

“Immersive Love”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Did any of you see the film that one the Best Documentary category at the Oscars a couple weeks ago? *My Octopus Teacher* immersed the viewer in an ocean underworld as the filmmaker, Craig Foster, documents a daily practice of visiting this eight-legged, unusual sea creature. Foster began this practice at a point in his life when he had reached middle-age and career burnout. By paying close attention to this odd creature, and slowly earning her trust, he was rewarded with lessons that helped steer the course of his life and show him what really matters. “What she taught me” Foster recounted, “is that you’re part of this place-- not only a visitor. That’s a huge difference.” Letting a creature such as an octopus-- something whose presence gets little regard by humans, besides its occasional appearance on a dinner plate-- be the master teacher is a surprising twist for us humans, who often consider ourselves at the tippy-top of the evolutionary ladder.

But the lectionary would tell us otherwise. “Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it. Let the floods clap their hands, let the hills sing together for joy at the presence of the Lord, who is coming to judge the earth,” Psalm 98 tells us, allowing us to see that hills, rivers and seas-- and the creatures within them-- have a spirituality of their own, a relationship with God that is unmediated by humans.

Of course, we bring our own sounds of praise too. “Break forth into joyous song and sing praises. Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody. With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord.” Where are the brass musicians from our church-- Bonnie, Leo, and Lily-- when you need them?! Although, again, creation doesn’t require humans to sing or make music. I am eagerly anticipating the emergence of the Brood X Cicadas, which will come in just a couple of weeks, after their 17-year rest in the ground.

“When cicadas emerge, they create a grand wash of sound, a complex thrumming drone that sounds like just noise to humans...it’s music if you take the time to truly listen.” David Rothenburg, who is a professor of philosophy and music, likes to play his clarinet in a field among the singing cicadas, and some other musician friends he invites. As he describes what he and the other human musicians experience with these insects,

“We become humble members of an orchestra of millions. We try to tune in to the surrounding thrum, and as with jazz, we use some themes and sounds we have previously prepared but leave room for the improvisation that happens in the moment.

Is it crazy to bring human instruments and voices together with millions of thrumming and wing-flicking cicadas? Does the mix need any more sound? Every musician should try at least once to add his or her own small voice to the millions.

It's a profound experience. Far from crazy, it's necessary. Human sounds must fit into and around the callings of nature if we are ever to construct a surer, more promising way to survive on this complex and beautiful planet."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps these creatures who have been buried in the ground for 17 years know something of what resurrection sounds like. To come out into the world after being buried surely is something to sing about as they go about the business of making new life!

And that is the experience we are meant to have with baptism. Last week we had the Ethiopian eunuch, this week the lectionary in Acts gives us the Holy Spirit pouring out onto circumcised believers and Gentiles alike, calling *both* groups to be immersed into the waters of baptism and to come up and claim the new life Christ brings. Can you imagine how abuzz that early church must have felt? Can you feel the life teeming in the air? In 2 weeks, our baptismal font will open as we invite Evan and Christian to emerge into that new life Christ brings, and the new life they bring to the church.

When we immerse ourselves in Jesus's love and life, our isolation melts away. This is good news for people who have had a close study in isolation this past year! Jesus tells his listeners, "I do not call you servants[a] any longer, because the servant[b] does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard."

Last month I read an article in the *New York Times* about domestic workers-- servants-- in several of the wealthy countries along the Persian Gulf. Mostly coming from poorer African, Asian, or other Arab countries to work jobs such as housekeepers or nannies so they can send money back home to make their families' lives better, they often find the work to be more burdensome than expected-- but by then, they are isolated and with no rights. "They are unable to change jobs or leave the country without permission from their employer, and their bosses often confiscate their mobile phones and passports."<sup>2</sup>

However, some have discovered a refuge and a community they can immerse themselves into through Tik Tok. This social media app has become a popular place where domestic workers can connect with one another, and together they make up songs and dramas that parody their bosses. By making fun of their high-maintenance employers, they not only get to share the relief of laughter; they also know they are not alone. Some have even shared, through social media, information about contracts and wages that have helped their peers get into safer and fairer working conditions. Through this virtual community, they are no longer defined by their servitude; they find their dignity again through the friendships they are able to form.

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<sup>1</sup> David Rothenberg, "The Sound of Cicadas Is Music if You Take the Time to Listen" in *New York Times* May 8, 2021

<sup>2</sup> Louise Donovan, "Domestic Workers in Gulf Countries Vent Woes on TikTok" in *New York Times* April 25, 2021

Although all this community is a virtual experience, it gives them a taste-- a promise, even-- of the new life that is at hand. While our sacraments are not virtual-- we use real water; we taste real bread and drink real wine or juice-- they are outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace.

We do not literally shed an exoskeleton to show our new life, as the cicada nymphs do after they crawl up from the ground. But we do emerge from the baptismal waters; we make restoration and find forgiveness after we have sinned or caused brokenness; and we shed away that which keeps us from living into the life to which God calls us. Unlike the filmmaker who had a transformative education in the presence of an octopus, we may not be able to sit at the feet of Christ to get an education on what his love means. But we can read scripture and sit at his table, and in sharing the bread and his cup, we discover he is among us and in us.

The practices we share as a church-- disciples of Jesus Christ-- immerse us in Christ's lessons of how to live, and how to love. When you practice something, it can often feel virtual; it's not the real deal-- not yet. But take heart, Christians, and live as if the time is coming soon. You may even find that your practice becomes the encounter, the loving, and the living.