

"The Journey to Becoming"

Luke 2:41-52

January 20, 2019

Throughout our lives, God's will is made known to us in myriad ways: we may experience the Holy Spirit's call during a time of deep fear, after we wake up from a confusing dream, in a heart-to-heart conversation with a trusted friend, or in a silent quiet time of introspection. The possibilities are endless. No matter how it comes to us though, the Holy Spirit always calls us to journey onward, pointing the way toward wholeness and healing.

As a young man, Jesus heard the Spirit's call and he answered it. From the moment he dedicated his life to God's Word, he spoke and moved in the direction of truth and love. Today's scripture reading may be the first story of Jesus' journey to becoming what God intended for him. Hear what the Spirit is saying to us, the church, in Luke, Chapter 2, beginning at verse 41:

Every year Jesus' parents traveled to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up as they always did for the Feast. When it was over and they left for home, the child Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents didn't know it. Thinking he was somewhere in the company of pilgrims, they journeyed for a whole day and then began looking for him among relatives and neighbors. When they didn't find him, they went back to Jerusalem looking for him.

The next day they found him in the Temple seated among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions. The teachers were all quite taken with him, impressed with the sharpness of his answers. But his parents were not impressed; they were upset and hurt.

His mother said, "Young man, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been half out of our minds looking for you."

He said, "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that I had to be here in my Father's house?" But they had no idea what he was talking about.

So he went back to Nazareth with them and lived obediently with them. His mother held these things dearly, deep within herself. And Jesus matured, growing up in both body and spirit, blessed by both God and people.

Here ends the reading. May God add a blessing to these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

Eighty-three-year-old poet, Mary Oliver, took her last earthly breath this past Thursday. She understood, I think, life's questions, the value of journey, and the peacefulness of mortality. She was entirely comfortable in the questions of life. Her most famous one was this: "*Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?*"

This is her poem, "The Summer Day."

Listen for the playfulness in her inquiry:

Who made the world?

Who made the swan, and the black bear?

Who made the grasshopper?

This grasshopper, I mean-

the one who has flung herself out of the grass,

the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,

who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-

who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.

Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.

Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.

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,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

Miss Oliver was born in 1935. That makes her a contemporary of my parents, and it's a comforting connection. In her career she won both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. In 2007 the New York Times described her as "far and away this country's best-selling poet." She said of her vocation, "Poetry isn't a profession, it's a way of life. It's an empty basket; you put your life into it and make something out of that."

Sometimes, the *Gospel of Luke* reads like poetry. It's an empty basket until we put our lives into it and make something out of it that matters in the world. As Mary Oliver was able to paint images with her writing, Luke has a way of painting images with his stories of Jesus. Take today's story for example. Close your eyes and picture the madhouse scene in Jerusalem around the days of Passover festival in about the year 15 of the common era.

See the muted colors of the clothing of men, women, and children rushing about the Temple Square in flowing robes, sashes and scarves. See excited children splashing about in the water as they run through the

streets, laughing and teasing each other, their parents looking on with watchful, disapproving eyes.

See the Temple. Stalwart, sturdy, made of stone. It has high parapets, lampstands and steps surrounding. The walls are high enough to prevent onlookers from seeing inside. Sounds come out into the crowd from within, for the outer Temple is abuzz with activity.

Priests are busy accepting Temple gifts. Coin boxes are placed all around the square for donations. Animal offerings are being made and the parts of the animals not used in the burnt offerings are consumed by the sojourners at large feasting tables.

The Rabbis and holy men are huddled in corners together discussing the scriptures. Marketeers are busy selling items to the travelers. Some who cannot afford lodging are staking out their nighttime sleeping spots around the outside of the Temple walls where they will be warmer and sheltered from the cold winds.

Can you see it? Can you hear it and smell the aromas? Into this cacophony of human and animal activity, Luke drops a weary couple and their 12-year old son. Joseph and Mary have made their first trip to the Temple, to the center of their faith life, all the way here on foot from Nazareth-- some 65 miles over rough terrain. In tow is Jesus, a boy heretofore unknown to the religious leaders or to the people he would come to know and love intimately.

It's all about the journey. It is personal, and it is corporate at the same time. Mary Oliver writes in her poetry about the juxtaposition of human and natural life. Her early journey was difficult and confusing. She was the childhood victim of sexual and physical assault. The memory and lasting damage of her victimization plagued her for her whole life, causing her to prefer to keep to herself much of the time.

At age 17, she had her sexual awakening as lesbian. In 1952 when she discovered this for herself, she was of course not free in society nor with her family of origin to live her authentic life. Nevertheless, in time she found her Beloved, Molly Malone Cook, her partner for over 40 years until Molly's death early in 2005.

Mary used her writing to overcome her recurring nightmares and to give others the natural world as a salve for what ailed their tortured souls. She said of her journey to becoming the expressive master God called her to be, "I felt those first important connections, those first experiences being made with the natural world rather than with the social world."

Her need was personal. Her journey was a pilgrimage to her own sacred Temple. She came to the place where she would finally, haggard and worn, receive her blessing, an affirmation that her efforts to serve and feed the broken and hungry creation were at last appreciated. Her need was personal, but her gift was universal, communal, corporate.

I wonder if the same Spirit-call that whispered to her whispered to Jesus as he wandered alone lost in all the madness of the Passover festival. The Spirit-call came to Mary Oliver in the form of a question: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Could it have been that same Spirit, the Spirit that found the lost Mary Oliver and gave her home and love and purpose, also found the lost boy Jesus and gave him the same gift?

Luke tells us that Joseph and Mary were in a panic when they couldn't find their son. They searched high and low three days for him, fearing the worst. Had he been kidnapped and thrown in a pit like young Joseph of the ancient times? Had he been taken by wild animals carousing about and attracted to the festival environs by the smells of other animal meat? Had he been conscripted into the army or worse yet, had he decided to leave his mother and father of his own accord?

If you have ever lost a child in a crowded airport or shopping mall, if you have ever lost your pet out into the dangerous and dark night, you know this feeling of unreasonable terror, this knot in the pit of your stomach where your panicked mind conjures up all kinds of scenarios full of gruesome violence and unresolved fear.

Fortunately, almost all the time, your child or pet is found safe and sound and asking you or looking at you like, "What's the big deal?" I can't even imagine those folks who have not had their prayers answered. Many

of them can never love God again, though God loves them still. The journey for some is unbearable.

In this story of Luke's, however, the journey to Jerusalem for young Jesus is just the beginning of his journey. It is the journey of becoming, becoming who he is meant to be. It is a personal journey, but it is also a journey of the community, for Jesus did not live nor die for himself, but instead he was all about the community. When at last located by his parents, he was nonplussed, declaring to them, "I had to be in my Father's house. You should have known to look for me here."

This church is on a journey as well. It started as far back as you are old, for you have been on a pilgrimage your whole lives that has brought you to this place now. You-this church-me—we are all on a journey to becoming what God has in mind for us, what Spirit needs us to be and do. Can you feel it? Can you feel the anticipation as we begin to personally- and corporately, examine the why of what this church is about and what we are doing and adding to what this community of faithful believers is to be about?

Right now, I want you to turn to someone else in the pews and discuss together this question: "Why do you need to be here today?"

Why do I need to be here today? What am I on a journey to become? I wonder if Jesus asked himself this question when he squeezed

himself out of the crowds and made his way into the Temple Square where the religion scholars were talking together. "Why do I need to be here today? What is Spirit calling me to become?"

This might well have been the day Jesus knew what he was to be, what he was to do for God. Maybe his day in the Temple with God was like Mary Oliver's first day with a pen and paper, asking herself what she was to do with her wild and precious life.

She used to get much of her inspiration during her walks in the woods. Eventually, she placed wooden pencils strategically in trees lining her common paths so that if she got an inspiration or a catch-phrase while walking, she could write it down on a small pad she carried.

I think Jesus did this, too, although not with pencils and paper. I think Jesus spoke up in stories and parables and short pronouncements during his walks and talks with his disciples and others. I think the brilliant and salient things he said came to him from the Spirit's inspiration, much like poetry, much like song, like prayer.

His journey was short by our standards. Three years is but a drop in the bucket of time. Yet, his journey to becoming was intense, focused, and guided steadily by his ever-present Holy Spirit.

What will you do with your one wild and precious life?

Mary Oliver wrote a poem she titled, "The Journey." It spoke to me when I read it again-- for the first time-- on Thursday as I thought about her

life, her path, and her calling as a minister to nature in its many forms. What does it say to you?

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice -
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company

as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do -
determined to save
the only life you could save.

May It Be So.