



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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MARCH 31, 2019
THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT
SIGHT, SOUND AND SILENCE: STILL LENT

Sights and Sounds of Faith: All Nature Sings Genesis 1:9-25; Matthew 6:25-33

As I began thinking about this sermon about how nature offers us abundant sights and sounds to enrich our faith, two sources of inspiration—both cartoons—fell into my hands fortuitously . . . or, perhaps, providentially. The first came from Leon Henderson who shared with me a greeting card he received on his birthday a few weeks ago. The front of the card pictures a man and his son fishing on a river. Their boat is pointed upstream, both father and son have their lines in the water, and the son has a boombox on the bow obviously playing loud music. The conversation balloon coming out of the father's mouth has him shouting to his son, "Can you turn off that blasted music?! I'd like to just hear the gentle sounds of nature a while." What the picture also shows is that the "gentle sounds of nature," which they cannot hear because of the music, is a giant waterfall which they are about to go over!

The other source of inspiration I received was the March 17 *For Better or For Worse* cartoon which shows the family daughter, Lizzie, sitting on the floor by a window, gazing at the sunlight streaming in. Her mother walks in and Lizzie exclaims, "Look, Mom! There's a sunbeam coming through the window! Doesn't it look like something you could touch?" She slips her hand gently into the sunlight and explains, "I'm pretending it's a piece of cloth that angel's gowns are made of!" Next, she runs her hand down the beam of light and says, "Now I'm pretending it's a magic slide!" Putting her hands together and making bunny ears, she says, "Now I'm pretending it's a movie projector!" Finally, she declares, "You can see neat things in a sunbeam—can't you Mom!" The mother replies, "Uh-huh," and in the final panel she thinks, "—and a few minutes ago . . . all I saw was dust."¹

Sometimes we don't hear the gentle sounds of nature because there is too much other noise in our lives or we do not pause to listen. Sometimes, when we look at the world around us, all we see is dust. Sometimes we simply need to be still and quiet with ears and eyes wide open to hear and see the wonders that surround us—all gifts of God's creative love. What do

¹Lynn Johnston, *For Better or For Worse*, Universal Press Syndicate (March 17, 2019).

you see when you look out of a window, when you step outdoors, when you walk through a wooded area or ride by a park? What do you hear when you stand in your own backyard? What do you see in a sunbeam . . . other than dust?

In January of 1933, Helen Keller, the woman whose illness as an infant left her deaf and blind, wrote an astonishing article that was published in *The Atlantic Monthly*.² In it, she reflects on how often we take life for granted until illness or tragedy brings us up short. She laments how we often neglect our faculties and senses until they are no longer available.

To illustrate how unaware of our world we often are, Ms. Keller mentions that she asked a friend, who just taken a long walk in the woods, what she had seen. “Nothing in particular,” she answered. And Helen Keller thought, “How was it possible . . . to walk for an hour through the woods and see nothing worthy of note?” This woman, who would walk through the woods and identify the bark of each tree she touched, the leaf of each bush, and the petal of her favorite flowers, resigned herself to the realization that “the seeing see little.” I must confess, however, that her solution to our apathy is shocking. She says:

I have often thought it would be a blessing if each human being were stricken blind and deaf for a few days at some time during his early adult life. Darkness would make him more appreciative of sight; silence would teach him the joys of sound.

She may be right, but I doubt many of us would sign up for such an experiment. To encourage us to be more attentive, Ms. Keller writes about what she would do, not if she had three days to be blind and deaf—for she had a lifetime of those experiences. Rather, she imagines what she would do if she had three days of sight. Admittedly, her enthusiasm and focus shame me.

The first day, she said, she would want to see the people who had been kind and generous companions to her. She would want to study each face, memorize its shape and contour, its complexion and responses. She would look into the eyes of her friends to see what they reveal about the heart of

²Helen Keller “Three Days to See,” *The Atlantic Monthly*; (January 1933, Volume 151, No. 1), 35-42. All quotes and observations by Ms. Keller are excerpted from this article.

each person. She would observe and take note of everything about the people who are dearest to her.

She would look into the eyes of her faithful dogs and walk through her house looking at all of the things that were familiar to her only by touch. In the afternoon she would walk through the woods and feast on all that she could see of nature's wonders in a few short hours. She would end the day by marveling at the human ability create artificial light so that we can continue to see even when nature goes dark.

On the second day she would wake early to watch night transform into day and then take in as much of the world as she could, visiting museums where she could observe the natural wonders of the earth, art galleries where she could observe the creativity of the human spirit, and anywhere the wonders of life are on display. She would end the day at the theater or a movie as she watched and listened to dramatic literature come to life.

Rising again early on the third day, she would spend her time observing daily life where people work and play. Starting in her neighborhood on Long Island, she would admire the cozy homes and lush lawns. She would drive into New York City and walk down Fifth Avenue, observing the people and what they do, how they dress and what they carry. She would visit slums and parks, factories and office buildings, experiencing the sights and sounds of life in as many ways as possible. When her three day gift of sight and hearing ended that night, she would relish the memories of all the wonders she had seen and experienced, and her life would be forever all the richer.

Amazing to me, in her descriptions of what she might experience if she could see and hear for three brief days, Ms. Keller, through her blindness and deafness, demonstrated that she saw our world in ways most of us do not. She described in perfect detail things she would want to see—things which we see every day but probably do not remember. What do you see in a sunbeam . . . other than dust?

The early chapters of the book of Genesis offer a poetic view of the creation of the world. God speaks and the sound of his voice explodes into light. Night and day are created, stars and moons appear, earth buckles with laughter making mountains and valleys, plains and hills. Waters gather into seas and, as God continues to speak, plants and animals, fish and birds fill the world. Finally, on that penultimate day of creation, God breathes life into humanity so that we might enjoy all of the wonders of God's world.

How sad that in our busyness we miss so much there is to see and hear and touch. How ironic that the crowning point of God's creation sometimes gives so little attention to the rest of creation. The psalmists, however, didn't miss much. They had keen vision and sharp hearing. Psalm 19 proclaims, "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (v. 1). When they gazed into the sky, they saw an exuberant display of praise to God. When they listened to the world each day, they heard a triumphant doxology to the Creator. Granted, we all have marveled at the bright joy of a sunrise and swooned at the orange glow of a peaceful sunset. Yet, we often fail to see and hear the many gifts God offers us each and every day. What we often miss is a treasure trove of wonders that remind us of how good and loving and generous God is. What do you see in a sunbeam . . . other than dust?

My yard is in desperate need of a make over. There is plenty of green but it is mostly weeds and moss—a lot of moss. I fight it every year with lime and every year it multiplies. This weekend our granddaughters came to visit. As soon as we stepped into the back yard, Savannah grabbed fistfuls of the moss and mixed it with pine needles, leaves, and sticks to make a St. Patrick's Day cake. And two year old Holly filled their play size wheelbarrow with moss and pine cones to make a blueberry soup. They saw wondrous possibilities in the things I consider to be nothing more than a nuisance and eyesore.

During these remaining weeks of Lent—and for the rest of our lives—it might do us good to step outside—even into a cloud of annoying pollen which, remember, is nature's way of re-creating itself—and be still a while. It might do us all some good to look at and listen to God's creation.

Go into your backyard. Visit a park. Ride out into the country. Walk the labyrinth here at church. Stand or sit and be still. Calm all of the voices and concerns and pressures that constantly call to you. What do you hear? Are there any birds? Can you distinguish one from another, recognizing their unique voices? Are there bees making their rounds, helping to pollinate flowers for the spring? Is there wind making music in the trees? Are there other animals or even human sounds that you usually ignore?

What do you see? Are there flowers beginning to bloom and trees starting to bud? How many different varieties of plants are in the yard? How tall are the trees? How many different colors surround you? Pick up a leaf

or rock or even a creature from the ground. Notice the intricacy, the details, the ways it meets its purpose in the world.

I remember a biology class when we sat down to study the structure of a leaf. I had seen billions of leaves in my life and knew they had a blade and a stem and veins running through them. I was awed, however, to learn that a paper thin leaf has at least nine layers and tissues. It was a moment of pure wonder to consider the intricacy of a leaf and to contemplate how it works to support the health of a huge tree, not to mention the role it plays in cleaning the air of carbon dioxide and replenishing the oxygen that we breathe, providing food and shelter for wildlife, and eventually becoming fertilizer for some other living thing. To consider that God engineers leaves with such detail and broad purpose was an occasion for wonder and praise.

When we take the time to pay attention to our world, to look and see, to listen and hear, we gaze into the eyes of God and listen to the heartbeat of God's love. Is that not what the psalmist did when singing Psalm 8 thousands of years ago?

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! . . .
When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars, that you have set in place, what are mortals that you care for them, O Lord?

That is the question that arises when we pay attention to the world around us. When nature, in all of its glory, sings praise to God, it is natural for us to ask, "What about us? What about me, O God?" The answer from God is offered loud and clear. Every detail of this magnificent world was created so that humanity—you and I—might have a place in which to live. God provided everything we could ever need and much more. Then God came to us in the person of Jesus to demonstrate firsthand how much he loves us.

I have always loved that passage from Matthew which falls in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount. After reminding his followers that his love turns the world upside down, after teaching them about prayer and generosity, Jesus reminds them of how generous God is. Listen to what he says:

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap

nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Matthew 6:25-33

Don't worry about your life, he says. Notice the birds flying around. God takes care of their every need. Notice how beautiful the flowers are in the field and yet, you are more beautiful than any of them. Notice how God takes care of our world and realize how much more God cares for you! Seeing the beauty of the world and hearing its song of praise will help us to realize the immense love God has for us.

How disrespectful we are to not pay attention to the wonder and beauty of the world God has given us. And how ungrateful we are not to take care of our home. Yet, we know that we can feel so close to God when we are in the midst of nature. We know how we marvel at the creativity of God in sunrises and sunsets, flowers and mountains and snowfall. During this Lent, let us be still and open ourselves completely to the magnificence of creation, including ourselves—so wonderfully made.

Ponder a final admonition from Helen Keller as a prompt to worship the One who created the world and all that is in it:

I who am blind can give one hint to those who see—one admonition to those who would make full use of the gift of sight: Use your eyes as if tomorrow you would be stricken blind. And the same method can be applied to the other senses. Hear the music of voices, the song of a bird, the mighty strains of an orchestra, as if you would be stricken deaf tomorrow. Touch each object you want to touch as if tomorrow your tactile sense would

fail. Smell the perfume of flowers, taste with relish each morsel, as if tomorrow you could never smell and taste again. Make the most of every sense; glory in all the facets of pleasure and beauty which the world reveals to you through the several means of contact which Nature provides.

And when you do, give glory to God for all of the goodness and wonder of life. What do you see in a sunbeam . . . other than dust? Perhaps the love of God whose generosity is boundless and whose creativity astounds us.

March 31, 2019

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

On days like this one, when sunlight brightens our lives and warms the air, coaxing new growth and a burst of color all around, we are keenly aware of your generosity on offering us such a beautiful and amazing world, O God. We thank you for every provision of life that is ours, for the wonder that surrounds us at every turn, and for the love which nurtures all of creation.

We pray that during these days of contemplation we will be more mindful of the multitude of gifts that you give us each day. Open our eyes to see the tiniest examples of your ingenuity as well as the bold displays of your artistry. Help us to recognize that the wonders we observe in nature are multiplied many times over in the persons you have created us to be. In our gratitude, enable us to use these wonderful gifts for the protection of our world and for the blessing of the people around us. We thank you for the gift of life, O God.

Because we hold that gift dearly, we pray for our loved ones, our friends, and for ourselves in the midst of illness, struggle, and uncertainty. Break through the fears of diagnosis to bring the assurance of care. Permeate the anxiety that binds us and bring calm and a renewal of peace. Clear away the undergrowth of self-doubt and failure to reveal a path that we have never noticed. Make us mindful that we are not alone but that you are with us in every challenge and opportunity of life.

Our world needs a springtime revival as well, O God. So much anger and pain and suffering exist. There is so much greed and too little generosity of spirit. Move your spirit among us to renew life within us and help us to live as Christ in the world. Move across the world, we pray, and bring new life wherever death reigns. Recreate us, we pray, and empower us to live fully as the children of God. For this grace and all of your mercy, we pray. Amen.