

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
January 24, 2009

Today in our lectionary we get one of my favorite psalms. I particularly love the first six verses:

1 The heavens declare the glory of God, *
 and the firmament shows his handiwork.

2 One day tells its tale to another, *
 and one night imparts knowledge to another.

3 Although they have no words or language, *
 and their voices are not heard,

4 Their sound has gone out into all lands, *
 and their message to the ends of the world.

5 In the deep has he set a pavilion for the sun; *
 it comes forth like a bridegroom out of his chamber;
 it rejoices like a champion to run its course.

6 It goes forth from the uttermost edge of the heavens
 and runs about to the end of it again; *
 nothing is hidden from its burning heat.

If this passage had come up during the spring and summer when we were having our outdoor services, I would be inclined to skip my own preaching entirely and let us spend the sermon time looking up at the sky and listening as the heavens declare the glory of God.

This scripture passage reminds me of the passage in the play *As You Like It*. The Duke, who goes out into nature when he is unjustly exiled from the court, says, "Now my co-mates and brothers in exile, has not old custom made this life more sweet than that of painted pomp?... Sweet are the uses of adversity....This our life....finds tongues in trees, books in running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything" (II.i.1-3, 12, 15-17). It is a lovely image, to find sermons in stones, and good in everything.

Well, our sermon today will be preached by a person rather than a stone. But it will be a reminder to listen to the sermons of the stones, to listen to the heavens declaring

the glory of God. Now I know some people who talk about going outside instead of going to church on Sunday morning, and it will not surprise you that I am not a big fan of that. We can go beyond the “either-or” thinking to the “both-and” thinking. We can BOTH go to church on Sunday morning AND still have 166 hours of the week to go outside. And I often find that regular worship enriches my appreciation of creation during the rest of the week, and my appreciation of creation during the rest of the week enriches my worship on Sunday morning. In fact, one of my spiritual disciplines for this week will be this: every time I look up at the sky to say “the heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows his handiwork.” I’ll let you know next week how it goes, and if you want to try it yourself, whenever you look at the say, say “the heavens declare the glory of God,” and let me know how it goes in your life.

For today, we’ll focus on three ways in which the heavens declare the glory of God. The first is grandeur. We speak about the grandeur and glory of God, sometimes eloquently, but the times that we feel the grandeur and glory of God are often the times that we are in the presence of the majesty of creation, whether that’s on water or on land, on the ocean or on the mountaintop. Experiencing the grandeur of God is an opportunity to praise God. It is also an opportunity for getting our own worries in perspective. A tense conversation with a friend that used to seem so enormous does not seem so overwhelming when I am kayaking on the Rappahannock, or looking up at the stars. I get a reminder that the world is bigger than whatever happens to be bothering me at the moment, and that in itself can bring peace.

In the poem “Moon” Billy Collins writes

The moon is full tonight...
 It's as full as it was
 in that poem by Coleridge
 where he carries his year-old son
 into the orchard behind the cottage
 and turns the baby's face to the sky
 to see for the first time
 the earth's bright companion,

something amazing to make his crying seem small.

And if you wanted to follow this example,
tonight would be the night
to carry some tiny creature outside
and introduce him to the moon.

And if your house has no child,
you can always gather into your arms
the sleeping infant of yourself,
as I have done tonight,
and carry him outdoors,
all limp in his tattered blanket,
making sure to steady his lolling head
with the palm of your hand.

And while the wind ruffles the pear trees
in the corner of the orchard
and dark roses wave against a stone wall,
you can turn him on your shoulder
and walk in circles on the lawn
drunk with the light.
You can lift him up into the sky,
your eyes nearly as wide as his,
as the moon climbs high into the night.

Or, as Carole King and James Taylor sing, “When this old world starts getting me down, and people are just too much for me to take, I’ll climb way up to the top of the stairs, and all my cares just drift right into space”. But catchy as that tune is, there is more to it than that. Even more important, I get a reminder that God is bigger than whatever happens to be bothering me at the moment. As the old hymn puts it, “then sings my soul, my savior

God to thee, How great thou art, how great thou art! The sky is a wonderful representative of infinity for us earth-bound humans. There's a form of healthy humility that comes from being in the presence of the infinite. I went to the Israeli Holocaust Museum, Yad Vashem, while I was in Jerusalem. One of the most moving parts of the experience was watching the videotapes of Holocaust survivors. It is an amazing thing to survive the Holocaust physically, of course, and what is even more amazing is that there are some people whose compassion can survive the Holocaust. The man whose compassion had survived and remained radiant even when he was elderly, talked about the suffering he had endured, talked about caring for his father, and he also said this: "Every night, I prayed that God would grant me to see the sun one more time. When I saw the sun, I thanked God. And then, every morning, I prayed that God would grant me to see the stars one more time. When I saw the stars, I thanked God." This old rabbi seemed to be someone who, even in the severest adversity, drew strength and hope from his experience that the heavens proclaim the glory of God.

This is related to the second way in which the heavens declare the glory of God: the "givenness" if we feel unsteadied by the changeableness of our lives, losses, transitions, new beginnings, it is soothing to experience something like a river or the sky, which remains constant over time, and which we experience differently at different times. It helps us relate to God, because God also remains constant over time, and we experience God differently at different times. Like the sky, God is a "given" for us and God also gives us new gifts of himself exactly when we need them most.

So when we look at the heavens declaring the glory of God, we see grandeur, we see givenness, and we see grace. We get to see the magnificence of the sky and the exquisiteness of a wildflower not because we have earned it through our good behavior. We get to see sunsets not because we have won some competition. God showers the extravagant gorgeousness of the universe on us whether or not we have met any standards for deserving it. And the moments in which we are awestruck by the extravagant gorgeousness of the universe are the ones in which any of our standards for who does or does not deserve it seem, if not petty, then at least ridiculously beside the point. It is the extravagance of the gorgeousness itself that is the point, given to us by an extravagantly generous God. I have been through my share of religious doubts, and so I am in some

ways sympathetic to phrases like “the search for God.” But I wonder whether the angels laugh at our concepts that we must search for God, when it is so obvious to them that the glory of God is painted on an immense canvas right in front of our eyes.

Dawn Mahaffey told me about George getting chewed out by his boss for arriving late at work. On his drive to work he had noticed a flower with a spiderweb sparkling with dew, and he did not want to miss the opportunity to admire it. When he came home from work he described it so vividly that Dawn could see it herself. All these years later, everyone has forgotten what time George Mahaffey sat down at the desk in his office. But even now, Dawn still cherishes the vision of that sparkling spiderweb. I can find sermons in George, because George could find sermons in spiderwebs and stones. In this season of Epiphany, may we all see God as the firmament shows his handiwork; may we hear the heavens proclaim the glory of God, and may we find good in everything.