

Lesson of the Lilies

September 27, 2020

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

Matthew 6:25-34

Psalm 19:1-6

Let me begin by telling you what a wonderful experience it has been for me to be with you the last four Sundays. Among other things it has allowed me to reconnect with some old friends. That is not an unmixed blessing, however. Last Sunday I began my sermon by telling a joke. As soon as the worship service was over, I received an email from Tom Hanks, who reminded me that I told that joke when I was pastor at Lake Shore forty years ago. It is more than a bit concerning that people remember your jokes decades later but can't recall what you preached about last Sunday. Which may be why Jesus told parables and not jokes.

Being with you – virtually – has allowed me to meet many of you that I did not know. I look forward to visiting Lake Shore and being able to say, “I know you. You were upper right, third from the left, right?”

I grew up on my grandfather's farm. You should not be overly impressed. It was subsistence farming. When my grandfather died at 94, he had never lived in a house with running water or indoor plumbing, except in the last year or so of his life when he was cared for by one or another of his children.

My playground was the woods, which made up, I would guess, 60% of the 160 acres of my granddad's farm. I spent many afterschool and summer hours in the woods. To this day, I have a mental map of its trails and creeks.

It was not a fearful place to me. I knew my way around. I was comfortable there. I had right to be there. But I was always aware that while nature held a strange fascination for me, speaking of beauty and complexity, it was separate from me, speaking of otherness and mystery. It wasn't dependent on me for anything. It had its own reason for being, and it didn't matter whether I knew what it was.

Another part of my fascination with the natural world was looking out of my bedroom window at the night sky and being mesmerized by the stars on a summer night. We lived far enough out of town that city lights did not hinder stargazing.

The psalm we read – Psalm 19 – was one of my favorites. I understood why the poet would write:

*The heavens are telling the glory of God,
and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork.*

A small academic insertion. If you are in the market for a Bible, get one with footnotes. If you have a Bible with footnotes, read them. The translators are whispering to you in fine print, telling you things that casual readers will never know. Like, that the word that is translated “firmament” can also be translated “dome.”

In the ancient Near Eastern worldview the world was flat, and it was covered by a dome, a pale blue dome. That's not hard to understand. If you viewed the sky as I did as a child and as the ancient poets of Israel probably did, which is to say, in a naïve, pre-scientific way, you might think that the sky is a thing, a blue physical thing, a dome that

if you went high enough, you could touch it. The ancients also believed that there was water above and below the earth. And sometimes water dripped through holes in the dome. Anyone could see that on a regular basis the dome turned black. And when the dome turned black, twinkly little lights shined through the holes.

Isn't that a fun way to think of the sky? As God's handwork? You can imagine God at a workbench crafting a dome and drilling holes in it.

The sky mesmerized another psalmist and caused him to ask a profound question:

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that care for them? (Psalm 8:3-4)*

Considering the beauty of the heavens, the poet was astounded that God would even notice human beings, much less make them "*a little lower than God and crown them with glory and honor.*"

Another psalmist asked the very same question – "*What are human beings that you regard them, and mortals that you think of them?*" – but got a very different answer: "*They are like a breath; their days are like a passing shadow.*" (Psalm 144:5) Compared to the majesty of the celestial bodies, human beings are of no consequence at all.

The point is not the different answers the psalmists gave. The point is that nature raised the question. Nature caused sensitive, thoughtful people to wonder –and ask ultimate questions: What are we doing here? How do we fit into all this? Speaking of all this, does creation go on forever or does end? If it ends and if you could go to the farthest edge, what would be on the other side? Nothing? What's nothing? Come to think of it, why is there anything?

To the ancient psalmists of Israel, and to me as a child, nature was a thing of wonder and of wondering.

It still is for many people. But climate change continues unabated, with record high temperatures drying vegetation, rendering parts of the West tender boxes, and many people, even some environmentalists, think of nature primarily in terms of human self-interest: the reason we should care about the environment is because if we don't we will all die.

To be clear, I am into preserving our species. That's a good thing. But I am also into recognizing nature as the handwork of God, nature as an expression of divine creativity, nature as a window into generative mystery and God.

That is what nature was to Jesus. It was a wonder to be celebrated, but it was also a transparency through which one could discern the deepest things of life.

The reign of God, he said, is like a seed that you bury in the soil, and as the weeks pass you have no idea what is going on in the darkness of the earth, if anything. But something is happening, life is happening, and one day it breaks through the crust of the soil.

The reign of God is like a tiny mustard seed that contains within itself the makings of a mature tree.

Or consider the lilies of the field. Wild flowers, not flowers in someone's well-tended garden. Bluebonnets. Indian paintbrushes. Dandelions. The lowly dandelion. Some of my neighbors may have seen me kneeling in our yard examining a dandelion. If so, they probably didn't give it a second thought. In my neighborhood, seeing a grown man on his hands and knees looking at a flower doesn't necessarily call attention to itself. A dandelion is amazing. The attention to detail. The intricate, delicate design. And the beauty. *"Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these."*

For whose appreciation was it put here? For whose eyes? If we hadn't walked by here today, Jesus could well have said to disciples, it would die tomorrow and no human eyes would ever see it. Why is it here?

For Jesus the mere existence of a wildflower raised a question, just as the moon and the stars did, and became a window into transcendent things. You think God would pay such meticulous attention to a dandelion and pay no attention to you? The lesson of the lilies of the field was about the providence of God, a lesson those of us who are moon and stars people who can get lost in calculations of astronomical distances and rendered mute by Hubble's photographs of unimaginable cosmic beauty, need to hear.

For Jesus and for the poets of ancient Israel nature is a window into divine mystery and a source of wonder.

I want to leave you with a quotation from a surprising source.

"Those who can no longer pause to wonder and stand in awe are as good as dead . . . The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. . . This insight into the mystery of life, coupled though it be with fear, has also given rise to religion." Albert Einstein.

(If Tom Hanks tells you that I used that quotation in a sermon I preached at Lake Shore ten years ago, don't listen to him.)

Benediction

From the mystery of God we come,
to the mystery of God we go.
And the coming
and the going
and everything in between
is gracious gift.