

Sermon 5-8-22
Heather Harriss preaching

Inner and Outer Landscapes

The last two Sundays we have reveled in the wonder of God's creation. The incredible ways we are interconnected with everything that lives and breathes, how rocks, dirt and water are home to unimaginable varieties of life and community. Listening to Paul and Kate preach I remembered sacred moments of experiencing God's presence in nature. As I was writing this one of my favorite poems by Mary Oliver came into my mind and then none of my words sounded right, so I'm going to share her poem with you:

When I am among the trees,
Especially the willows and the honey locust,
Equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,
They give off such hints of gladness.
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.

I am so distant from the hope of myself,
In which I have goodness, and discernment,
And never hurry through the world
 But walk slowly, and bow often.

Around me the trees stir in their leaves
And call out,
"Stay awhile."
The light flows from their branches.

And they call again, "It's simple," they say,
"and you too have come into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
With light, and to shine."

Being in God's creation settles and grounds us, reminding us we are a part of something big, something beyond our understanding. During the pandemic, many of us, myself most definitely included found ourselves taking daily walks. Remember the beginning of staying at home? I was so grateful it was spring, walking and seeing the daffodils come up as they always did. Even as toilet paper disappeared from the shelves at the grocery store, the wild purple violets were popping up in our yard, the green leaves unfurling on trees and bushes, absolutely unaware of all the things that were not happening as usual. During times when nothing makes sense, is a good time to go outside, to feel the ground under your feet, see the sky overhead, to be among the trees.

These outer landscapes nurture our souls, especially when our inner landscape is turbulent, unsettled and chaotic. The 23rd psalm is one we frequently return to when our inner world is full of despair and grief, when what we thought could never happen happens, when what we need is blocked by enemies. The psalmist writes, "You, Lord are my shepherd and I lack nothing, you guide me to lush green meadows and beside peaceful still waters. Even as I walk through the darkest valley, you are with me, protecting me and preparing a table for me in the presence of my enemies, anointing me with precious oil, filling my cup to overflowing; pursuing me with goodness and mercy, ever guiding me towards your eternally right here, right now home. Green meadows, still waters, a rod to protect, a staff to guide, an abundant table. We can go easy, we can be filled with light, we can shine.

It is a beautiful thing to experience that shift in our inner landscape, that shift like a break in the clouds when the blue sky peeks through. In my own life during times of turbulence and upset I have found my way to the grassy meadow through prayer and worship, sometimes guided to the still waters by a kind word from a friend, or by a group that provided understanding and support, or a spiritual director or therapist. Prayer and worship, connecting with friends and our church family, meeting with a counselor have all at different times and ways, met and guided me, protected and reminded me, our God pursues us with goodness and mercy, Our God provides restoration for our souls.

May is Mental Health Awareness month and there are many statistics to take note of: since the pandemic; 4 in 10 adults reported symptoms of anxiety or depression

this is up from 1 in 10. For young adults; people aged 18-25 years-- 1 in 3 had a mental illness in 2020. And for teenagers the rates for those who have considered suicide has also increased. Our souls are weary and sad; confused and afraid. Psalm 23 reminds us we can trust in God's presence in the midst of evil. Whatever preys upon us, individually and as communities we are not defeated, God is with us. In our suffering, in our fear and our alienation, God is present.

Mental illness touches all of our lives and sadly the church is not always a place of welcome. Just as we are aware of the amazing biodiversity of our outer landscape; let us be in wonder of the incredible neurodiversity of our inner landscapes. The Rev. Sara Lund prayerfully writes,

God of all life, all people, all places; that many of us continue to not understand issues of mental health—our own, and that of others. For all the broken reasons stigma is placed upon those living with mental health difficulties, building walls of isolation, rather than the support and love of beloved community; the support and love of radical belonging, Come, let us praise God who chose to become incarnate, to live among us, experiencing all that humanity endures, a disabled and neurodiverse God dwelling among us living with mental health challenges, substance use disorders, brain disorders, and neurodiversity. Come, let us praise God who says to each one of us, “no matter who we are or what medications we take or our diagnoses or where we are on life’s journey: I will be your God.” As a faith community we name the gifts and the unnamed experiences which come to those who live with a mental illness such as major depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorder, schizophrenia, substance use, addiction, historic and generational trauma, racial trauma, grief and eating disorders. We name the home which upholds our spirit through honest sharing, the courage to speak in a safe place. We give thanks for the many gifts that people with mental health disease bring into the world and celebrate the creative genius of artists, scientists, authors, scholars, business leaders, actors, musicians, inventors, who live with mental illness. Still speaking God, as the mysteries of the human brain unfold, we remain in awe of the intricate ways in which we are created in your image. May we be reflections of your love in this world.

How is your inner landscape? As you check in you may be aware of needing to lie down in green pastures and beside still waters. For many of us, the stresses of the pandemic were too much for our normal coping skills. I already mentioned how important getting outside and taking walks are for my mental health. This became even more so when I was healing from surgery for cancer. Once I was strong enough, every day, I headed out the door, through the short trail in our backyard, through the green space of the neighborhood behind our house and onto the street. The walking helped calm fears and worries and as I could walk farther and faster it was a visible sign of my returning health. Then one day, on the other side of the short trail a No Trespassing sign appeared. What!! We were shocked and took the sign completely personally—which really it was because Emma Anne, Michael and I were the only people to walk through this open space. That sign stung. It was an ugly “NO” In a long season of ugly No’s. No you can’t leave your house, No you can’t see your family, No you can’t worship at your church, go to work, go to school. No you can’t have the resources you need, No you can’t do that without a mask, No you can’t. And that’s just the beginning of the No’s. No, you can’t trust your elected officials the way you may have done before, No you can’t believe that systemic racism is not an integral part of everything, No you can’t make decisions about your own body, No you can’t.

In a season of No, we can forget we are held in God’s eternal yes. Yes, this is hard and you are not alone. Yes, there are resources available and people you can talk with. If you are not sure how to find these, Yes, contact me or one of the other pastors here at church! Yes, you are resilient and strong, look at all you have been through! Yes, you are God’s beloved and yes God is pursuing you with goodness and mercy, shepherding you to the path to become who you are created to be, guiding you towards God’s eternally right here, right now home.

When we are feeling distant from the hope of ourself, it is time to gently tend to our inner landscape. To get quiet enough to hear the whisper, “You too have come into the world to do this, to go easy to be filled with light and to shine.