

**Sermon: September 13, 2020 (OUTDOOR WORSHIP) – Psalm 95: 1-7**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

Two very different things happening in coming weeks will converge to shape today's message, and our worship services from now 'til Thanksgiving.

First, it's the season of Creation, a time when we look at our role as stewards of the earth, and the connection between God, and the earth, and all living beings. That being the case, what a great time for a couple of outdoor worship services... to be out in the open, experiencing first-hand the grass and the trees and the mountains, the sunshine and cool mountain air, living and breathing our gratitude as we enjoy these treasured gifts.

Second, on September 23<sup>rd</sup> our Wednesday night Evensong will start its twentieth year. Imagine that, twenty years. Among Evensong's gifts to our community of faith, is that it helps us (and me) ground our ministry in contemplation – taking the time to slow down, and get quiet, and listen for God's loving heartbeat, a heartbeat of inclusion, and peace, and justice.

So we have the season of creation, and the contemplative gifts of Evensong. There is something that bridges these two, and it begins, with something you will see on the front of your worship bulletin. There, you will find a depiction of the Examen, a contemplative practice within the Ignatian Roman Catholic tradition.

The Examen is a five-step process of prayerful reflection, which is typically done on a daily basis at the end of day, consisting of:

(1) Asking God for light, (2) Giving thanks, (3) Reviewing the day, (4) facing your own shortcomings and (5) looking toward the day to come.

Though intended for daily use, I'd like to use the Examen as our guide for the next five weeks, one step per Sunday, as we consider the earth and its needs. Today, then, it's step one: Asking God for light, looking at life with God's eyes, not merely my own.

As soon as I say that last bit, seeing things through God's eyes or, to rephrase that, perceiving things from God's perspective, my mind immediately goes to a childhood image: God enthroned, high up in the clouds, a male personage who sees, understands and perhaps even plans all that is going on down here. To an extent, that is the perspective of today's scripture reading from Psalm 95, which affirms the understanding of God as the ruler and creator of all, deeply invested in all these wonderful elements of creation. God, in this Psalm, is the creative force of all that we see, the unifying reality that connects us to all things, the caring presence who wants to keep us from harm.

The advantage of such an image, is that it acknowledges that I can't possibly understand everything that is going on in the world, not even everything going on in my life. It acknowledges that life is much bigger than me, and yearns for a broader viewpoint. Those of you who are avid hikers, and have perhaps seen Canmore from the top of EEOR or Ha Ling or the Middle Sister or Lady Mac, can attest to how much that view from above can help to re-set the relative size and importance of many of the things that tie us in knots down here at ground level; a wide-angle viewpoint helps me see many of the seemingly mountainous problems that chew up my energy, as the molehills that they truly are.

Increasingly, though – and especially since coming out here to Canmore, and spending a lot more time in nature than I ever had before, and being introduced by Evensong to wonderful authors like Wendell Berry and Mary Oliver – I find myself drawn to a different perspective, if imagining what it would be to observe things from God's perspective. That is, the view, not from the mountaintop, but from ground level. And here, I quote Mary Oliver and her poem, "The Summer Day": "I don't know exactly what a prayer is. I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass, how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields." And then she ends with a question:

"Tell me, what is it *you* plan to do with *your* one wild and precious life?"

One of our children, particularly between the ages of about 2 and 9, was infamous for getting their belly on the ground and their nose right down into the world of tiny things: insects, slugs, worms, voles, soil. Not too surprisingly, as a teenager this same family member became quite the skilled composter, turning grass clippings in with kitchen scraps at just the right ratio to make a beautiful, rich soil additive for next year. The big, broad vision that puts things into perspective is one way to portray God's view of things, but so is this angle from the perspective smallest and most vulnerable, considering the needs of seedlings and field-mice when deciding one's impacts on the world. Jesus repeatedly brought us back to this perspective, using sparrows and lilies as object lessons for God's loving care, and lifting up the importance of children. His classic words, "whatever you do unto the least of these... you do unto me" (Matthew 25: 20) speaks of God's deep connection with vulnerability, and we move ourselves in a Godward direction when we do likewise: considering the lives of the most vulnerable when deciding how humans are going to treat one another; considering the vulnerabilities of this beautiful and precarious planet, when deciding whether and how us humans are going to interact with planet earth, and facing up to it when we see how our actions have made things worse.

That belly-down, nose-in-the-grass viewpoint may well be the thing that connects us with the heart of God to the point that we step back from utterly obliterating this planet. It may also be the thing, that keeps us from the destructive, fearful practices that have carved such deep chasms between people of different ethnicities and skin colours, different places on the sexual spectrum, different political perspectives. Pretty much by definition, to be belly down on the ground is a position of humility: to be humble, is to be "of the earth, of the humus." The more that our lives really engage life-on-the-ground, the more humility we will have and the more empathy we will build for one another and for all living things. When I get past my ego concerns, and actually try to understand the burdens carried in this world by all who struggle, my willingness to engage in personal change and my willingness to advocate for bigger societal changes will almost certainly increase, and will have deep roots. I may even engage some of my own vulnerabilities in an open and honest way. God, the indwelling force of love that binds us together, moves us toward a deep empathy that changes everything.

And that move, from selfishness to empathy, from being detached from the hard realities of life, to engaging life in all its precariousness, helps us do that first thing that was mentioned: asking God for light. When we honour the sacred light that is in each neighbour, we invite God's light. When I move from a small perspective, built entirely around what's best for me and the people closest to me, to a broader viewpoint in which my life is but one part of a much, much bigger system, I invite God's illumination, and when I bring fresh attention to the most vulnerable aspects of life, I invite God's light once more.

Whether I change my viewpoint to see things more broadly, or to really see what's going on at ground level, I invite the illumination of God. To invite God is to realize that life is not all about me, but that I am part of this great big circle of belovedness and interconnection and wonder, a holy web of "all creatures great and small." A fresh perspective reminds us that when one element of existence on this planet is injured or imbalanced, all of life is impacted

Friends in Christ, I invite you this day and in these coming weeks, to let this combination of care for all of creation, and delving deep into the heart of God, bring light to each step of your life's journey, for the benefit of all. Amen.

References cited:

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