

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Joshua H. Narcisse
Sunday, July 20, 2025

Take a deep breath in through your nose, and let it out through your mouth.
Take another breath, deeper than the first.

With your next breath:

Breathe in God's steadfast mercy. Breathe out God's mercies to everyone else in this space.

Breathe in God's grace. Breathe out the need to be right.

Breathe into your legs God's strength. Breathe out any tension that may be lingering there.

Breathe into your arms God's tenderness. Breathe out any inclination toward harshness.

Breathe into your core God's love. Breathe out any bits of hatred or resentment you're holding onto.

Breathe into your mind God's hope. Breathe out any cynicism that has taken up root in you.

Breathe into your spirit God's presence. Breathe out the confidence that you are never alone.

Amen.

Continue to settle into your breathing. Whether with eyes closed or fixed, hear now this reading from the poet Mary Oliver. As we are invited further into this practice of Sabbath.

At The River Clarion

by Mary Oliver

1.

I don't know who God is exactly.

But I'll tell you this.

I was sitting in the river named Clarion,

on a water splashed stone

and all afternoon I listened to the voices of the river talking.

Whenever the water struck a stone it had something to say,

and the water itself,

and even the mosses trailing under the water.

And slowly, very slowly,

it became clear to me what they were saying.

Said the river I am part of holiness.

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And I too, said the stone.
And I too, whispered the moss beneath the water.

I'd been to the river before, a few times.
Don't blame the river that nothing happened quickly.
You don't hear such voices in an hour or a day.
You don't hear them at all
if selfhood has stuffed your ears.
And it's difficult to hear anything anyway,
through all the traffic, the ambition.

2.
If God exists he isn't just butter and good luck.
He's also the tick that killed my wonderful dog Luke.

Said the river:
imagine everything you can imagine,
then keep on going.

Imagine how the lily (who may also be a part of God) would
sing to you if it could sing,
if you would pause to hear it.
And how are you so certain anyway that it doesn't sing?

If God exists he isn't just churches and mathematics.
He's the forest, He's the desert.
He's the ice caps, that are dying.
He's the ghetto and the Museum of Fine Arts.
He's van Gogh and Allen Ginsberg and Robert Motherwell.
He's the many desperate hands,
cleaning and preparing their weapons.
He's every one of us, potentially.

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The leaf of grass, the genius, the politician, the poet.
And if this is true, isn't it something very important?
Yes, it could be that I am a tiny piece of God,
and each of you too,
or at least of his intention and his hope.
Which is a delight beyond measure.

I don't know how you get to suspect such an idea.
I only know that the river kept singing.
It wasn't a persuasion,
it was all the river's own constant joy
which was better by far than a lecture,
which was comfortable, exciting, unforgettable.

3.
Of course for each of us, there is the daily life.
Let us live it, gesture by gesture.
When we cut the ripe melon,
should we not give it thanks?
And should we not thank the knife also?
We do not live in a simple world.

4.
There was someone I loved who grew old and ill
One by one I watched the fires go out.
There was nothing I could do
except to remember
that we receive
then we give back.

5.

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My dog Luke lies in a grave in the forest,
she is given back.
But the river Clarion still flows
from wherever it comes from
to where it has been told to go.

I pray for the desperate earth.
I pray for the desperate world.
I do the little each person can do,
it isn't much.
Sometimes the river murmurs,
sometimes it raves.

6.
Along its shores were,
may I say, very intense cardinal flowers.
And trees, and birds that have wings to uphold them,
for heaven's sakes—
the lucky ones: they have such deep natures,
they are so happily obedient.
While I sit here in a house
filled with books,
ideas,
doubts,
hesitations.

7.
And still,
pressed deep into my mind,
the river keeps coming,
touching me,
passing by on its long journey,
its pale, infallible voice singing.

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Sabbath as Practice

I love the Lord,
God heard my cry and pitied every groan.
As long as I live and troubles rise, I'll hasten to God's throne.

Lord, we love you, we truly do.
But there are so many other things
that compete for our affections.
So many other things that we end up loving in place of you.
We so love our lives; the little comforts we've acquired:
The friends that bring us joy.
The partners that make sure we never feel alone.
The children whose laughter makes music in our heart.
The work that brings us purpose, significance, even prominence.
Lord, we love you.
And hear you, calling:
"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind."
(Matthew 22:37)
But, but, if I am honest God,
sometimes I love other things more than I do you.
I love my past,
at least my sense of how things used to be,
how comfortable I used to feel.
I long for the quiet assurance
of when things made sense around me.
When I knew every face on my street.
When I knew every name of the person on my pew.
When things went the way I had planned.

Lord, I love you, I truly do.
But there are so many other things
that compete for my affections.
I need your help.
I don't know how to love you with my whole heart.
I don't know how to abide in you.

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I don't know how to rest in you.

There is after all so much fear, that has my attention.

It grips me and will not let me go.

It takes ahold of my heart even more completely than you do.

And I am ashamed to admit it,
but resting in fear is so much more familiar
than finding my rest in the mystery of you.

Lord we love you, we just need help finding our rest in you.

Even when violence.

Senseless and devastating.

Becomes all we can see.

When grief,

Debilitating and constant.

Becomes all we can breathe.

When brokenness,

Tragic and common.

Becomes our daily reality

Lord, help us to abide in you,

Help us to rest in you,

Even when fear wants us more.

Help me to hear you whispering through the Psalmist:

“Cast your cares upon the Lord,

and the Lord will sustain you.

The Lord will never permit the righteous to be moved.” (Psalm 55:22)

Lord help me to love you with my whole heart,

And with my soul,

And with my mind

Past the anxieties that crowd out the assurance of your peace

Beyond the exhaustion that has taken up residence in my bones.

Lord help me to love you.

Right here, in this world though broken and in pain.

Lord help me to abide in you.

Right here where death thinks it has won.

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Lord, help me to rest in you.

Right here, even in this space where I have shown up convinced I need to prove myself worthy.
Right here where I need to be reminded that loving you is the first step in loving myself enough
to stop for a moment,
take a deep breath,
and remember that I belong first to you.

Lord I love you, and in this moment I can sense myself gaining clarity as to why.

I love you because of the brilliance you place in every blossom;
because of the softness of the breeze you cause to caress my skin on a sun washed day.
Thank you for helping me to notice.

Lord, I love you,
For the grace you send to shape each of my days,
and the mercies you cause to spare my every moment,
and your peace showing up to settle my anxious thoughts.
Thank you for helping me rest in it.

Lord, I love you.

Now I need you to help me love you “not [just] in word or speech, but in [my actions] and [in] truth.” (1 John 3:18)

Lord, help me to practice it.

Help me to practice Sabbath.

Help me to rest in your love
and not my possessions,
or my pride, or my profession,
or even the people I call my own.

But in you,
and in you, set the pace for this “one wild and precious life” you’ve given me.

I love you Lord,
you’ve heard my cries,
you’ve held my hand,
you’ve called me your own.

Help me to act like it.

To your glory and for my good,
Amen.