

Sermon for August 10 2014
Cloud Sourcing: The Spirit through the ages

A voice of hope and redemption¹

Psalm 19:1-4

Matt. 5:43-45

It's good to be back. Good to be among you again.

The past three weeks were an important time of stepping away from normal routine. It was time to allow certain reservoirs within myself to become full again. I hope that many of you have had or will yet have an opportunity to do the same, however briefly.

For me, vacation time is a time to fast from electronic communication and from reading or listening to the news. Instead we feast on the natural world spending as much time as possible in God's good creation.

Occasionally when John and I return from vacation we will play a game before we turn on the radio or turn on the computer. Before we "tune in" again, we try to predict what we will hear from news media.

We assume we will hear about a murder or a shooting, at least one tragic accident, car, bus or ferry, and at least one if not two or three terrible international incidents.

When we returned this time our predictions were once again fairly accurate.

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We left the day that the Malaysian Airlines flight from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur was shot down over Ukraine. We didn't know about it until part way through our time away when we joined some friends. We didn't know about the tragedy of more deaths in Gaza and among religious minorities in Iraq. We didn't know about the outbreak of the ebola virus in Western Africa.

Now along with the rest of you we do. And I asked myself how our summer theme of Cloud sourcing: the Spirit through the ages could help us come to terms with this steady stream of fear or anger or even despair inducing tragedies.

Whose voices among the Cloud of Witnesses all around help me to lay side by side my experiences of the restorative effects of God's gloriously created world with my knowledge of the human caused tragedies of our world?

Psalm 19:1-4 gave me a place to start.

The heavens herald your glory, O God,
and the skies display your handiwork.
Day after day they tell their story,
and night after night they reveal the depth of their understanding

Without speech. without words,
without even an audible voice,

their cry echoes through all the world,
and their message reaches the ends of the earth.

(Inclusive version.)

Even without voice without speech or words – the cry of the heavens,
day after day and night after night reveal a depth of understanding that
we can hardly touch or begin to grasp in one lifetime and yet in every
nation of the world the same sun and full moon rise each day and the
same order of the stars surround us all.

There are two human voices from the Cloud of Witnesses that come to
mind when I ask
how the natural world informs my political understanding of the world
and human cultures within it that perpetuate violent destructiveness.

These voices belong to Mary Oliver and Wendell Berry.

Wendell Berry turned 80 this week.

Mary Oliver will be 79 in September – both are acclaimed American
poets and authors

It's probably not quite fair to draw on their voices for this series of
sermons because I have quoted both of them previously, but sometimes
powerful, redemptive and hopeful words bear repeating.

Both of them have become adept at listening to the inaudible voice of creation,
and expressing well what they hear there.

I'll begin with an excerpt from an essay by Mary Oliverⁱ

Once years ago, I emerged from the woods in the early morning at the end of a walk and – it was the most casual of moments – as I stepped from under the trees into the mild, pour-down sunlight I experienced a sudden impact, a *seizure* of happiness. It wasn't the drowning sort of happiness, rather the floating sort. I made no struggle toward it; it was given. Time seemed to vanish. Urgency vanished. Any important difference between myself and all other things vanished. I knew that I belonged to the world, and felt comfortably my own containment in the totality. I did not feel that I understood any mystery, not at all; rather that I could be happy and feel blessed within the perplexity – the summer morning, its gentleness, the sense of the great work being done though the grass where I stood scarcely trembled. As I say, it was the most casual of moments, not mystical as the word is usually meant, for there was no vision, or anything extraordinary at all but only a sudden awareness of the citizenry of all things within one world; leaves, dust, thrushes and finches, men and women. And yet it was a moment I have never forgotten, and upon which I have based many decisions in the years since.

My story contains neither a mountain, nor a canyon, nor a blizzard, nor hail, nor spike of wind striking the earth and lifting whatever is in its

path. I think the rare and wonderful awareness I felt would not have arrived in any such busy hour. Most stories about weather are swift to describe meeting the face of the storm and the argument of the air, climbing the narrow and icy trail, crossing the half-frozen swamp. I would not make such stories less by obtaining anything special from the other side of the issue. Nor would I suggest that a meeting of individual spirit and universe is impossible with the harrowing blast. Yet I would hazard this guess, that it is more likely to happen to someone attentively entering the quiet moment, when the sun-soaked world is gliding on under the blessings of blue sky, and the wind god is asleep. Then, if ever, we may peek under the veil of all appearances and partialities. We may be touched by the most powerful of suppositions – even to a certainty – as we stand in the rose petals of the sun and hear a murmur from the wind no louder than the sound it makes as it dozes under the bee’s wings. This, too, I suggest is weather and worthy of report.

It was a moment she has never forgotten and upon which she has based many decisions in the years since.

Or what about Wendall Berry’s poem the peace of Wild things:

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.

— Wendell Berry

Have you ever had one of these moments? These moments that Wendell Berry and Mary Oliver have the gift to express are available to everyone.

I recall experiencing this kind of moment on the shores of the St. Lawrence River one evening, late in our trip.

As I sat in the complete stillness of evening and watched the steady current of the massive river, mercifully moving all the sins of our polluting habits with her out to sea, forgiving us more than 70 times 7 with her purifying power, not even the odd motorboat or jet-ski

changed the effect on me of the motion of the river and the peace of the moment.

I think of the rose petals of the sunlight recorded by Mary Oliver and the heron and wood-drake of Wendell Berry and I think of the different parts of the world that I've had the privilege of seeing and some that I've only read about and seen pictures of and know with certainty that these moments are available to all – to those in conflict in Ukraine, to the Palestinians and Israelis, to the Kurdish Muslims and the Islamic State forces and the dear souls in Western Africa who have contracted the ebola virus.

Every single one of us are citizens of God's creation or as Mary Oliver would say part of the citizenry of all things within one world; leaves, dust, thrushes and finches, men and women. The sun rises on the good and the evil, and the rain falls on the just and the unjust, Jesus reminds us in Matthew chapter 5 just after he asks his followers to "love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them." And this means something. Although creation may be without official voice, Wendall Berry and Mary Oliver and even Jesus himself want us to hear what the sun and the sky and the rain have to say to us about our place in the whole and our relationship to all. We are all children of God.

I can't go talk to the Islamic State, or ISIS forces in Iraq, but I can pray that the colourful wash of the sunset penetrates the armour of their hate and anger in a way that a sword never could, or that a soldier's

discovery of a cold drink from a spring in a hot dry land might cool his soul enough that the next would be victim will receive a recognition of empathy instead of death.

The creation in its endless giving is the loudest and most ubiquitous voice there is and I pray that all those who would perpetuate their own will by violence and destruction will hear her cries that already echo through all the world and her message that already reaches the ends of the earth according to our Psalmist in 19:4

Because when she reveals our global citizenry as children of God she speaks a powerful word of hope and redemption.

ⁱ from *Long Life: Essays and Other Writings* by Mary Oliver