

Prayers of nature, nature of prayers

- Friends, our psalm this morning is one that rejoices in all the earth singing prayerful praise to God
 - We pray in song, and so too do the heavens rejoice, and the earth is glad, and the sea and all that is in it resounds, and the fields and trees are jubilant
 - “Let all creation rejoice before the Lord,” the psalmist sings
- I thought this psalm might open the door for us to continue the journey we started last week of exploring our sacred relationships with nature—what nature is, and what nature is for us, from a spiritual perspective
 - We might recall from last week how a first step towards building our love for nature might simply be paying attention to nature, in its specifics and particulars around us, paying attention with focus, care, and love
 - We considered the words of Simone Weil, who said that “absolute attention is prayer”
 - This week, I thought we might explore this idea of prayerfully paying attention to nature
 - And so we’ll consider today just how attending to nature might fit within our notions of “prayer,” and we’ll also look to a few short nature-focused poems to see how these prayerful encounters with nature might take shape
- So, what of that first question—how does paying attention to nature fit within our wider experience of prayer?
 - A couple months ago we delved into what exactly prayer is, and we might recall starting with some definitions of prayer that seemed

true in themselves, but not entirely descriptive of all that prayer can be for us

- Those were definitions of prayer like “a petition or request made to God,” or “our communication with God,” or quite simply “talking with God”
- Back in March, we considered the fulness of another definition of prayer, one coming from Wikipedia of all places, which describes prayer as:
 - “an invocation or act that seeks to activate a rapport with the object of worship through deliberate communication”
 - We thought about the nature of “rapport” as a close and harmonious relationship of communicating well and mutually understanding feelings or ideas
 - When we pray, we’re not just communicating with God, we’re also learning how to communicate well with God
 - Our practice of prayer helps us both to better express ourselves to God and to better listen to God
- Those moments when we pay attention deeply to nature, perhaps those are indeed times when we develop that sort of rapport with God, moments when we get ourselves more in-tune and harmonizing with God
 - Those times of feeling at peace in nature, or in awe of nature, or rejoicing in nature—those moments might just nurture our living relationship with the divine
- I thought we might consider together a few poems that explore this sort of prayerful way of focusing attention on nature, as poetry might be the closest we can approach in words that special sort of connection found with nature

- I thought we might look briefly at three poems by three different poets, each providing us with a slightly different perspective
- First, I thought we might hear together Mary Oliver’s short poem, “Praying”
 - *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*

 - 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.*
- Mary Oliver here draws our attention to the very sort of prayerful state of mind that our attention to nature can provide:
 - We pay attention to nature, start letting the words flow, and then we find we’ve entered the “doorway into thanks,” encountering the “silence in which another voice may speak”
 - Our focused wonder and awe in nature leads to overflowing thanks and gratitude for such blessings of beauty—and leads us into that prayerful rapport when we might hear the whispered voice of Spirit in our hearts
- Mary Oliver points out how we tend to seek the grand and majestic—whether in the parts of nature we focus on, or the words of prayer we start to form

- But she points out that even the most humble flourishing of life reflects the wondrous mystery of nature's beauty and sacredness
- And our most humble words, they're more than sufficient to nurture that harmonious rapport with the divine
- The simplest glimpse of nature can draw us into a sacred reverie, and the simplest words of prayer can draw us near to God
 - It's not a contest, Oliver says, but a doorway
- The second poem I thought we might hear this morning was written by Wendell Berry, and is called "The Peace of Wild Things"
 - *When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*
 - What's the journey that Wendell Berry describes here?
 - Well, the voice of the poem begins in a place of worry and despair, fearing for what the future may hold
 - Then, that narrator goes to lie down at the banks of water where drakes and herons reside, the narrator goes into nature

- The narrator experiences what Berry calls “the peace of wild things,” and is reminded that the natural world is filled with life that flourishes despite not taxing themselves with worries for the future and anxieties about what will come
- And in that reverie, the narrator experiences grace and freedom
- That journey of the poem, it all sounds a bit familiar, doesn't it?
 - Indeed, it echoes the passage in Matthew chapter 6 in which Jesus tells us to “behold the birds of the heavens” and to “consider the lilies of the field,” and to learn from their example of being provided for despite not worrying about the future
 - Wendell Berry's poem here describes what it might be like to actually live out Jesus's teaching there, to feel and experience the truth of what Jesus says to us
 - It reminds of something another poet, Emily Dickinson, wrote in a letter to a friend:
 - Dickinson said, that's the only commandment I could ever be sure to always obey—“consider the lilies”
 - Perhaps when Jesus says to us from Matthew chapter 6, “behold the birds of the heavens” and “consider the lilies of the field,” he doesn't just mean “think about them;” perhaps he means for us to go out, look around us, and witness the birds and flowers—and to experience first-hand the prayerful reminders to let go of worry and anxieties for the future
- The third and last poem I thought we might consider this morning is Marilyn Chandler McEntyre's, “Olive Trees,” which reads:

- *If the sun came closer,
everything would burn.
Each tree is an act of courage,
holding its own, making peace
with the heat and dry ground,
forbearing while mountains,
not yet made low, rise like
monuments to what may be borne.*

*God, who burned in bush and pillar,
watches still from behind a veil of fire,
burns away, and scatters in harsh
and unavoidable blessing. Under its heat
the small fruit grow, are plucked and brought
to vinegar and salt. Immolation
brings forth. Taste and see.*

- McEntyre's poem revels in the wonders of nature, the literal and metaphorical fruits of God's love and presence
- McEntyre describes the active, burning presence of God at play in nature, seeing the flourishing of life as responding to the ongoing creative Spirit, the breath of life in all life
 - The sun shining down on us providing nourishment to the olive trees that live in dynamic harmony with their environments
 - Those trees that, from harsh soils, bear precious fruits
 - The immanence of all this wonder, that we can just reach out and touch it
- McEntyre's encounter with nature awakens prayers of glory and wonder, prayers of rejoicing hallelujahs

- And so we might wonder together, what have our own encounters with nature awakened within us?
 - Have we, like Mary Oliver, stepped through the doorway into thanks, and felt the silence in which another voice might speak?
 - Have we, like Wendell Berry, sought solace in nature and felt our worries and anxieties melt away, as we experience just how deeply God loves and provides for all of God's children?
 - Have we, like Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, simply marveled in wonder and awe at the miracles of life around us and the presence of Spirit they reflect?
 - Where have our encounters with nature led us before—and where will they take us ahead?
 - How might we seek out these sorts of encounters with nature, this week, this afternoon even?
 - Perhaps we might each seek out an encounter with nature today and see where those moments of prayerful attention might lead
- For now friends, let us pray
 - Let us pray with gratitude for the wonders of this world we live in and the nature that flourishes all around us
 - Help us to open ourselves to prayerful encounters with nature, O God, so that we might enter into that nature-grounded space of prayer
 - Let us pay attention deeply to nature, entering into prayer and tuning into our harmonious relationships and rapport with you, O God
 - May we be ever moved by the simple wonders of nature around us, and may we be ever moved closer to You—amen