

Creation Sunday

November 8, 2020

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*To Linger Among the Trees*

On Thursday I got off the computer, put down my phone and headed outdoors. My wearied and anxious heart needed a break from the madness of the election news. The place I often go when I need to be refreshed is Pennypack Trail. I love being out there in all of the seasons, observing the beautiful intricacies that each has to offer. However, the landscape is particularly stunning in autumn. The trail did not disappoint me on Thursday. As soon as I entered its golden canopy of trees, I felt like I could breathe again. The craziness of the past forty-eight hours faded away and I recovered my faith in the goodness of our world and God's loving providence. Writer Parker Palmer says, "he's drawn to trees because of the way they slowly and quietly cycle through the seasons 'as though nothing had happened' while our individual and collective lives whirl madly around them. Contemplating a tree with more than a few years on it helps him regain perspective on the events of life — the good stuff and the hard stuff — that can too easily inflate beyond their true importance in the scheme of things."

In the Bible, trees are there from start to finish. In the beginning, God said let there be a world filled with light and dark. Let there be earth and sky and land. And right in the center of it all, let there be trees. God then gave the trees to all the beasts, and all the birds, and all the creatures that move along the ground. The trees were a gift from our loving Creator for the flourishing of life. In his book Reforesting our Faith, Dr. Matthew Sleeth offers this reflection: "With the exception of God and people, the Bible mentions trees more than any other living thing." "One of the reasons I believe God blazed a tree by every important character and event in scripture is because of trees' nearly universal presence. There are trees in virtually every place that humans live on the planet." "If I had to pick one subject other than Jesus to corroborate the inspired origin of the Bible, I'd pick trees. Why? Because while the Bible was written by many people over numerous centuries, the consistent use of trees throughout points us to one author." "

A year after hurricane Katrina struck the gulf coast a group of us from my church in Connecticut headed to Mississippi to help in the rebuilding efforts. Even after all that time, the devastation was overwhelming. One day we took a break from our work to visit the legendary Friendship Oak, a tree that had been a sapling at the time that Christopher Columbus first visited the New World; and it was still standing after centuries of storms. According to legend, all who enter together the shade of its branches remain connected for life. In the aftermath of Katrina, it had become a site of sacred pilgrimage. Groups gathered under its branches to pray, sing, mourn and pause amid the tireless work at hand. This Oak embodied the words we pray together at God's eucharistic table: All you create is a sign of hope for the journey.

Trees are everywhere in our stories and in God's story. They are symbols of the existence of life itself, aptly so since they are the longest living organisms on earth. Their longevity gives us an image of the enduring nature of God's creative and restorative love for the world. Even after leaves fall to the ground in autumn, even after raging fires consume a forest, or storms damage their branches, trees find a way to live on. Out of the cut stumps and smoldering ashes, God patiently nurtures life. From them we know that new growth will emerge. Buds will blossom and birds will once more make nests in their branches.

To be followers of Jesus, the Word made flesh, is to walk with him back into God's garden. It is to be with our loving Creator in the cool of the day, and to sit beneath the tree of life, enjoying its abundance. It is to return to that the source of grace and to know that within ourselves, within our own DNA resides that same goodness. Just as Holy Scriptures begins with the image of a tree, it ends with one. When we arrive at Revelation's final chapter, we hear of a new city: "In the midst of its streets and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve different kinds of fruit, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of this tree were for the healing of the nations." God's beautiful tree of life reappears to heal us. The healing of our hearts. The healing of the heart of our own nation and of all nations.

As the writer of Chronicles delightfully proclaims,  
*Let the earth be glad;*  
*Let the sea resound, and all that is in it;*

*let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them!  
Let the trees of the forest sing,  
let them sing for joy before the Lord!*

*Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;  
his love endures forever.*

After a difficult and challenging week amid a terribly difficult and challenging year, what the trees and fields and seas reveal to us is that no matter how we humans mess things up, God's love for us endures. God's belief in us endures. God's beauty endures. And God's creation will tell of God's promises for generations to come.

Poet Mary Oliver is one of my favorite evangelists of the good news told through the splendor of creation. Many daily distractions, small and great, can take us far away from whom we really are, from that core of goodness we were created to embody. In her poetry, Mary Oliver invites us to linger among the trees and recover these feelings of hope and joy we carry with us, - to allow the grace, light, and connection that is available all around to flow through us, and to heal our world.

*"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." Amen.