

John Muir, the Scottish environmentalist and naturalist and founder of the Sierra Club wrote: “Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul alike.” “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.” and “I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in.”

Our first hymn is green book #197, “How Firm a Foundation”

Our first reading comes from Jean Toomer, a 20th Century Quaker and famous Harlem Renaissance writer who wrote in 1947:

“Worship is the hunger of the human soul for God. When it really occurs, it is as compelling as the hunger for food. It is as spontaneous as the love of a couple. If we feel it, no one needs to tell us we should worship. No one has to try to make us do it. If we do not feel it, or have no desire to feel it, no amount of urging or forcing will do any good. We simply cannot be forced from the outside to worship. Only the power within us, the life within, can move us to it.”

Elizabeth Powell Bond was a Quaker abolitionist and later the Dean of Women at Swarthmore College where she wrote in 1895: “The highest purpose of prayer is to lift the soul into close companionship with God. Such prayer is not an attitude of the body; is not a formula of words. It is an impulse of the soul that often cannot express itself in words. In the midst of our busiest occupations, when hands and mind and heart are bent upon accomplishing the purpose of the hour, there may come a flash of divine illumination, flooding our souls with light, showing us how God is the center of all things, the life of all that lives. In that moment’s deep revealing comes to us the secret of faith that need not question; of hope that foresees its own fulfilling; of strength

that wearies not in the walk with God; of love whose beneficent impulses go out to all the needy, and sweetens all life's relationships; of peace that bears the soul upwards to the regions of perpetual calm.”

And finally, a reading from Isaac Pennington, early influential Quaker minister and writer who wrote in 1670: “And the end goal of words is to bring people to the knowledge of things, beyond what words can utter. So learn of the Lord to make right use of the Scriptures, which is by esteeming them in their place, and prizing that above them, which is above them. The eternal life, the Spirit, the power, the fountain of living waters, the everlasting pure well is above the words concerning it. This, the believer is to witness in oneself, and to draw water with joy out of it.”

Our second hymn is green #19 “Praise be to God the Almighty”

Joys and Concerns---then music interlude

Dear Friends—In this height of summer, of vacations and renewal, of growing crops and time outdoors, keep us ever connected and aware. We are always on the verge of worship, always about to encounter the Truth and the Spirit in our experience of time and place and one another. Let us not shy away from the profound or from being moved, but give us eyes of wonder and appreciation, of grounding and resolve, of directness and directedness. Wherever we are, alone or together, at home or away, in a room or in the natural world, let us be both present and deep within. May our emotions of joy or sorrow, our concerns and empathy with one another, be always built on the larger foundation of sacred care and bathed in the overflowing fountain of sacred love. Amen.

Our third hymn is Green book #121 “In the Garden”

Children may now head downstairs for time with each other.

Message: Dear Friends, For many of us, it is in the garden, in nature, that we feel closest to the essence of life, that we experience peace and wonder and beauty. It is not surprising that paradise, Eden, and our human origins are described as gardens, as abundant nature. This is where many of us feel that we speak with the divine, as our last hymn describes with its own imagery, where God walks with us in the cool of the day. We all have preferences in terms of nature, whether it be lakes or mountains or beaches or forests or well-tended gardens or the sky of stars and sunsets. As John Muir observed, it is all hitched to everything else, attracting and distracting as the case may be, but living and breathing the life that we live and breathe. It is likely that connection to life itself which makes time in nature so restorative to human beings, that reminder that there is something before the built environment and beyond human society, a reminder we need now more than ever.

A little over a month ago, Craig and I were hiking in the stunning landscapes of Scotland, lands of our family heritage as well as that of John Muir, but also in the remote spots of the outer Hebrides and the Orkney Islands. It felt like we traveled in the multiple dimensions of not only latitude and longitude, but time and spirit. We visited several sites of the standing stones that are older than the pyramids, and on the Orkney Islands saw the dwelling places of those ancient people, touching and leaning on those stones. The circles were wide, and the circling hills and water mimicked their shape and mystery as we passed fishermen casting their lines over windswept waves. We reached a giant stone called the Watchman, who was raised long before Stonehenge, and associated with eternity and the transience of individual human life and the faith in collective survival. These stones are positioned to mark the seasons, the tilt of the earth and the count the spin of the earth, the days, and thus the predictable continuity in the everlasting change. The ancient chapels and cathedrals of the first millennium of Christianity were also there, were also stones. Feeling permanent.

One of my great hopes was to see puffins, a bird more whimsical and joyous than stately and profound, but rare. As we stood on a cliff of likely puffin burrows, the little rabbit holes where they tend their eggs, we saw one puffin on the water out in the distance, and passed around the binoculars in our little group. We strained to point out that one bird, bobbing in the water, until each had it sighted. Meanwhile, there at our feet, a puffin emerged from his burrow and was eyeing us quizzically as if to ask, what are you looking at? We were straining to look so far, as he stood right there. He even flew off and then circled round and landed back at his burrow, as if to demonstrate this was no big deal. On that remote island of Westray, we strained and hoped and searched, while he simply lived, and wondered why we were looking at him. On that same island, we saw the blooming Scottish primrose, one of the rarest flowers on earth, just a tiny blossom. We leaned close over the wee pink specimens hidden in the grass atop dramatic cliffs, just a few tiny plants blooming on that day. Our trip, thus, a combination of the remote and evanescent, the ephemeral and bright, together with the symbolically eternal mountains and stone of millennial ages. We walked these places, we hiked the hills with other pilgrims, our progress not much different from all who came before and who knew each other's names and voiced and listened to thoughts and dreams much as we do today.

The five-thousand-year-old burial chamber, a giant construction on Orkney at Maeshowe, at midsummer, the solstice, catches a beam of light to cast straight down the long hall onto the back wall, much as do the great carved stone temples of Abu Simbel in Egypt. Again, marking the wonder of the tilt and spin of earth, the predictable within the ephemera of our days and seasons, looking for the deeper human time of our ancestors. We also wondered at the compulsions to climb and travel, to go beyond everyday limits and see the tops and bottoms and ends of the earth. To what purpose? To know or defy it? To prove or disprove?

Here is where the ultimate language of God, the language the Persian poet Rumi identifies as silence, comes in. At each far place, at each natural sign, at each marking, one can only answer in silence and wonder. There are no words when one reaches the top of the mountain, when one sees the beautiful sunset. In some cases, as at the ancient cathedral of St. Magnas in Kirkwall, the printed words on placards request silence. As our reading from Isaac Pennington makes clear—words are always inadequate and incomplete reflections of divine or profound experience, even the words of scripture. In worship, in Meeting, in a congregation, we don't hunger for the words, we hunger for the experience—of deep love, of true community, of the sacred. And yet, journeying deep within, we are, at times, compelled to speak, compelled to share this journey, seeking to know and share.

The journey within can be as far and wide as going to remote islands, and as filled with wonder and new and exotic experience. It can come from the woods and water of our community, the Finger Lakes, and in one room, with one candle where also shines the Light within. Let it happen to you, let it happen to us, a firm foundation and a fountain every springing, now and forevermore.

Closing hymn is green #180 “There is Nothing I can Give You”

Mildred Binns Young, who with her husband led the first work camp of the American Friends Service Committee and helped establish the Delta Community Farm in Rockdale, Mississippi, observed in 1961: “I have never outgrown a sort of naïve surprise and delight which I felt when I found out that there is one single thing that one can have without limit and not deprive anyone else—the Love of God, God's presence.”