

Life That Flourishes
John 1:14-16

From *A Poem for My Daughter*,
By Teddy Macker

It seems we have made pain
some kind of mistake,
like having it
is somehow wrong.

Don't let them fool you—
pain is a part of things.

But remember, dear Ellie,
the compost down in the field:
if the rank and dank and dark
are handled well, not merely discarded,
but turned and known and honored,
they one day come to bed rich earth
home to even the most delicate rose.

God comes to you disguised as your life.
Blessings often arrive as trouble.

Life is easy, yes.
And life is hard.
Life is simple, yes.
And life is complex.
We are tough, yes. But we are also fragile.
Everything's eternally perfect
but help out if you can.

To love everything, not just parts...
to love all of yourself, not just certain traits...
to rest in not knowing...

To carry the cross
and lay your burden down...

To be a Christ unto others,
a Christ unto one's self...

To laugh...

To be shameless, wild, and silly...

To know—fully, headlong,
without compunction—the ordinary magic
of our beautiful human bodies...

These seem worthwhile pursuits, life-long tasks.

Eden is.
The imperfect is our paradise.
All is grace.

Sermon

All this fall, we've been talking about our new vision statement. Connection, compassion, courage—the values that we believe shape us as a community of faithful people. The values that we think will carry us into the next years to keep us, more and more, acting, living, as partners in God's hope. God's hope not only for ourselves, but for the communities we live and work in. And what is that hope that God has for us and for everyone? Flourishing. Life that is not just OK, more than just surviving. Flourishing.

Last week we had Grace Imathiu here with us. If you weren't here last Sunday, I hope you'll take the time to listen to her sermon in our online archives. She's a dynamic, wonderful preacher, and I think she caught—for many of us—a truth about our lives that we rarely name.

Grace talked about exile. For the ancient people of Israel it was literal exile from their homeland, because military invaders destroyed their cities and marched them into a foreign land. This was the Babylonians' conscious strategy with conquered people: not to destroy them, but to drain them gradually of their identity, to keep them displaced from home until they forgot who they were. For us it's more likely to be a metaphorical exile—a sense of not belonging; almost as if your home, the place where you feel understood and you understand, has left you.

The truth is, we all know something about how that feels.

Whether it's because an invading army has come and thrown you out of your home, or because the world is changing so fast you can't keep up, or you're just missing the way things used to be, most of us know something of that feeling of exile. It is part of the human condition.

Being in exile does not feel like flourishing.

“How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?” the people of Israel cried when they were exiles in Babylon.

How can our lives flourish when so much in this world seems wrong, out of place, frightening?

What is God's vision of flourishing in a world that feels like that?

How has God ever responded to his creation's protest that things are not as they should be?

I think we heard it this morning in those few verses from the Gospel of John, words we often read right around Christmastime.

*The Word (meaning the presence of God) became flesh
and made his home among us.*

In another translation of the Bible (*The Message*):

*The Word became flesh and blood,
and moved into the neighborhood.*

This is what God did when God came to live on the earth in human form, in the person we call Jesus: God moved into the neighborhood. Your neighborhood. The place where you live. God comes and settles in in the place that sometimes feels more like exile than it does like home. This is where God has chosen to live. God comes and sees this imperfect, even strange, place that is so not what it's supposed to be, and God says, "Yeah, this will be fine for me. I'm moving in."

Why? Because you're there. Wherever you are, however unkempt or dangerous or devoid of beauty your world seems to you: that's where God has decided to live.

And does it help, to have God living next door to you? We pray, all the time, for God to be present with us. "God, please be with my mother who is sick, or my friend who grieves, or my child who is taking a test today. Be present in our worship, and in our meetings. Be with me as I go into this presentation, or this interview, or this difficult conversation."

I will tell you honestly, I have wondered sometimes whether we ask only for God's presence because we don't really believe that God can do anything else. Whether we ask for God to be with someone who is sick rather than ask for healing because we're hedging our bets, just in case God really can't do anything quite that powerful or effective.

But it might be my wondering that is misplaced, even a little naive. I think I might have sold short the power of presence, and especially God's presence. It's the Franciscan priest Richard Rohr who has reshaped my thinking about this. There's a mystery in presence, he says, something that happens when someone is willing to come alongside of you in authentic relationship, and when you allow yourself to be influenced by the other's nearness, changed by it. "The self-disclosure of one evokes a deeper life in the other," Father Rohr says.¹ God's presence, God's willingness to be vulnerable enough to get down on the floor of human life with me, changes me. Pulls out of me some strength, or patience, or courage that I had no idea was there.

Let me see if I can show you what I mean. I want you to take a look at this video. It's taken with a handheld cell phone in a crowded theater, so the quality isn't great, but I think you'll be able to see what's happening. It's a ballet recital, the kind I spent many hours at when my

¹ Richard Rohr, *Things Hidden*, p. 64

daughter Stacey was little. Keep your eye on the two-year-old ballerina on the far left, who is wailing from the moment she walks out onto the stage.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idq6_SWjMIQ

Did you see what that dad did? He came alongside his daughter. Danced with her. He didn't pull her off the stage and say "You don't have to do this." He didn't empty the theater so she wouldn't have to face her fear of performing in front of a crowd. He also didn't get in front of her and try to coach her, tell her again to be strong, muscle through. No. He did something simpler, and much more God-like. He came and he danced next to her. He stood with her and twirled and pointed his toe and pliéed right alongside of her, right there on that stage that had seemed terrifying, impossible, just a moment before.

And did you see what happened to that little girl when her dad came and reached his hand out to hold hers and to dance along with her? She started to dance too. It turned out she did know when to put her right foot out, and then her left. She remembered what she'd been taught about when to circle up with the other dancers. She stopped looking at that scary roomful of people, because she was looking at him. She became a ballerina. She flourished.

That's the power of presence. The complete, vulnerability-risking, self-giving of one pulls out some deeper and more capable life in the other. God's presence calls something out of us that maybe was there all along, but it got buried—under layers of fear, or sadness, or shame, or not knowing what to do next. That's what it means for God to move into the neighborhood with us. It's not just so that we'll have better neighbors. It's because the presence of God next to us—just like that dad who danced—draws out of us everything we need to get through whatever terrifying situation is in front of us. So that we can flourish, even in a world that sometimes feels like exile.

But living a life of faith isn't only about finding our own flourishing. What we say in our vision statement is that we believe God's great hope for the world is that life will flourish for *everyone*. Because God doesn't move into only the good neighborhoods, or just the church's neighborhood. God isn't even limited to the neighborhoods where people believe in him. God moves into *every neighborhood*. Lives alongside of people whether they are looking for God or not. God wants every life to flourish.

In our vision statement we're saying we want to be part of making that hope a reality in this place, in this community. How do we do that? What does God's work of making life flourish for everyone look like?

It looks like this. (Image: dad holding daughter's hand) It looks like holding hands with someone who is doing a hard thing. It looks like a sustained connection, and actions that stretch our hearts wider than they've ever had to go before, having the courage to take meaningful risks. It looks like living in one another's presence. Dancing together in those moments that feel frightening, and too hard.

But you want to hear something even better? I don't think we have to be the Dad in that video. You don't have to know all the dance moves. You don't have to be strong enough or big enough to lead someone else through the choreography of their life. You just have to be this person. (Image: baby in father's arms) Someone who's willing to stay close and let God carry you into the scary places where presence is needed. It's the three of them together that got through that dance with grace. This picture reminds me of all the times one of my little sisters made me powerful just by being my wing-man. Sometimes that's all we need. Sometimes that's all that is needed from us.

Stay close. Stay present. Especially in the hard moments. So life can flourish...for everyone.