

“Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.”
First Sunday in the Season of Creation
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
Mark 4:1-9 ~ September 12, 2021h

“Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.” Amen.

My brother in law is a farmer, as were his parents, and their parents before them. The Hurlburt’s have been farming in the northwest corner of Connecticut since the 1740’s. From homesteading, to sheep and poultry, to dairy, to grass-fed beef. When my sister Becky married Bill some twenty-plus years ago, I recall one of the topics they discussed was travel. Becky had travelled to Europe and Asia and looked forward to more. Bill had been up to Massachusetts and Maine, and across to New York.

“Don’t you want to go to Paris?” Becky asked.

Bill shrugged. “I’m still finding so much to discover and see on the land I live on right here,” said Bill; “the stand of sugar maples, and the beautiful copper beeches; that spring above the field that spills into the little pond; the bluebirds that nest in the apple orchard, and it looks like the beaver is building a new dam. There’s an awful lot right here.”

Farmers come in all shapes and sizes and I am certainly no expert, but I imagine that farming imposes a necessary and profound humility. It is endless, year-round work, with no guarantees. Earlier this summer, I learned that Bill would only be able to mow and bale his fields twice this year instead of his customary three times because there’d been too much

rain. Last spring, the sap in the sugar maples was running full and they were able to produce twice the amount of syrup as the year before.

Bill is super-conscientious. Mows his fields clean right to the edge, keeps the tree lines trim and neat, continually adjusts the diet of his cattle, works every hour that weather permits. This may sound romantic, but for Bill anyway, that humility born of utter dependence on things beyond his control... is satisfying, gratifying. It constitutes the whole of his life. It engenders nothing less than awe.

In a way that you and I would likely miss, Bill would immediately understand and appreciate the outrageousness of the sower's actions. Peasant farming in Roman-occupied, Jesus' day, was not unlike share-cropping in Jim Crow America. It was carefully calibrated to ensure that those on the bottom could never climb up, would – by design, fall deeper into debt. Seed was the life-blood of a peasant farmer; veritable gold – used first to pay the landowner, then to feed his family, and if lucky, have just enough to sow, plant, and do it again the following year. If the weather was just right, and the market fluctuated in the right direction, a bumper crop could yield three, four, or five times.

So, the story of a sower tossing seeds all over every which way, carelessly letting some of it fall among thorns, or on rocky soil, or anywhere but the choicest land available would constitute flagrant abandon. For a crop to yield thirty, sixty, or one hundredfold – that's not simply full barns and full bellies; that's an announcement that the entire stratified economic order has been blown to bits and those who were

perpetually trapped are now released. This is a freedom-from-oppression, hit the jackpot forever, event. The abundant sower takes care of the poor.

On this first Sunday in our observance of a season of creation, I read this parable as a story of God's irrepressible and lavish life-giving generativity. God is the sower, nurturing, creating, feeding, giving life with unceasing abandon. And it is a reminder that God has a passionate interest the interconnected balance between those with access to power and wealth, and those who are being impoverished.

Let's begin with God's lavish creativity. While God is surely good at lots of things, God is not very good at measuring. God probably wouldn't do very well following a recipe. Actually, God could be hard to live with, at least in a steady way, because God would always, always be inviting everybody to stop by - "c'mon in, have something to eat"; giving everything away - "sure you like my jacket, take everything in my closet"; starting great big creative messy projects - "isn't this beautiful!" And dropping everything to run outside and watch the sun set. From the first days of creation, to the feeding of the 5000, gathering outcasts, to forgiving us sinners.

How do we live with awareness of God's irrepressible generativity? How do we cultivate the soil of our own lives; clear the weeds, fertilize with nutrients? How do we live with awe? We've each had breathtaking experiences of God's creation - in the presence of a

waterfall, the lapping of a waves, the night sky, a butterfly alighting delicately on the branch.

I believe our lives are shaped by our intentions. A story is told about a nun who was trying to learn a practice of silent contemplative prayer. But no sooner had she focused her attention and quieted her mind, than she realized she was already distracted and thinking about something else. “What shall I do?” she asked her teacher, the mystic Thomas Keating. “Oh, how wonderful,” he replied. “Every moment is an opportunity to affirm your intention anew.”

How do we cultivate gratitude and awe? By viewing every moment as an opportunity to cultivate gratitude and awe – perhaps with a refrain from one of the Psalms: “Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.” When cold, gray rainy days arrive, “Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.” When hot steamy days drag you down, “Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.” When your beloved dog or cat dies, “Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.” When your heart cries in pain with news of wildfires, floods, and pestilence; when your anger burns hot against the endless indifference of our economy, our politicians, our own complicit self-interest - stop and feel God’s holy passion rising up within you. “Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.”

What can we do today, this week? Go to Great Falls on the Potomac and stand in silence as the water thunders by. Read a poem, write a poem; notice the lilies. Pay attention to a bird.

While this relentless pandemic is draining the energy and reserves out of one and all, it is also revealing the disparities of our world. In an extraordinary act of ecumenical unity, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Pope, and the Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church – leaders of hundreds of millions of Christians worldwide – issued a “joint statement on the protection of creation.” The pandemic has prompted their realization anew that, quote, “in facing this worldwide calamity, no one is safe until everyone is safe, that our actions really do affect one another, and that what we do today affects what happens tomorrow.

“These are not new lessons, but we have had to face them anew. May we not waste this moment. We must decide what kind of world we want to leave to future generations. God mandates: ‘Choose life, so that you and your children might live. (Dt. 30:19) We must choose to live differently; we must choose life.’ ((You can find the full text at columba.org.)

In the name of God, they point first to the degradation of the planet’s resources, then to the adverse effects on the poor. They call upon us to set aside self-interest, to cooperate and work together among and between nations, to cease the cycle of consumption, and to take action not for ourselves but for our children’s children.

Dear ones, let us stop now, be silent. Consider anew the intentions of your own heart. (Silence). Being still, receive the word of God, spoken by Isaiah (55):

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.
For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.