

The Peace of Wild Things

A homily by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon

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I begin this morning with the poem “The Peace of Wild Things” by Wendell Berry.

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.

The peace of wild things. It conjures images of a lake that is still and clear and smooth as glass. I can imagine the silence, pierced only by the gentle flap of wings as the heron glides away.

It sounds lovely. To go and lie down where the wood drake rests, and sleep in the peace of nature. There’s a similar Mary Oliver poem – *Sleeping in the Forest* – which calls to mind that same earthly serenity.

I love these poems. But... have you ever slept in the forest?

I have rarely spent a night in nature that was entirely serene. I remember particularly the first time James and I ever went camping together, being awakened harshly in the night by what I was sure must be a mountain lion on the hunt, but James insisted was a little screech owl calling for a mate. Whatever it was, the sound was bloodcurdling.

The next night of the same trip, we huddled in our tent as torrential rain came down all around us and thunder clapped in the distance.

The mating habits of owls and the violent possibilities of weather are only two of many examples of this fact: that the ‘peace of nature’ is rarely still and calm, but more often a wild and powerful mix of life, death, terror, and beauty.

When we set out to praise the peace of wild things, nature itself requires us to carefully define our terms, lest we sink into a romantic pastoral vision that does not exist in the living, changing, breathing world around us.

Sleeping in the forest has taught me something about peace – that peace is a living,

moving process – sometimes quite and calm, sometimes alive with a million buzzing sounds – but always changing.

We often use the word peace to describe times when we are feeling comfortable and in control. We think peace will be ours when the frantic motion has stilled at last. It will come when everything that challenges us ceases.

That vision of peace yields stagnation at best and tyranny at worst. This is true at a personal spiritual level, and at a global socio-political level.

I think of all the times I have tried to find ‘inner peace,’ by squashing down the emotional tumult inside me... only to find in a day or a week or a month later that the feelings roar back as I discover that all I have done is delay the processing of my emotions. Peace is not the cessation of struggle.

In the realm of the socio-political, I think of the many cycles in history of revolution and peace, and the ongoing way that times of upheaval yield to a desire for stability. When this stability is interpreted as the absence of challenge, totalitarian leadership will arrive to create it, leading to an enforced kind of peace, where once again tumult is squashed, often at the cost of many real lives. Peace cannot be the destruction of dissension.

In an article for the Denver Times, my professor, theologian Jay McDaniel points out that “when everybody agrees, particularly with those who have authority, it is not authentic harmony, nor is it peace.” Peace is not the exercise of control.

Poet and Essayist Wendell Berry writes in his book *The Art of the Commonplace* that: “the most dangerous tendency in modern society [...] is the tendency toward encapsulation of human order – the severance, once and for all, of the umbilical cord fastening us to the wilderness or the Creation.

Aside from claims of danger, clinging to the conception of peace as a state of order and control is most simply the surest way to guarantee we will never have it. If nature teaches us anything, it is how very ‘not in control’ we are. Every tornado, every wild noise in the night, every moment of birth and death humbles us before the grandeur of nature.

No, the peace in nature is a peace amid wildness. It is a spirit of non-anxious openness to the creativity that arises from chaos. It is the thread that carries us along through the tumult of both natural and human-made wilderness.

A parent who finds a moment of personal calm in the bath while the kids splash and scream around them can possibly relate to this kind of peace – the kind of peace that is centered, yet open to the fullness of life.

What we recognize in our finer moments is that our center is not a fixed point, but an ever-moving way of being that we carry with us as we journey through the wildness of life.

That center of peace can exist at every level, from the individual human spirit to the global level, when it allows for ongoing change and evolution and finds a sense of stability rooted in compassion and connection, rather than totalitarian sameness.

In the worldview of Process Theology, which is a special interest and passion of mine, peace is defined as the balanced point of harmony and intensity – the place that is ordered enough to move forward and wild enough to propel us into creative possibility.

Process theologian Jay McDaniel compares this kind of creative peace to jazz. He says that “True peace is more like an improvisational jazz concert; a constant responsive blending of discord, mistakes, beauty, competition, cooperation, unpredictability and insight – all in the name of a larger harmony.”

Religious scholar Karen Armstrong similarly argues that true peace “recognize[s] the richness of the holy -- it is large enough to contain apparent contradictions, such as sorrow, hope and joy, [...and] it often contains both gratitude and grief.”

In this time of Advent, as Christians wait expectantly for the birth of Jesus, who was called Light of the World, Wise Counselor & Prince of Peace, it occurs to me that the Christmas story is yet another pathway into this same lesson.

The message of Christmas is that God enters the world in wild places – God is born in a dusty barn stall to a teenage mother, surrounded by animals and in the midst of political upheaval.

The God of the Christmas story could have chosen to be born in an immaculate palace into a life of power and order.

Instead, as the tale tells it, he chose to be born in the humblest of times and places. He was born, as every child is born, into a world of tragedy and beauty and infinite possibility.

And from the wilderness, he would grow to spend his life teaching people to feed the hungry, visit the prisoner, welcome the stranger. From the peace of wild things, he would grow into the richness of all that is holy, embodying the creative power of life and love.

For me, the Christmas lesson is profound – that love and light and peace are not ideals that exist somewhere outside of us, in perfect Platonic state – rather they are constantly being born into the world amid chaos and wildness.

We live in a world forever turning, and therein lies the sacred potential of peace; That we can all grow into the richness of the holy – centering our lives upon the creative, changing force of love.

So in this season, as in every season, come into the peace of wild things. The peace large enough for all our lives – rich in gratitude and grief, full of tragedy and beauty and creative possibility.

Come into the grace of the world, centered in a love that is wild enough to grow.

Then will we sing at last our joyful song of peace.