

Grace Episcopal Church
Third Sunday after the Epiphany 2023
Rev Brian C Justice

Isaiah 9.1-14
Psalm 27.1, 5-13
1 Corinthians 1.10-18
Matthew 4.12-23

Follow Me

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O God,
You are calling us to be
light, frolicsome, beautiful, afraid of nothing,
as though we had wings.
May we follow you.
Amen.

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In her poem “Starlings in Winter” Mary Oliver marvels at the miracle of these birds, so “full of gorgeous life.” And then, having observed the birds, she observes herself.

Chunky and noisy,
but with stars in their black feathers,
they spring from the telephone wire
and instantly

they are acrobats
in the freezing wind.
And now, in the theater of air,
they swing over buildings,

dipping and rising;
they float like one stippled star
that opens,
becomes for a moment fragmented,

then closes again;
and you watch
and you try
but you simply can't imagine

how they do it
with no articulated instruction, no pause,
only the silent confirmation
that they are this notable thing,

this wheel of many parts, that can rise and spin
over and over again,
full of gorgeous life.

Ah, world, what lessons you prepare for us,
even in the leafless winter,
even in the ashy city.
I am thinking now
of grief, and of getting past it;

I feel my boots
trying to leave the ground,
I feel my heart
pumping hard. I want

to think again of dangerous and noble things.
I want to be light and frolicsome.
I want to be improbable beautiful and afraid of nothing,
as though I had wings.

Ah, the starlings in winter ... in the theater of air, together they fly, rising and spinning,
over and over again, like one stippled star that opens, and you simply can't imagine
how they do it.

Then, as if she had looked into some kind of spiritual mirror, the poet reflects on
herself. Her feelings, her longings, her heart pumping hard. She wants "to think
dangerous and noble things" ... "to be light and frolicsome" ... to be "improbable" ...
"beautiful" ... "afraid of nothing as though (she) had wings."

Mary Oliver, I think, has spoken something universal, something that we all feel, that we all long for ... we want a life that feels like ... well, like *starlings in winter*.

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In the Gospel reading today, Matthew introduces the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus.

As Jesus walked along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Peter, Andrew, James, and John. He said to them, “Follow me.” And Matthew reports that these fishermen left their boats, their nets, their families and *followed him*.

When we hear this story we might think, that’s fine. That’s picturesque. That’s charming. These nice young men joining Jesus.

Wait ... no!

What in the world is happening here?

What could possibly lead Peter, Andrew, James, and John to do that?

I don’t understand!

Nobody leaves their boats, their nets, their families to follow a stranger ... nobody leaves everything behind to find a new life ... to find a new life ... unless ... unless ...

Then, I thought of Mary Oliver and the starlings in winter. I thought of her deep longing for life, a life abundant and full of abandon. I thought of her seeing the starlings, the free flight of birds in the communion of air. That was like seeing a light suddenly shining into her darkness.

Then I thought again of Peter, Andrew, James, and John ... and of the other disciples, too ... and of Mary, Martha, Mary Magdalen, the woman at the well ... what they felt, what they longed for ... how they must have desired with a deep desire “to think

dangerous and noble things” ... “to be light and frolicsome” ... to be “improbable” ... “beautiful” ... “afraid of nothing as though (they) had wings.”

And then ... I wondered at *what those men and women saw when Jesus walked by ...* this mystic, this master, this marvel, this man who manifestly had *something more going on ...*

It was a like a light suddenly shining into their darkness ... the light of Christmas, the light of Epiphany, the divine light of Love was right there in this luminous person saying to them, “Follow me.” Walk with me into The Way of Love, into the liberating, life-giving Love that is improbable, beautiful, afraid of nothing ...

Then, my question changed. No longer was the question, how could they follow a stranger like that? The question was, *how could they not follow?*

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I remembered something else. The Gospel is always in the present moment and the Gospel is always about you and me.

We are the fishermen by the sea. We are the women in the village. You and I. Right here. Right now.

And Christ is calling us to follow The Way of Love.

What are you and I going to do?

I know ... leave the boats, leave the nets ... let's go ...

Amen.