

## Lily Time

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Faith United Church of Christ  
Richmond Heights, Ohio

Trinity Sunday  
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Song of Solomon 2:8-17; Matthew 6:24-34

“Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.” -- Song of Solomon 2:10b-11

As Rick Lorentz and I were driving back from Washington, DC, last Wednesday, we were privileged – and that’s really the only word to use – privileged to drive through some of the most beautiful country in the eastern part of the United States.

The trees and fields of northern Maryland, western Pennsylvania, and eastern Ohio were lush and green – unusually so, it seemed to us. There was an eye-catching vibrancy to the plants around us that I, at least, didn’t recall seeing in recent springs, and perhaps that was because of the abundant rainfall we had in April and May. Or perhaps, Rick and I hypothesized, the world might have seemed greener and lovelier because of our heightened appreciation for all things green after the tough winter of recent memory.

Or maybe you notice things more as aging slows you down and someone else does the driving – thanks again, Rick, for a great job, especially through the rain – and a green leaf or a purple iris or a yellow field has a greater chance of catching your attention. Someone has said that we humans were meant to live life at walking speed, and that’s probably true. Sure, I like a fire truck or an ambulance to be as speedy as the next person when a victim needs help, but as for the rest of us, I think we might very well be “Addicted to Hurry,” as Kirk Jones puts it in the title of his book.

Rick and I were in DC, as most of you know, to attend the Annual Gathering of Bread for the World, which includes Lobby Day, when hundreds of us from across the country went to Capitol Hill, in person, to urge our elected leaders to make the best possible use of our tax dollars to help those most in need. I’ll say more about Lobby Day later this summer, as I suspect Rick will, but one of the things that struck me as we walked around Capitol Square was how fast-paced everything is. Everyone walked at a fast pace, everyone spoke in short, clipped sentences, and God help you if you didn’t keep up with the traffic.

And not just in Washington. We stopped on our way home in Pennsylvania for fuel and lunch, and I bought a sandwich at Subway. As the young woman began assembling my sandwich, she began firing questions at me at a pace I couldn’t understand, and I found myself asking her to repeat almost every question she asked: Six or twelve inch? What kind of bread? What kind of cheese? Which toppings? What dressing? And so on. Maybe I’m losing my hearing, or maybe I’m losing my mind, or maybe I’m losing both, but regardless of the reason, I was grateful to be back at walking pace when the dog and I set out for the park Wednesday night.

The text for this morning’s sermon comes from the little book known as the Song of Solomon, which speaks a great deal of love and the physical beauty of God’s creation, especially as two young people find it in each other. The young woman recalls a visit

from her boyfriend, in which he says this to her through her bedroom window, "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away, for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone."

And thank God, most of us in northeast Ohio might add. The winter finally is past and we're luxuriating in those beautiful colors we sang about in our opening hymn. We're tired of being cooped up. We're tired of being anxious about frozen pipes and furnaces giving up their ghosts. We're sick of the puddles and the slush and the chapped lips and the chapped hands. Thank you, God, most of us are saying, that the winter finally is past.

I don't know if there's a person in your life you might invite to come out to play with the words "my love" or "my fair one" or "my dove" or any number of the other epithets these young lovers call each other in Solomon's song, but don't let not having such a person in your life right now stop you from coming away from winter into the season of growth and renewal and refreshment and color and aroma and delight.

Just a few months ago, as the dog and I tromped through snow and slush and wintry mix month after month across a gray and barren earth, the words of the memorial acclamation from the communion service kept playing through my head, not as we say them in church, but as I felt them in my heart: "Spring has died. Spring is risen. Spring will come again." That was probably some form of sacrilege, but I'd hardly be the first guilty of sacrilege in the name of hope.

And, miraculously, on this beautiful spring Sunday in June, it has. Our ancestors, who depended on agriculture rather than agribusiness for their daily bread, surely had a greater appreciation for the miracle of creation than we have. We have mechanized the world, inserting our machines between our lives and God's world, and as long as our machines work, God's world should work, too, or so we believe.

But not everyone believes that, because there will come a day, sooner or later, when our machines will all fall silent – every one of them, no exceptions – but God's world will carry on without our machines, and probably without us, perhaps slowly repairing itself from the wounds we inflicted on it. A few voices have spoken up in defense of that world – people like Wendell Berry and Aldo Leopold and Ansel Adams and Rachel Carson and Annie Dillard and John Muir. They've been urging us for decades to become more mindful of what we're doing to God's world and thus, to ourselves. They've been imploring us not to take creation for granted, and not to treat the earth as a commodity, and not to ignore the signs of exhaustion and distress coming from the soil and the water and the air and the fish in Lake Erie.

Those believers – believers in the worth of God's creation – they're telling us that we're not giving back what our machines are helping us take away. Those believers are joining their voices to the voices of the deformed fish and the dying honey bees and the undrinkable water, all clearly understood by God but understood by only a handful of us. Those believers are urging us to be mindful, to take notice, to take care.

"Consider the lilies of the field," Jesus said. God takes care of them, and God will take care of us, too, if we'll open our eyes and minds and hearts to that loving presence that cares for all creation, us included. We'll have to work, of course; considering the lilies of the field is not navel-gazing or day-dreaming. Considering the lessons of the lilies means recognizing that humans have to work, just as beavers work and sparrows work and ants work, and that's as it should be. Work is the dignified calling that helps make us who we are, which is why people who are shut out of meaningful work – and that word meaningful is meaningful – are deprived not only of money, but also of identity and a sense of worth and a sense of being able to contribute to the lives of others.

The dignity of work is what scripture teaches in its very first verses. When our English versions of Genesis 2:15 say that God put the human being in the garden to "till it and to keep it," that's not quite what the text says. What it actually says is that God put

the earthling – and that’s a good translation of the Hebrew word *adam*, who comes from the *adamah*, the earth – God put the earthling in the garden to “serve it and preserve it.” The first of those two Hebrew verbs is the ordinary, everyday Hebrew verb *avad*, which means to serve, not till.

That’s our job, to serve and preserve the earth, God’s beloved and good creation, of which we are a part and of which we are not masters. And in serving that good earth as it should be served – as co-creators with God, in whose image and likeness we are created – we serve all our co-creatures, which is why Rick and I traveled to Washington to help Bread for the World. Social ethics and environmental ethics go hand-in-hand, and to ignore one is inevitably to distort the other.

Jesus told us to consider the lilies of the field so that we might learn from them the things of God. There’s nothing un-Christian or neo-pagan or new age about this; it’s straight-up, orthodox, New Testament Christianity. Call it natural theology, if you prefer; but whatever you call it, I hope and pray, dear friends, that you’ll embrace it. I hope that summer will help you slow down, step outside, turn off your screens, take out your earbuds, and then listen as all nature sings.

Listen to the songs of things just being themselves, serene and complete and beautiful and strong. Consider the lilies, who neither toil nor spin – and who most certainly do not worry – and yet who are clothed more splendidly by their creator than Princess Diana. Let those lilies teach you how to be the you God created you to be. If you’re a sufficiently able student, a lily can do that.

Come away, friends, from the works of our hands and the worries of our minds and the devices of our hearts, for lo, the winter is past. It’s lily time.