

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
Christmas Eve 2011
Luke 2

When I bought a book of poems by Mary Oliver, one of my favorite poets, I expected poems, and I was surprised to find this:

Instructions for living a life

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it.

They are wonderful instructions for a wonderful, meaningful life. And it occurred to me that this is what the scripture writers have been telling us all along. It is what the gospel writers have been telling us all along. It is what Jesus has been telling us all along.

Instructions for living a life

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it.

The scriptures also give us illustrations of what it looks like for people to pay attention, to be astonished, to tell about it. And they also give us illustrations of what it looks like not to.

Frederick Buechner does also, in a short piece called, "The Innkeeper":

"That was a long, long time ago" said the Innkeeper, "and a long, long way away. But the memories of men are also long, and nobody has forgotten anything about my own sad, queer part in it all unless maybe they have forgotten the truth about it. But you can never blame people for forgetting the truth because it is, after all, such a subtle and evasive commodity. In fact, all that distinguishes a truth from a lie may finally be no more than just the flutter of an eyelid or the tone of a voice. If I were to say, 'I

BELIEVE!’ that would be a lie, but if I were to say, ‘I believe...’ that might be the truth. So I do not blame posterity for forgetting the subtleties and making me out to be the black villain of the piece--the heartless one who said, ‘No room! No room!’ I’ll even grant you that a kind of villainy may be part of the truth. But if you want to speak the whole truth, then you will have to call me a villain with a catch in your voice, at least a tremor, a hesitation maybe, with even the glitter of almost a tear in your eye. Because nothing is entirely black, you know. Not even the human heart.

“I speak to you as men of the world,” said the Innkeeper. “Not as idealists but as realists. Do you know what it is like to run an inn—to run a business, a family, to run anything in the world for that matter, even your own life? It is like being lost in a forest of a million trees,” said the Innkeeper, and each tree is a thing to be done. Is there fresh linen on all the beds? Did the children put on their coats before they went out? Has the letter been written, the book read? Is there money enough left in the bank? Today we have food in our bellies and clothes on our backs, but what can we do to make sure we will have them tomorrow? A million trees. A million things.

“Until finally we have eyes for nothing else, and whatever we see turns into a thing. The sparrow lying in the dust at your feet, just a thing to be kicked out of the way, not the mystery of death. The calling of children outside your window—just a distraction, an irrelevance, not life, not the wildest miracle of them all. That whispering in the air that comes sudden and soft from nowhere—only the wind, the wind...

“Of course I remember very well the evening they arrived. I was working on my accounts and looked up just in time to see the woman coming through the door. She walked in that slow, heavy-footed way that women have in the last months, as though they are walking in a dream or at the bottom of the sea. Her husband stood a little behind her—a tongue-tied, helpless kind of man, I thought. I cannot remember either of them saying anything, although I suppose some words must have passed. But at least it was mostly silence. The clumsy silence of the poor. You know what I mean. It was clear enough what they wanted.

“The stars had come out. I remember the stars perfectly though I don’t know why I should, sitting inside as I was. And my wife’s cat jumped up onto the table where I was sitting. I had not stood up, of course. There was mainly just silence. Then it happened

much in the way that you have heard. I did not lie about there being no room left—there really was none—though perhaps if there had been a room, I might have lied. As much for their sakes as for the sake of the inn. Their kind would have felt more at home in a stable, that’s all, and I do not mean that unkindly either. God knows.

“Later that night, when the baby came, I was not there,” the Innkeeper said. “I was lost in the forest somewhere, the unenchanted forest of a million trees. Fifteen steps to the cellar and watch out for your head going down. Firewood to the left. If the fire goes out, the heart freezes. Only the wind, the wind. I speak to you as men of the world. So when the baby came, I was not around, and I saw none of it. As for what I heard—just at that moment itself of birth when nobody turns into somebody—I do not rightly know what I heard.

“But this I do know. My own true love. All your life long, you wait for your own true love to come—we all of us do—our destiny, our joy, our heart’s desire. So how am I to say it, gentlemen? When he came, I missed him.

“Pray for me, brothers and sisters. Pray for the Innkeeper. Pray for me, and for us all, my own true love.”

No matter how often we are tempted to criticize what other people do, or don’t do, at Christmas time, we all know what it’s like to be lost in the forest of a million trees. We know what it’s like to miss what God gives us.

Young children know what it’s like to pay attention, to be astonished, to tell about it. Those of us who are older need a little help sometimes, so that we remember. So God gives us scriptures in which the narratives of the birth of Jesus illustrate what it looks like to pay attention, to be astonished, to tell about it. When the angel appears to Mary, she pays attention, she is astonished, she tells about it as she sings the Magnificat. When the angel appears to the shepherds, they go with haste and find Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

It is an astonishing thing that in the middle of a world in which human beings attempts to love each other are so often clumsy, misdirected, bungled, or inadequate, divine love would show up. It is an astonishing thing that in the middle of a world that is

full of pain and dirt and death, God would appear in the birth of a baby in a manger. Be astonished.

Buechner also writes a short piece entitled, “The Shepherd”:

“Night was coming on, and it was cold,” the shepherd said, “and I was terribly hungry. I had finished all the bread I had in my sack, and my gut still ached for more. Then I noticed my friend, a shepherd like me, about to throw away a crust he didn’t want. So I said, ‘throw the crust to me, friend!’ and he did throw it to me, but it landed between us in the mud where the sheep had mucked it up. But I grabbed it anyway and stuffed it, mud and all, into my mouth. And as I was eating it, I suddenly saw—myself. It was as if I was not only a man eating but a man watching the man eating. And I thought, ‘This is who I am. I am a man who eats muddy bread.’ And I thought, the bread is very good. And I thought, ‘Ah, and the mud is very good too.’ So I opened my muddy man’s mouth full of bread, and I yelled to my friends, ‘By God, it’s good, brothers!’ And they thought I was a terrible fool, but they saw what I meant. We saw everything that night, everything. Everything!

“Can I make you understand, I wonder? Have you ever had this happen to you? You have been working hard all day. You’re dog-tired, bone-tired. So you call it quits for a while. You slump down under a tree or against a rock or something and just sit there in a daze for half an hour or a million years, I don’t know, and all this time your eyes are wide open looking straight ahead someplace but they’re so tired and glassy they don’t see a thing. Nothing. You could be dead for all you notice. Then, little by little, you begin to come to, then your eyes begin to come to, and all of a sudden you find out you’ve been looking at something the whole time except it’s only now you really see it—one of the ewe lambs maybe, with its foot caught under a rock, or the moon scorching a hole through the clouds. It was there all the time, but you didn’t see it until just now.

“That’s how it was this night, anyway. Like finally coming to—not things coming out of nowhere that had never been there before, but things coming into focus that had been there always. And such things! The air wasn’t just emptiness any more. It was alive. Brightness everywhere, dipping and wheeling like a flock of birds. And what you always thought was silence stopped being silent and turned into the beating of wings,

thousands and thousands of them. Only not just wings, as you came to more, but voices—high, wild, like trumpets. The words I could never remember later, but something like what I'd yelled with my mouth full of bread. 'By God, it's good, brothers! The crust. The mud. Everything. Everything!'

Oh well. If you think we were out of our minds, you are right, of course. And do you know, it was just like being out of jail. I can see us still. The squint-eyed one who always complained of sore feet. The little sawed-off one who could outswear a Roman. The young one who blushed like a girl. We all tore off across that muddy field like drunks at a fair, and drunk we were, crazy drunk, splashing through a sea of wings and moonlight and the silvery wool of the sheep. Was it night? Was it day? Did our feet touch the ground?

"Shh, shh, you'll wake up my guests," said the Innkeeper we met coming in the other direction with his arms full of wood. And when we got to the shed out back, one of the three foreigners who were there held a finger to his lips.

"At the eye of the storm, you know, there's no wind—nothing moves—nothing breathes—even silence keeps silent. So hush now. Hush. There he is. You see him? You see him?"

"By Almighty God, brothers. Open your eyes. Listen."

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it.