

For the people of St. Philip's  
Year C, Lent I  
February 25, 2007  
Luke 4: 1-14  
Maria Hoecker, preacher

If you ever want to find out how much you don't know, take a walk in the woods with a bird watcher. My husband, Rick, spent most of his life watching and feeding birds. Whenever we sat out on our porch in Kansas or walked along the bluffs of the Missouri River he would pause now and again. He would stop as if someone had called his name, his attention focused upward.

"Do you hear that?" he'd say. "It's a Baltimore oriole, those are rare in Kansas. Do you hear that throaty whistle?" I'd strain my ears to listen and before I could focus on its location he would have already spotted the bird high up in the trees. "There it is!" He'd whisper, nearly motionless. "Do you see that flash of orange? What a beautiful bird." I'd still be trying to figure out which tree he meant, sweeping my gaze across a river bluff of trees and leaves when Rick would hear the cooing of a mourning dove and move on.

Rick taught me the names and characteristic features of a lot beautiful birds. Near our house that overlooked the Missouri River we were privileged to witness many a migration of birds on their way through to somewhere else. Indigo Buntings, Western Meadowlarks, Canadian geese, pelicans, bald eagles, Baltimore Orioles, yellow and purple finches, wrens, and hummingbirds. We kept an Audubon field guide book of birds on our window sill and for nearly ten years in it marked all the birds that we saw and heard.

Now you may be in awe of these powers of identification, or perhaps you are an old hand at bird watching yourself. In any case you know how it is to start seeing more in your ordinary, every day environment than others might. It's not as if the birds were only available in the zoo, or flew in just on Tuesdays. They were always there in the appropriate seasons, and every year they would return. Gradually, you find out how to recognize them. At least that's how it was for me. You just have to tune in to what's around you.

Same goes for identification of wildflowers, or mountain peaks, or the species of trees, or the faces of folks in your neighborhood.

As with the birds along the Missouri River flyway, I heard the same songs as Rick, saw the same flashes of color, and over time with him, I came to know much more about what I saw and heard. Rick had a head start on me. He had been roaming the bluffs of the river since he was a boy. At first I'd think, "that must be some kind of bird." But as Rick trained me over time in our walks together, he helped me train my eyes and ears to look and listen. The trills and the whistles started sorting themselves out, and that flash of orange that caught the light of the setting sun began to be vivid and meaningful. It all became more familiar to me.

As the years went by I began to discover how much there was to notice. In training my eyes to see and my ears to hear, the woods surrounding our bluff top home in Kansas became alive. The birds were there all the time; it just took someone in the midst of the chorus to perceive it. You have to *become* a birdwatcher.

Just because something is there does not mean that we automatically see it and understand it. Sometimes perception takes guidance and practice.

In our Epistle reading for today, Paul says, "The Word is near you, on your lips and in your heart." This is a quote from Deuteronomy, and Paul is using it to talk about the presence of God in Christ, and how we access that presence by faith. Christ is near, already part of our world; God is available, not distant or difficult to contact. Yet sometimes we have to train ourselves to recognize God's presence. We have to become, if you will, God-watchers.

The place to go looking is right where we are. This seems counter-intuitive because our heart usually longs for things that are elsewhere. Yet like a birdwatcher, we need to train our hearts, our eyes and our ears to look deeper into what is around us.

Last week we celebrated all the many missions that spread the light of Christ to a dark world. The very mention of the word “missions” conjures up a vision of exotic far away places, places where special folk find God by taking the Word of Christ out to others. I hope that I also made it abundantly clear that missions exist in our own streets.

“The Word is near you, in your heart and in your lips” The original passage Paul is quoting adds, “It is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask: ‘Who will ascend into heaven for us to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?’”

No, the Word is near us: Christ is all around, the song of the Spirit is constantly sounding, right here and now. But the question is, can we hear it? Do we perceive its call? How might we listen and respond?

On Ash Wednesday we heard the invitation: “*I invite you, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a Holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s Holy Word.*” This is an invitation to train ourselves to perceive, to listen with new ears and see with new eyes. We do these daily disciplines so that we can learn to perceive what is already there.

These Lenten disciplines are not new, they aren’t the only ways to observe a season of Lent, but they are amongst the most reliable, tried and true methods used by Christians for centuries in order to gain a deeper awareness of God’s Creation.....by “self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s Holy Word.”

As Rob said on Ash Wednesday. We don’t need to proclaim to each other our daily discipline, it is enough to go on an inward journey with God. These disciplines don’t require an audience.

I invite you to take some time and utilize these spiritual disciplines to become a God-watcher. I too am on this journey. Pray as though God is at your side for an entire day. Or fast on a day when you have a chance to sit down and feel the hollowness of your belly and then ask yourself what that reminds you of. What else, who else feels that way?

And as for self-examination, maybe, try on the simple questions of a child, things like “How come you lied?” or “Why can’t I be friends with him anymore?”

Each of us can find our own way toward a deeper awareness of what surrounds our being. That’s what Lent calls us toward. For the next 40 days, try it. The word is near you, in your heart, in your house, in your neighborhood, Listen and watch.

Sit quietly, and look towards the call of the mourning dove, listen deeply until the Presence of God begins to take shape before your eyes. Soon you will be able to say it for yourself: *The Word is near me, on my lips and in my heart.* And it was there all along. Thanks be to God.

Sources for reflection: The Rev. Beth Maynard, The Rev. Rick Hoecker, and The Rev. Dr. Susanna Metz