

1

In the mornings I enjoy sitting on my back patio, looking up, waiting for the sun to rise and peek over the edges of the trees. As I watch the dark and greyed out leaves hanging on the branches, suddenly I notice a few brighter leaves, glowing with the first glimmer of the sunlight reflecting off their dancing edges. Those leaves that I had not paid any attention to are suddenly transformed, catching my eye as I watched them turn from grey to a brilliant glow.

Have you ever had a similar experience, when something you hadn't noticed suddenly seems to stand out? It's like those black and white photos where one particular part has color, where a portion of the photo stands out from everything else. Maybe you're trying to make an important decision. You struggle for days, tossing and turning at night, trying to discern what to do. And then suddenly, without even trying, an idea comes to you, seemingly out of nowhere, as though a light has focused on one idea that

dances in your mind. You know you've made a decision. You finally feel at peace.

Or maybe you're in a crowded room full of people, feeling a bit isolated since you don't know anyone. Suddenly one person seems to stand out in color amidst the greyed-out crowd. Something nudges you to strike up a conversation with that person, who becomes a friend for many years.

You may have had similar experiences, and as I look up at the colorful, dancing leaves in the morning light shining amidst the still dark leaves, I'm reminded of the ending of Luke's Gospel, where Jesus reminded his followers of everything he had taught them. He recalled ancient stories of struggle—from Moses to the prophets to the psalms—reminding them that struggle has been part of their history. And yet, he celebrates that new life is possible, that sins are forgiven, that one can begin again.

After Jesus encouraged them, he withdrew, and the story ends by saying that Jesus was "carried up into heaven," though some ancient biblical manuscripts do not include these words. I think it's

2

interesting that the ones that do include this phrase use the Greek word **ἀναφέρω** (an-af-ER-o), meaning “to bring up” or “carry a burden.” Our modern minds may struggle with a literal imagery of Jesus being lifted up into the heavens, but I wonder if the writer meant to imply that Jesus lifted up our burdens, reminding us that we are not alone in our struggles. Jesus promised to his followers that he would send a Comforter, an Advocate, the Spirit. When we have flashes of insight, when something that appears grey suddenly brightens with light—maybe that’s the Spirit opening our eyes to see what we had not noticed before.

When we lift up our gaze, we may discover that God’s Spirit has illuminated a path that we never noticed before. What was grey suddenly stands out in color.

In the evenings I often lift up my eyes to notice the stars. While looking at those seemingly random jumbled of points of light, I begin to see shapes, remembering the names of constellations

I learned as a child: the Big Dipper or Orion the Hunter. Star gazers have looked into the heavens for centuries, seeing patterns, telling stories, trying to discern meaning in the vastness of the universe. We might even suggest that Jesus is dancing with the stars, helping us create meaning as we gaze into the heavens.

For example, when looking at Orion we see the bright orange-red star Betelgeuse, which expands from 480 million miles wide to 800 million miles. Its inner core is millions of degrees in temperature, and yet, its atmosphere is cool enough to contain water vapor. Part of the constellation contains a fuzzy patch, which is a stellar nursery, where newly forming stars are developing. Looking up at this constellation reminds me that in the vastness of God’s universe, new things are forming all the time.

Artist Elizabeth Turks found a way to create something new using her artistic skills. She wanted to bring hope during the pandemic to a senior living community in Pomona, CA by asking residents, “What do you tell yourself when you face adversity?” After

3

listening to them, she envisioned a “Wild garden on steroids” and used the 31-acre campus and the 500 residents and staff as her canvas to create a moving film entitled “Look Up.” She wanted to create a multimedia artwork with kaleidoscopic images that “would shatter myths of helpless senior citizens.” They even found ways for those with wheelchairs and walkers to participate by connecting umbrellas to their equipment.

A retired music teacher who is a resident there said, “There’s so much division going on in the world. Something like this, where people could be together, people could be united in one

project, and people could feel really good about being human for a few moments, that’s uplifting.”

The artist commented on the project by saying, “Plunging into this project has just been an act of grace because it’s kept me optimistic.”¹ Isn’t that something we all need right now? An act of grace? Optimism?

I invite you to watch an excerpt from this film, for I hope it will encourage you to look up and realize you’re not alone—for God’s people and God’s Spirit surround you, offering you hope, even in a pandemic, reminding us that we’re all valuable parts of God’s family, no matter what our age or abilities. (See video at <https://vimeo.com/481464739>.)

¹ Lisa Fung, “Elders and an Artist Bring a Social Sculpture to Life,” Nov. 20, 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/11/20/arts/design/artist-elizabeth-turk-retirement-community.html