

“Learning from the Birds and the Lilies and the Land”

Leviticus 25:8-12, 19-24, 55

Matthew 6:25-34

When we're at home, we tend to fall into so many little routines, don't we? Even if we don't mean to, we do the same things, we have the same worries, and we make the same mistakes – day after day after day. But then, sometimes, we travel. And...well...even though we can't take a vacation from ourselves or our problems, somehow going somewhere different can make us feel alive and renewed in a very particular way. On vacation, we think about what is lacking in our day to day lives and we lean into it. Sitting in one place too much? Go skiing! Life too hectic? Go lie in the sun at the beach! Getting bored? Paint the town red in some big city!

It is good for us to get out of our ruts from time to time so that we can see ourselves a bit more clearly. Still, some things can be harder to get away from. When I was on vacation, I spent some time with friends in Oklahoma City. We visited the zoo together which was quite fun. I was so eager to see the red pandas – my favorite animal – but they were kind of far from the entrance. So, at first we marveled at all the strange and scary and beautiful animals, taking the time to find each one in its enclosure. But, after awhile, well...the lions were lying down with their backs to us, the giraffes were too far away to get a decent picture, and the only red panda I could see was high up, barely visible. Mutter, mutter, mutter (as my mother sometimes says).

It was hard not to get annoyed by the few disappointments, even in the presence of so many amazing animals. That is, until we got to the otters. Otters aren't in my top five best animals list, but it's hard not to love them. I have never once approached otters without seeing as much swimming and frolicking as I wanted to see. They are adorable and the bubbles that trail after them when they play only make them seem more whimsical. Still, within a few minutes, the otters were old news and I was waiting for my friends to be ready to go.

When, suddenly, we saw a little boy – maybe four years old – running up to the otter enclosure. His eyes were opened so wide. My friend Aaron showed him where the otters were and this little boy was just the picture of joy and glee. He turned around to show his Dad, he clapped his hands – he even made sure that we weren't missing it. With that little boy there, the joy and beauty of God's creation was undeniable. We saw the world through his eyes for such a brief time, but that changed everything.

We fret and worry – especially for the past year plus. We have a lot to worry about and so many things that we can get pulled into. But Jesus tells us so firmly, so lovingly, that we should not worry. We should not get lost in our rhythms and grievances and fears. He really does hit the nail on the head – we worry about what we will eat, if we will have enough money, if we will make it through a crisis. We remember that Jesus was poor and most of his own people were living hand to mouth. Their concerns for survival were very real. But Jesus guides them to gaze upon creation to see and hear what God is teaching us. The birds don't farm the food or harvest it, but God makes sure that they are nourished.

And he tells us to become students of the lilies in their beautiful growth. They don't work themselves to the bone, they don't do special weaving and sewing to be as wondrous as they are. Their natural selves are more beautiful than anything humanity could make. God's glory shines through when we look to the birds and the flowers – and, really, all of creation. What would change if we looked at ourselves like Jesus saw those lilies? No amount of gussying up makes us any more beautiful and glorious because God made us and God loves us. Also, if God keeps the world going, why do we doubt that God will keep us going? We have to learn to trust God more and more to ease off our worrying. This is no simple task.

I know that the Gospel passage is a pretty familiar one, but, as we turn to Leviticus, we find ourselves somewhere a bit more undiscovered. So, let me give you a little bit of background. First, we remember that God gave us the Sabbath day to keep holy and to do no work. That's why we're gathered together here today and, hopefully, we extend that holiness and rest into wherever we go next.

We know that people and animals get a sabbath, but did you know that God also gives a sabbath to the land? The Israelites could plant for six years, but on the seventh, the ground lay fallow. They wouldn't have known the science back then, but to this day, farmers leave fields unplanted so that the soil can be replenished and renewed. Though the people may not have known why, God provided for them to have better yields.

The third sabbath is the year of Jubilee. This is a bit more complicated. Each tribe of Israel was allotted an area of land, then each clan, and each family. Yet, sometimes it happened that a family's crops failed or some other disaster struck and bankrupted them. So, they were permitted to sell their land to survive. However, when the year of Jubilee came around, every fifty years, the land would go back to the clan, to the family. That means that once in a lifetime, God gave you the chance to start fresh, to work your own land, and to see if you could get your feet back on the ground. It was also a time when slaves were freed and returned to their families.

Other cultures around the Israelites did this debt forgiving, slave freeing, and land restoration, too. However, that happened at the whim of a king. Maybe it was something he decreed to celebrate his coronation or some victory. This means that, oftentimes, their "jubilee" would come when you least expect it. What if you had just loaned someone money yesterday and now that debt was cancelled? What if you had bought land at a fair price only to have it taken from you soon after on the whim of a distant leader? God looked at this and said – do not worry.

I will make the jubilee regular and recurring so you can predict it. Then you can buy and sell and trade fairly – knowing the value of the land. What’s more, God promised them that their fields would produce extra for them in the 49th year so that they could live comfortably during the jubilee. They would be safe and full and dwell in God’s holiness. The jubilee was just like the miracle with manna, but it extended on into the people’s future.ⁱ

Then God says something fascinating. God reminds the people that they should never sell the land permanently. The land – all of creation – belongs to God. This means that we aren’t landlords or kings or peasants or any of that. We are all renters and God holds the deed. We are strangers, guests, foreigners, tenants. In a way, all of these are words that remind us that God asks us to see ourselves as travelers. We may forget to stand in awe of God’s handiwork, but all creation belongs to God and all creation is holy and beautiful, teaching us new things every day.

We are God’s servants – a word that can mean worker, slave, or worshiper. We serve God by caring for creation – the land, the animals, our sisters and brothers, ourselves. We worship God by remembering to step back from our worry and behold the beauty and glory all around us. We work as well as we can to make something with our lives, with our words, with our deeds, that shows the world who God is and how God cares for each one.

We should try not to worry. We should remember that we are travelers. Every day we encounter something new that has never existed before. Every day will hold its unique blessing and hope and promise. Maybe there will be trouble tomorrow, but, “tomorrow will worry about itself.” Today we will open our eyes and lift our voices in praise. Amen.

ⁱ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jubilee_\(biblical\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jubilee_(biblical))