

“Washing the Dust of Everyday Life from our Souls”

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Job 38:1-7, 34-41; Mary Oliver, “Mysteries, Yes”; Mark 10:35-45

There was a little bit of a garden next to the driveway at the house where we lived in Kalamazoo that was kind of funny. Several years ago, in the fall, a friend stopped by to say hello, and mentioned that she was trying to get rid of some perennials that a local nursery had given her. Could we use any, she wondered? She brought out a box of mostly dead-looking plants, and plopped them down on the driveway before I could say “no.”

The plants sat beside the driveway for a good while, looking very dead. But after a time I got to feeling sorry for them, and figured, what the heck, I’ll put them in this small little garden, and see what would come up the next spring. There was no thoughtful planting done in this garden. No research about color or height or how much sun anything needed. I simply dug a bunch of holes, stuffed the dead plants in, and forgot about them.

I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that the plants weren’t actually dead, but each year I would marvel at this odd little garden and its funny conglomeration of flowers. And each year I would do virtually nothing to it. Except for an iris, some asters, some sedum and some lavender, I have no idea what any of the plants were. All I know is that the garden was beautiful, and somehow, everything seemed to get along.

I was reminded about this tiny little speck of God’s creation, when I recently went to a place called “Grounds For Sculpture,” down by Princeton. Have any of you been there? It’s a sculpture “garden” in the best sense of that word. It is 40+ acres of land that used to be the site of the New Jersey State Fair. It retains some of the buildings from the state fair days—the “Domestic Arts” building and the “Motor Exhibits” building—but what makes it truly spectacular, or did on the spectacularly gorgeous fall day that I was there, in addition to the 270-odd pieces of impressive sculpture, some of which amuse, others of which amaze, and yet others of which invite deep thought—was the beautifully landscaped grounds.

The beautifully landscaped grounds at Grounds For Sculpture, bear absolutely NO resemblance to my funky, yet beautiful little garden. They may include some of the same flowers, but that’s where any comparison ends. At Grounds For Sculpture, a team of people who know what they are doing has spent thousands of hours designing and maintaining the most incredible natural

complement to the sculptures. By contrast, I spent about ten minutes plugging seemingly dead twigs into the ground in completely random order. And yet, each garden—my 15 square foot one and their forty acre one—is remarkably beautiful, in its own, subjective kind of way. (On the other hand, thousands of people didn’t visit mine every year, either!)

But here’s what struck me as I strolled the sculpture garden grounds, camera in hand, surrounded by beauty on so many levels, recently: there are a finite number of words in the world, and yet, year after year, generation after generation, people are able to put them together in different orders and different ways, and they create beautiful, new poetry; there are a finite number of mediums in the world, and yet, year after year, generation after generation, people are able to put them together in different orders and different ways, and they create beautiful, new art and sculpture; there are a finite number of musical notes in the world, and yet, year after year, generation after generation, people are able to put them together in different orders and different ways, and they create beautiful, new music; there are a finite number of kinds of trees and plants in the world, and yet, year after year, generation after generation, people are able to put them together in different orders and different ways, and they create beautiful new gardens, like the one I just saw. I could go on with this, but I think you get the point—how can we not marvel at the infinite capacity the world has for beauty! And not surprisingly, I believe it is *all* a gift from God.

It’s kind of funny, but being outside, on a beautiful day, in a beautiful place, with beautiful art and beautiful nature, and well, I could not help but feel the awesome power of something holy. Do you know that feeling? If it’s true, as Picasso is reported to have said, that “art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life,” the combination of the art and being in the midst of creation left me with a very clean soul that day!

So it occurred to me that maybe, just maybe, it was OK to preach a sermon, during this creation season, not about the perils of climate change, but about the beauty of creation! That’s when I scrapped my plan for this sermon and decided to invite you to think about beauty, and where and how you experience it.

So go to that place for a minute—the place in God’s creation that makes your heart sing. Can you describe it? Or is it a feeling? What does it smell like? Can you touch it? Stay there for a minute. Inhale it. Enjoy it. Mary Oliver tells us that “we live with mysteries too marvelous to be understood.” Perhaps this is one of them for you? My response to so much of the beauty of creation, is pure awe.

Now let me bring you back here for just a minute. You know the story of Job, right?—we get only the smallest bit in our Hebrew scripture reading today. The poor guy has been through the mill—he knows suffering. His children have been killed, he’s had to deal with leprosy and boils, and he’s reduced to begging for survival. He sees a world that is cruel and dangerous, full of things that tear at his soul. He feels hopeless, and who can blame him? His world is framed by pain and suffering.

So in some ways, I suppose, God’s answer to Job (the part that we hear in today’s reading), seems a little odd. But in fact, I think what God is showing him, in the way the answer is given, is about hope and grace and beauty. Suffering and grief aren’t the whole story of our lives, even if it seems that way sometimes. The beauty of God’s creation stands as testimony to all that is good, the hope of each new day and the power of new life.

“Where were you when I created the earth? Who laid the cornerstone while all the choruses of morning stars sang and the heavenly court shouted for joy? Who instills the ibis with its prophetic wisdom? Where does the rooster pick up its intuition?” In the beauty of ordinary things—stars and birds—these are words of hope.

Anne Frank, in her *Diary of a Young Girl*, wrote about connecting with God in the simple beauty of creation: “The best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be quiet, alone with the heavens, nature and God. Because only then does one feel that all is as it should be and that God wishes to see people happy, amidst the simple beauty of nature. I firmly believe that nature brings solace in all troubles.”

Whether it’s a garden, a mountain, an ocean, a stream, a desert, there is hope and grace and beauty to be found there. May we, as Mary Oliver says, keep company always with those who say "Look!" and laugh in astonishment, and bow their heads.