

Taking for Granted

^{NRS} **Job 12:7** "But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you;⁸ ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you.⁹ Who among all these does not know that the hand of the LORD has done this?¹⁰ In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being.

^{NRS} **Hebrews 4:14** Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession.¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.¹⁶ Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

^{NRS} **Mark 10:17** As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"¹⁸ Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.¹⁹ You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'"²⁰ He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth."²¹ Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."²² When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.²³ Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"²⁴ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

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For three Sundays we will be considering the theme, "God, whose giving knows no ending." That is, of course, the name of the hymn that we'll sing each week.¹ We'll focus each week on a different verse of the hymn, and on scripture passages that are the foundation for the hymn.

The text from Job this morning reminds us that in God's hand "is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being." Our very life itself is a gift from God and we almost always take it for granted. When we were children, we were less likely to take life for granted. Most of us bounced out of bed in the morning, eager to go play, eager to experience life, learn new things, see new places, and explore our childhood world. We learned to count, and write, and read, and our horizons were always expanding with the new tools we were learning in school. They were fun times and we feasted on life as fast as our brains would take it all in. At some point, most of us began to lose our sense of wonder. Our curiosity was less fervent. Perhaps we began to feel like we understood the world around us pretty well and that, to some degree or other, we had some control over our lives. As teenagers, we began to gain some independence and our future as adults stretched out as far as our mind's eye could see. We felt immortal and pretty invincible. We took life for granted.

As we travel through adulthood, our path invariably has some bumps and some potholes. Employment opportunities come and go. Friendships wax and wane. Relationships sweeten and sour. Children bring both joy and pain. We begin to understand that we have less control over our lives than we thought. Still, we tend to take life itself for granted. But Job reminds us that God provides our very breath, our very life. The hymn affirms this as we sing about God's generosity when we describe God as the "Gracious donor of our days."

A few weeks ago, Nancy and the Jesus Kids put up a question on the bulletin board and invited everybody to write their answers on the board. The question was, "Where do you see God?" People have written some very good answers. Many listed the beauty they find in nature as one of the places that they see God. One comment was, "I see God many places, when I take the time to look." This morning, let's take the time to look.

I've been thinking back over the times when I've seen God in nature. Once, I drove around a bend in the highway and suddenly Yosemite Valley stretched out in front of me. I was overwhelmed and speechless, in awe of the beauty and majesty of that valley. Fortunately, there was a place where I could pull over and just

stare as I tried to take it all in. There were winter nights in Alaska when the Northern Lights did their ethereal dance across a black, black sky. Big beauty. Majestic canvases of awe-inducing splendor. But when I take the time to look, there's God's work to be seen and felt in little bits of nature. There are the gaudy, brilliant colors of a fuchsia bloom – and the hovering tiny hummingbird drinking its nectar. There are the glorious yellow blooms with deep purple throats at the top of the okra plants. There's the velvety texture and the lovely flared curves of a half open rose.

Where do you see God in nature, in God's handiwork that surrounds us? Close your eyes and remember. Was it in the subtle shades of green in the spring? Was it the autumn colors along the Blue Ridge Parkway? Was it the white caps rolling resolutely in to the beach? Was it in a National Geographic spectacular landscape, or in a tiny, delicate ball of fur? When has God's beautiful creation left you awestruck? Remember and savor the feeling.

Where do you hear God in creation? Is it in the thunder of a summer rainstorm or the thunder of the surf on the sand? Is it in the hooting of the owl as you lie down to sleep, or the cardinal's chattering as you wake up? Is it in the babbling of a mountain stream or the roar of a plunging waterfall? Is it in the gentle purr of a contented cat or the exuberant joy of a mockingbird's concert? Where and when has creation filled your ears with wonder?

And your nose? When have you filled your lungs with pleasure? When has the smell of God's handiwork filled your nostrils with appreciation? For me it's when I'm picking basil leaves for cooking or reaching into the tomato plant for a tomato and I'm enveloped by the smell that only a tomato plant has. Perhaps for you it's the smell of fresh cut grass, or fall leaves, or the scent of rain on a summer afternoon. Maybe it's the wood fire in the fireplace or the milk breath of a kitten. How very loving of God to perfume this world with so many fragrances that make us sigh with pleasure.

The psalmist sang, "Taste and see that the Lord is good." (Psalm 34:8) Taste and see. It's a mixed metaphor. I always thought it was an odd image. I heard it as "experience things and come to the understanding that the Lord is good." That meaning is there, of course, but we can experience God's love for us literally with our taste buds. Have you ever drunk water from a mountain spring? It really tastes good! As a child, did you suck the honey out of a honeysuckle blossom? Have you stopped to do it lately? Many of us moan with pleasure when we bite into the first tomato sandwich of the summer or the first ear of corn or the first watermelon of the season. O, taste and see that the Lord is good! How about the bay leaf in the stew, the bite of fresh ginger, or the satisfaction that only okra seems to provide?

Then there is the sense of touch. Think of the warmth of the sun on your face, the cool breeze as you step into the shade on a hot day, the feel of green grass on bare feet. There's the soft fur of a kitten, the warm, silky ears of a hound dog, the velvety leaves of the lamb's ear plant. How about the smooth polished surface of river stones - or the soft smoothness of driftwood on the beach? Maybe you sense God's grace and love in the purring cat in your lap or the devoted dog curled at your feet. And hugs! Thank God for hugs!

Sight, smell, taste, hearing, and touch. These are the senses that we use to experience God's creation. If we take the time, our senses will tell us of God's power and love, if we just let them. And Job said, "Ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you;⁸ ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you.⁹ Who among all these does not know that the hand of the LORD has done this?¹⁰ In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being."

If we take the time, if we open our eyes and our ears - no, more to the point - if we open our hearts and minds and receive what our senses can bring to us, then we will be overwhelmed by the loveliness and the generosity of God's gifts to us. But so much of the time, we take it all for granted. We take it for granted in the sense that we ignore God's never-ending giving. We just take no notice. We're unaware of the gifts being showered on us constantly.

Part of the reason that we're unaware is that we're distracted. That's not a new phenomenon. Mark tells about the man who ran up and knelt before Jesus. He didn't ask a casual philosophical question over dinner. This wasn't even part of a question and answer period at the end of a lecture by Jesus. No, this man had something urgent and important on his mind. So he ran up to Jesus and knelt before him. All of the body language indicates urgency and respect. The situation isn't, "Well, Jesus, what do you think?" Instead, it's "Tell me what to do!" Jesus says, "You need to behave yourself!" And the man says, "I have been. I've been good." Here is where we'd like to stop. This guy is a great example to us all. He must "believe in Jesus." His running

up and kneeling clearly shows that he believes that Jesus has authority, that Jesus knows the answer. What's more, this man has led a good moral life. He's been a model of good ethics and an upstanding citizen. He is a good man. But he's distracted. He's got a lot of possessions. His stuff is piling up. It's cluttering his vision and limiting his horizon. He can't see past his stuff and therefore he's blind to both God's bounty and to the plight of others. The kingdom of God is near. It's all around him, but he can't see it. He can't enter into the kingdom because he is blinded by his stuff.

George Carlin used to do a routine that was all about our stuff. We spend a lot of time getting stuff. We rearrange our stuff. We dust and clean our stuff. We repair and replace our stuff when it breaks. When we buy a house we look carefully at cabinets and closets and garages and attics and basements. The house has to have good storage capacity so that we can store our stuff. Then we go rent a storage room so that we can keep the rest of our stuff. In all of this dusting and shuffling, we scurry about, heads down, taking care of our stuff. And we fail to look up and see the sunset - or smell the rose - or hug a friend. The more stuff we have, the more attention it needs. The more we have, the more we want. And the stuff fills our days and blocks us from seeing the bounty and the beauty. The focus on stuff crowds out gratitude for what we are freely given by God. We take it for granted, in the sense that we assume, that we need more stuff. We take for granted, in the sense that we ignore, God's generous gifts all around us.

As the old TV knife commercial said, "But wait! There's more!" The writer of Hebrews notes that we have a great high priest who intercedes for us. Speaking on our behalf is Jesus, who knows our weaknesses, who sympathizes with our weaknesses. He was tested by life just as we are. So we have yet another gift, the gift of a Savior who sympathizes with us. Therefore, the writer to the Hebrews says, we can approach God boldly, filled with hope for mercy and unmerited forgiveness. Here is what we need to take for granted - take for granted in the sense that we're confident and certain. We are assured, we're completely confident, we have absolute certainty that Jesus is our mediator, our high priest. He has empathy for us. He sympathizes with us. Your Sunday School lesson was exactly right. Repeat after me: Jesus loves me! . . . This I know! . . . Amen!

¹ The tune of this hymn is from a famous hymnbook, *The Sacred Harp*, published in 1844. *The Sacred Harp* and its later editions are part of the shape-note tradition. The notes have different shapes that indicate their pitch relative to each other, a system that was devised to help people learn to sing harmony. The Sacred Harp is sung a capella, that is, without any instrumental accompaniment, in three or four parts, with the melody in the tenor part. Some years ago, Bill Moyers did a special on the hymn *Amazing Grace* and the hymn was performed by many different groups and in many styles. It was sung by an opera singer, a folk singer, Johnny Cash, a prison choir, and two groups of Sacred Harp singers, one white, one black. The black group, led by a wise gentleman in his 90s also sang another song, "Lord, Won't You Give Me Just a Little More Time?"