

Nutana Park Mennonite Church

Summer Vesper Service

June 24, 2021

Musical Meditation: “Be Still and Know” VT #37

Welcome and Introduction

[Patrick] My name is Patrick Preheim, co-pastor of Nutana Park Mennonite Church. On behalf of Nutana Park Mennonite I extend a warm welcome to those who are gathering this evening virtually for a worship service which will include readings and music reflecting creation, summer, and the close of day. Vesper and Evensong services are not a part of this congregation’s tradition, or Mennonite communities more broadly, but there can be something quite moving about coming together in worship to reflect on the seasons and the day we have just lived. In April we did something on a Spring theme. The project was well enough received we decided on having something similar in these long days of Summer.

I would like to thank those who are assisting with the service this evening: Jeff Olfert and Don Froese at the a.v. posts; Edna Froese who compiled the written offerings and is also a reader; Fern Stockdale-Winder and Dean Stockdale who are assisting with accompaniment and singing.

In this week which has included National Indigenous Peoples Day it is particularly important to acknowledge that we are gathering on the traditional territory of Indigenous peoples. We give thanks to Creator, and to those peoples who have stewarded this land for generations. We are grateful for the opportunity to live, work, and worship here as we witness the reconciling movement of the Spirit and seek to live into right relations with our Indigenous neighbours and all of creation. (VT #878)

[Edna]

“Solstice” is a word derived from Latin, meaning “sun standing still.” Well, so it seems on that day, because Solstice is the longest day of the year. In the days leading up to June 21 or 22, every day is just a wee bit longer, and thereafter, every day is just a wee bit shorter again. It might well seem as if the sun is standing still – standing still for us to breathe and be in sunlight.

Light is now most plentiful. The growth that began in spring is showing promise of fruitfulness. We are still a long way from full harvest, yet the earliest first fruits are appearing. In fact, haskaps, those strange-looking Siberian berries that have found a happy home in Saskatchewan, are already near the end of their production. Strawberries, traditionally served at solstice celebrations, are just coming into their own and turning breakfasts into morning feasts of thanksgiving.

This is a time to spend our energy with joy and to reflect on growth – organic growth, spiritual growth. As the summer sun unfolds the leaves on the trees to their fullest, so may our souls expand to receive the sunlight and the light of the Son. It is a time to exult in being-ness, even as we know that being is kin to becoming. The sun stands still only for a day.

[Patrick]

Gardener God,
you have planted and protected us
by your faithful hand.
Send us the sap of your grace
from Christ, the true Vine,
and make us blossom
and bear the fruit of love
as a sign of your life in us.
Let the sweet fragrance of the shoots
you have planted
give you praise forever. Amen
(VT #1002)

[Edna]

A Prayer of Thanksgiving

Thank you, Lord, for beauty wherever our eyes have seen it, in the heavens or on the earth, in the great seas or tall trees or wide plains, in the flight of birds or the strength of the beasts.

Thank you for beauty heard, whether it be in the human voice or the music of manifold instruments fashioned by many skills, whether it be the great sounds of the storm or the laughter of the little child.

Thank you for the beauty neither seen nor heard, deeper than the flesh and higher than stars; that is, the grace of the heart's desire and lasting affection, the grace of forgiveness freely given and hospitality boldly offered, the grace of holiness of saints whose love opens wide, the grace of the larger kingdom of the Eternal, and the grace of every gesture by which the soul holds high converse with the mystery of your mercy.

For all beauty we bow our hearts gratefully and in reverence. For him in whom life became redeeming grace, even Jesus Christ, we give you thanks, Amen.

(Samuel H. Miller (1900-1968), Dean of Harvard Divinity School and Baptist minister, in *The Communion of Saints: Prayers of the Famous*)

Song: "In the Lord I'll Be ever Thankful" VT#118

[Patrick]

Little Summer Poem Touching the Subject of Faith

Every summer

I listen and look
under the sun's brass and even
in the moonlight, but I can't hear

anything, I can't see anything—

not the pale roots digging down, nor the green stalks muscling up,
nor the leaves
deepening their damp pleats,

nor the tassles making,
nor the shucks, nor the cobs.

And still,
every day,

the leafy fields

grow taller and thicker—
green gowns lofting up in the night,
showered with silk.

And so, every summer,

I fail as a witness, seeing nothing—
I am deaf too
to the tick of the leaves,

the tapping of downwardness from the banyan feet—

all of it
happening
beyond all seeable proof, or hearable hum.

And therefore, let the immeasurable come.

Let the unknowable touch the buckle of my spine.
Let the wind turn in the trees,
and the mystery hidden in dirt

swing through the air.

How could I look at anything in this world
and tremble, and grip my hands over my heart?
What should I fear?

One morning
in the leafy green ocean
the honeycomb of the corn's beautiful body
is sure to be there.

Mary Oliver (*New and Selected Poems, II*)

[Edna]

Pied Beauty

Glory be to God for dappled things—
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls, finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
[God] fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1918)

Song: “Planets Humming as They Wander” VT #175

[Patrick]

Gracious God,
when there is nothing we can say,
we give you thanks
that your Spirit intercedes for us
with sighs too deep for words.

Loving God when there is nothing we can do,
we give you thanks
that you are working for good
in this world of struggle and pain.

Holy God,
when there is nothing else we know,
still we give you thanks
that nothing in life or in death,
nothing in heaven or on earth,
nothing in this world or the world to come
will ever separate us from your great love;
through Jesus Christ. Amen.

(VT #994)

[Edna]

O Triune God of changeless power and endless life, be favourable to your Church throughout the world. Gather, enlighten, sanctify and sustain it by your Holy Spirit. Give us more and more to trust the silent working of your perpetual grace, which brings forth in Christ the salvation of humanity. And let the whole world know that the things which were cast down are being raised up, and the things which had grown old are being made new, and all the things are returning to the perfection of the One from whom they came. Amen.

(Peter Taylor Forsyth [1848-1921], Congregational minister and theologian, in *The Communion of Saints: Prayers of the Famous*)

[Patrick]

The Summer Day

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean—
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down

into the grass, how to kneel in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
With your one wild and precious life?

Mary Oliver

Song: "God Lights a Lamp" VT #299

[Edna]

"Musings on Summer"

Let the first day of summer be the day that we declare beauty to be necessary – and the necessary to be beautiful. Let the mystery of growth of earthly and earth-bound things be also the mystery that lets us grow toward our own ends, when it will be time to let go of control and welcome whatever comes.

Vespers summons up evening things, sunsets, light gone brilliant with shadows, reflection. The long evenings, when light stretches on past its usual disappearance, are designed for quiet cessation of activities, time at last for blankness of mind and emptiness of thought. Nothing needs to be done at once, not even going to sleep. The body is now made for a lounge chair, the collapsible kind that lets us be rooted wherever we happen to be, for one place is as good as another for slipping into meditation and pondering who we are and whose we are meant to be.

Out on the fishing boat, the water and the light and the waiting have all come together to turn even the pale water lily into the laughter of God. This is not a time to fret over theology or doctrine or to dispute over where the Spirit might be present. There is an "is-ness" in all things – existence to the hundredth power, yet accomplished so silently that even mathematicians and philosophers together are content to wait for the next fish jumping.

Summer breathes largely, chooses to bloom even more largely and abundantly. One flower is enough to draw the heart into heaven. Let the ants do the scurrying; they're bred for it and their very scurrying is the hustling of the force of life that makes gardens and worlds and galaxies.

(Edna Froese)

Song: "God Who Touches Earth with Beauty" VT #550

Psalm 139: 1-16 (NIV)

P. O LORD, You have searched me
and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.
Before a word is on my tongue
you know it completely, O LORD.
You hem me in—behind and before;
you have laid your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain.

E. Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.

P. If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,"
even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

E. For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.

P. My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place.
When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,

your eyes saw my unformed body.
E. All the days ordained for me
were written in your book
before one of them came to be.

(**P.** The word of the Lord – **E.** Thanks be to God)

[Patrick]

Praying

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

(Mary Oliver)

[Edna]

Instructions for an Evening of Your Life (by Sarah Bessey)

Find a bit of water to look at, it doesn't have to be much. Maybe a pond (1), a river, a creek (2), a lake (3)—if you're really lucky, find the ocean (4). But go there alone at sunset. (5) I know it seems indulgent and impossible—that's because it is. But every once in a while, the best way to keep moving through your life is to do something that seems impossibly kind for your own soul.

So go. Alone. Late in the day.

Leave behind the book. Leave behind your prayer journal. Leave behind the notebooks and schedule planning. Leave behind the mobile phone—if you're in a good spot, there won't be any reception anyways.

And here is your assignment: sit down and watch the water.

That's exactly it.

(6) Sit in silence at the edge of the water and learn to be satisfied.

This is the tricky part when your life is full with good and necessary and hard things, I know. Your mind will jump around from thing to thing to thing. You'll feel guilty and then you'll feel indolent. You'll feel like time has slowed down.

You'll start to think that you need to make this time "count" for God and so you'll start to formally pray in the ways that you were taught to pray—stop that. Then you'll want to journal or read that about-God book you've been meaning to get to because you think you really need to grow spiritually and the only way to do that is to try harder. You'll get restless. You'll think of all the Things You Should Be Doing. You'll feel twitchy perhaps. Then you'll remember how when you were a kid you used to be able to just be in a place without compulsively needing to check text messages or chase around getting things done, and you'll think, *I didn't used to be so fragmented and urgent.*

Be silent and watch the water. (7) Do one thing right now and do it with your whole self.

Prayer will come, it just might look a bit different than you expect. Rest will come to your mind, you have to wait for it in patience, this isn't the province of multi-taskers. The middle distance of your mind will rise up and envelop you in an exhalation just as the sun begins to move towards the horizon. You'll start to notice life as it is happening in that moment and this might begin to feel in your body like poetry is meant to sound.

A fish will fly up out of the water and return, leaving only a ring of circles going farther and farther out to every shore. You'll see a bird and try to figure out what kind it is—a heron? Look at that elegant neck—swooping down low over the water heading for the reeds. You'll see dragonflies swooping and after a few times, you won't duck in a cringe anymore. (8) You'll watch the clouds drift and the water move and the sun sink and your soul will begin to stretch out into the space left open. This is not only what you need—this is what you want, what you desire, and even those are sacred things at times. Before you know it, your hands will find a spot to rest and your breath will slow down.

Become acquainted with the silence in your own soul; you might be surprised by the sound of you. Sometimes you might rise up in gratitude and thanksgiving, other times the pain you're allowing yourself to feel might be overwhelming. Sometimes your soul feels like worship and sometimes this feels like encountering a stranger—do I know you? Then sometimes it might simply feel like a good friend you haven't seen in far too long and you'll think, *Why don't I do this more often?*

(9) Let the sun set over the water. Be baptized in the gracious last light of the day, the satisfied light. Close your eyes and feel the light against your darkness, warming you.

When the sun has disappeared, the light remains. And when the night sinks down in shades of indigo and navy blue, you'll be ready to be friends with the night and the silence, and hopefully with your own soul at last. The first star of the evening will appear at last like a benediction for the patient and faithful ones.

(from *A Rhythm of Prayer*, ed. Sarah Bessey)

Song: "Now, on Land and Sea Descending" VT #503

[Patrick]

Closing prayer:

God,
it is night.

The night is for stillness.
Let us be still in the presence of God.

It is night after a long day.
What has been done has been done;
what has not been done has not been done;
let it be.

The night is dark.
Let our fears of the darkness of the world
and of our own lives rest in you.

The night is quiet.
Let the quietness of your peace enfold us,
all dear to us,
and all who have no peace.

The night heralds the dawn.
Let us look expectantly to a new day,
new joys,
new possibilities.

In your name we pray. Amen. (VT #986)