

“Many Things on Our Minds”
June 23, 2024

Song of Solomon 2:10-13
Mark 13: 28-31

As I said during the announcements, this is “Picnic Sunday”—again, not a real day on the calendar of the church year, although maybe it should be. And it occurred to me as I wrote this sermon that if this were an outdoor worship service before a picnic, it would be short—a minister can’t say much outside, because a congregation can’t hear much outside.

So, let me get on with this.

On this beautiful summer morning, as the sun shines upon us after yesterday’s downpours, recall again those words from the Song of Solomon:

The winter is past!
The rains are over and gone;
the flowers appear in the countryside;
the season of birdsong is come...
the green figs ripen on the fig trees
and the vine blossoms give forth their fragrance.

Bill and Marie have nurtured our hearts with the music of Dvorak this morning, so let us linger with the composer a little longer.

When asked about his training in music, Dvorak said that he had studied with the “birds, flowers, myself, and God.” They do it a little differently down at the corner of Burlington and Clinton, but maybe Dvorak understood something deeper.

Perhaps he read the Song of Solomon.

The season of birdsong is come.

The flowers appear in the countryside.

Whether we are composers or not, these summer days invite us to consider again the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. Along with Dvorak, we are called to open our hearts that we might better know ourselves and better know God.

It’s especially appropriate for us in Iowa to listen to Dvorak in these months. After all, it was in the summer of 1893, when the composer, world renowned, teaching in New York, and desperately homesick for his native Bohemia, traveled west to Spillville, Iowa, a small town made up almost entirely of Czech immigrants. There he wrote both his “American Quartet” and his “American Quintet,” and put the finishing touches on the majestic symphony he titled *From the New World*.

Nathan Beacom tells us that “the music Dvorak made in America dealt with the joy of home, but equally with the universal human feelings of loneliness, estrangement, and longing for a place to fit in. ...Music was a way of knitting our souls back together with the world and the God who first composed it.”

As the summer begins, then, we can rejoice that in this community we have found a place where we fit. And having found such a place, we as we open our doors wide to invite others inside—that belonging might replace of their own loneliness and estrangement. This is the generous liberalism of this congregation: welcoming others into community and holding fast to our values.

As the summer begins, with song and prayer, we join with all the world around us and give thanks to God, the Great Composer, who is always creating something new in us and in the world.

In a sense, summer rejoicing and thanksgiving come easily for Congregationalists. One of the distinguishing features of Congregational hymnals is the number hymns on the subject of changing seasons. When we sing, we take note of the cycles of the moon and the earth as we move around the sun.

Such hymns are an echo of our past, rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures that praise God for appointing “the moon to mark the seasons.” Our faith has long recognized that the seasons change and we change as well. Each new season brings new opportunities and new challenges and our hymns suggest that we can understand something of the Holy One through the natural world as it progresses through the year.

The summer offers us a wonderful opportunity to slow down, to look around, and to see one another and encounter God once more. If we feel like we are missing something in our lives—missing deep relationships, missing ourselves, missing God—what better time to start the search once more.

The summer offers most of us the chance to get outdoors more comfortably and for longer periods of time. Warmer weather, more daylight hours make it seem as though there is a little more time available and that we can go places that are not as accessible during other parts of the year.

The summer gives us the opportunity to let nature tell us about itself and about its Creator. Hear the message that there is a season for everything and a time for every purpose under heaven.

We’re not naïve about this, of course. Not everything that we discover will be pleasant. Nature will also tell you, if you listen and look long enough, that all things must pass, that we will die.

Even if we’re not natives, most of us have lived in Iowa long enough to know that when the summer days come again, they bring with them the destructive power of tornadoes, storms, floods, and derechos. A few times already this year, the sirens have sounded and we headed to the basement—with the exception of those who for some reason hear those sirens as a signal to go outside and look for the approaching storm.

The changing seasons in all their beauty remind us that the life of faith is lived with an ongoing awareness of both the providential care of God and the challenges of the natural and the human world. There is a kind of vigilance that is needed to recognize the care that surrounds us in the midst of the challenges that confront us. Perhaps we need to be alert even on lazy summer afternoons.

As searched the scriptures, I was surprised to find that so many of the references to the summer in the Bible often suggest a downside to this season. In a hot and arid land, however, this might be expected.

Jesus, talking with his followers about the coming upheaval, the end of the age, suggests the signs of the end will be like the coming of summer. “You see the leaves on the fig tree, you know summer is near.” Watch! Needing to choose a season that could be a portent of doom, Jesus chose the summer.

A prayer from the Iona Community in Scotland tells of our summer situation: “We acknowledge the many things on our minds, and the concerns we carry with us into worship today.”

We come to worship in the summer as not only the weather but also the presidential campaign season heats up. Republicans move toward what the former President calls “a horrible city” as Democrats move toward a city where the former mayor once famously said during another convention that the police were there to “preserve disorder”—and once again, there will probably be a lot of disorder to preserve. Long days of this season might simply give us more time to fret about the coming election.

This summer we carry concerns about the ongoing wars in Ukraine and Gaza with us to worship. If we are alert, also on our minds is the horrendous famine in Sudan, so ignored by the media.

Many things are on our minds.

We are aware of turmoil and suffering—in the world, in our lives. St. Augustine put it well when he said that “there are days when the burdens we carry are heavy on our shoulders and weigh us down, when the road seems dreary and endless, the skies gray and threatening, when our hearts are lonely, and our souls have lost their courage and our lives have no music in them.”

You’ve probably felt like that at times, haven’t you? My sense is that a lot of people have been feeling that way in recent months.

Of Iowa, Dvorak wrote: “It is wild here and sometimes very sad.”ⁱ The vastness of the prairie, the expanse of the fields was overwhelming—but the people welcomed and restored him. So here in the New World as he did in the Old, he would write “thanks be to the Lord God” at the end of each of his compositions.

It is summer. It is still wild here in Iowa. And it can still be sad, or troubling, or filled with worry about tomorrow. We have many things on our minds.

Still, we have the flowers and the birds.

We have one another.

And we are all held in the love of God in every season.

ⁱ Nathan Beacom, “When Dvořák Went to Iowa to Meet God,” *Plough*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/culture/music/when-dvorak-went-to-iowa-to-meet-god>