

When I was six years old, my parents and three older siblings were living in a bungalow on a suburban street in Montgomery, AL. One of the features I adored was a large magnolia tree in the front yard. Not the tulip magnolias that are prevalent in NE Ohio. But the *magnolia grandiflora* that is common all throughout the southeast. The ones with wide, dark-green waxy leaves, woody flower buds that are the size and shape of hand grenades, that open up to large white flowers with petals the size of a child's palm. The greatest feature of the magnolia in our yard was that its branches grew all the way to the ground. As a six-year old, it made for an easy climb.

Magnolias are expansive. Once you get about halfway up the trunk you are enveloped. Everything on the outside goes away, and the tree becomes your secluded hide-away, where you can be free to think your thoughts. I can still recall the specific smell of the tree – piquant and woody when not in bloom; heavenly perfumed when the blossoms were out.

Now, I'm not a big perfume guy – I have a very acute sense of smell.

Back in the days when I went to shopping malls, and would enter a department store (why do they put the perfume desks at the entrance to the department store?!?), I would literally hold my breath until I got well past the desk – it would offend my sense of smell so much.

But the magnolia blossoms were a different story – the sweet, lemony smell was music to my nostrils – still is.

I loved being in that tree.

Sometimes I would climb it with my neighborhood friends. It made a great fort – we could come up with all sorts of imaginative adventures up there. But as a six year-old, I really enjoyed my solitary time there. I didn't have the language for it then, but I was an introvert. I liked being around people, and my family. But at times it would get to be too overwhelming and I'd need time away from everyone, and that tree became my refuge.

If there were arguments in the house, I could go into the tree as a place of silence and safety.

If I needed just to be alone, the tree was a monk's cell – close quarters, holding me like a cocoon.

There I could talk to myself – in my head, or even out loud. I couldn't recall what I talked to myself about – a child's thoughts. Whatever needed to be processed – in a sense, whatever needed to be prayed about. I was safe in there – no one could hear me, no one would bother me. Just me and the tree, and the One who made us both. In that space, I was free to be.

A moment ago, we heard these words of Rachel Carson:

A child's world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement.

The magnolia tree, among other places, certainly served that purpose for me. I wonder if you had similar experiences as a child – if similar spaces and places come to your mind?

Let's allow that question to sit with you for a few minutes.

I invite you to sit up, and put your feet on the ground. If you feel safe to do so, and would find it helpful, I invite you to gently close your eyes.

Picture a place that brought you comfort – you choose the age, you choose the memories. Mine was a suburban setting – yours may be in the middle of a city – or somewhere on a farm. Perhaps it is in the forest, or by a large body of water. Or under the expanse of stars. Where is a place where you could go – be embraced by the environment around you – and be allowed to fully be you?

Allow your senses to be involved – what do you see, feel, touch or hear?

What's going on in your insides – with what emotions do you connect?

Is there a sense that you are tending to your spirit – connecting to something bigger than you?

Place yourself there for a half minute or so.

Wait for a time

OK – come now back into the worship space around you – reacclimate yourself to this time and place.

Throughout this service we have heard how John Becker chooses to account for his holy time in the natural world through the writing of haiku. As AnneMarie said at the beginning of the service, it is an efficient three line reflection made of 5 syllables, then 7, then 5. I'm going to leave another moment of quiet to see if anything comes to you worth working on in haiku form. If not, is there anything you would like to note about the

experience before we move on – a key word, phrase, or lasting image. Feel free to note that now.

Let's close this practice by acknowledging to God our thanks for the places – bigger than us – that hold us when we need to be held and restored.

The statement from Rachel Carson continues,

It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood.

I believe this is part of the purpose for the ancient Hebrews concocting the story of the Garden of Eden, and the subsequent departure from it by our totem progenitors. Eden, and Adam and Eve, and a conniving, talking serpent are not reflecting an historical event. They are representations of the need for humans to understand the world in which they live, and the way in which we are. It is indeed “our misfortune” – as Carson declares – that we forget the wonders of childhood. It is part of the human experience. At some point that wonder turns to a quest for knowledge – and once we have answers we put labels on those answers written in permanent ink.

Take one aspect of the Eden story as an example. The Original Man and Woman learn from the Agent of Further Knowledge (aka the

serpent) that they are naked. Before that revelation – they just were as they were. In the course of being told they are naked, all of a sudden what was “beautiful and awe-inspiring” now has a stigma attached; to being as they were. There’s no good reason for why it is “wrong” to be naked – but if it is “wrong” then they don’t want “God,” their Maker, to see them that way. And they hide. Well, they TRY to hide. This is Carson’s point – sometimes, even before we reach adulthood – enough stigmas stick to our souls that we lose sight of the fact that WHO WE ARE – each of us – is, indeed, beautiful and awe-inspiring. And we believe that our belovedness is lost.

It is both a heart-rending and heart-warming moment in the Eden story, when the Creator walks through the garden calling out, “Where are you?” Heart-rending, in that the one who fashioned these marvelous creatures knows that they are now hiding from their Beloved Creator. Heart-warming, because the Creator wants to seek out the ones who felt the need to hide. It is an act of unconditional love.

This God is still with us. This God who calls out to each and every one of us whenever and however we hide ourselves, “Where are you?” It’s not so much so that God can find us ... it’s more so that we can know that God is searching for us and wants us to find ourselves – and recognize that God loves us *precisely* for who we are. And if there are stigmas (or whatever you want to call them) that become obstacles to us delighting in who we are (ie.

our naked selves), then God wants us to hold God's hand as we walk through the Garden together and work those things out.

Somehow, when we return to the sacredness of the beautiful places on the earth, we are reminded of our own sacredness and beauty. We are gifted with the recollection that we, too, are part of the beauty of the earth.

Those places call us to return to our Creator – who LOVES us – and reclaim “the sources of our strength” to once again be a blessing in the world.

You....me....and ALL that was created to be.

Amen.