

Sermon Preached October 18, 2009
Year B, Proper 24
Job 38:1-7, (34-41)
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
North Andover, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Wilson

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

Last week the kids got the game Guitar Hero and Emma thought perhaps I could be in their band. She asked me if I could play base. Now, she's known me all of her life and never seen me pick up a musical instrument, but with the faith of a small child she thought it possible I could play base. But I told her no, I didn't know how to play it, but that I'd be willing to learn. With enthusiasm she cries out, "You're in, Mom!" And so now it is, with great amusement, that I find myself the base player of a Guitar Hero band called the "Roaches."

A few days later on Columbus Day I enjoyed the sound of crisp leaves crunched under my feet as I walked along the trails of the Harold Parker State Forest. I was out to enjoy the beauty of nature and was not disappointed. The place was awash with colorful leaves, twinkling ponds and sunshine.

Then last night I enjoyed conversation with a number of parishioners at our Stewardship dinner. I laughed. I ate. Later I cuddled with my cat Abby. I read a book. I thought about my sermon. I felt the soft wool of a blanket.

What do all these stories and activities have in common? They are all possible because of the generosity of God. I can live and move and have my being because God created the universe. I can love my children, eat my food, do my job, bask in the fall sunshine, all because God gave these things to me to enjoy. Simply by virtue of living my life I can know deep gratitude to God the Creator.

At the same time, we all know, life can be enormously challenging. Not everything is sunshine and light. We loose our jobs, loved ones die, wars break out, we become ill, we feel unloved or alone. These things too are part of this world which the Almighty has created. Are we to feel grateful for them, too?

In the book of Job, which we read this morning, Job has had a bad month. His house is destroyed, his crops die, his animals are stolen, the servants are murdered, even his children are killed. In the midst of his mourning he falls ill and his body becomes covered with sores.

His wife tells him to curse God and die, but he won't. His friends come to visit, but mostly they make him feel worse. All Job can do is call on God to appear before him and justify these terrible things that have happened to him. Job doesn't believe he deserves it. In fact, he is angry with God. But at no point does he stop praising the Almighty. It is Job who makes the famous statement, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" [Job 1:21]. Good or bad, Job praises God because even if things go south, all of life belongs to the Almighty in the first place and everything he has ever had is ultimately **not** his, but a gift from God. Even in his sorrow, he feels gratitude.

Last night we kicked off our Stewardship Season with a wonderful dinner, Jeopardy-style game, songs, and guest speaker. Today I kick off our stewardship preaching series with some meditations on gratitude.

This notion of gratitude is tied to our understandings of God the Creator as shared during our Blessing of the Animals service a few weeks ago. Many Christians speak of "Original Sin." In fact, the idea of original sin was one which developed only about 500 years after Christ.

But if we look at the Bible, what it actually says in scripture, it begins with a description of “Original Blessing.” God made the universe and looked at everything and called it “good.” You are good. I am good. The animals are good. The earth is good. But through free will, sin entered the world and that original blessing was distorted. Through sin we cause wars, we pollute, we hurt each other, and so on. But the Creation itself was made to be good. And God gave it to us to care for. It didn’t have to happen that way. God didn’t have to make anything, and She certainly didn’t have to give it to us to manage. She could have been a lot more controlling about how resources are used. But the Almighty gave us choices. God gave us the good earth which He created. Our very existence is founded on goodness and generosity.

Which make me wonder, what would life be like for us, in fact for the whole world, if we were to walk through life with profound feelings of gratitude? How would that change how we look at the world, at each other, at God? I think we would hold some things more tightly and others more loosely.

For instance, I think we'd hold our loved ones a little more tightly. When our spouse says hurtful words, when our friends let us down, we can still find the original goodness in them, allowing us to forgive. It would give us greater empathy for them and help us deal more gently with ourselves and others.

I once heard of a woman who was kind to everyone she met. She saw the goodness in everybody. No matter how wretched or despicable a person, she could always find something good to say about them. Once someone asked her about this, and wondered whether she could say anything good about the Devil himself. "Well," she said, "he's a hard worker."

What would that attitude be like on a national or international level? How hard would it be for countries to have friction with one another if they could see the inherent goodness of the citizens of each other's nation, the beauty of the earth in each other's country, and feel gratitude for their presence in each other's lives? It is only when we feel fear of another, or superior to another, or greed for more, that nations come into conflict. If a recognition of the goodness of all of creation (and not just the parts in our country), and deep thankfulness for it, ruled the nations, what a very different world we would live in!

At the same time with this view, we'd probably hold our money a little more loosely. If we recognize that our money is not ours, but a gift from God, it becomes a much more urgent thing to share it with the less fortunate and in ways which serve God's purposes. If we see money as part of God's creation and not our creation, we are more willing to share some of our money with the church, with Neighbors in Need, or in countless other good ways for the healing of creation.

The final thing we are to be thankful for is the coming of Jesus into the creation. God taking on human form, teaching us how to live without sin, showing us ways to restore the broken creation. Then dying on a cross for our sins and rising to new life, so we too may rise to new life in the Kingdom of God. Our very existence is founded on goodness and generosity, and it continues in the risen life of Christ.

During these next few weeks as we hear the witnesses of members of our congregation, as we listen to the sermons, as we ponder what it means to be stewards of all God has given us, let us make an effort to engage in life with deep gratitude for God's many blessings. Amen.