

Looking for the light

a devotional from
ST. CHARLES AVENUE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Thursday, April 2, 2020

by Gillian Egan

"[On] an island . . . everything is complete, and everyone has his obstinate, sure, and self-sufficient place. Within their shores, everything functions according to rituals that are as hard as rock from repetition, and at the same time they amble through their days as whimsically and casually as if the world ended at the horizon." - Tove Jansson, *The Summer Book*

Philippians 1:1-11.

Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

At first after everything closes, our house is claustrophobically small. The three boys bounce off the walls, the noise constant. I work in tiny bursts, driven mad by unceasing interruption "Mom." "MOM." "Hey mom!" How on earth will we manage this.

I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy, for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now;

We learn to use every inch of the space we have: the front porch has never seen so much action. It is shaded by a butterfly bush, abuzz with bees. Limpid yellow loquats droop from the next-door neighbor's tree, intruding over our railing. Sometimes the sixth-grader sits there when he has a live class session, so his classmates can see the flowers in the background.

Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ:

I set up two chairs in the corner of our tiny back lawn, screw a beach umbrella into the ground between them. Flustered and hot from wrestling with the umbrella, I sit a moment and am charmed by the view of the back of my house – all our window boxes spilling over with blooms, the windows freshly washed with Windex and newspaper.

Even as it is meet for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart; inasmuch as both in my bonds, and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel, ye all are partakers of my grace.

Today it has been almost three weeks since I last went to the office. I sit on the couch with my burnt toast and coffee, checking work email. The six-year-old absent-mindedly scoots closer,

iPad in hand and headphones on, until the length of his left side is touching my right. In the kitchen, the light filters through the clear water in a vase of green leaves – the cut lilies died long ago, but the filler greenery has lasted weeks, since the last time I went to the grocery store.

For God is my record, how greatly I long after you all in the heart of Jesus Christ.

I scrub the wooden picnic tabletop out back and set up my laptop there while two of the boys and Patrick play cornhole on the small lawn below. Our middle son sprawls on the patio chair reading, skinny arms and legs impossibly long, his black-rimmed glasses smudged. My heart overflows.

And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; that ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ.

I cut a lemon wedge for my ice water – our next-door neighbor left them on our porch yesterday. There is fresh basil for our pasta tonight, plucked from our small container garden on the back deck. We plant basil every spring and it usually dries up and dies while I fly on airplanes hither and yon, unable to tend to it. Now I am never not home.

11 Being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.

One day, this will end, and we will all scatter, back to our outside lives. How on earth will we do it?

Question for Reflection

In Tove Jansson's *The Summer Book*, she tells the story of an old woman and her small granddaughter who live together on an island in the Baltic Sea, roaming far and wide across it during their summer adventures. Esther Freud wrote the Foreword for the book's 2003 reprint. She traveled to the real island that was Jansson's home and inspiration for *The Summer Book*, and upon her arrival was dumbfounded to learn that one could circumnavigate the entire island in four and a half minutes. Freud described feeling uneasy and claustrophobic there, and writes: "To calm myself, I think of all the things Sophia and Grandmother do on this tiny island in the long slow months between spring and autumn. They make animal sculptures, and carve boats from bark, they gather berries, driftwood and bones. They draw 'awful things,' tell stories, build Venice in the marsh pool, row across to other islands, sleep and swim and talk. . ."

Many of us are now on islands in our own homes, close-kept, intimate, necessarily bound within a drastically reduced physical space. *The Summer Book* is about finding worlds to explore with enthusiasm and curiosity even in the smallest of spaces – joy in the small things. (Happy to let any of you borrow it! I'll spritz it with Lysol and leave it on the porch for you.) The Philippians passage is also about joy - joy experienced both "in my bonds, and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel" (the NIV translates this as "whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel"). Chained up in my bonds of social distancing, it takes conscious effort to find joy.

Finding joy in adversity is a laughable directive to many who face job loss, emptying pantries and bank accounts, whose homes are not safe places, whose loved ones ill or on the frontlines and at risk. We can ask how to keep the joy of Christ in our own hearts, even in the bonds of our anxiety and fear. But we can also ask how we can reach out to others and support them, like Paul did to the Philippians. In what ways can you reach out to those you long for and carry them through these difficult times? What do you have to offer, and how are you sharing those offerings?

Prayer

*Glory be to God for dappled things—
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
For rose-molds all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.
All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise Him.*

- Gerald Manley Hopkins

To send us your prayer requests, click on [this link](#) and our church staff and prayer group will add you to our weekly prayer list. You will have the option to specify your request as confidential.

If you would like to contribute to our daily devotionals, please email Pastor Sarah, sarah@scapc.org.

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