

“Grasshopper Faith”  
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
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I want to begin with a poem by Mary Oliver, called “The Summer Day.”  
Who made the world?  
Who made the swan, and the black bear?  
Who made the grasshopper?  
This grasshopper, I mean —  
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,  
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down —  
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.  
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.  
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.  
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?

Imagine with me for a minute that you are in a field of grass. It is warm outside, and there is a little bit of a breeze. You have a blanket spread beneath you, and the sun is warming your face. Your hands are behind you, propping you up into a sitting position, and your legs are out in front of you. If this position is normally physically uncomfortable for you, today is a day when your body has eased into its pose with grace. You feel at peace.

You lean back more, one elbow on the ground so you can prop the side of your head up with your hand. You are looking at the grass. You notice how each blade rises up from the earth. The ground is a mixture of dirt and tiny, decomposed bits of leaf and twig, as well as very small stones. You look closer, and see a team of ants rolling a tiny stone— to them, a big boulder. What purpose do they have?

A movement catches your eye. The grass just beyond your gaze quivers. What makes it move? Ping! A grasshopper leaps from the grass you are observing, and it lands on your resting arm! Resisting the urge to flick it away, you carefully pluck it off your shirt, and hold it in the palm of your hand. You notice its large eyes, and wonder what they see. You see the antennae extending from its head, but also much smaller hairs coming out of its whole body. Its abdomen rests on the heel of your palm. You start to count the segments of it. The grasshopper's legs, currently crouching, bristle your hand. The insect's abdomen suddenly gets heavier on the heel of your palm— and then, Ping! With a pop and a snap, the grasshopper catapults itself back into the grass, disappearing from your view, but joining a chorus of other insects that you had not noticed chirping until just now.

As you survey the landscape, again it feels as if it is just you, the grass, and the sun sitting below the heavens. But your grasshopper visitor, as well as the ants and the dirt, revealed to you that there is so much more happening that passes without your notice.

What happens is God's design. The one grasshopper you hold? God calls her by name. God knows all of their names, and not one goes missing to God's care. Probably, the grasshopper is unaware of this. Then again, maybe she knows, in ways humans cannot yet trust or perceive. Perhaps even more than for the hope of luring a mate, the call of the Creator is why the grasshopper chirps its song.

We are held, counted, cared for, created— just as that grasshopper is. How might we sing back to God our praise? Sometimes, it is easier to notice how the things of nature— in their simplicity and beauty— reflect a praise back on their creator, than it is to notice how our own lives can be a reflection of thanks and praise to our God. Yesterday, when I walked my dog through the Madonna cemetery, I saw an eagle flying overhead. As it circled high above me, I wondered whether its coasting, lofty flight had a purpose, such as to find prey, or to seek a mate, or to find a lovely stick to add to its nest. Or was it possible that he was just flying out of sheer delight of the feeling of having his body mounted up, wings upheld by air, trusting that the design of his Creator would help him defy the laws of gravity.

“Showoff!” I shouted at the eagle in the sky with a laugh. Second Isaiah prophesies, “Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint.”

Want to know the mysteries of the earth? Want to know the truth about who God is? Maybe you should watch the patterns the eagle draws in the air. Maybe you should consider, as Mary Oliver did in her poetry, the grasshopper.

But I suspect that it is not as easy for you to have the faith of a grasshopper, or the creaturely confidence of an eagle. You likely know what it is to walk, and get weary. It is fine and good to note the glories of creation, and to remember God's love and care. But sometimes, that glorious grasshopper ends up in the lizard's mouth.

Nature is glorious, but sometimes it can be cruel. Last week a girl in Australia was cleaning her guinea pig's cage, and had set her little pig in the yard to nibble grass while the cage was cleaned. A snake came from behind a bush, and snapped its jaws around the guinea pig. The girl, 12 years old, grabbed the snake by the tail, and like a helicopter swung the snake around and around with the tiny guinea pig suspended from the snake's mouth on the other end. The girl's father and dog came outside when they heard the commotion. The father then grabbed the snake, and whacked it against a wall. The snake released the guinea pig, who then hid behind some shrubbery until the girl scooped it up to cuddle it and check on it. The pig was just fine. The snake slithered away— until dad grabbed it and threw it into the next yard.

What looked like it would become a glorious day for the snake ended up being a disappointment. What looked like the day of death for the guinea pig became the day of its deliverance. Our lives sometimes feel like that, and sometimes we are the pig, sometimes we are the snake. We wonder, will God's intervention feel like meddling? Or will it feel like salvation?

There are times when we may feel like we are trapped in the jaws of a snake, wondering if our salvation will arrive. I imagine this may be how it feels to live in a war, or even a mental health crisis. And on a milder level, as humans, we all know what it means to run and feel weary, to walk and feel faint. Second Isaiah's passage was given to God's people while they were living in exile in Babylon. These are people who had lost everything close to their hearts. The prophet wanted them to know— God wanted them to know— that they would be counted. That God would not forget their names.

I have a friend, Yaryna, whom I never considered very religious. The things she has loved— running, art, literature... have little do with church. But in recent years, though she has moved another state away and we rarely see each other, she has started texting me about the bible. Perhaps this interest has come about because some health issues have kept Yaryna from running. She is now too weary to run. Perhaps it is because Yaryna, who is Ukrainian, is watching her country under war, and has two of her immediate family fighting in it now. Her approach to the bible is scholarly and philosophical rather than devotional— true to Yaryna's character. But I wonder whether

on some level, the bible gives her a story that is bigger than hers or ours, and reminds her that God has seen human suffering, and knows the human longing for liberation, and is indeed intimately involved in our lives, even as God sits over and above all things in God's heavenly tent.

I often ask her how she is handling the stresses of her home under siege and her loved ones risking their lives in battle. Recently we were talking about how connection with others often helps to lift us out of our pain. My frame of reference was an afternoon of volunteering I had done that week through the church. Yaryna's frame of reference was a political prisoner in a Russian jail whose writings she followed. Yeah, our realities are a bit different. And so I leaned in closer to hear what she said about finding hope when everything is lost. This man, Igor Kozlovsky, was a theologian and professor who was imprisoned by Russian invaders for his pro-Ukrainian teachings. To make it through the harshness of Russian imprisonment, he focused on how he could help others— passing notes to other inmates tucked into the laundry basket, he formed a community and shared news of resistance and hope. When his captors found that too much of a threat, they placed him in solitary confinement. All alone, to keep from going mad and from losing hope, Kozlovsky offered lectures to the rats in his tiny cell. Perhaps, like the mindful study of a grasshopper, even a rat could give him hope in God's purpose and design.

It is one thing to tell the people you count the grasshoppers and know them by name, or that you strengthen the powerless. It is something else to show them. That's exactly what Jesus did, in his ministry in Galilee, when he met in the personal spaces of peoples' homes, and in the public spaces like the synagogue, teaching and curing illnesses, and casting out demons.

It is nice to think of God, wrapped up in the heavens, a canopy of stars and planets as her tent. But it is another thing to consider that when God's creation does not go according to God's design, when we do not act as the beloved community to which God calls us, God will also leave the tent, and come and dwell among us— near as our own heartbeat.

As Jesus did, God walks among us. God touches us. God calls out that which lays claim on us but did not come from God. God heals us. And when we are still weary, still broken, still heavy with the burdens of oppression and violence... God sits with us, and notices us— really notices. God calls forth the wonder in us, even when we are broken, God makes the sun to shine upon us, to remind us that we are part of a much bigger creation: the sun, the dirt, the grass, the ant, the eagle, and the grasshopper. Like each one of them, though we will live, and though we will one day die, we are named. We are counted. We are loved.