For this First Sunday of Lent, "begin each day by lighting a **candle of repentance**, praying, 'God of mercy, help me change my life; let me love today with a wild and imaginative love, on earth as it is in heaven.'"

Each Sunday in Lent I will close the sermon with this very suggestion. [Light candle] And now, if you so choose, repeat this prayer after me:

God of mercy
Help me change my life;
let me love today
with a wild and imaginative love.
on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen.

Sermon Series: The Poetry of Lent

Part 2: The Ancient Rhythm of Holding On and Letting Go

Second Sunday in Lent

Mark 8:31-38 Roman 4:13-25
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
February 25, 2018



TO LIVE IN THIS WORLD
YOU MUST BE ABLE
TO DO THREE THINGS:
TO LOVE WHAT IS MORTAL;
TO HOLD IT
AGAINST YOUR BONES KNOWING
YOUR OWN LIFE DEPENDS ON IT;
AND, WHEN THE TIME COMES
TO LET IT GO,
TO LET IT GO.
+ MARY OLIVER

I want to begin with a short recap of the theme introduced last Sunday as our path through Lent this year. We will be following an inspirational devotional booklet entitled, **Mary Oliver and the Poetry of Lent: A Lenten Devotional**. For each of the five Sundays in the season of Lent there are readings – both an excerpt from the assigned lectionary scripture passage and an excerpt from one of her poems. A brief meditation and selected practices accompany these readings throughout each week.

The First Sunday of Lent rightly focused on **the theme of repentance**, which was the message of Jesus' first public pronouncement after his baptism and 40 days being tempted in the

wilderness. **To repent simply means to turn around and have a change of heart, a change of mind, a change of life.** An image used in one of Mary Oliver's poems, Wild Geese, reminds us the Holy Spirit can be like a wild goose, flying untamed all around us, sometimes nipping at our heels calling us to a change of life. This image originally comes from ancient Celtic spirituality. We were also encouraged to connect with God by taking a wilderness walk at some point during last week, which I realize was a bit hampered by the cold and rainy weather. But there's always this week. Finally, we lit a candle, as we will at the close of each sermon during Lent. It was the Candle of Repentance, asking God to help us to change what needs to be changed.

That leads us today, the Second Sunday in Lent. Using the assigned lectionary Gospel reading, Mark 8:27-38, the devotional booklet focuses in on verse 36, **"For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" This is going to make repentance seem easy.** To get into this a bit, let's look at an excerpt from Mary Oliver's poem, "In Blackwater Woods." It's printed on the cover of today's worship bulletin, and I'd like for us to read it together in unison.

*To live in this world
 you must be able
 to do three things:
 to love what is mortal;
 to hold it against your bones knowing
 your own life depends on it;
 and, when the time comes
 to let it go,
 to let it go.*

The meditation portion of the devotional booklet reflects: "This passage in Mark is full of mysteries, and at its core is how salvation somehow involves both losing one's life and saving it. Jesus warns that there are ways to "gain the whole world" and yet still lose your life; and at the same time he promises that God works through loss in order to save. With Oliver, we can see these mysteries unfold in the natural world – and in our own lives – through the ancient rhythms of giving and receiving, losing and saving, holding on and letting go."

In its own way, this poem and this meditation remind us **life and faith are always an unpredictable journey, not a destination**. This was true of the life of Abraham and Sarah, as we heard expressed by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans.

In the Gospel of Mark, he focused in particular on Jesus' and the disciples' journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, and the final week of Jesus' life. In the process of that journey the portrayal of Jesus' ministry shifts. No longer will his messiahship be demonstrated through a ministry of healings and miracles. The way open before Jesus is now one of suffering and rejection and death. Jesus' journey with the disciples is one that takes them away from the safety and growing acceptance of Galilee and leads them onto what one biblical commentator calls, "the cross-strewn testing grounds of their faith."

After confessing Jesus as the Christ, the promised Messiah, Peter rebukes Jesus for saying the he must undergo great suffering, rejections, and death, only to rise again after three days. **Peter, in turn, is rebuked by Jesus for not being able to discern the difference between human things and divine things. We often have the same problem.** Then comes the bad news. Jesus then says that as disciples they are on a similar journey.

The stakes have just dramatically risen. There is suddenly more to being a disciple of Jesus than watching him heal and hearing him teach. Being a follower of Jesus, we learn, means taking responsibility for going on our own journey of faith with God. We also learn **discipleship involves giving up an element of our own lives through sacrificial love. A theology of the cross declares that having faith is not the same as being certain, living in hope is not the same as possessing optimism, and most importantly, love is not painless.**

The disciples surely must have envisioned their way to Jerusalem as a triumphal journey, not as a death march. How much of Christianity today still misunderstands this aspect of discipleship, glossing over their particular understanding of Christianity with a sense of triumphalism and victory. Understanding this as a denomination is probably why there isn't a Triumph Presbyterian Church, let alone a Victory Presbyterian.

Instead, **Jesus lays out just three requirements, but they are frightening: to deny oneself, to take up one's cross, and to follow Jesus. I would suggest that these still apply to those of us who follow Jesus today.** A quick word about what it means to deny oneself, however. A popular phrase used in Alcoholics Anonymous goes like this: "It doesn't mean think less of yourself, just think of yourself less." We can never insulate ourselves completely. Life is a continuous and sometimes hazardous journey. So, let us again recall the wisdom offered by Mary Oliver "to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go."

The devotional booklet offers some practices that may help in this regard. It suggests: **Experiment with a "letting go" fast this week**, creating little sanctuaries of Sabbath time. Try fasting from technology for an hour, a day, or the whole week; or create a mealtime "Sabbath box" for cell phones or other devices, so you can better taste and see how God is good!

Here's another: **Make a list of what you need to embrace and to release** in order to live more fully. Make the list itself beautiful (handwrite it on special paper; illuminate initial letters like an ancient manuscript; whatever works!) and put it up somewhere you'll see it every day. Explore this question in a journal, or discuss it with family or friends over a meal. This is similar to what I shared on the first Sunday of this year about carrying around (metaphorically) a backpack, and the need to see what things you need to keep or put into your backpack, and what you might need to take out.

Before closing with the lighting of the candle for this week, I want to share another poem, posted just this week by Steve Garnaas-Holmes on his website, www.unfoldinglight.net. It's entitled, "Deny Yourself," reflecting on Mark 8:34, Deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me.

*Abandon the illusion you're a self-contained individual.
Be a part of this wounded world,
and find yourself with Christ.*

*Set aside your own desires,
give yourself fully for others;
be the hands and heart of Jesus.*

*Renounce self-protection,
accept your brokenness,
and reach out for love.*

*Let go of your own plans.
Join in the healing of the world.
You will not be alone.*

*Follow your soul, not your ego.
Follow it right into people's suffering.
Follow it right into the heart of God.*

*Pour yourself out;
let the world pour in;
then you are one with the Beloved.*

Opportunities are daily before us, times when we may give our lives sacrificially to the acts of love, compassion, justice, and peace, even in the face of the same forces of sin and death that confronted Jesus. So, as the devotional suggests, this week begin each day by lighting a **candle of salvation**, praying, "God of grace, help me love what is mortal. Help me hold on to what needs to be embraced, let go of what needs to be let go – and have the wisdom to know the difference." [Light candle] And now, if you so choose, repeat this prayer after me:

***God of grace,
help me love what is mortal.
Help me hold on to
what needs to be embraced,
let go of
what needs to be let go
– and have the wisdom to know the difference.***

Amen.



Sermon Series: **The Poetry of Lent**
 Part 3: **Defending 'The Temple'**
 Third Sunday in Lent

John 2:13-22
 College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
 March 4, 2018

If you've already read the entry for the Third Sunday in Lent in the *Mary Oliver and the Poetry of Lent* devotional booklet, you're aware that she has a very different take on the familiar story known as "The Cleansing of the Temple." We'll take a look at her perspective near the close of this sermon.

The story itself is fairly straightforward. Jesus goes up to Jerusalem, enters the temple, drives out the animals and the people selling them, and overturns the tables of the money changers. It's a story that appears in all four Gospels. While there are many similarities between them, there are also significant differences, especially in John. Perhaps the foremost difference is that Matthew, Mark, and Luke (together called the Synoptic Gospels), place this event near the very end of Jesus' life, after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem that we refer to as Palm Sunday. For these authors, it is a pivotal event that leads directly to Jesus arrest, trial, and crucifixion.

This story is placed by the author of the Gospel John, however, at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Notice that it's in chapter 2. It immediately followed the first of six signs in this gospel, the wedding at Cana where Jesus turns water into wine. **The theological significance of John's placement is more important to him than chronological precision.** Arguments, therefore, about when it really happened, at the beginning or the end of Jesus' ministry, misses the point that each of the gospel writers is trying to make.

In the hands of the author of the Gospel of John, the story of the Cleansing of the Temple highlights that right from the very *start* of Jesus' public ministry **the abundant new life that he offers poses a challenge and threat to the existing religious and even political order – in other words, an overturning of the status quo, of business as usual.**

This story has often been interpreted as an exemplary example of righteous anger. It is clearly meant to place Jesus squarely alongside the Hebrew prophets of old who lashed out at injustice, hypocrisy, and the improper worship of God. This story has often been used by preachers, therefore, as **an irresistible call to action to take up our whips, metaphorically, and work to drive out our preferred injustices and abuses of power in our day and age. While that deeply resonates with those of us concerned with social justice issues, upon closer scrutiny we find that it is not quite that simple – as biblical stories rarely are.** So, let's take a closer look.

**THERE ARE THINGS YOU CAN'T REACH.
 BUT YOU CAN REACH OUT TO THEM,
 AND ALL DAY LONG.
 THE WIND, THE BIRD FLYING AWAY.
 THE IDEA OF GOD.**

• MARY OLIVER

The historical setting for this story is the Jewish Feast of Passover, when the city of Jerusalem would have swelled to up to three times its normal population, causing all kinds of havoc and frantic activity. It's imperative to note that during Passover, cattle, sheep, and doves (the sacrificial animals used by the poor) were *required* for burnt offerings in the Temple. Most of those making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem traveled a great distance and would not have brought animals with them. So, they needed to buy animals to sacrifice in order to participate in temple worship. Similarly, the temple tax could not be paid with Greek or Roman coins because they bore the image of the emperor's head on them – considered by the Jews to be idolatry. That money, therefore, had to be exchanged (no doubt with a surcharge) for temple currency.

So, ironically, **this picture of a wild open-air market was, in fact, a necessary practice for the proper functioning of the temple system.** And though there was no doubt abuses were inevitable, **these practices simply reflect a reality of Judaic temple worship in Jesus' day.**

Some biblical scholars have offered, therefore, that Jesus' protest wasn't so much about the practice itself – and certainly not an attempt to overthrow or replace the temple system – but rather *where* it was taking place – in the outer court of the temple, near the Holy of Holies that represented the very presence of God on earth. The outer court, by the way, called the Gentile court, was about the size of five footballs fields – so it is most unlikely that with a horde of Roman guards stationed to keep the peace Jesus would have been able – or allowed – to clear that entire area of animals, sellers and moneychangers. Again, literalness is beside the point for this gospel writer. It does indeed seem likely, however, that this story has a basis in an actual event in Jesus' life.

The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), then state that Jesus says, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a *den of thieves.*" This is not the charge in John. He reports that Jesus says, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a *marketplace!*" **There's a big difference between a den of thieves and a marketplace.**

As always, it's important to ask what any of this has to do with us today. I don't think it's too much of a jump to look at this story from a Christian perspective and explore what it says if we approach this as "The Cleansing of the Church." **So, instead of approaching this story primarily as a call for us to take out our righteous anger on injustice and oppression, as important as that may be, what if this text pushes us to imagine Jesus entering our own sanctuaries, overturning our own cherished rationalizations, our upholding of the status quo, and perhaps even driving out much of what we think and do in the name of God?** Has Western Christianity, like the temple system before it, simply settled into comfortable behaviors that enable it to meet institutional goals, turning an increasingly blind eye to the possibilities of corruption inherent in the religious system itself? Perhaps worse, **how has Christianity in our country today turned the business of church into a marketplace? Let me count the ways.** And I'm not referring to the selling of Fair Trade coffee, tea, and chocolate in our Fellowship Hall. Yet also, how has a prevailing consumeristic attitude and mindset to church life affected its ministry and sense of community?

Using this same biblical passage, poet Mary Oliver goes in a completely different direction. That's what I love about scripture interpretation. Instead of critiquing the actual practices of upholding of the status quo by organized religion, she looks outside of the box when it comes to defining the 'temple' itself. The devotional booklet includes

an excerpt of her poem, "**Where Does the Temple Begin, Where Does It End?**" It is printed on the cover of today's worship bulletin. Let's read it together.

*There are things you can't reach. But
you can reach out to them, and all day long.
The wind, the bird flying away. The idea of God.*

She rightly reminds us there are some things we just can't grasp and hold onto as if they are ours to possess. Beyond literal things, like the wind and a bird flying away, Mary Oliver also applies this to our idea of God. And the next line in her poem is: "And it can keep you as busy as anything else, and happier." **We are encouraged, therefore, to keep reaching out.**

When she asks us to consider where the temple begins and where it ends, she pushes us to think outside the four walls of the church itself, and to **question the difference between what we deem as sacred and the secular**. In the meditation portion of the devotional booklet it states, "Jesus' love for the temple runs deep, and he challenges us not only to feel the same but also to **ask where the boundaries of "the temple" really are**. Does the sacred ground end at the sanctuary door? Or does it include the woods, the birds, and the sky, as both Oliver and Genesis 1 would suggest? Does the temple include Christ's own body, and so all of our bodies as well (John 2:21)? And if it does: how shall we fiercely love and defend "the temple" today?" **What would it mean for you to defend and protect 'the temple'?**

Our understanding of Jesus as the incarnation of the Presence of God extends to us, as well. Are we not, as the apostle Paul reminds us, also a temple of the indwelling Holy Spirit – the Sacred Presence of God within us? So, **what if we were to expand our understanding of 'temple' to include all of creation. For if God is present everywhere and in all things, then all ground is holy ground, and all creation is holy and sacred.**

The care of creation itself is something we are called to put into practice. And in the process, let us not forget the warning to not turn it into a marketplace where we walk lockstep with the status quo and business as usual.

That brings us to the lighting of the candle for this week. The devotional booklet encourages: Begin each day by lighting a **candle of courage**, praying, "God of love, help me live today in ways that consecrate the world, defend the vulnerable, protect what is good, and honor creation." [Light candle] And now, if you so choose, repeat this same prayer after me:

**God of love,
help me live today
in ways that consecrate the world,
defend the vulnerable,
protect what is good,
and honor creation.**

Amen.



Sermon Series: **The Poetry of Lent**
 Part 4: **God Saves the Whole World**
 – **Not Just Us**
 Fourth Sunday in Lent

John 3:14-21
 College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
 March 20, 2011

**IS THE SOUL SOLID, LIKE IRON?
 OR IS IT TENDER AND BREAKABLE, LIKE
 THE WINGS OF A MOTH IN THE BEAK OF AN OWL?
 WHO HAS IT, AND WHO DOESN'T?
 I KEEP LOOKING AROUND ME...
 WHY SHOULD I HAVE IT,
 AND NOT THE ANTEATER WHO LOVES HER CHILDREN?
 WHY SHOULD I HAVE IT, AND NOT THE CAMEL?
 COME TO THINK OF IT, WHAT ABOUT THE MAPLE TREES?
 + MARY OLIVER**

John 3:16. Let's recite it together – in the King James Version as God, no doubt, intended.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

For many Christians, this famous verse summarizes the entire gospel message in a nutshell; functioning as a theological reflection upon the meaning of Christ coming into the world. Yet, there are some very

important things to recognize when interpreting this passage. First and foremost, **it is about God's action, not ours. It is primarily about God's grace.** By loving the world, loving us, loving you and me, **God sent us One who would reveal how much God loves us.** That, in a nutshell, is the Jesus story. **It is the internal recognition and acknowledgement of that love that has the power to transform lives.** For some, that recognition may occur in an instant, in what might be described as a conversion experience. For other, it may be in knowing that there was never a time in their life when they weren't loved by God. As one biblical commentator explains:

Belief in Jesus changes one's life so that one can, indeed, speak of being 'born again,' not because of an intrinsic change in human nature, but because of the new beginning that comes with **a recognition of the full character of God that is revealed in Jesus.**

That's something that even progressive Christians can continue to affirm. The nature and character of God, as revealed in and by Jesus, is a God whose love knows no bounds. This is what allows us to live life fully, and it reminds us that **the imagery of**

eternal life is as much or more about the 'here' as it is about the 'hereafter'. Let me put that another way. In its biblical context, 'eternal life' does not mean the mere endless duration of human existence. Rather, **it is a way of describing life as lived in the unending Presence of God**. To have eternal life is to be given life as a child of God - at that begins now, and each and every day.

Salvation, understood this way, is not an intellectual, or even emotional, acceptance of doctrinal statements that theologians (including the gospel writers) believed about God and Jesus. For we are told in verse 17 that God sent the One named Jesus not to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through him. Notice that **it is the world that God so loved**. Writes one biblical commentator: It was not a nation [or a certain people]; it was not only the good people; it was not only the people who loved God; it was the world. The unlovable and the unlovely, the lonely who have no one else to love them, the person who loves God and the person who never thinks of God, the person who finds rest in the love of God and the person who turns away from the love of God - **all are included in this vast inclusive love, the love of God**.

God doesn't pick and choose who to love, everyone is loved, and loved equally and unconditionally. And even though we all tell ourselves we know that, sometimes I think we still have trouble knowing that in our hearts, in the very depths of our being. Despite what we have done, despite our attitudes, God has included us, God has reached out to us – to you.

In this biblical story, then, the message that cries out the loudest is one of acceptance: God's acceptance of us. Recognizing this message of God's acceptance lies at the heart of second bullet point of our congregation's Mission Statement: **"Receive and openly share the love of God."** It's written that way for an important reason. We often talk about sharing the love of God with others. But that's just the first step. We really can't do that effectively until we first understand that we, you and I, are already the recipients of God's love.

There are many people in our society today, perhaps even yourself at times, for which self-acceptance may be one of life's biggest struggles. **At the heart of the gospel, however, is God's acceptance of us**. Since this comes as a result of God's grace toward us as a free gift, **it is something that we cannot achieve, or earn, or manufacture - we can only receive it, accept it, believe it**. The gospel writer's point in this story is that God's acceptance of us should and must have an impact on how we view ourselves, how we act, how we relate to God and each other, and how we view the world. Our world, our very selves, *cannot* remain the same when we realize that we are loved with a love that will not let us go.

To use a favorite metaphor of the author of the Gospel of John, **our journey in life and faith is one from darkness to light**. Verses 20-21 state, "For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God." **Now, when the Scripture says, "Those who do not believe are condemned already," it does not mean they are going to hell. Instead, it means that living a life of darkness, marked by evil deeds, is a condemned way to live life**. The author of the gospel of John seems reluctant to speak directly of God condemning people to eternal damnation. If anything, he is tending away from a picture of God who wants to punish people forever towards **a picture of God who wants abundant life for people**.

Living in the light means that we admit the truth about ourselves. It means recognizing and acknowledging those “dark” places and things in our lives. It also means, when necessary, asking for forgiveness and changing our course of action. That’s the very definition of the concept of repentance - a really big theme during Lent.

But enough about us. Are we human beings the only ones who experience eternal life, the only part of God’s creation that has a soul? There are many Christians who would say, yes. That’s why people have debated for ages whether dogs go to heaven or not. (We all know where cats go...they go to heaven, too.) Poet **Mary Oliver** wonders about this in her poem, “**Some Questions You Might Ask.**” A portion of it is printed on the cover of your worship bulletin. So, let’s read it together.

*Is the soul solid, like Iron? Or is it tender and breakable, like
The wings of a moth in the beak of an owl?
Who has it, and who doesn’t?
I keep looking around me...
Why should I have it,
and not the anteater Who loves her children?
Why should I have it, and not the camel?
Come to think of it, what about the maple trees?*

In the devotional booklet it claims, “Oliver’s poem can be read as a provocative, playful riff picking up on the striking fact that Jesus does *not* say, ‘in order that all **people** might be saved.’ For aren’t the bear and the hummingbird, the snake and the scallop, the iris and maple tree included among God’s beloved?” For a growing number of Christians, including myself and perhaps you, as well, **God’s love and grace and redemption are extended all that God has created, not just the 2-legged creatures who walk upright.**

So, here are the practices for this week shared in the devotional booklet.

- Look for moments – a conversation, a Facebook post, a phone call – in which you might be tempted to offer words of judgment, and instead offer words of grace and understanding.
- Learn something new about a creature you know little about – perhaps even one you don’t like! Share what you learn with at least one other person, or post it for others to enjoy.
- **Where does your circle of love need to be expanded?** Explore these questions in a journal, or discuss it with family or friends over a meal.

That brings us to the lighting of the candle for this coming week. Begin each day by lighting a **candle of grace**, praying, “God of mercy and hope, help me expand the circle of those I love.” [Light the candle.] As we have done each Sunday during Lent, I ask that you repeat that same prayer after me, if you so choose.

**God of mercy and hope,
help me expand
the circle of those I love.**

Amen.

Sermon Series: *The Poetry of Lent*

Part 5: *Mindfulness – Being Aware of the Present Moment*

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Jeremiah 31:31-34 John 12:20-33
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
March 18, 2018

EVERY DAY
I SEE OR I HEAR
SOMETHING
THAT MORE OR LESS
KILLS ME
WITH DELIGHT,
THAT LEAVES ME
LIKE A NEEDLE
IN THE HAYSTACK
OF LIGHT.
+ MARY OLIVER

What, or how much, do you know about what is called 'mindfulness'? Maybe a lot, maybe only a little. Let's take a look? **What is mindfulness?** Is it a philosophy, a religious spiritual practice, a way to meditate, an exercise to reduce stress and anxiety, a pathway to connect with God? Yes! It's all this and more.

College Hill's Book Study Group is currently discussing Robert Wright's 2017 book, "Why Buddhism is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment."

No, it isn't about converting ourselves to Buddhism, but rather learning to use ancient spiritual practices and wisdom in a Christian context. The book's Introduction even includes a quote from the Dalai Lama, "Don't try to use what you learn from Buddhism to be a better Buddhist; use it to be a better whatever-you-already-are." So that's what we are doing.

I'll be sharing a few different definitions of 'mindfulness' this morning, because there isn't just one. The book states, **"To live mindfully is to pay attention to, to be 'mindful of' what's happening in the here and now and to experience it in a clear, direct way, unclouded by various mental obfuscations. Stop and smell the roses."**

The first time I talked about mindfulness in a sermon was upon my return from the sabbatical trip to Ireland and Iona, Scotland in 2015. You may remember an 8-part sermon series, "Connecting With God." The purpose was to reflect a Celtic spirituality approach to understanding the nature and character of God, and then explore ways to connect with that Sacred Presence. I have been particularly reminded of that approach to spirituality as we have focused on the devotional booklet, "Mary Oliver and the Poetry of Lent," these past few weeks.

We have seen how Oliver's poetry reflects a very inclusive understanding of God's love and grace, extending it to cover all of creation. This Sunday's focus is no

different. As we will see, the devotional booklet looks at this spiritual practice known as mindfulness. In that sermon series, week 5 was called, "Reconnecting With Spiritual Practice," I shared the following:

In a blog by Zachary H. Avery, entitled, "Consciously Embracing What Is: The Path of Presence & Mindfulness," he writes:

Our fast-paced, multitasking, instant messaging, drive through, fast track, 24/7, tweeting, iEverything, microwaving society has lost (or perhaps, forgotten) some things. One of these things that we've forgotten is how to live present in each moment. You see, Buddha said, "The secret of health for both mind and body is not to mourn for the past, worry about the future, or anticipate troubles, but to live in the present moment wisely and earnestly."

Wikipedia defines mindfulness as "**the intentional, accepting and non-judgmental focus of one's attention on the emotions, thoughts, and sensations occurring in the present moment.**"

Doctor Herbert Benson (author of the infamous book *The Relaxation Response*) adds, "Mindfulness is the practice of learning to pay attention to what is happening to you from moment to moment. **To be mindful, you must slow down, do one activity at a time, and bring your full awareness to both the activity at hand and to your inner experience of it.**"

Rather than being intentionally aware of what's happening in front of and inside of us, we constantly turn to phones, computers, and TVs that distract us from the here and now.

When we embrace mindfulness, the world opens up to us. We're suddenly able to see beauty and grace in ways that we've previously overlooked or taken for granted. The normal, boring, mundane, and common suddenly becomes infused with life and brilliance.

Paying attention, cultivating moment to moment awareness of events around us, and being fully present in and to the world in which you and I live is a spiritual discipline unto itself. Speaking personally, one of the most effective ways that I become mindful of what's going on around and inside of me is through the practice of photography. It causes me to stop and look closely, to appreciate intricacy and beauty, and to express gratitude to God for the wonder of creation all around me. To use another phrase common in Buddhist meditation, it helps calm my monkey mind.

Now, whether or not it's done using a camera, I encourage you to pick up a rock (like the children of the church did a few moments ago), a flower, a twig, a child's art project, even a blade of grass and look into it deeply and intently. Pay attention to it, and to what you experience while doing it. **Perhaps, like me, you'll find God in the details. Yes, the present moment is indeed underrated.**

Let's look, now, at how all this is approached in the devotional booklet. It begins with a verse from the assigned lectionary Old Testament passage we just heard from Jeremiah 31. This passage reveals that the covenant God made with the house of

Israel, based on the written law given to Moses, will be replaced by God's law written not on paper, but in the hearts of believers. Verses 33-34 declare, "**I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts;** and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

As Christians, we believe that this prophecy was being fulfilled in and through the life and ministry Jesus of Nazareth, and in the understanding of the Holy Spirit already dwelling within us. **The implications of this new covenant are profound in understanding our relationship with the Divine. The old covenant was external, the new covenant is internal. Therefore, it is imperative that we look inside ourselves for that 'law' of God that is already written upon our hearts.** To paraphrase John Philip Newell in his 2008 book, *Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation*, "**What is deepest in us, and in all created things, is not opposed to God, rather it is of God.**"

Mindfulness, then, offers a path that can help us recognize and connect with the Sacred Presence within ourselves, within others, and within creation itself. Mary Oliver reflects upon her own understanding of all this in her poem, appropriately entitled, "Mindful". An excerpt is printed on the cover of today's worship bulletin. As in past weeks, let's recite it together:

Every day
 I see or I hear
 Something
 that more or less
 kills me
 with delight,
 that leaves me
 like a needle
 in the haystack
 of light.

This week I want to finish reciting the entire poem.

It is what I was born for –
 to look, to listen,
 to lose myself
 inside this soft world –
 to instruct myself
 over and over
 in joy,
 and acclamation.
 Nor am I talking
 about the exceptional,
 the fearful, the dreadful,
 the very extravagant –
 but of the ordinary,
 the common, the very drab,



the daily presentations.
 Oh, good scholar,
 I say to myself,
 how can you help
 but grow wise
 with such teachings
 as these –
 the untrimmable light
 of the world,
 the ocean's shine,
 the prayers that are made
 out of grass?

"The prayers that are made out of grass." The devotional booklet adds the following for our consideration. "What if God's law were 'written on our hearts'? Instruction would no longer be needed, since genuine joy and praise, compassion and justice would all be second nature. The prophet Jeremiah declares that such days 'are surely coming;' in the meantime, we may learn from the Spirit through a thousand teachers all around us. To walk with Mary Oliver is to join her in this kind of mindful day-to-day learning, all for the sake of that day when instruction is no longer necessary." The practices suggested for this week include:

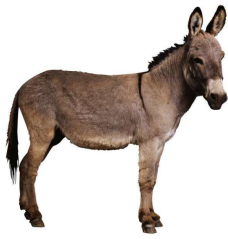
- Try what renowned preacher Fred Craddock calls "going marveling": an afternoon or evening walk, in solitude or with family or friends, to gather marvels (sights, sounds, shells, stones, pine cones – anything that brings to mind God's marvelous generosity!). Post a photo of your discoveries on Facebook or Instagram. I do that a lot.
- Experiment with a "mindfulness fast" this week, setting aside things and activities that create undue distraction and stress: television, the news cycle, your Twitter feed – whatever threatens to pull you out of the present moment.
- Where and when would you like to be more mindful (the homefront, your commute, the natural world, relationships, parenting, etc.)? Explore these questions in a journal, or discuss it with family or friends over a meal.

So, again we have come to the point to light the candle for this next week. This week begin each day by lighting a **candle of mindfulness**, praying, "God of wonder and delight, help me notice the miraculous today." [Light candle] As we have also done each Sunday during Lent, I ask that you repeat that same prayer after me, if you so choose.

***God of wonder and delight,
 help me notice
 the miraculous today.***

Amen.

Sermon Series: **The Poetry of Lent**



Part 6: **Calling All Donkeys**

Palm/Passion Sunday

Mark 11:1-11
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
March 25, 2018

**ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF JERUSALEM
THE DONKEY WAITED.
NOT ESPECIALLY BRAVE,
OR FILLED WITH UNDERSTANDING,
HE STOOD AND WAITED.**

+ MARY OLIVER

As you could probably tell by looking at today's worship bulletin, this Palm Sunday we're going to talk about donkeys. Don't blame me, it wasn't my idea. It was Mary Oliver's.

For those of you who have attended worship here during this season of Lent, you know that we've been following a small booklet entitled, **Mary Oliver and the Poetry of Lent: A Lenten Devotional**. Of all the variety of topics and perspectives that could be the subject of today's biblical story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the devotional focus on Oliver's poem, entitled, "**The Poet Thinks about the Donkey.**"

Over the years you have heard me mention how enlightening it can be to look at any biblical story from the perspective of the different characters. For instance, take the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Many different lessons can be gleaned by looking at the story from the perspective of the younger prodigal son, or from that of his obedient older brother, or from the perspective of the forgiving and welcoming father.

It's indeed enlightening and enriching to look at anything from a variety of perspectives! Saying that, it has never crossed my mind to look at Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, on what tradition calls Palm Sunday, from the perspective of the donkey. So, for you traditionalists looking for a standard interpretation of this story, you're going to be sorely disappointed.

Let's get into this by reciting together the excerpt of Mary Oliver's poem printed on the cover of today's worship bulletin. I will then finish reading the entire poem when we have read together the first stanza.

On the outskirts of Jerusalem
the donkey waited.
Not especially brave, or filled with understanding,
he stood and waited.

*How horses, turned out into the meadow,
Leap with delight!
How doves, released from their cages,
Clatter away, splashed with sunlight!*

But the donkey, tied to a tree as usual, waited.
 Then he let himself be led away.
 Then he let the stranger mount.

Never had he seen such crowds!
 And I wonder if he at all imagined what was to happen.
 Still, he was what he had always been: small, dark, obedient.

I hope, finally, he felt brave.
 I hope, finally, he loved the man who rode so lightly upon him,
 As he lifted one dusty hoof and stepped, as he had to, forward.

Were you able to make a parallel connection in your life with the role of the donkey? If not, the meditation portion of the devotional booklet explains, "Jesus was a skilled student and faithful lover of scripture, and here in a kind of street theater he enacts a passage from the ancient prophet Zechariah. The crowds fully participate in the performance, lavishing praise on the triumphant king, "humble and riding on a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9). Oliver zeroes in on the donkey himself, the humble creature carrying the humble savior, calling our attention to how even the most "lowly" can play indispensable roles in the grand drama of salvation, in Jerusalem and beyond."

I have come to appreciate Oliver's perspective. Do we not often consider ourselves just regular ordinary people, humbly living our lives day to day, lifting one dusty hoof and stepping (as we have to) forward? Yet, **upon reflection, have you ever noticed that you ended up playing a very important role in the life journey of another?** I say, "upon reflection," because we often do not realize at the time how our words and actions impact others. **And as people of faith, we often look back and then recognize that the Presence of the Divine had been at work in and through our lives.** Perhaps we also recognize that Sacred Presence working in the lives of others to make a big difference in our own.

I get a daily email from unfoldinglight.net. It comes in the form of a poem by pastor **Steve Garnaas-Holmes**. He often reflects upon the lectionary scripture passages for the coming week. I have quoted him in recent weeks because of our focus on poetry during this season of Lent. He begins his poem, "**Untie the Colt**," by quoting Mark 11:2.

*You will find tied there a colt
 that has never been ridden.
 — Mark 11.2*

Jesus entered as a king,
 but on a colt, not a war horse,
 king of vulnerability,
 prince of lowliness.

Am I on a horse?
 the horse of being right,
 the horse of insisting,
 the horse of privilege?

Soul, untie the colt,
the colt of gentleness,
of listening, of humility.

Untie the colt that is not afraid
to not have all the answers,
to still be learning.

Untie the power of your vulnerability.
Ride the colt that knows
the power of powerlessness,
the power of love.

Am I on a horse?
Untie the colt
and get on.

There's absolutely no doubt that one of the most crucial elements of the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem was on what he was riding. The **horse** was a symbol of a king or a military leader, and it carried the connotation of power and pride. A **donkey**, especially a young one, which the scriptures call a colt, was the exact opposite. It symbolized the epitome of humility and service. In this story, **the donkey played a key role in revealing the kind of "king" Jesus was – a humble man of service.**

Garnaas-Holmes' poem calls on us to reflect upon difference. It even asks if we go through life riding on a horse or a donkey. Do we ride upon the horse of being right, the horse of insisting, the horse of privilege? At times, I will confess, I find myself to be quite an accomplished horse rider. And if we're honest with ourselves, those of us living as white, middle class citizens certainly ride upon the horse of privilege, whether we want to admit it or not. But that's another sermon that requires deeper explanation and reflection.

As followers of the ways of Jesus, perhaps our choice of transportation should be the donkey, a colt. Hear these poetic words again, taking them to heart.

Soul, untie the colt,
the colt of gentleness,
of listening, of humility.

Untie the colt that is not afraid
to not have all the answers,
to still be learning.

Untie the power of your vulnerability.
Ride the colt that knows
the power of powerlessness,
the power of love.

If that what it means, metaphorically, to be a donkey – or to ride on a donkey – then perhaps **Jesus is indeed calling all donkeys – to be gentle, be a good listener, be humble, don't be afraid to not have all the answers, be a learner, be vulnerable, know**

the power of powerlessness, the power of love. The practices that the devotional booklet encourages us to participate in this week include the following:

- Text three people today with words of praise and encouragement.
- Experiment with a “criticism fast,” refraining from disparaging yourself and others, thereby making room for words of support and appreciation.
- For what in your life (big things and little things) do you most want to thank and praise God? Explore this question in a journal, or discuss it with family or friends over a meal.

So yet again we have arrived at that point to light the candle for this coming week. This week begin each day by lighting a **candle of praise**, praying, “God of glory, God of love, help me praise you today in all I do and say.” [Light candle] As we have also done each Sunday during Lent, I ask that you repeat that same prayer after me, if you so choose.

***God of glory, God of love.
help me praise you today
in all I do and say.***

Amen.



Sermon Series: **The Poetry of Lent**

Part 7: **“The light that can shine out of a life.”**

Maundy Thursday

John 13:1-17, 33-35
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
March 29, 2018

**IN SINGAPORE, IN THE AIRPORT,
A DARKNESS WAS RIPPED FROM MY EYES.
IN THE WOMEN'S RESTROOM, ONE COMPARTMENT STOOD OPEN.
A WOMAN KNELT THERE, WASHING SOMETHING
IN A WHITE BOWL**

• MARY OLIVER

According to scripture, after Jesus' hope-filled and triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the rest of the week didn't go very well for him. Before the close of Thursday night, Jesus will be betrayed and arrested. Just before this occurs, however, Jesus shares a meal with his disciples.

Each of the four gospels tell the story a bit differently, especially the Gospel of John. Only in the Gospel of John are we told how Jesus got up from the table, took off his outer robe, tied a towel around himself, poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciple's feet, then wiping them with the towel that was wrapped around him (John 13:4-6). It is this particular story that undergirds the traditional worship of what the church universal calls Maundy Thursday. For it is only in John's version that Jesus gives the disciples a new commandment (in Latin *mandatum* from which we get 'mandate', hence Maundy). That command, of course, is to love one another.

When Jesus returned to the table after washing the disciples' feet, he acknowledged they did not know now what he was doing, but that they would later understand. But why the confusion? Washing another's feet in Jesus' day was considered a shameful task, perhaps that of a slave. So, naturally the disciples did not understand. Peter's outright protest, then, is completely understandable given the humiliating impropriety of what Jesus is doing for those he loves.

Jesus replies, however, by giving them a directive for their mission as his followers, **“If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet”** (v. 14). The disciples learn a valuable lesson, as do we in the church today. As followers of the ways and teachings of Jesus, we are not to argue over who is the greatest, or use our privilege to take advantage of others, or to lord it over others. Rather, **we are called to attend to the humble, and perhaps even humiliating, tasks of serving one another. That's a primary way we can put our love into action.**

But **what does genuine love look like in practice?** This question is asked in the devotional booklet that we have been following throughout this season of Lent, **Mary**

Oliver and Poetry of Lent. It adds, "Here Jesus teaches his disciples that **love looks like humble, tangible, vulnerable service.** To illustrate this, the devotional booklet offers an excerpt of Mary Oliver's poem, entitled, "Singapore". It's about her real-life chance encounter with a woman cleaning a public restroom, and it becomes a window into how dignity and humility intertwine. Therefore, it can serve as a good lesson for us. I'd like to share the entire poem with you on this Maundy Thursday evening.

In Singapore, in the airport,
a darkness was ripped from my eyes.
In the women's restroom, one compartment stood open.
A woman knelt there, washing something in the white bowl.

Disgust argued in my stomach
and I felt, in my pocket, for my ticket.

A poem should always have birds in it.
Kingfishers, say, with their bold eyes and gaudy wings,
Rivers are pleasant, and of course trees.
A waterfall, or if that is not possible, a fountain rising and falling.
A person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem.

When the woman turned I could not answer her face.
Her beauty and her embarrassment struggled together, and neither could win.
She smiled and I smiled. What kind of nonsense is this?
Everybody needs a job.

Yes, a person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem.
But first we must watch her as she stares down at her labor, which is dull enough.
She is washing the tops of the airport ashtrays, as big as hubcaps, with a blue rag.
Her small hands turn the metal, scrubbing and rinsing.
She does not work slowly, nor quickly, but like a river.
Her dark hair is like the wing of a bird.

I don't doubt for a moment that she loves her life.
And I want her to rise up from the crust and the slop and fly down to the river.
This probably won't happen.
But maybe it will.
If the world were only pain and logic, who would want it?

Of course, it isn't.
Neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only
the light that can shine out of a life. I mean
the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth,
the way her smile was only for my sake; I mean
the way this poem is filled with trees, and birds.

Did you notice how dignity and humility intertwined? Did you notice, to quote Mary Oliver, "light can shine out of a life"? And so, the question is this: how can we make our love more tangible, more luminous, more clear? It requires, in part, our being humble and vulnerable. The devotional goes on to suggest a couple of practices.

- Reach out to someone who has been kind to you, and express your appreciation face to face or with a note.
- Wash the hands or feet of a family member or friend; make someone a meal; give a pet a special treat; or put up a new birdfeeder.

I'd add, **engage in random – and not so random – acts of kindness. If and when you're available, and time allows, volunteer somewhere.** Since College Hill was selected this week as one of the feeding locations for Tulsa Publics School students for breakfast and lunch, should there be a Teacher Walkout next Monday, we could certainly use some help here at the church, to be a presence to help monitor and supervise the children. TPS is providing the food and food service.

I'd summarize it all this way: With and through love and humble service, how can you let light shine out of your life? Also, how can you be more attentive to recognize and acknowledge the light shine out of the life of others?

As with each of the past Sundays in Lent, I will now light a candle. On this Maundy Thursday, we light a candle of love, praying, "God of love, help my love become more tangible, more luminous, more clear today – and every day." [Light candle] And now, if you so choose, please repeat that prayer after me.

***God of love,
help my love become more tangible,
more luminous,
more clear today
– and every day.***

Amen.



Good Friday Reflection

by Terry Baxter • March 30, 2018

When we think about Good Friday, we see a theatrical spectacle. A cast of characters who are hard to forget: Jesus, Judas, Peter, the other Disciples, the Priests, Pilot, and all the Jewish people.

Jesus, knowing what is about to happen, shares a last supper with his disciples. This sharing sets the stage for him to inform them that one of them will betray him. Surely not me! exclaims Peter. And though Peter wasn't the disciple Jesus had in mind, he does let Peter and the other disciples know that Peter will deny knowing Jesus three times before the night has ended.

Jesus and the disciples move to a place where Jesus intends to pray. He asks the disciples to stay awake and keep watch while he moves a bit away to pray privately. Jesus asks God if there is a way to fulfill the plan without dying but Jesus, knowing the nature of humans, acknowledges that things will take their course.

After praying, Jesus returning to his disciples finds them asleep and he asks them why they couldn't stay awake and watch. One can almost hear, "Am I not important enough for you to stay awake?" Soldiers and temple guards approach and Judas kisses Jesus to indicate to the soldiers that Jesus is "the guy". They haul him away. During this time period, Peter is approached and asked if he is a disciple, to which he says "What are you talking about?" Peter is again challenged, "surely I saw you with him", but he again denies even knowing Jesus. And when asked a third time, he again claims ignorance. (Whether the rooster crows twice or once or not at all isn't important... Peter denied Jesus as Jesus had stated at dinner.)

Jesus is taken to the priests who question him and decide that, even without testimony from anyone, they've had enough of his nonsense and send him to Pilot with the request that Jesus be put to death, their authority in the Roman Empire insufficient to take a life.

Pilot interrogates Jesus and tells the priests the he can find no wrong, especially nothing to warrant a death sentence. So, the priests having already worked up the crowd and having some of their own planted in the crowd, remind Pilot of the custom of offering an exchange by asking the Jewish people which person they want killed... The condemned "bandit", "murderer" Barabas or the innocent Jesus. Pilot asks three times and the people each time demand Barabas be released and Jesus killed by crucifixion. Pilot "washes his hands" and after flogging Jesus, remands him to the guards for execution.

The execution follows and by late afternoon, Jesus has died and he is quickly buried in a tomb before the Sabbath can begin at sundown.

Remembering the role each plays in this, as we call it, "Good Friday" drama, we see that the desire for power, jealousy and self-preservation running through the actions of each of the players:

Judas, having been paid by the priests to point out Jesus, convinces himself that by forcing a confrontation, the kingdom of which Jesus spoke will somehow take over.

The Disciples, tired from a long day and not heeding Jesus' request, don't think it important to stay awake and "watch".

Peter, though he said he would never betray his friend Jesus, seeks to keep himself safe by denying even knowing him three times before the night is over.

The Priests, jealous that Jesus has so many followers and that his teachings will upset their authority and power, manipulate the situation to obtain an unwarranted death sentence.

Pilot, not finding guilt, but wanting to keep in the good graces of the Priests and the people, follows the "custom" of releasing one person in exchange of another.

The Jewish people allow themselves to be caught up in the moment and swayed by the Priests demanding that Jesus be crucified instead of Barabbas.

But what about us, as modern-day Christians?

- Like the sleeping Disciples, how often do we fail to act?
- Do we sometimes remain quiet rather than speaking out, denying Christ as did Peter?
- Do we take advantage of situations and try to control outcomes so we stay comfortable, as did the Priests?
- Do we allow authorities or common practice ("tradition") to dictate our reaction in a situation, as did Pilot and the Jewish People?
- Are we still putting Jesus on the cross?????

Good Friday Reflection

by Marianne Stambaugh • March 30, 2018

Good Friday is a hard place for us to pause the narrative of Jesus' life. We are people who seek light and transformation, and this is the day of darkness and betrayal. My earliest childhood memories of the story of the crucifixion are that it is graphic, violent and highly sensory: a kiss that betrays, a sword slicing off an ear, the blood-thirsty crowd, the flogging, Peter by the campfire, a rooster crowing, casting lots for Jesus' garments, the crown of thorns, the thief on the cross, the smell of sour vinegar, and then the uncanny darkness at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. And the words "The veil of the temple was rent!" This story was a far cry from the Beatitudes and parables of Sunday School. It's sad, bloody, and full of treachery.

As an adult, I tend to want to move from the Last Supper directly to the Empty Tomb. Even the symbolism in our protestant churches comes from Sunday, not from Friday. We prefer the empty cross, not the crucifix with the body of Christ still hanging there.

But here we are on this sacred day, pausing the narrative at this difficult spot. The late Rev. William Sloane Coffin had this to say:

On Good Friday the darkness was all but complete, the message clear: fear and hatred kill. And let us not be sentimental, ours is still a Good Friday world.

While all of Lent is intended to be a time of deep spiritual reflection, Good Friday is the culmination, the day we remember just how dark-hearted and selfish we humans are. Without making the journey through Lent to the crucifixion, we could be tempted to see ourselves as somehow separate from or above the attitudes that crucified Jesus.

And yet we call the day *Good*. Other cultures call it God's Friday, Holy Friday, Sorrowful Friday or even Long Friday, but *Good* is how we know it. I like the questions posed in our Lenten guide on this point:

- Do we call it good "because Jesus shows us love and mercy even unto death?"
- "Or is it because Jesus subversively transforms some of the worst things in the world (the Roman cross, violence, hate crime, betrayal among friends) into some of the best things in the world (the Tree of Life, grace, resurrection, forgiveness among enemies) thereby proclaiming in the end, that God will redeem everything?"

Or is it because, as the poet Mary Oliver puts it, this story will break our hearts open? A columnist on the website *OnBeing* says Oliver sees at least two ways for the heart to break: it can break *open* into new life, or break *apart* into shards of sharper and more wide spread pain. In her poem "*Lead*," Oliver says:

*I tell you this
to break your heart,
by which I mean only
that it break open and never close again
to the rest of the world.*

By working our way through the Lenten guide – either with great discipline and daily helpings, or by sipping it on Ash Wednesday with good intentions and then gobbling it all up in Holy Week – we have prepared our hearts. Perhaps you've given up negative tendencies, reached out to others, unplugged from technology just a bit, lit a candle, discussed your thoughts with others, breathed more deeply, or meditated. The Lenten journey now brings us here to the darkest part of the narrative. As people of faith we know where this story is going, and we do not despair of the darkness. We must pass through it to reach Easter.

Good Friday is a good place for us to pause the narrative of Christ's life so that we may consider our own hearts, our motives, and our desires. We are people who are now prepared to celebrate the light and transformation that is coming.

As Christian writer Barbara Johnson puts it, "We are Easter People living in a Good Friday World."



Photo by Rev. Todd Freeman

EASTER SUNDAY



Pay attention!
Be astonished!
Tell about it!

Easter Sunday: Hope, New Life, Transformation

Mark 16:1-8
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
April 1, 2018

Just yesterday I received an email sent by a Presbyterian pastor friend and colleague, entitled, "Alleluia! The Lord is risen! I can think of no better way to express the meaning of Easter. So, I'd like to share this message with you this day.

Alleluia! The Lord is risen!

This proclamation of Good News was first shouted by people living in a world of oppression, nationalism, fear, injustice, bigotry, religious arrogance, hatred, economic disparity, sexism, violence, social privilege. It was a world which would not accept the presence of a loving, grace-filled, forgiving, healing, transforming, Incarnational God in its midst. Yet, the early followers of the Risen Lord were eager to boldly shout, "Alleluia!!! The Lord is risen!!!"

Today we live in the same world with all the same infectious diseases. Let us boldly shout with our lives and voices, "Alleluia!!! The Lord is risen!!!" Let us be Easter People in the midst of a Good Friday world.

Thanks be to God for your faithful shoutings and whisperings, "Alleluia!!! The Lord is risen!!!" which have brought light into the darkness of the world and human suffering.

He is risen, indeed!!! Alleluia!!!

There is a story that I like to retell every 3-4 years on Easter Sunday. When I interviewed for the position of installed pastor at a small, progressive and inclusive Presbyterian congregation in Dallas back in 1997, 21 years ago now, I was asked by a person on the Pastor Nominating Committee if I would have a problem with someone who serves as an elder on the Session who doesn't believe in the literal bodily

resurrection of Jesus. My response back then was probably similar to one experienced by many of you at some point in your own journey of faith.

I responded to that question by stating that I had no reason *not* to believe the story of the Resurrection as anything but as literal history, that Jesus was in fact bodily and physically raised from the dead. The reason I believed that had to do with two things. One, I thought I *had* to believe the story literally. And two, I had never been introduced to an alternative metaphorical understanding, while still realizing the disciples did indeed experience the very real spiritual presence of Jesus still with them after he died. But knowing how my own theological perspectives and biblical interpretations had changed over the years, especially compared to before I attended seminary, I stated to the person who asked me that question that if a church leader did not believe the story of the Resurrection literally, then I could live with that and I wouldn't have a problem with that person.

Upon further discussion with that Pastor Nominating Committee I learned that a former interim pastor at that church preached an Easter sermon some years earlier making the bold statement that *unless* a person believed the resurrection narrative literally – believed in a physical bodily resurrection – they had no right to call themselves a Christian. This particular belief, for that pastor, was a fundamental requirement and was non-negotiable.

Part of the message that I bring to you this Easter, therefore, is simply to warn that **the traditional church's list of what they consider fundamental belief requirements that impose an institutional monopoly on access to God and eternal life is what Jesus' own life and ministry tried to dismantle. And remember, Jesus said the mark of his followers is revealed in how they love one another, not what they profess to believe about Jesus.**

Recalling that story from back in Dallas is important to me. (By the way, I was called to be their pastor and served there for nine years.) The story reminds me how **the specifics of what you and I believe often change over time.** And perhaps even more importantly, it reminds and challenges us to **accept where other people are in their own personal faith beliefs.**

So, on this Easter Sunday we're not going to get into a conversation, let alone a debate, on what you "should" or "should not" believe about the literalness of the Resurrection. Your beliefs are your beliefs, and chances are you have very good reasons for believing the way you do. My main concern, therefore, isn't whether this story is taken literally or metaphorically. Rather, it's how it is interpreted and applied to our own lives and our church life.

The story of the Resurrection is often interpreted too narrowly, and even somewhat selfishly. Many a sermon will be preached today with its main point being that God's raising of Jesus from the dead means that if you believe this you get to spend eternity in heaven. According to the biblical narratives in the four gospels themselves, which don't agree about the specifics of the event, **is going to heaven really the primary gift of Easter?**

See if you can guess the author of the following quote. Here's a hint. It's from a book published in 1960 and adapted into a movie in 1962.

Sometimes the Bible in the hand of one man is worse than a whisky bottle in the hand of (another)... There are just some kind of men who – who're so busy worrying about the next world they've never learned to live in this one, and you can look down the street and see the results.

Those powerful words were spoken by the character Atticus Finch, written by Harper Lee in her masterpiece, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. These words, in a nutshell, describe a major flaw in the teaching within most of Christian organized religion today. **The story of the Resurrection, with its theme of an empty tomb and “Christ Is Risen,” is not primarily about the promise of eternal life, yet that is part of it. Above all, it’s about hope, new life, and transformation.** And that applies in the **here and now** in how you and I choose to live our lives and be in relationship with God and other people. To put it another way, **Easter is more about the here than the hereafter! The application of the Resurrection story, therefore, is more about our doing than our believing. It’s more about our journey than our final destination.** As I have also shared in the past, the ‘Living the Questions’ church school curriculum, *Saving Jesus Redux*, talks about **“Practicing Resurrection.”** It states:

The real power of the Resurrection comes when the followers of Jesus become the body of Christ in the world, striving to bring new life to the world, to eradicate injustice, poverty, and violence. In both the society at large and in people’s personal lives: **the practice of resurrection is about otherwise “dead” people being inwardly transformed and empowered to transform society.**

Notice there are indeed both personal and societal dimensions to “practicing resurrection” in the here and now. The Easter promise of hope, new life, and transformation is this: **the ways of God ultimately prevail over the attitudes, behaviors, and systems opposed to God’s ways.**

A crucial part of the Easter promise, as revealed in and through the life and ministry of Jesus, and through this story of his resurrection, is that the Sacred Presence of God is always with us and within us – miraculously enabling us to initiate and participate in profound moments of love, compassion, peace, joy, justice, dignity, and therefore become an actual real life expression of hope, new life, and transformation. This is what marks us as ‘Easter people’ and as a ‘resurrection community.’

The forty days of Lent have now given way to fifty days known as Eastertide, the season of Easter. Throughout Lent we followed the devotions in the small booklet, ***Mary Oliver and the Poetry of Lent***. The booklet ends with a brief excerpt of one of her poems chosen for Easter Sunday, entitled, “Morning Poem.” See if you can make a connection with the meaning of Easter.

Every morning the world is created.
Under the orange sticks of the sun
the heaped ashes of the night
turn into leaves again.

Do not these simple words indeed reflect hope, new life, and transformation? This is emphasized on the cover of today’s worship bulletin, taken from the devotional booklet. Let’s read it together.

**Instructions for
Living a Life:
Pay attention.
Be astonished.
Tell about it.**

Since we have incorporated quite a selection of poetry into our services of worship throughout Lent, I'd like to close with a poem by Rev. Bret Myers, posted just this past week on progressivechristianity.org. It's entitled, "**Easter Encouragement for the Journey**".

Remember that resurrection is more than mere resuscitation! It is life transformed!

It is faith in possibilities, when others are convinced of inevitability.
 It is the courage to love others, when they don't love you in return...
 to show compassion, when others are heaping judgment...
 to live by peace, when others are being violent...
 to work for justice, when others are working for wealth...
 to respond with gentleness, when others are reacting with rage...
 and to trust that life, well-lived, even if short-lived,
 is preferable to longevity without virtue.

Don't remain caterpillars when you can become butterflies!

Live beautifully! Birth goodness in all you think, say, and do!
 For you are called to life abundant!
 God's blessings be with you.

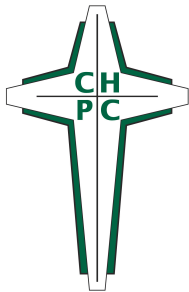
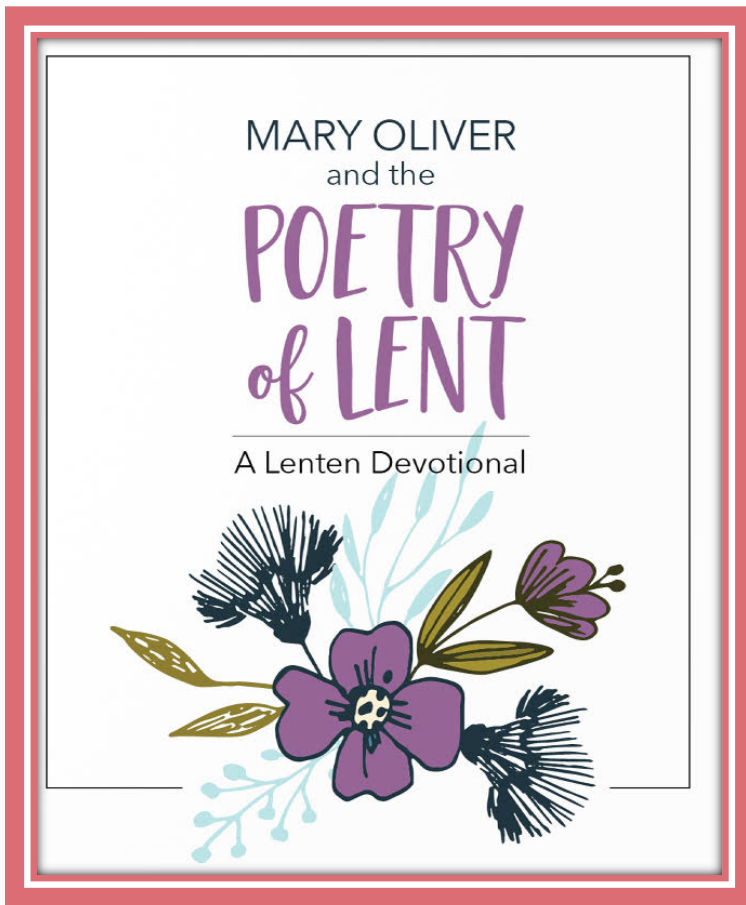
Amen.



• HOPE •

• NEW LIFE •

• TRANSFORMATION •



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