

Reconnecting with Light
I Peter 2.1-9, Psalm 27, Matthew 10.24-27
June 25, 2017
Pentecost +3A
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott
St. Charles Ave. Baptist Church

Our scripture declares today: You have been called out of darkness and into the marvelous light of God. The Lord is light and salvation, the kind of light that chases fear away. To look on the face of this Light is to know beauty and to see goodness. These are truths to proclaim in the light and shout from the rooftops. We are chasing after something, you and I. Chasing after a metaphor, chasing after truth, chasing after a way of knowing what is real and what is not, chasing after our best selves, chasing after the thread that stitches us all together as one.

It's week four in our summer series on Reconnecting—inspired by John Philip Newell's 2014 book, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings*. His suggestions for our future health and wholeness honor the continuum between practices of being and doing, practices honoring the individual's journey as well as the journey of the broader faith community.

Remember our guiding questions each week: "what is trying to be born that requires a radical reorientation of our vision. What is the new thing that is trying to emerge from deep within us and from deep within the collective soul of Christianity?" and "what is it that we need to let go of to prepare the way for the new birthing [of the church]?"¹

As with each chapter, Newell points us toward modern-day prophets who will help us explore dimensions of these guiding questions, and today he guides us toward the work of Mary Oliver calling her "one of the great prophets of Light in our modern world." That is how we know he is a friend! He tells us our story in poems. We know the poetry of our scripture is already doing the same: Light that chases fear away, the face of God (who is Light itself) showing us beauty and goodness. These words today must be lived and cannot be pinned down. Metaphor and poetry need our attention if they are to be heard, and they slow down our listening if we are to hear their messages rightly.

¹ Newell, p. xi

You may recall poet Marie Howe's observation, "poetry holds what can't be said. It can't be paraphrased. It can't be translated. The great poetry I love holds the mystery of being alive. It holds a kind of basket of words that feels inevitable." Today is a day for baskets of words as we explore together the mystery of being alive. More specifically, we are exploring the mystery of Light as the source of all things as we read in John's gospel, chapter 1:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

"One of the features of the rebirthing of God," writes Newell, "is reconnecting with the Light. It is the Light at the heart of every newborn child. It is the Light at the heart of all life."² This light enlightens everyone and has come into the world through holy mystery.

"The Sun" by Mary Oliver

Have you ever seen
anything
in your life
more wonderful

than the way the sun,
every evening,
relaxed and easy,
floats toward the horizon

and into the clouds or the hills,
or the ruffled sea,
and is gone—

² John Philip Newell, *The Rebirthing of God*, chapter 3, p. 29

and how it slides again

out of the blackness,
every morning,
on the other side of the world,
like a red flower

streaming upward on its heavenly oils,
say, on a morning in early summer,
at its perfect imperial distance—
and have you ever felt for anything
such wild love—
do you think there is anywhere, in any language,
a word billowing enough
for the pleasure

that fills you,
as the sun
reaches out,
as it warms you

as you stand there,
empty-handed—
or have you too
turned from this world—

or have you too
gone crazy
for power,
for things?

If we release our distraction for power and for things, for certainty and exclusivity, then we know this moment Oliver describes. We know these moments of seeing; a kind of holy lostness when we briefly, fleetingly grasp what matters most, regardless of circumstances. Newell points us toward Jacob's story in Genesis 28. His mother has sent him into exile to protect him. On his last night before entering "a new land, filled with uncertainty, he [is] visited by an angel, and he [dreams] of messengers of light ascending and descending all around him. When he [awakens] from sleep, he [says], "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it...This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

Newell reminds us what the Celtic world says of these moments of awakening and awareness. "In the Celtic world that gateway is present everywhere. In every place is the immediacy of heaven. In every moment we can glimpse the Light that was in the beginning and from which all things have come. As Oliver says, 'The threshold is always near.' We can step over this threshold and back again in the fleeting span of a second. In a single step, we can find ourselves momentarily in that other world, the world of eternal Light, which is woven inseparably through this world—the world of matter that is forever unfolding like a river in flow."³

Celtic spirituality names these spots *thin spaces*—and we love to return to them. The places in which time stands still. The places in which we feel most fully ourselves and most fully alive. The places in which we do not have to fill the air with our chatter but can become truly and deeply still by the comfort and power of the place. I think this sanctuary is a thin place. The way the old, dark wood creaks and speaks. The way the light shines through the clear glass of the 2nd and 3rd floor windows. The way we are still together—hearing only the sound of breath and wind and whatever passes by. We need these thin places in which "'the threshold is always near'...so that when we return to the demanding and conflicted places of our lives and our world we do so with open eyes that have been refreshed." Though the places are not "an end in [themselves... they inspire] the work of transformation."⁴

Newell is calling us to cultivate practices of stillness and being in order for the work of transformation to happen. Before there can be a whole-hearted pursuit of social justice, there must be internal stillness. Before we can know as individuals or as a people what turn we will take next, there must be a quiet knowing and certainty and observing. Call this mindfulness. Call this walking meditation. Call this prayer. Call this, as Mary Oliver does, "standing still and learning to be astonished." These ways of seeing and being in the world are necessary for our humanity. Standing in the Light of God is our salvation.

"Praying" by Mary Oliver

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch

³ Jacob story and Celtic world: Newell, chapter 3, p. 32

⁴ Newell, p. 35 describing a specific place of worship in India—the Matrimandir in Auroville.

a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

“What she is describing is a movement from awareness into open-eyed wonder, and from awe to prayer, and from prayer to adoration.” Being seers and gatherers of Light is a calling on all of our lives, and we must cultivate practices to better enable us to access the Divine presence in our world. We must remember that the goal is not just that we see and name and gather Light so we feel better or find some personal comfort. Even worse, the goal is not that we gather it and then gloat that we found it and it's ours and now we hold onto it in here better than anyone else holds onto it somewhere else. The goal is that we see and name and gather Light and then begin to bear that light—to shine with that light. The gospels tell us of a time that Christ was transfigured by the Light—fully changed and overcome with the brilliance of God's presence. We are called into this. How does that old camp song go? *This little light of mine...I'm gonna...* You see, to bear light is to shine. To pray and meditate and draw near the presence of God will absolutely and necessarily inspire particular kinds of action in the world. But let's not move too quickly to action and doing, though we do like it there. We like the planning and the acting and the reacting. Perhaps harder for is the place of noticing and being. This is interior work. This is tending the rooms deep within us that most cannot see. Stay here with me.

Think of the place or places that make you feel closest to the Light. What is your place? Imagine yourself there now. In a month's time, I will have my toes in the sand as I stare into the waves of my childhood and get lost in their sound. Quite often, I find an open bench in Audubon Park beneath that very best stretch of live oaks, and I savor the stillness and quiet and let it work its way into my bones. Mary Oliver is surely with me when it comes to the way the trees speak.

“When I Am Among the Trees” by Mary Oliver

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."

There is a flow of noticing, naming, shining, being. We observe, we find, we are changed, we must move in this world in particular ways because of what we have observed and found and how we have been changed. In our practice, we will continue to be swept up into this flow over and over again. To that point, Celtic prophet John Eriugena observes the root word for "the Greek noun for God, *theos*...is the Greek verb *theo*, which means to run or flow." Exploring that word play, Newell adds, "God is the Light that flows through all things. It is like a subterranean river running deep in the folds of the universe. Without it there would be no life." Our work and our practice, then, says Scottish poet Kenneth White, "is not just to look at the flow, not merely analyze it, but know that we are part of it and dive more deeply into it."

The places of connection (where we pray, where we notice, where we come alive) speak to us again of our of-God-ness, as we talked about a couple of weeks ago. And the sacred spaces, particularly those of nature, speak to us again of the of-God-ness that is in all of creation, not just the human part. Reconnecting with Light is reconnecting with the sacredness of ourselves and of everything else. Newell writes, "[This practice] means knowing that we have a sibling relationship with everything that exists and that the Light that we glimpse in the trees, in the creatures, in the eyes of another, is the Light that is also within us. Do we know that we are bearers of this unspeakably beautiful Light? Do we know that this Light at the heart of our being is for one another and for the world?"⁵

⁵ Newell, p. 38

We do this work not just for ourselves but for one another. We chase after the Light of God for the beauty and goodness of the world. Before we act, before we rise up, before we plan, we must be amazed. We must see what is beautiful and good. We must give thanks for it and let it work its way into our beings. We must shine with the essence of God that is already within us from that first creation blessing. We give ourselves to this practice so that when our lives come to an end, we can say along with Mary Oliver,

excerpt from "When Death Comes" by Mary Oliver

When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse

to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;

...

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world

When it's over, I want to say all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

My friends, You have been called out of darkness and into the marvelous light of God. The Lord is light and salvation, the kind of light that chases fear away. May you look on the face of this Light and know beauty and see goodness. May you know your own beauty and your own goodness. May you know the beauty and goodness of the world. May you know the beauty and goodness of others. May you know the beauty and goodness of God. May you shine, utterly transfigured by this encounters. May you proclaim what you have seen and known in the light and from the rooftops. May this be our prayer and our Way. Amen.