

Where Does the Temple End?

March 5, 2018

Psalm 19 John 2:13-22

Third Sunday in Lent

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In the poem that I read as our Call to Worship this morning, Mary Oliver asks us a question with the poem's title. The question she asks us is this: "Where Does the Temple Begin, Where Does the Temple End?"

Now I can't say exactly what the poet had in mind when she titled her poem ... but I like to think that she had that same temple in mind that Jesus visits in our morning's gospel text ... this temple that those ancient Jews were told was the only place they could encounter the Holy ... through their sacrifice of animals ... this same Jerusalem temple that had been corrupted by human greed ... this temple where Jesus gets so angry in this morning's text ... that he drives out all the money changers with a whip of cords ... and says they have turned the temple into a marketplace.

That Temple is what I like to think Mary Oliver was thinking about when she titled her poem.

And if that's true ... that the poet had that fixed place in mind ... that temple in Jerusalem with all its rules about who could go where and what you had to do to ever have an experience of God ... then she proceeds in this poem to convince us that religious leaders don't control holy space ... that holy space doesn't begin and end at the doors of that Temple or any temple ... that that limited, walled in space that can be corrupted by human beings ... is not all we have ... not the only way to God. Rather ... the poem suggests that our true temple has no such fixed boundaries.

In her poem she insists that the Holy can also be found outside those Temple walls. She insists that the Holy can be found out there under the stars ... out there in the wind ... out there watching the tinsel-eyed fish and the unlooping snake ... out there where the boundaries are fluid.

That we can reach out to the idea of God all day long.

I have a friend in Fort Wayne, who, for many years, spent a month or so each fall with her husband in a cabin along the coast of northern Maine. And as she walked that coast line over those few weeks, she would pick up rocks. She would then bring those rocks back to Indiana ... and back to our shared book study group at Plymouth Church.

She would lay the rocks out on the floor of the room where we met ... and then invite us all of us present to take the rock that "spoke" to us. And so we would all sit there for a time and "listen" ... and then ... eventually ... each of us would take a rock.

My friend had very definite feelings about these rocks ... that they did indeed speak a word to those

who needed to hear from them ... and she received this learning from a Native American shamanic practice called “rock seeing” ... where a person chooses a rock that draws his or her attention ... and then sits with the rock and begin to see shapes and symbols ... little creatures and living things in the crevasses, markings, pits and shadings of the rock ... until the person gets a feeling or a thought from the rock ... that wasn’t there before.

From both my friend’s perspective ... and from the perspective of the Native American practice ... we literally can become aware of what the natural world has to say to us.

Like the contemporary poet Mary Oliver ... the ancient poet who wrote what we call Psalm 19 shares a similar perspective.

Hear again the Psalm that Marj read for us just a few moments ago ... in a bit more modern language:

The universe bounds with the energy of God; it is invisible and you can see it everywhere. It hums and grows at a billion tireless kilometers an hour; it sings and dances itself bigger a million miles a day. Without words it spins out the great story; without lyrics it writes the great universal song ... everywhere God is telling the story.

It was Origen ... one of the fathers of our faith ... who said, “Nature is the primal scripture.” And if that sounds familiar ... it should ... because that was the theme for our first sabbatical time in 2006 ... and in my own lived experience of God ... I have found that deeply true.

Because for me ... and I know for many of you ... nature certainly does speak ... nature certainly does offer a timeless, universal experience of God. There is no doubt that time spent in nature ... time spent listening to nature ... is one way of recognizing that we’re part of something greater than ourselves ... especially when we find our place and rhythm within the order God provides ... when we feel amazement at how all this unfolds in the grand and sweeping vision of the Creator God.

So on this third Sunday of Lent ... the poetry of both this ancient psalmist and of Mary Oliver challenge us to feel wonder ... to feel awe ... to be amazed at all God has created.

And so perhaps this week we can spend some time outside in nature ... pondering how wonder and awe might lead us to repentance this Lenten season. How wonder and awe might move us from a desire to consume towards gratitude ... might move us from grasping to letting go ... might move us from our old way of living to a new way of living ... one that more closely aligns our lives with the life of God ... moving us from living the narrative of this world ... to living the narrative of God’s world.

That wonder and awe can be an entry point into deeper spiritual growth ... the majestic realities of outer space preparing us to encounter the majestic realities of inner space.

So ... can we be still long enough to hear the song of creation ... the proclamation of the sun and

stars? Do we join, at least with our heart, in the song of praise ... wordless but full of power? Because as the psalmist says this morning ... even if human beings forget the source of life and all good gifts ... even if human beings desecrate the temple ... creation itself does not forget.

In an interview in *The Sun* magazine, the author, philosopher and professor, Jacob Needleman, says that it is in leaving behind our preoccupation with self that we can open up our lives to the living God ... not God as a judgmental deity watching us from a distant throne in the sky ... not God on a throne sitting in a temple ... but the God who is present with us everywhere ... the God within whom we live and move and have our being.

Needleman describes his first recognition of the holy ... on a starry night when he was 8 years old. He and his father sat looking up at a wondrous night sky. He said, "I was stunned by what I saw ... there were a million stars ... the whole sky was filled ... and my father simply said, 'That is God.'"

Needleman says the college students he works with often ask questions like: What is it all about? Why are we here? What are we doing? Is there something else we're meant to be doing? ... the big questions ... he says ... that every human being thinks about sooner or later.

And he suggests that just like the mind can barely comprehend a billion galaxies in outer space ... so the mind is incapable of answering such questions ... cannot answer these deep questions of the heart. The answers lie in a deep *feeling* that shows us what meaning is ... that gives us the *experience* of God rather than merely a belief in God.

He believes that too often organized religion ... in other words the church ... keeps us at the believing level ... and keeps us asleep to the living God.

And so it's no wonder Needleman says that the proof for the existence of God ... is the existence of people who are inhabited by and who manifest God ... in other words people who ... filled with the God of creation ... "hum and grow, sing and dance ... people who spin out God's story" ... with their lives.

Without deep experiences of the Holy ... these deep feelings of God that the psalmist and the poet express this morning ... Needleman says we are likely to suffer from a fundamental sense of meaninglessness in our lives.

And I don't think it's a stretch to say that such meaninglessness ... such soul sickness ... leads to so much of the brokenness in our world.

So ... get out there in God's creation this week ... allow the awe and wonder you find there to heal your soul ... let the God that is as close your own breath ... encounter you.

Hear again those words of Mary Oliver:

Where Does the Temple Begin, Where Does It End? By Mary Oliver

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.

And it can keep you as busy as anything else, and happier.

The snake slides away; the fish jumps, like a little lily,
out of the water and back in; the goldfinches sing
from the unreachable top of the tree.

I look; morning to night I am never done with looking.

Looking I mean not just standing around, but standing around
as though with your arms open.

And thinking: maybe something will come, some
shining coil of wind,
or a few leaves from any old tree—
they are all in this too.

And now I will tell you the truth.
Everything in the world
comes.

At least, closer.

And, cordially.

Like the nibbling, tinsel-eyed fish; the unlooping snake.
Like goldfinches, little dolls of gold fluttering around the corner of the sky
of God, the blue air.