

Aaron Miller
Sunday, January 15, 2017

The American poet, Mary Oliver, has this great line from her poem *Sometimes--* she writes: *Instructions for living a life: Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.* I've been thinking about that line ever since I first read it, not too long ago. Of course, it's the sort of thing only a poet can get away with saying. I mean, honestly, is there not more to life than walking around talking about what astonished us today? And what about all the moments in our days that are decidedly not astonishing? I admit, there are days when I'm astonished that there's *another* email to be answered; or that there's *more* laundry to be folded; or that I have had to scrape my windshield nearly every time I've wanted to drive in the last month, in this land where "we don't really get winter." But I don't know if those things are really worth reporting. In the thick of the everyday, only a poet can get away with suggesting that the basics for living are attention, astonishment and a willingness to share it.

That was the first thing that came to mind when I read that line. The second thing that came to mind is today's gospel passage, which makes me think that the air in poetry-land is maybe not quite so rarified as I'm inclined to think it is. In St. John's company, Ms Oliver's life instructions seem like they might not be as far-fetched as my stunted imagination wants them to be.

It helps that John begins his gospel by rightly focusing our attention. John starts by turning our attention to God. The opening lines of the gospel are a soaring glimpse into the wonder of God--God speaking and creating, God loving and enlivening, God enlightening the darkness, revealing grace and truth. And I tried to make the case on Christmas morning, when we were thinking about John's first

words together, that what is truly astonishing about what he says is the absolute freedom he seems to have when it comes to mingling the things of heaven and earth--the way he weaves them together as though there were never a more natural fit.

If we pay attention, this ought to catch us very much by surprise. That the divine light would shine relentlessly in the dimness and darkness of this world, that the One through whom and for whom all things are made would move into our neighborhood--would become like us so that we can become like him--ought to take our breath away. Still, with so much else to divert our attention--24-hour news and our neighbors' opinions and rising property taxes--I think it's fair to say that most of us are fairly easily persuaded (whether we admit it or not) that there's a time and a place for heavenly things, astonishing things, and it's not always and everywhere.

But John is insistent that there's just not much weight to that claim. He refuses, regardless of where we find ourselves, to let us get away with inattention to the ways and means of God--which have a peculiar, sometimes unnerving, habit of taking shape in the most unlikely of places. It's almost laughable, really. Hard to believe.

Today's story mirrors so much of our shrunken expectations of God. If we'd started a few verses earlier, we'd know that this wasn't the first time that John the Baptist tried to get people to pay attention to the unexpectedness of God. And you'd think he'd have had a decent chance, given that everyone around him had shown up for some more or less religious reason. Most of them were there to be baptized. Some were there because they were full-fledged followers of John; they were his disciples, learning how to be radically attentive to God.

But yesterday, he'd yelled out and pointed at Jesus, and quite possibly jumped up and down, saying, "Look: the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! I saw the Holy Spirit descending on him like a dove, just like I was promised would happen. That's him: the Son of God, the One I've been telling you about!" And evidently, in response to that great revelation, the people did nothing. Because here we are today, and John is saying, to his disciples, again, "Look: the Lamb of God!"

Why didn't anyone move to follow Jesus yesterday? We don't really know, but it's not hard to imagine, having spent my whole life in churches, with folks who are trying to be attentive to God, that the people heard the good news, the news their hearts longed to hear--that God was with them and for them and about to do a new thing in and among them, something more wonderful than they'd dare have imagined--but they couldn't really wrap their heads around the truth of it. Whether it was too good to be true, or to true to be good, the reality that the Way that God was setting the world right was walking right in their midst was more than they could believe, let alone respond to. They apparently paid no attention.

But that was yesterday. Today, although the sermon isn't nearly as flashy, two disciples hear what John says, and they do pay attention. It's only two, which is probably also worth noting, but still. The scales seem to fall off their eyes and they catch a glimpse of what John's going on about. And they sort of creep up behind Jesus, until he asks them what they're after. To which they give an answer that is so profoundly unrehearsed that it's just delightful. The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, says, "What can I do for you, boys?" and they say: "Uh...Where are you staying?" These are clearly not the best and the brightest. I think Jesus laughed, and, never short on attention or astonishment or grace, he begins the pattern for living, saying: "Come and see."

That starts a chain reaction that seems to be all running and skipping and breathlessness as the disciples start telling what they've seen and heard. Peter is gathered in and renamed. Philip is next, and then it's his turn to run off in wonder to tell Nathanael.

I like Nathanael very much. Nathanael: who is sure of his world, minding his business, sitting under his fig tree. I think there's a clue to the man, in that image. To sit under a fig tree is an Old Testament image of satisfaction and well-being. A fellow sitting under his fig tree has the world on a string. Life is good. It's a lovely image.

But John seems to be drawing our attention to the fact that certainty and satisfaction aren't the be all and end all of a life of attentive astonishment at the ways and means of God. We hear it in Nathanael's response to Philip. It's not clear whether he's being funny or incredulous, but either way, he's disbelieving. Forget the Messiah--can *anything* good come from Nazareth? From his fig-tree vantage it's hard to imagine that even God could make something of a place like that, let alone live there.

But there's something in Philip's astonishment, in his wonder at what he's seen and heard, that is enough to get old Nate up and moving again. And then it's his turn to be astonished. Suddenly, at the feet of the One who forever defies our expectations and our limitations, who knows us better than we know ourselves and longs for more for us than we would ever ask, Nathanael's fig tree isn't so important. It's hard to imagine him heading back to his spot of certainty and satisfaction when he's begun to see the astonishing ways of God for this world.

Nathanael's wonder leads us to the last sentence of our reading, Jesus' promise that "You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." And what is especially important here, is that the "you" in it is plural. This isn't just for self-sure Nathanael. All of a sudden it feels very much like Jesus is talking not just to him, or to the handful of unlikely disciples around him, but to all of us unlikely disciples in every generation who are ready to give up our preferred teachers (like Andrew and the unnamed disciple), our long-held identities (like Peter), whatever our day-to-day expectations (like Philip), even our certainties and our comforts, our fig trees, in order to pay attention to God who is willing and able to do more than we can ask or imagine, to be astonished by the unexpected intricacies of grace, and to share our wonder with the world.

I feel like I might be headed into poetry-land again.

Which is ok--clearly prose doesn't always lift the gospel luggage. Nevertheless, the fact is, we're all going to leave here and head back into complicated lives, where it would be nice to have time for the "unexpected intricacies of grace," and the kind of wonder that had those first disciples dropping everything to follow Jesus. But I know that it's just not as straightforward to do as it is to preach. It's easy for me to say: go pay attention to the ways and means of God and be shaped by astonishment and tell people. And even as I say it, I have to be honest and admit that I've got quite a lot of other stuff to do.

And then I think, as I often do, of G K Chesterton's claim that "the Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it's been found difficult and left untried." And the truth is, John's not telling us this stuff so that we'll have an inspirational story, or a bit of spiritual poetry, now and again--he's telling us to get our attention,

so that we might come to believe--to trust and to know that God really is living and active in all the ins and outs of our days--and in believing, that we might have *life* in Jesus' name (John 20:31). Not less life--more life! John is as convinced as St. Paul that whatever we do or say, it can be done in Jesus' name and to the glory of God--and if it can't be, that should raise some questions (Colossians 3:17).

I wonder what would happen if we really allowed ourselves to be convinced of it, too. Here's a practical thought. It's so straightforward and practical that it's almost boring. What if we started our days, not with the news or Facebook or email or our day-planners, or anything else, but with Scripture and prayer? What if we took the risk--even if it costs us our fig trees--of *starting* with attention to God, not fitting God in to our plans and expectations? If you don't know where to start, take a chance and ask someone. If you already do that, what if you added 15 minutes of prayer? Maybe spread that 15 minutes over the course of the day?

I bet we'd begin to see, more and more, that the dividing line between heaven and earth isn't quite as thick as we've been lead to believe. In fact, in Jesus, it's become astonishingly thin. Like Nathanael, we wouldn't settle anymore for a moment or two of spiritual wonder in the midst of a more or less satisfying life, but we'd begin to see, to know, to live, to sing and to share all the hope, peace, joy and love of God on earth as in heaven.

That would be astonishing.

Amen.