

## Learning from the Black Oaks

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*Texts: Song of Songs 2: 8-13*

*James 1: 17-27*

Beloveds, hello!!! It is so good to be back amongst you, and though we are a small but mighty few gathered here in the sanctuary on this Labor Day weekend, I can feel the spirit strongly. Hello to all who are joining online from wherever this long weekend finds you. It is GOOD to be back with you after this summer of transitions – I missed you! When I last saw you we had just stepped through the threshold of saying goodbye to Dan, and hello to the unknown, to the fertile dark of the future. And here we are, welcoming today our Interim Senior Minister Mike as he takes part in our service for the first time. Mike, we are so excited to have you and Janine as part of our community, and so eager to welcome you over these next weeks, to learn from and with you, and to grow with your care in this season.

Since you last saw me, I have also said hello to the unknown and to the fertile dark of the future, stepping across a marriage threshold with my now-husband Aram. I'm still getting used to saying that! We had an amazing wedding day – a week of concentric circles of celebration, really – and we've landed back from our honeymoon to the chaos and joy of moving across the river to Jamaica Plain, where we're planting our roots this year. It is GOOD to be back with you today, and I'm eager to see who

we are and can be together in this season as change has been working us.

In that spirit, please will you pray with me.

*May the words of my mouth and meditations of all our hearts together be acceptable to you, oh God, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.*

The other night, I stepped out onto the deck at our new house, which is right underneath a giant old oak tree. The oak tree nestles right next to the house and is the home to many – I’ve seen raccoons make their beds in its branches, and squirrels skittering and climbing all around, and birds calling to each other from the arms of the tree. The tree gives good-natured grandfather energy to me – they’ve seen a lot, they’ve been around a long time, they’re content to have all the creatures hanging off of them, running all over them.

So on this particular night a few days ago, as I stepped outside to take in the tree and the neighborhood in the moonlight, the deck absolutely covered in the bumper crop of acorns that the oak is offering this year, I felt struck by the tree’s groundedness and its power, by its longevity and grace. I was reminded of one of my favorite lines from my beloved Mary Oliver: in her book *Upstream*, she wrote, “it lives in my imagination strongly that a Black Oak is pleased to be a Black Oak.” It lives in my imagination strongly that a Black Oak is pleased to be a Black Oak.

Today, I want to meditate with this together: **what does the Black Oak, in conversation with our scripture this morning, have to teach us about our belonging in the ecosystem of God's love and community?**

Beloveds, if you're anything like me, that line from Mary Oliver lands as a mirror, a reminder of what is already so, and as a challenge. Maybe you sometimes struggle to be pleased to be yourself – I think we all do. Maybe you spend more time wrestling your demons than snuggling them. Maybe you know in your heart that we're all made in God's image and beloved of God just as we are but there are some days when it is harder to believe that, when your inner critic is loud, or you feel inadequate in some way, not up to the task that is in front of you, doubtful of your belonging, convinced that you need to do it all or that you don't really matter. Those moments come up loudly when there are big changes in our lives, big shifts and big, courageous undertakings, like the one we're in together as a church.

Doesn't it sound nice to be Mary Oliver's Black Oak in those moments? Grounded, pleased to be made just as they are, no need to strive to be any different?

What the Black Oak has to teach us is what Song of Songs is here to remind us of today: that we are an integral part of the flourishing of God's

ecosystem, known intimately and loved specifically by God and by the creatures around us for exactly who we are.

Now, Song of Songs can feel a little edgy. It's a part of the Bible that's full of romance, and embodiment, and love, things that we have often been taught culturally aren't appropriate in church. "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away" – it feels sometimes like it belongs more in a Shakespeare play than in how we've usually experienced the Bible. But we know that Christianity is, at its heart, an incarnational theology, a story of divine light embodied in fleshy humanity, a commitment to taking seriously and playfully the sacred holiness and messiness of our embodied human forms. That's part of what we honor when we take Communion, as we will today in a little bit. In Song of Songs, we find ourselves in the role of the beloved, longed for and fully seen and called to by someone who loves us specifically for who we are. They are beautiful love poems between two humans, and they are also a reminder of how deeply God knows us and loves us and pursues us, just as we are.

Crucially, though, the Song of Songs love poems aren't just between two lovers or between God and God's beloved – they are located within a flourishing world, an ecosystem of community in which God's spirit blooms forth through the flowers, the voice of the turtledove, the fig tree putting forth its figs, the vines that are in blossom giving forth fragrance. "The time of singing has come," the poet tells us, and we get the sense that we are

being invited to sing as part of a chorus of voices – human and bird and oak tree and fig tree – singing their own particular song of joy at being alive as themselves. “It lives in my imagination strongly that a Black Oak is pleased to be a Black Oak.”

What happens when we take seriously the idea that we were made like this, just as we are, with our beauty and our faults and foibles and insecurities and senses of humor, with our pet peeves and our unshakeable inner light? We can get out of our own way, trust that God made us as we are on purpose, and to give what is specifically ours to give to this great and wild forest of all beings, each unique, each made with love by God.

This came home to me in a big way during our wedding week. So if you’ll indulge me for a few moments, I’d love to share with you a little bit about it. After months of planning from the macro down to the micro, after a few days of being in the flow of family gathering and smaller celebrations, our wedding morning arrived, and my mind was full of tracking the details. We had an ancestor altar to set up with photos and items of beloved ancestors that our parents had brought along – but when would we find that time? We were planning to do a binding of our hands, an old Celtic tradition, as part of the ceremony, and we had the cloths for that, but we hadn’t found the time to braid them into the cord for the binding yet. And did someone have a pen? I need to finish writing down my vows! That morning,

I knew there was no way that I could do it all myself, and no way that I wanted to, but it was slow going, releasing the grip of control over how it all would turn out or get done before ceremony time.

Slowly, and with encouragement, I remembered that I was one tree in a forest of others, part of a living and breathing ecosystem of friends and family with beautiful and specific gifts, each of them made by and beloved of God in their particularity. My friend Elizabeth walked her mama through the threshold of death a few years ago and has a deep-hearted knowing of how to honor ancestors, and so when she stepped up to lay out the ancestor altar, I knew there was no person more equipped. She spent more than an hour laying out the altar with deep love and care, offering the particular gifts that come from her life experience. I passed them to our friend Mariel, who, knowing their own strengths and gifts, passed them on to artist friends Nico and Paula and drove to get us all lunch instead. My dad got a football game started and infused the morning with the spirit of playfulness. And the day continued like that – each person leaning into the gifts that were particularly theirs to give, so generously, Black Oaks pleased to be Black Oaks in the forest ecosystem of the collective.

This was even true of moments of crisis – at one point in the afternoon, getting towards time for the ceremony, the guys were still throwing the football around on the lawn. My brother-in-law, David, seeing that his nice wedding shirt was getting dirty, decided to stop, but my dad,

ever the diehard sports enthusiast, said, “one more throw – I’ll go long!”

And as David heaved the football, my dad ran for it hard, eyes up, straight into a stone wall. I didn’t see the moment itself, but I watched from my little hair and makeup station in the farmhouse, wondering what was going on as people gathered round, as my sister’s boyfriend brought water for washing his wounds, as two friends who are nurses brought out their first aid kits and bandaged up his shins, and the day proceeded.

Now, by no means am I encouraging any of us to run headlong into stone walls. There has been enough of that this summer, thank you very much! But that was such a true version of my dad, such an expression of exactly how God made him to be, that that moment of playfulness and pain and foible, too, contributed to the day and to the formation of the community – it allowed the community to come together in care, for everyone to breathe an exhale of relief that not everything had to be perfect, for the nurses to offer their gifts, and for everyone – especially my dad himself, who I think is truly proud of his commitment to the catch – to go home with a story to tell. My dad didn’t have to do anything or produce anything to be worthy of love and care in that moment, and to strengthen the community through his being exactly the wild and rascally human that God made him to be.

Because in God’s forest ecosystem, we are strengthened by our diversity, by the specificity of our gifts. In God’s forest, no one tree stands

alone. In God's forest, there are moments when a tree needs more nourishment than its neighbors, and its neighbors stretch to share their resources. In God's forest, we each give what we are uniquely able to give by BEING that which we are uniquely able to be. In God's forest, a Black Oak is pleased to be a Black Oak, and we are learning, again and again, that God made us who we are on purpose.

Our second reading from the epistle of James echoes this. He writes, "every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above... In fulfillment of God's own purpose God gave birth to us by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of God's creatures." We are among the ecosystem of God's many creatures, just some of the fruits of God's abundant creativity and love, and any gifts we have to give come from the divine inspiration that flows through us in unique and particular ways. We are each a one-of-a-kind prism channeling and reflecting God's light.

James goes on to talk a lot about the importance of doing. He writes, "Be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, ongoing away, immediately forget what they were like." They look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.



In our Northeast Protestant work ethic-inspired culture of busyness, productivity, and task-oriented-ness, I know we need to take James's words with a grain of salt and with some nuance. Because constant doing, when it comes from a place of believing our worth and belonging depend on our productivity, is a distraction from our innate belovedness, our enoughness, and our core human dignity – amen?? So let's not get it twisted, beloveds.

When I hear James's words, I return to the oak tree in my backyard. I think of the way the spirit of God, the great mysterious life force that enlivens us all, flows through that tree from the ecosystem of which it is a part. The way it can't help but be a Black Oak – and how it lives in my imagination strongly that this Black Oak is pleased to be a Black Oak, that there is nothing this oak can do but surrender to God's will for their life and give over their acorns – the gifts that they particularly can give – wantonly, abundantly, back to the Earth which is also God's. The Black Oak isn't efforting hard – it's being exactly who and how God made it to be, and it is giving from that place, from the generosity that comes straight from God.

Beloveds, we are in a season of change and newness that asks our ecosystem – our little corner of God's forest – to stretch and flex and be courageous. This moment asks us to trust that we each belong here in our specificity – that each of us is deeply needed in this community exactly because we are how we are. We can't be church without each of the trees

in this forest, and without the spirit of God that made and enlivens each one of us. None of us can do it alone – the deacons can't do it alone, the Friday Café volunteers and guests can't do it alone, the Godly Play class and teachers can't do it alone, Mike can't do it alone, those of us who join each week or occasionally in person or on Zoom can't do it alone. Amen? We give the acorns that are ours to give – the acorns of our presence, our time, our energy, our love, our hugs, our cooking, our rest, our asking for help, our laughter, our tears, our prayers. We give what is ours to give, generously, we trust others to do the same, knowing that their gifts will be different, and we let God take care of the rest.

The time of singing has come, Scripture tells us. Arise, my love, my fair one, God calls to us. I made you to be exactly who and how you are for just such a moment as this. And so we look in the mirror of God's love for us, a mirror that is less fickle and transient than the human mirror that James describes, and we see the truth of our imperfection, our particularity, our belovedness, our necessariness. We practice being Black Oaks pleased to be Black Oaks, trusting in the care and wisdom of God's crafting hands when God made us. And we let the distractions of our self-criticism and self-judgment, our stories that we're not important or that we don't belong, step aside so that we can let the life force of God run through our branches and deliver the blessed acorns that are ours to give in this season. Amen?

And so, before you leave today, come see us – Aram and I have collected a bunch of acorns so that we can send you each home with one, if you like – a reminder of how precious and needed you are, just as you are; a reminder to get out of the way and let God’s spirit flow through you. And so let the people say – amen!

