

Lori Erickson sermon
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Learning to See

As some of you know, a few years ago I took up sketching. And one of the first things I discovered is that learning to draw is really about learning how to see.

I thought that I was already pretty good at that. After all, I've spent much of my life as a travel writer. My job has required me to pay attention to places—to notice what makes one landscape different from another, to look for telling details, to describe what I see.

But sketching requires a different kind of attention. If I'm writing about a tree, I can look at it and think: *oak tree*. I might notice that it's large, or that its leaves are turning color, or that its branches are moving in the wind. But if I try to draw that tree, suddenly "oak tree" isn't nearly enough. I have to notice which way the trunk bends, where the branches divide, which ones reach upward and which ones droop, and where the light falls.

This sort of noticing is one of the things I love most about sketching. It slows me down. It makes me linger. It forces me to look at something long enough that I begin to see what was there all along.

Leonardo da Vinci had a phrase for this: *saper vedere*, meaning "knowing how to see." For Leonardo, seeing wasn't simply something our eyes did automatically. It was a skill to be cultivated, a discipline of careful attention. In his advice to young artists, he urged them to slow down and study the world detail by detail. He told them to "acquire diligence rather than rapidity."

I love that phrase: *knowing how to see*. And I've begun to wonder whether that kind of attention isn't simply an artistic practice. Maybe it's also a spiritual practice. Looking and seeing, after all, aren't quite the same thing.

Which brings me to the fact that today we're beginning something new at New Song. For the next several weeks, we'll be observing the Season of Creation. It's an ecumenical Christian observance that begins around September 1, the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, and continues through October 4, the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi. Each Sunday has a different emphasis: Pray. Learn. Act. Advocate. Bless.

So today we begin with prayer.

You might wonder why we need a special season for creation. Does this mean that a commitment to environmentalism has been added to the church calendar? Well, in some ways yes, but in a larger sense no. Because Creation Season isn't about taking a few weeks away from the Christian story so we can talk about nature. It's about noticing how much of the Christian story we've sometimes failed to see.

The Bible begins with creation—with light and darkness, water and earth, plants and creatures, and God looking upon all of it and calling it good. And creation never disappears from the story. God speaks to Moses through a burning bush. The Psalms are filled with mountains and rivers, trees and animals praising God. Jesus tells people to look at birds and lilies, seeds and soil. Even our sacraments depend upon creation. We baptize with water. We gather around bread made from grain and wine made from grapes.

So Creation isn't scenery surrounding the Christian story. It's woven through the story from beginning to end. And we are part of it. Perhaps that's one reason we need Creation Season. Like me looking at a tree and thinking, *tree*, we've become so accustomed to the world around us that we don't really see it anymore.

Which brings me to the reading from Ezekiel, which is one of the Bible's great images for the prophetic vocation. God tells Ezekiel that he has been appointed as a watchman for the house of Israel. A watchman's first responsibility is to pay attention. He stands where he can see what others cannot. He looks toward the horizon. He watches for danger. And when he sees it coming, he sounds the warning. The people may listen or they may not. But the watchman is responsible for seeing—and then for telling the truth about what he sees.

Perhaps the artist and the prophet have something in common. Both are trained to pay attention. The artist says, *Look at this. Look at the shape of that branch, the way the light falls, the colors in the shadows.* The prophet also says, *Look at this. Look at what is happening. Don't turn away.*

And that means attention isn't always comfortable. If we look closely at the world, we see extraordinary beauty. We see monarch butterflies somehow navigating thousands of miles. We see the first green shoots pushing through frozen Iowa ground in March. We see the brilliant colors of October.

But if we keep looking, we see other things too. We see polluted rivers and topsoil washing from fields. We see habitat disappearing. We notice changing weather patterns. We hear about people whose homes and livelihoods are threatened by drought, flooding, fires and rising seas. We begin to understand that our lives are connected to all of this.

Today we can flip a switch without knowing where the electricity came from. We can buy food without knowing where it was grown. We can throw something "away" without knowing where away is. Most of us aren't deliberately choosing not to care. We're simply living in a world that makes it very easy not to see.

That's why it's significant that the first invitation of Creation Season isn't *Act*. That comes later. The first invitation is *Pray*. And maybe one purpose of prayer is to help us become watchful.

Our Psalm today expresses that beautifully. Again and again the psalmist asks God to teach: "Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes." "Give me understanding." "Make me go in the path of your commandments." "Incline my heart." The psalmist doesn't assume that we already know how to see or how to live. We need to be taught. We need our hearts redirected.

Maybe that's a good way to think about prayer during this Creation Season. Prayer isn't only bringing God our needs, worries, gratitude and hopes. Prayer can also be the willingness to say: *God, teach me. Show me what I've failed to notice. Show me what you love. Show me what is hurting. Show me how I am connected to it. And then show me how to respond.*

Because Christian attention can never be entirely passive. Paul gives us the reason in today's reading from Romans: "Love does no wrong to a neighbor."

For centuries, Christians have wrestled with the question of who counts as our neighbor. Again and again, scripture expands the circle: the stranger, the person from another nation, the person who is poor, even those we would prefer not to call our neighbor.

Creation Season asks us to widen our vision still further. What about the people downstream? What about people already suffering the greatest effects of environmental degradation and a changing climate? What about children who will inherit the world we're shaping now? We cannot love our human neighbors without caring about the world that sustains them.

And what about the rest of creation itself? A chickadee doesn't have to justify its existence to us. Neither does a prairie. Neither does a river or an oak tree. God loved them before we figured out what they could do for us.

Once we begin to see these connections, the question arises of what we should we do. Ezekiel's watchman doesn't simply enjoy the view from the tower. Seeing eventually carries responsibility. Here at New Song, there will be time during this Creation Season to talk about that. We'll move from prayer to learning, from learning to action and advocacy, and finally to blessing.

But today our task is more basic. Before we decide what to do, maybe we need to become people capable of seeing. Perhaps we need to practice the prayer of the psalmist: *Teach me. Give me understanding. Incline my heart.*

So I'd like to suggest a small spiritual practice for this week. Go outside and choose one thing—a tree, a flower, a bird, a spider web, a cloud, whatever presents itself. Give it five minutes of your attention. You don't have to sketch it or know its name. Resist the temptation to pull out your phone and identify it or photograph it. Don't accomplish anything. Just look.

Notice something you hadn't noticed before. Maybe you'll notice beauty. Maybe you'll notice damage. Maybe you'll simply realize that you've walked past this particular piece of God's creation hundreds of times without really seeing it.

Leonardo called it *saper vedere*: knowing how to see. Maybe that's a good place for us to begin this Creation Season—not with guilt, not with a list of things we're supposed to do, but with attention. For today, perhaps our prayer can be very simple: *God, teach us to see.*

Amen.