

Abundant living in perilous times
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Genesis 2:7

then the Lord God formed the first human from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the human became a living being

John 10:10

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.



Good morning!

It's wonderful to be here with you today. Thank you for the invitation to share a message with you.

Of course, I wish that I could be there in person and I regret that we have been unable to pay our usual Earlham School of Religion visit to your meeting.

I remain optimistic that we will have that opportunity again soon.

At the same time, I am deeply thankful for the technology that allows us to connect in this way from such a distance. In my own meeting in Richmond, Zoom has proven a lifeline for congregational community.

How distant might we have grown from one another in its absence?

What risks might we have taken to reconnect?

Isn't that life? Doors closing and opening before us in ways we would not have imagined, opportunity and tragedy, grace and denial, interwoven in ways both maddening and holy.

What are we to do with this swirl of contradictions and the ways it sends all of our tidy plans and strategies adrift?

Lately I've been increasingly drawn to the visual of murmuration.

Is anyone familiar with this term?

The poet David Whyte gives a powerful illustration of it in his book *The Heart Aroused*. He tells the story of how one day in 1799 a young Samuel Taylor Coleridge “gazed out of his carriage window and saw in the distance an immense flock of starlings sweep across the sky.”

The birds formed a cohesive whole composed of thousands of living, moving parts, and as a collective entity they shifted and morphed, expanded and contracted in the sky before him. The vision of these birds made an impression on him that lasted his entire life.

PLAY VIDEO IF POSSIBLE

Flight of the Starlings

https://youtu.be/V4f_1_r8ORY

Whyte goes on to suggest that this is in many ways a good description for our lives, and I would argue especially so in the midst of a pandemic.

“Our jobs are this day secure and the next in question again,” he says. “A hundred different details and strategies dance before our eyes.”

Given our desire for order, how can we find peace with disorder?

Is there beauty to be found there?

What possibilities emerge when we let go of our need for control?

Coleridge put his hope in imagination as a response to this chaotic swirl.

“To Coleridge,” Whyte explains, “the imagination was not simply the ability to dream things up, but an actual sense, like hearing, or seeing or touching. By imagining, by calling on the internal images that naturally arose to meet outward circumstances, it was possible to live vitally among the confused eddies and swirls of everyday existence.”

Now, I don't know about you, but these words sing to the Quaker in me. I perform some Friendly translation that says I have - you have - each of us has the resources within us - the Christ within - to ground our experience and call forth from us that which we can contribute to the world in need even as we see its fragile order and our own limited orderings collapse around us.

We are God-breathed beings bearing the likeness of God and carrying within us an Inward Seed that can chasten, guide, and inspire.

Part of this, I believe, leads to a celebration of life in and of itself as a generous gift of God. If we didn't already embrace this celebratory appreciation of our existence, the existence of those we love and care deeply about, and the existence of those we may never meet, COVID-19 narrows our vision - helps us focus on the beauty of each shimmering moment we have been given to share with one another.

Theologian John Caputo picks up on this theme in his beautiful book *Hoping Against Hope*. He says that in moments where we pause to appreciate the murmuration of starlings, the flight of a butterfly, a kiss between strangers, a loving

glance from a grandchild, we are given “reminders of mortality that make us prize this fleeting moment all the more.”

“This mortal life,” he says, “is a gift to be savored for itself, that blossoms because it blossoms.”

He goes on to say that “We are here today and gone tomorrow as Jesus says of the lilies of the field, earthly reeds blowing in the cosmic wind. Our fleeting existence is a passing moment on the cosmic stage, a grace we are granted for the while, for which our life is lived as a prayer of unthinking gratitude.”

And so, my prayer for you today is that you find ways to embrace life where you find it, embrace your own life and the lives of those around you and around the world. Take a moment to appreciate the gift you have been given, and consider how you might use that precious gift to be a blessing to others.