



Interrupted by Delight

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church
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This past week my family was in Florida, and I realize it's a little obnoxious to be talking about being in Florida to those of you in Minnesota who have continued to endure particularly snowy winter. But I hope you'll forgive me because I need to talk about it. My family and I had the incredible experience of getting to see a surprisingly huge array of wildlife. We saw alligators, and pelicans, sharks, dolphins, gopher turtles, black racer snakes, bald eagles, osprey, swallow-tailed kites, seagulls. But two wildlife encounters especially moved me. The first was that early one morning, my husband came in from the dock where he'd been hanging out to tell me there were manatee in the water. So we went outside and watched what appeared to be a mother and baby, gracefully moving through the water, surfacing to breathe, diving to feed, for nearly an hour. It was breathtaking. The irony was that I had just mentioned a few days earlier that I didn't think manatee were the most beautiful creatures in nature, yet I found them captivating watching them live.

The second encounter was that along my morning run, a passerby pointed out these small burrowing owls on the ground in the field next to the sidewalk. There were two of them, and it looked like one was sitting on a nest, while the other hissed at us ferociously. The next day, when I ran by again, only one owl was there, perched on a stick on the ground, and he just watched me without moving or hissing. It looked like his mate and their eggs were gone. And he did not show any fear of me, but he also didn't move from keeping vigil at his post. In my imagination, he was being loyal

and waiting for his mate and their eggs, even though these were probably victims of the osprey who were also nesting nearby. He wouldn't even move to protect himself from me.

Whatever it was that we thought we were there in Florida to do, again and again, the beauty of the natural world and the nonhuman beings who live in it intruded into our awareness. These moments were usually an interruption of something else we were in the middle of doing, like pausing my morning run to watch the burrowing owls nest on the ground, or getting out of the water because sharks were feeding nearby, or foregoing morning prayer to go check out the manatees. It was such a gift to be interrupted. It was a gift to get outside my habitual ways of thinking and acting to simply delight in the incredible diversity and magic of the created order. Slowly over the course of the week I felt myself being sort of subtly knocked off-center, because I could see these creatures for themselves. The manatee was taking care of her calf. The burrowing owl would not leave its vigil or even protect itself from me, waiting for its mate. It was a gift to be knocked off-center, to realize that neither I nor the human race are the center of the universe, but that we share it with countless gorgeous diverse creatures. In fact I was so moved by this that it put me in mind of what Doug Mensing shared with me before I left, which is that the national Episcopal Church has invited people to a Lenten pledge to care for creation using specific acts we choose as individuals. It's one thing to care for creation out of a sense of obligation or duty or even fear, fear of climate change and a world that seems totally out of control. But it's another thing to care for creation because you can't believe how beautiful a mother manatee is with her baby, and you experience that creatures are not objects, but subjects with majesty and beauty in their own right.

The reason I've told you this story is because I see it as an example of the spiritual practice that we focus on most during lent, which is turn. I suspect most of us have imagined that "turn" is primarily about repentance – as in,

turning away from things that don't lead to life. Saying no to things out of guilt or an honest acknowledgment that they aren't working any more. And that can be part of what "turn" is about. But I think "turning" is at least as much about what one is turning toward: toward wonder, and delight, and the capacity to be interrupted by these things. In today's scripture reading, God spoke to Moses out of the bush, which moved Moses to turn aside, to be interrupted out of business as usual to see this great sight. In the Hebrew the sense is of a sight that takes your breath away, that utterly captivates you. Moses allowed himself to be interrupted to become captivated by something. And God spoke to him out of the middle of that delight. And then God called him to become more fully who he already was: a Hebrew who couldn't stand injustice, who wanted his people to be free, but whose own efforts to create justice had only ended up making him a criminal in exile. God called him to turn aside, sure, but it was to turn toward something. It was to turn toward the God whose name is "I will become what I will become," a God whose being is a verb, and who sees and hears and knows and cares about the oppressed.

You and I might think we are never going to have epiphanies like the bush that was burning and was not consumed, where God speaks to us in that way. But I suspect the opposite is true. I suspect that God wants to interrupt us with beauty, with amazement and joy and curiosity. I think God wants us to be moved and interrupted by delight, and by the gifts that God has already given us in spades. These never leave us self-absorbed and detached; they lead us to care for the world God so loves.

The little book we are using as a Lenten devotional speaks about the practice "turn" in this way multiple times, like the home decorator who is passionate about bark. If you haven't begun, the book is still available out in the gathering space. There is joy and power in turning toward life. And this is a needed and refreshing take on the real meaning of repentance, especially for lent. Turning is not so much depriving yourself as trusting

that the change of direction God invites you to is something you were born for, something that begins with curiosity and joy and an encounter with the God who is a verb, who is involved, who sees, hears, knows, and comes to us.

The practice of turning is one we make over and over again. Sometimes it's big picture direction changes, like a change in job or a willingness to face addiction or renewing or ending a relationship that needs change or becoming a vegetarian. Sometimes it's about the everyday, like choosing to make time to be soulful, to be silent in the presence of God so that you can be nourished. Turning can be about saying yes to your child when she asks to play with you, or choosing to listen with your full attention and set aside judgment. Turning is choosing the practices of the way of Jesus as the shape of your life instead of letting your life run on autopilot: get up, go to work, cook dinner, do a little email, try to squeeze out a few minutes for your family, then sink into Netflix till you can fall asleep, repeat. The practices of the way of Jesus are a potent, mindful and joyful alternative to this.

So this week I'd invite you to notice what catches your attention in wonder and delight, and allow yourself to be interrupted, to turn toward that delight. How might you follow the way of Jesus from this place of wonder? How does that delight impact the rest of your life and ministry in the world? How does it change the tone and motivation of what you do? At first this might seem like a lot of "squirrel"! moments. But you know, a dog is born to chase squirrels. We are born to take delight in all life, in all the natural world, and to care for that world and the beings in it from a place of delight. This is the Beloved Community. May we embody that community with the natural order and everything and everyone in it. Amen.