

Meredith Jeremiah

For the Earth

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The Wendell Berry poem I just read, the *Peace of Wild Things*, is a classic in my family. I can hear the words clearly in my mother's voice and could probably recite it almost from memory I've heard it so many times. This poem is one that I remember hearing in times of trouble throughout my childhood, when people were afraid. We heard it at church after 9/11. In 2008, when financial anxiety wound its way through the pews like a ghost. And just generally when things felt like too much for people to handle. I could see as a kid that these words seemed to bring the adults some kind of visible comfort. But it has taken me years to understand exactly why. We'll come back to this, I promise.

I've realized, sitting up here this past month, that we are still getting to know each other, you and I. You might be curious about me, about who I am. And, to be honest, I am curious about you too. It takes time to build relationships and connections, but I want to share with you this morning a bit about who I am, what brings me here, and where I have been on the journey that brought me to your door. My hope is that this will be an invitation, an opening, a starting point for us to build a relationship this year. In that spirit, I begin.

When I was 23, so about 5 years ago now, right around this time of year, I moved to rural Arkansas to live and work on a ranch. I would lead outdoor education programs about hunger and poverty, and care for the animals that lived there. Now, let me make sure and say right up front, this was not part of "the plan." I am, or at least used to be, someone who likes to make plans and stick to them. I like things to go a

certain way and to be prepared. Mary Oliver's poem, *I Worried*, feels like it was written for me personally, although I suspect many of you can relate to it too. She writes,

"I worried a lot. Will the garden grow, will the rivers flow in the right direction, will the earth turn as it was taught and if not, how shall I correct it?" Mary cuts right to the heart of it here, the idea that we might be able to control things so rhythmic, so natural, so much beyond even our understanding is laughable. But at 23, this was exactly how I felt. I was working at a high school in the same town where I had graduated and just feeling generally stuck. My life lacked direction, and I had no idea what I was doing. I felt like I should be able to control everything in my life. That I should have gotten the perfect job right out of college that combined my passions with the ability to be totally financially independent. I felt ashamed of where I was and the direction

my life was going. Honestly, at 23 it felt like I had already kind of failed. Though I always knew this, it took a while to really sink in that no person is perfect or has a perfect life. Now, looking back with some perspective I can see that really I was exactly where I needed to be. One thing lead to another, that lead me to where I am right now. But I couldn't see that then. And so, I spent that time desperately seeking. Seeking connection with others, with something greater than myself, seeking what I would now call God but couldn't then name.

I'm sure most of us can relate to this right? Uncertainty has no age bracket, and can strike us all at any time. This feeling of wondering, who am I? And what am I put on this planet to do? What is my purpose or calling? These are questions people have been asking since the beginning of time. And I'm not sure anyone has really figured it out, at

least in this lifetime. It can be painful, difficult, scary, this uncertainty. It definitely doesn't feel good, does it? But I think sometimes we need to sit with these feelings to really understand what might be happening below the surface, and the lessons to be learned all around us.

But Mary Oliver has more wisdom for us in her poem. She continues, "Was I right? Was I wrong? Will I be forgiven, can I do better? Will I ever be able to sing, even the sparrows can do it and I am, well, hopeless. Is my eyesight fading or am I just imagining it, am I going to get rheumatism, lockjaw, dementia? Finally, I saw that worrying had come to nothing. And gave it up. And took my old body and went out into the morning and sang." It took a while before I was able to heed Mary Oliver's advice, but once I did I was incredibly grateful.

The thing was, I had already felt the call to ministry. In the background I already kind of knew which direction I might need to be going. I was just too busy trying to ignore it, not listening to God. I was 15 when I first felt it, very young. It was a Sunday morning, just like any other really. My Dad, my siblings and I are sitting in the sanctuary of our church. Windows surround us as we sit in the pews so I can see the green of the trees outside, so close I almost feel as if I am within them. I feel surrounded and held. My dad makes us go to church every Sunday to hear my mom, and honestly I don't really want to be there. I couldn't tell you for the life of me what the sermon was about, or much else for that matter. But I do remember watching my mother in the pulpit and I remember feeling something. A pull, kind of like a magnet towards metal.

But I also felt something else. There was fear there, and I felt my veins run cold at the idea of speaking from a pulpit. And so, I buried this feeling, what I would come to know as my call, down deep where it could not see the light of day. I felt the call again around the time I graduated from college. It was stronger this time, so much so that I even found myself on my computer looking at the credentialing process for ministry, and then promptly slamming my laptop shut thinking, “That’s way too much, I can’t do this.”

Famous transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau writes, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately.” Well, I wasn’t sure about the woods or even living deliberately for that matter, but I was definitely about to try something different. And so, I arrived in Perryville, Arkansas deeply uncertain of both myself and what I would find there. I didn’t know it yet but the Earth would be my teacher.

Frederick Buechner, Presbyterian minister and theologian writes in his book *Listening to Your Life*:

“At its heart, I think, religion is mystical. Moses with his flocks in Midian, Buddha under the Bo tree, Jesus up to his knees in the waters of Jordan: each of them responds to something for which words like shalom, oneness, God even, are only pallid alphabetic slurs. “I have seen things,”

Aquinas told a friend. Religion as institution, as ethics, as dogma, all of this comes later and in the long run maybe counts for less. Religions start, as Frost poems do, with a lump in the throat, to put it mildly, or with the bush going up in flames, the rain of flowers, the dove coming down out of the sky.”

As the leaves on the tree outside my window changed, the hot Arkansas summer turned to a cool fall with mist over the



valley each morning, Buechner's words began to ring true for me. Life took on a sort of monastic rhythm dictated by the needs of the animals I was looking after and the people I was teaching. Rising with the sun, I eventually learned to do things like milking goats, building fences and planting trees. And I gained confidence speaking and teaching in front of people.

As I let myself open to new friends and experiences, the world as I had known it before expanded before my eyes. I got up to watch the sunrise every morning and drink coffee on the porch with my friends, and I stepped quickly across cattle guards. I began to realize that a slow walk on the rocky paths and through the woods could be a prayer. In the way the sunset shone through the tallest pine trees I'd ever seen, I felt the connection I had been longing for all this time. And I met people who would change the course of my life forever. I

watched my best friends fall in love, and I met the friend who would, a couple years later, introduce me to my husband. I began to develop my own personal theology deeply rooted in that place. God, or something larger than us, is at work in the world. We are all a part of an interconnected web of existence. And later, I would add, that all we have is today. Tomorrow is, in fact, not promised.

After a while I was overwhelmed by a sense of gratitude to be right there, in that place. Where time slowed down and I was surrounded by open spaces. Where I found the stillness I needed to figure out who I was and what I believed and to listen to the call that was still there, pulling less gently this time. It had become a serious yank.

The Earth had been my teacher all this time.

Not everything was sunshine and roses though. That place also saw me through deep pain. I spent the holidays

that year with my Uncle Jack in the hospital, and later grieving his early death at 53, my first big loss. I returned to the ranch raw, hurting, and in need of healing. I knew that that place was not yet through with me.

As I worked through grief my appreciation for the life I was living deepened even further. It became clear to me just how very short life is and how much of the sacred can be found in the ordinary parts of life. Though I was in the pain of loss, nature's rhythms continued, and in early spring everyone was excited about the impending arrival of new goat kids and lambs. Outside of milking the goats, I hadn't had a ton of contact with them on a daily basis. I was definitely still learning how to care for them and was still a bit fearful of somehow hurting or mishandling them. I had begun slowly venturing into their pens, petting them gently and being still with them. Each week was more and more

comfortable. Even though I loved them, I was still fairly uncomfortable and would definitely avoid any of the pregnant goats. Around this time of year everyone at the ranch was on high alert for signs of labor. Late one evening, after everyone else had returned to their houses for the day, I was in the pen with one of my friends helping him to check on some of the goats when I heard one make an unusual noise. “How do we know again if a goat is in labor?” The words were barely out of my mouth when I saw a goat kid fall from the mother who had cried out in pain. In that moment I was paralyzed with fear. He ran over and began checking to make sure the baby was breathing, that the mother was okay and to see if there were more waiting to be born. He looked at me standing there, so afraid and yet mesmerized by what lay before me. “You either need to help me or go get someone right now.” I thought about it for a minute feeling

that familiar feeling of fear but also of being called upon. I decided I was ready. “Okay, what can I do?” I got the supplies and we cut the umbilical cords together, dipping them in iodine to prevent infection. There were 3 kids born that night. We weighed each baby and brought extra grain to the mother. We made sure that all three of them had a chance to nurse before we headed up the hill to go home. Though shaken, I knew that that night I had witnessed a spark of the divine.

The Earth was my teacher.

Later that year, I would lose my adoptive grandparents, Grandma Juanita and Grandpa Herman just three months apart. When my mother’s parents died young, they became like parents to her and were grandparents to me and my siblings. Through the fresh pain of these new losses, there

was also support from friends and still joy and appreciation for the life I was living. I also knew that I was ready to accept the call to ministry. The way I saw it, life was short and this feeling of call was not going away. Somehow I just knew I was on the right path. And so I began taking steps toward divinity school.

So, here I am before you this morning. While there are some unique things about my story, I know it is not so individual, and the earth is certainly not my teacher alone, but all of ours. I have heard your prayers these past few weeks, and I know that so many, if not every one of you, shares this same deep connection to the world around us. And so, let us turn back to the words of Wendell Berry. I said at the beginning that it has taken me a long time to understand why his words are so comforting, but I think I can finally explain it now. There is so much to worry about in

this world, to keep us awake at night, to create that tightness in our chests that anxiety can bring. But, there is also so much peace. The still water, the day-blind stars, the mist covered valley, the autumn leaves. There are places to rest in the grace of the world, and to be free. May it be so. Amen.