

Year C, Epiphany 4, 2/3/2103  
Luke 2:22-40, the presentation of Jesus in the Temple  
Poetry, A Response to Seeing God.  
Rev. Laura Ruth Jarrett  
Hope Central Church on the day of Annual Meeting

Hear this poem by Hafiz, a 14<sup>th</sup> century Sufi mystic poet, who loved the same God we love, the One God.

Wherever  
God lays his glance  
Life starts  
Clapping.

The myriad  
Creatures grab their instruments  
And join the  
Song.

Please, will you pray with me?

It doesn't say so in the book of Luke, but probably, eight days after Jesus was born, Joseph brought him Jesus to the temple for the bris or maybe the bris, the circumcision, happened at home. Maybe Joseph laid Jesus in the lap of his grandfather in the Elijah chair, and then there was the blessing of the cup of wine, of which the boy was given just a drop, and then Jesus was given his name.

Joseph came to the temple again, this time with Mary, 31 days later to redeem their first born from God. For after the tribes of Israel stopped sacrificing their first born sons on behalf of the tribe, starting with Abraham and his son Isaac, the first born was instead given to God. The first born could be redeemed, bought from God or traded for with God with a lamb and a pigeon. But if the family was poor, a second pigeon could replace the lamb. They weren't rich enough, Mary and Joseph, but they brought Jesus to the temple anyway.

After 40 days after the birth of Jesus, the number of days a woman had to wait to be clean, to be able to enter the temple, Mary and Joseph, poor as they were brought two pigeons to be sacrificed so to redeem their son from God.

But there, because the Holy Spirit led him there, was Simeon, a man who was righteous, that is, just, that is, he did works of justice as required by Torah and by Judaism as it was practiced then and as it is now still practiced. He practiced also, prayer, for the coming of God's Messiah. To him it was revealed that he would not die until he had seen God's Messiah.

The response of Simeon to seeing this poor child in whom there was a messiah, was poetry, a poem prayer so familiar to us who love the bedtime service of compline - so familiar to us who have been to funerals:

Lord, you now have set your servant free \*  
to go in peace as you have promised;

For these eyes of mine have seen the Savior, \*  
whom you have prepared for all the world to see:

A Light to enlighten the nations, \*  
and the glory of your people Israel.

This beautiful poem, the poem of release because God has been seen, is a complete and holy response to the presence of God.

The way it is reported in Luke, it is as if Simeon spontaneously came up with beautiful language, perhaps even more beautiful in his original tongue Hebrew or Aramaic. But I wonder if he, like all poets and preachers, had been rolling those words around in his mouth or if he had ink stained fingers and blotted paper, sculpting words and heart to prepare for the realization of the promise, that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. Wouldn't we want to have prepared some beautiful words in case we see God?

Oh, I think in fact, that preparation is so necessary to see God. It's not that God can't appear in any place or time, or that we are too thick or dull to notice, but I think, maybe we might be too busy or numb to notice. Simeon, it is said belonged to "Quiet in the Land" a group who did just acts, perhaps caring for the poor, feeding the hungry, seeing to the orphan and the widow. As a practice of this group, he prayed for the coming of the Messiah.\* Maybe, if Simeon hadn't been practiced noticing the holy spirit leading him to the temple, or if he hadn't been noticing that God might reveal herself in children, he might have been too busy checking his email instead. (\*Jerry Goebel: 2005  
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Maybe Simeon wanted what the poet Mary Oliver wants:

Every morning I want to kneel down on the golden  
cloth of the sand and say  
some kind of musical thanks for  
the world that is happening again—another day—  
from the shawl of wind coming out of the  
west to the firm green  
flesh of the melon lately sliced open and  
eaten, its chill and ample body  
flavored with mercy. I want  
to be worthy of—what? Glory? Yes, unimaginable glory.  
O Lord of melons, of mercy, though I am  
not ready, nor worthy, I am climbing toward you. (a fragment of "Climbing Toward You.")

And what of Anna, the prophetess in our story? She, widowed after 7 years of marriage, spent the rest of her life in the temple, never leaving, fasting and praying. She too, picked Jesus out of what may have been throngs of diaper drooping hungry babies. At 84 years old, she saw God in the baby of Mary, the adopted son of Joseph.

“At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.”

Of these two, Simeon and Anna, hang the responsibility of the sightings of Jesus as Messiah, for the Jews and the Gentiles. A perhaps unwitting Mary and Joseph brought their first child to temple, to be then recognized as the parents of the long awaited Messiah.

But for me, the more compelling than the sighting of the Messiah is the teaching that if we want to recognize God, we get the pleasure and opportunity of practicing noticing in anticipation of seeing God.

Mary Oliver writes,

My work is loving the world.  
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird —  
equal seekers of sweetness.  
Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.  
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.

Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?  
Am I no longer young, and still not half-perfect? Let me  
keep my mind on what matters,  
which is my work,

which is mostly standing still and learning to be  
astonished.  
The phoebe, the delphinium.  
The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.  
Which is mostly rejoicing, since all ingredients are here,

which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart  
and these body-clothes,  
a mouth with which to give shouts of joy  
to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy dug-up clam,  
telling them all, over and over, how it is  
that we live forever.  
("Messenger")

Our job is to put our hands to the work that will open the eyes of our eyes to see God. That is the work of our church, to do whatever we can do to prepare ourselves to see God.

Some preparations might seem mundane to some, but to others, the making of a budget is poetry, a way to see God. The compiling of an annual report recounting the work of the In-care Team or the Called to Care team is holy work. For some, the preparation for seeing God is taking bags of groceries to one who is hungry because one can't bear the memory of hunger, and for others, it is to receive the groceries so that the providers of groceries may feel the glorious fulfillment of being of use.

Marge Piercy writes,

The people I love the best  
jump into work head first  
without dallying in the shallows  
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight. . .

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,  
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,  
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,  
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge  
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest  
and work in a row and pass the bags along,  
who stand in the line and haul in their places,  
who are not parlor generals and field deserters  
but move in a common rhythm  
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.  
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.  
But the thing worth doing well done  
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident. . .

The pitcher cries for water to carry  
and a person for work that is real. (two fragments from "To Be of Use," from *The Moon is Always Female*)

It is necessarily that we do our work, but it is important how we do our work to prepare to see God. Mary Oliver writes,

That time  
I thought I could not  
go any closer to grief  
without dying

I went closer,  
and I did not die.  
Surely God  
had His hands in this,

as well as friends.  
Still, I was bent  
and my laughter,  
as the poet said,

was nowhere to be found.  
Then said my friend Daniel  
(brave even among lions),  
"It's not the weight you carry

but how you carry it -  
books, bricks, grief -  
it's all in the way  
you embrace it, balance it, carry it

when you cannot and would not,  
put it down."  
So I went practicing.  
Have you noticed?

Have you heard  
the laughter  
that comes, now and again,  
out of my startled mouth?

How I linger  
to admire, admire, admire  
the things of this world  
that are kind, and maybe

also troubled -  
roses in the wind,

the sea geese on the steep waves,  
a love  
to which there is no reply?  
("Heavy")

And finally, all our work preparing to see God, should prepare us to be poets in God's presence, or dancers, or singers, Sunday School teachers, or lovers, or budget makers, all tilting toward health, strength, resilience. We don't want to be in a fit of resentment, too busy with our email or drunk or too frightened to see when the Messiah appears on the arms of his mom and his dad, and their little cage of pigeons. We may want to have rolled some words around in our mouths or have some ink stained fingers and blotted paper so we have a way to say, come in, come in. Mary Oliver writes,

Dear Lord, I have swept and I have washed but  
still nothing is as shining as it should be  
for you. Under the sink, for example, is an  
uproar of mice—it is the season of their  
many children. What shall I do? And under the eaves  
and through the walls the squirrels  
have gnawed their ragged entrances—but it is the season  
when they need shelter, so what shall I do? And  
the raccoon limps into the kitchen and opens the cupboard  
while the dog snores, the cat hugs the pillow;  
what shall I do? Beautiful is the new snow falling  
in the yard and the fox who is staring boldly  
up the path, to the door. And still I believe you will  
come, Lord: you will, when I speak to the fox  
the sparrow, the lost dog, the shivering sea-goose, know  
that really I am speaking to you whenever I say,  
as I do all morning and afternoon: Come in, Come in.  
("Making the House Ready for the Lord")

*All Mary Oliver poems in the sermon are from Thirst, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 2006*

For the invitation to the Eucharist

“The Vast Ocean Begins Just Outside Our Church: The Eucharist” Mary Oliver

Something has happened  
to the bread  
and the wine.  
They have been blessed.  
What now?  
The body leans forward  
to receive the gift  
from the priest's hand,  
then the chalice.  
They are something else now  
from what they were  
before this began.  
I want  
to see Jesus,  
maybe in the clouds

or on the shore,  
just walking,  
beautiful man  
and clearly  
someone else  
besides.  
On the hard days  
I ask myself  
if I ever will.  
Also there are times  
my body whispers to me  
that I have.