

Student Work

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Praying Poetically

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Praying Poetically

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Daily Scripture Texts

[Psalm 148](#)

[Proverbs 8:22-31](#)

[1 John 5:1-12](#)

This summer, I spent time sitting at a dog beach in western Michigan. I set up a comfortable spot for myself and watched as my housemates played fetch with their dog, Finley. The other dogs on the beach chased the waves of Lake Michigan up and down the shoreline. My housemates and I held up our hands and used our fingers to gauge how long it would be before the sun went down. It was very easy to meet new friends; all we had to do was look to our neighbors, ask a question about their dog, and a conversation would begin. Our cellphones stayed in our bags the whole time.

On that beach, I eagerly flipped through my book of Mary Oliver poetry; I had read this particular collection on the floor of my local Barnes & Noble several times before I finally splurged and bought it for myself. I've always loved poetry. My high school English teacher said that "Poetry is to see what we did not see. In poetry, we imagine and re-imagine what we think." This teacher introduced me to Mary Oliver and told me that she is especially good at finding beauty in the ordinary.

One of my favorite poems of Oliver's is titled "Praying".

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

After a while, I looked up from my book and took a second look at everything going on around me. The way the dogs chased the waves up and down the shore. The way the sunset bounced off of the lake. Everything felt right. I felt almost as if I was standing at God's side when He stepped back, looked at His creation, and said it was "good."

As a worship leader, I tend to think of "praise" occurring inside a sanctuary or during a time of corporate worship. I imagine music, preaching, liturgical prayers, the reading of Scripture, communion...I imagine formal "church" services. However, Scripture shows that "praise" is so much more than our communal gatherings on Sundays.

Psalm 148 is a song that comes at the doxology of the book of Psalms. It calls on all of creation, everything in heaven and earth, to praise the Lord. The psalmist uses similar poetic language to that which is used in the creation story found in Genesis. God created the world and then filled it. From the highest of heights, deepest of depths, and everything in between; all of creation was made to praise the Lord. ¹

Dr. Bob DeSmith teaches in his Responding to Literature class that “A poem’s a happening, man!” Poetry both conveys an experience and is itself an experience. Poets like Mary Oliver teach me how to have good experiences. I am able to learn from her encounters how to have one of my own.

Life all around us is praising the Lord. The snowflakes, the patterns of the moon, the cows in the pasture, the waves of Lake Michigan, the blue iris, and the weeds in the parking lot all glorify the Lord. Seeing how they faithfully praise Him helps me “patch a few words together” and walk through the “doorway into thanks, and a silence in which another voice may speak.”

Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for his name alone is exalted;
his splendor is above the earth and the heavens (verse 13)

Hallelujah. Praise the Lord.

Footnotes

1. Psalms – Tremper Longman III [↩](#)