

Christmas Day 2016

Christmas is a humane and human holy day; it marks a birth and reminds us of other births and the tender feelings we have for one new and helpless.

Our Christmas traditions are warm and domestic and soften us.

Our traditions render God gentle and near and thus do bring us toward the story that is at the center,

of God entering the creation through the life of a family.

I've bored a few of you with my newfound enthusiasm for the poet Mary Oliver.

I noticed her name in an article making fun of sermons by Episcopal priest.

The article said you can tell a sermon is by one of us if it quotes Martin Luther King, Jr., Wendell Berry, and Mary Oliver, and fails to say much about Jesus.

I hoped that did not reflect my preaching and wondered who this poet that many of my colleagues apparently appreciate.

I found in her poetry many things I have loved to read.

She is something of a nature mystic, a spiritual person, but there is no trace of any explicitly Christian consciousness in her poetry.

Maybe she knew the Lord in her youth.

She offers something to us, however, as we try to sense what the good news of the word becoming flesh means.

For her worship of nature shows us what it means to worship a God who took flesh, if we have forgotten, if we have become so virtual, so spiritual, so cognitive, that we forget that God took a body and showed us himself in Jesus Christ.

She writes in the poem *Wild Geese* "You do not have to be good.

You do not have to walk on your knees [f]or a hundred miles through the desert, repenting. You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves...Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting --over and over announcing your place in the family of things."

The world, she says, offers itself to your imagination, the world calls to you in the geese, announcing your place in the family of things.

If I were not a Christian, this would be sufficient for me, this consciousness that I am another animal,

that I belong to the earth, am part of a great membership of all things,

that I will enjoy my season of life and return to the earth

of which my body and even my consciousness are formed.

The attraction of a nature spirituality has moved more than one person in our world in recent years and through the centuries.

Paganism, the worship of the creation, is the default mode, of human religion. It is what we all fall into without divine revelation, if God does not seize our consciousness and direct us to God's own self, which is apart from the wonders of creation.

This then is how wonderful God is, that God seems to have realized us about this, that we are inclined to worship the creation, rather than the Creator, that we are charmed and claimed by the wild geese, the sunset, the birth and death of every living thing.

And in God's infinite wisdom and plan, God chose to enter into that creation we are inclined to worship, by the birth of a man child in Israel 2000 years ago.

The Word became flesh and dwelled among us, and people fell at his feet and worshiped and said: My Lord and my God.

His speaking was clearer than the calls of the wild geese, his invitation to love of God and neighbor was the explicit, verbal invitation to the membership in creation that is hinted at all around us.

His death and resurrection made clear the means of forgiveness by which we can truly love the world and hope for a world to come.

All this in a body as inclined as ours is to encounter the joy and delight of the created order.

It is as though God said, "Ah, you need something physical? You are delighted by flesh? I can do that!"

This is a crucial thing to recognize about heresy, departure from traditional Christian belief, say for instance, a nature spirituality:

it has truth in it and often great comfort as well.

But it cannot fully satisfy.

The wild geese and sunset may help us be comfortable with the world and even with death,

but they do not teach us moral excellence; they do not offer us eternal life.

Christ, the word made flesh, wins our hearts as a member of the creation and then offers life in a new creation.

Let me rewrite *Wild Geese* "You do not have to be good.

You do not have to walk on your knees [f]or a hundred miles through the desert, repenting. You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves, the Christ...Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, God offers himself to your imagination, calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting --over and over announcing your place in the Kingdom."

The very life of the creation bears the imprint of the creator and the savior and points us back to him.