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Luke 12:24-28

Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, you of little faith!

Psalms 8

O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.
When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are humans that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than God
and crowned them with glory and honor.
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

A few years ago my best friend Mike (SLIDE) (that's the two of us at a ballgame) told me he got into birding in a pretty serious way. I was a little surprised. I thought serious birding was, you know, for... older people. But I appreciate birds too, and as Mike and I inch closer to our mid-40s, we are getting older too.

The more I thought about it, the more it dawned on me that our family already casually appreciated birds. We have had a seasonal bird feeder at our house for several years. Our kids have all had moments of being fascinated with the bird

species that show up at our house, and at some point we picked up a copy of the Sibley Guide to Birds of Eastern North America (SLIDE) to figure out who was visiting our small yard. It has been a lot of fun to have red-tailed hawks take up residency in our neighborhood, to hear them calling back and forth to each other. We even drove up to Black Moshannon (SLIDE) one time when there were reports of a massive flock of snow geese migrating through our area.

So I asked Mike what pulled him into the hobby. Some of you probably already know what I'm going to say - Mike had discovered Cornell's Merlin Bird ID app, (SLIDE) an incredibly powerful way to dive into birding.

The app uses audio recognition software (SLIDE) to show you which birds are in your vicinity by their birdsong and calls. As Mike talked me through the things he was discovering about the birds in his neighborhood, I found myself being drawn into this new world - this video is a few minutes from a walk through Millbrook Marsh that I took the other day. I was already a person who appreciated being outside for a hike, a round of disc golf, or a bike ride through the woods. Perhaps I could use this new tool to further appreciate the world around me.

And a few of you already know this about me, but I really love a good collection. I have early memories of sorting my Lego collection. (SLIDE) At various times throughout my younger years I collected hockey and baseball cards, (SLIDE) stickers, stamps, coins, (SLIDE) POGS (remember those?), (SLIDE) posters, and even for a little while, Beanie Babies. Most of these collections are still collecting dust in my parents' attic in Ontario, but some have moved with us and now take up residency in my pastor's office right here.

As I have grown older my collections have shifted to other things, some of them physical like books, CDs, records, sports collectables and autographs, but others are experiential – national and state parks, major and minor league ballparks, disc golf courses... the list goes on and on.

So a free app (SLIDE) that allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the natural world, all while creating a collection of birds in my area? Sign me up.

It was amazing to realize just how many birds I could hear from our backyard - one time I even texted Mike to celebrate 15 different birds in 15 minutes of sitting

on the back porch!

Now certainly, the app wasn't perfect. The more I used it, the more I realized that I had to use a bit of common sense as my collection grew. (SLIDE) Just because the app tells you there is a Red Junglefowl native to South America in your backyard, doesn't mean that is actually the case - it might just be picking up our backyard chickens.

But there was another unintended consequence that I hadn't considered. Now instead of hiking, or disc golfing, or even biking with my eyes up looking around me, I found myself more frequently looking at my phone screen, hoping it would tell me what my ears were hearing. The more I used the app, the more I had to remind myself to take the time to look up! If this app really did offer me a chance to appreciate creation, why was I walking through the woods with my face glued to a screen? (SLIDE)

When I hear this morning's scripture passages I wonder if that's exactly what those biblical authors are reminding us to do. When the Psalmist reminds us to look to the heavens, to notice the moon and the stars, to see our fellow human beings and the creatures around us, it's a reminder to look up. (SLIDE) When Jesus, in Luke's Gospel, encourages us to consider the ravens and the lilies, it isn't just a simple story to tell us not to worry, but to really pause and notice the world around you. Stop doing whatever it is that keeps us busy and preoccupied with our worries and stresses - if only for a moment - and notice what's happening around you.

Naming observation and reflection as Spiritual Disciplines is so important at a moment in time in which we can be so over-stimulated with all that is taking place. Whether it is our busy lives, the many needs of our community, the chaos of our political world, it can be so challenging to stop long enough to observe and reflect.

Related to creating time for intentional observation, of course, is setting aside time for intentional reflection. (SLIDE) In our planning meeting on Tuesday, Bethany noted that she was recently encouraged by a friend to spend some time intentionally doing her own thinking. What this person meant was that at a time when information is at our fingertips we impulsively search for immediate

answers. Everything is just a quick google search away. What if we paused enough to let our own minds think through possible solutions?

One traditional practice that helps us enter into a time of observation and reflection is the Prayer of Examen. (SLIDE) Grounded in Ignatian spirituality, the Examen invites us to pause amid our days - traditionally at the end of the day - and intentionally review our experiences. By gently examining where we felt God's presence, where we struggled, and how we responded, we might cultivate a deeper awareness of the Divine in our daily routines and learn to recognize God working in both the quiet and chaotic moments of our lives.

For some of us this comes naturally. I was so touched by the way Carmen began our time together, and by the sharing from Leah, Molly, and Bethany during Children's Time. Each week the more observant among us send in pictures and videos of the ways they have noticed the divine in their daily lives. And we're fortunate that each of us can probably name folks in our lives - whether known or folks at a distance - perhaps trusted authors and faith voices who have a gift of observation and reflection.

But for some of us it can be a real challenge. I like, maybe even *prefer*, being busy, engaging in my hobbies and interests - building out those collections - and taking time with family and friends to move through the various stages of life. So it can feel like having to pump the brakes to slow down enough to observe and reflect.

But when we slow down enough to do these things, when we take a deep breath and consider... even if we just pause enough to look up. We can be surprised by what we notice.

When we make space for observation and reflection, we open ourselves to greater clarity, peace, and growth. Taking time to notice our surroundings and examine ourselves allows us to align our lives more closely with the way of Jesus, transforming routine moments into encounters with something bigger than ourselves. As a nice silver lining, our ability to enjoy those things that bring us joy, and to be more fully able to care for each other in times of need, is much more possible when we take time to breathe and make space to consider the birds of the air and the flowers of the field.

Even my birding app is more meaningful when I lift my head up to breathe. (SLIDE) It turns out when I actually am able to find the bird making the noise, I appreciate it far more than just watching its image pop up on my phone. And in that way I'm actually considering the birds rather than just getting the check mark in my collection.

This morning I want to invite us to step into a few quiet moments together. Whether you prefer to do this with eyes open or closed, start with taking a deep breath. Meredith will offer us some music as we enter a time to remember and observe our lives today, and reflect on what Spirit might be whispering to our hearts and minds as we go from this place.

For those for whom this does not come naturally, you'll notice we have included an insert that provides you with a pathway to practice Examen, using our five fingers. Carmen pointed this out to us this week as we planned, and it is a lovely gift, using the fingers that follow us around. (SLIDE)

Five Finger Examen

1. Be still

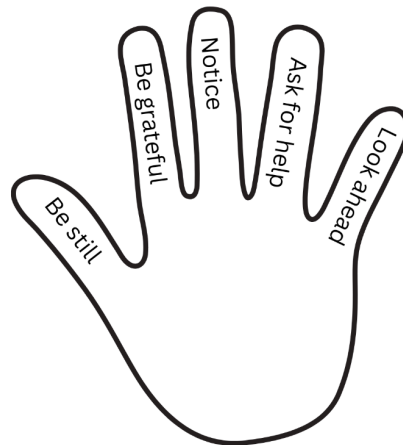
Our thumb reminds us of what is important. Notice your breath, try to still your mind, and be present to God and yourself.

2. Be grateful

As our index finger points things out to people, reflect on your day and point out everything you're grateful for.

3. Notice

Our middle finger is usually the longest and the one that stands out. What stood out to you today? Where have you felt happy today? Sad? Frustrated? Were there any challenges today? Any victories?



4. Ask for help

Our ring fingers are where we put our wedding rings. Think about your responsibilities and promises you have made. What do you need God's help with? Is there anything you need to say sorry for?

5. Look ahead

Our pinky finger is our smallest one. Sometimes a small change can make a big difference. Think about tomorrow. What do you hope for? Are there any little changes that you can make?

So take the next few minutes to take note of each finger and what it represents, and spend a bit of time observing and reflecting. Meredith will offer us some music from the piano, and I will close our time in a few minutes.

(music)

Church, thank you for taking the time to engage in this way. If you found it meaningful, and haven't already done so, perhaps you can find moments to incorporate this practice into your daily or weekly routine.

May God's presence continue to go with us as we strive to look up amid our busy world.