

Sermon: Creation Faith
Text: II Thessalonians 5:12-17
Context: WWPCCC
Thanksgiving Sunday
Date: November 19, 2006
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*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

I Thessalonians 5:16-18

Given this wonderful display of old-time mountain memorabilia, it's tempting this morning to channel the spirit of an old-time mountain preacher.

But I'm thinking that's not what you're hoping to hear on this Thanksgiving Sunday. Which is good because I'm not sure I could actually do that, for all sorts of reasons.

So then, what to do? What is the right tone to take, what are the right words to offer on this special day? I wondered about going to the opposite extreme – just go to Barnes & Noble and buy a nice Thanksgiving story book, and read a homespun tale about an early mountain-style Thanksgiving.

I think you'll agree, that would certainly be a better option than for me to stand up here and blast away with a fire and brimstone, sinners in the hands of an angry God-style sermon.

But in the end, the Barnes&Noble option may not actually serve us all that well, either. Because a simple, homespun story may not do justice to this day and to this occasion.

For giving thanks is not just a homespun act. It's a sacred act. Yes, it was among the primordial events in our nation's history — the Pilgrims giving thanks for surviving the hardships and privations of that first, hard year in New England.

But of course thanksgiving and harvest celebrations were a part of the cultural and spiritual practices of most of the indigenous tribes of North America, including, I suspect, those tribes whose generosity kept the Pilgrims from starving that first, hard year in New England, and who knew that land by names far older than the one given to it by the Pilgrims.

Indeed, thanksgiving is practiced by virtually all people everywhere. Certainly it's a major liturgical component of all the major world religions. The discipline of giving thanks, and the practice of expressing gratitude (thanksgiving's twin) are foundational pillars of any spiritual practice worthy of the name.

We see and hear that in the passage I read just a moment ago: *We urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.*

That's like the Cliff notes version of the Christian faith right there and how does it end? *Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.*

Have you ever wondered why that is? Why is the giving of thanks and the practice of gratitude universally recognized as a religious or spiritual act?

Personally I think it has to do with stars. And with pumpkins and the precious smell of new little babies.

If you can find some dark place where starlight is not obscured by the light of cities, then look up at the stars. When you look up in perfect darkness, you can see the vast white and blue river of stars that comprises the Milky Way. Billions and billions of them, as Carl Sagan used to say.

Then the overwhelming realization might also hit you that the Milky Way is itself just one of billions of galaxies that populate the universe, and that each one of these, in turn, is also comprised of billions of stars.

And there you are, standing on an infinitesimally small blue marble, the only known outpost of life in the entire universe. That you can gaze up at it all, and contemplate in your mind, the boundless infinity of space, is enough to bring you to your knees, overwhelmed with wonder and weeping with gratitude.

Or turning the focus back to earth, you plant a thin, white seed in the ground and, like some sort of sacred magic trick, just a few months later the ground yields a twenty-pound orange squash from which you can make pies and soup and jack-o-lanterns.

Maybe best of all, when you pick up a baby, and press that little one to your breast and smell that baby smell – you know, not the bottom part, the top part — you’re smelling miracle itself.

In a wonderfully evocative phrase, Walter Brueggeman, the great scholar of the Hebrew scriptures, calls this kind of attitude “creation faith.” It’s the recognition that everything we’ve been given is a miracle, starting with the earth itself and life itself.

“At the outset of all creation,” Brueggeman writes, “heaven and earth are called into being by God’s speech . . . and are intended for God’s purposes of fruitfulness and well-being, so that God may look at the earth and say each evening, “It is good” (*The Earth is the Lord’s*, Walter Brueggeman, Sojourner’s, Oct. 1986.)

From the cosmological to the personal, that is, from the miracle of stars, to the miracle of pumpkins and newborn babies, we recognize that everything we’ve been given is grace, a gift from God.

And so, as pilgrims from all around the world, and from all faith traditions do in their special ways, on their special days, we gather here in this sanctuary in this special way, on this special day to say Yes! and Thank you! and Amen!

And to celebrate the most astonishing miracle ever — that we are here at all.

Some years ago, I made a wonderful discovery, hidden in opening verse of the Genesis story. I discovered that the language of the Hebrew creation story reflects this whole continuum, from the cosmological to the practical. And it does this in one word--a word for which there is no direct English equivalent.

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,” Genesis says in its magisterial opening line, which Diana read for us. In Hebrew, the word for Earth is “erets”, which can also be translated “land.”

I make this point because both meanings are important, and relevant to our purposes today.

Again, Walter Brueggeman: “‘Erets’ as ‘earth’ offers a paradigm of an untroubled place for life which is not historically located. [That is,] the Bible does not say with any specificity where the garden of Eden is . . . because the Garden is a theological [concept]” (ibid.).

In simpler terms, here is what that means: In the Hebrew tradition the Garden of Eden is not a literal place. It’s a metaphor, intended to symbolize, always and for everyone, God’s promise of peace and abundance.

But the other meaning of this word — erets as land – well, that’s important too, for we don’t just live on *the Earth*.

We live here, on this land, in this specific place. We live on little eretses given to us by God, little Edens where God’s vision of life is meant to prevail – local gardens bursting with peace and abundance.

Now obviously that is an idealized model of life. We all know that in reality, land is more often a source of conflict, more a place that people fight over and where feuds break out, than it is a place where little bits of Eden break out.

Which I think is why the idea of “creation faith” matters so much. What if we really believed that the Earth is Lord’s, and everything in it, as it says in the Psalms?

What if we really believed that the ultimate ownership of the earth and of the land belongs to God?

That is the foundational claim of the creation story in Genesis: that the cosmic earth and the local land, both of these ultimately belong to the God who created them.

Here’s what would happen if we really believed that:

If we embraced the truth of creation faith, we would never, ever build an oil pipeline and insist that it run through the sovereign lands of an indigenous people who lived here before the Pilgrims arrived.

We would not run that pipeline under America's second largest river, risking an oil spill that runs from South Dakota to St. Louis.

We would never, ever, drill for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, despoiling one of the last truly wild and pristine places on earth for sheer profit.

When Jesus taught us to pray *your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*, we would take him at his word that this world, and this land -- this erez -- is meant to be not just an outpost of life, but the very locus of the Kingdom of God, a place where love and peace and justice prevail among all its people.

Creation faith gives us a beautiful vision of the way life is meant to be, the way we believe God intended it to be. But it's also a radical vision. What makes this vision so hard to achieve is that the earth is populated by, and the land is filled with, living, breathing human beings.

That's the bad news. We humans are part of the problem. We are the one thing that keeps God's vision of shalom, of peace and abundance, from being realized.

But here's the good news. Like the land itself, the people in this ongoing creation story are also understood in a way that corresponds to this beautiful and radical vision.

Again, Brueggeman: "The community of Israel is understood as a social experiment in the ancient world. This alternative community is an attempt to organize life outside the imperial arrangement and the monopoly of the [prevailing] city-state system . . . We are invited by such a premise to think about ancient Israel not as a kinship group, a language group, or a religious group, but as a group [that exists as an alternative to empire]" (ibid.).

Now fast forward a couple thousand years. I am of the view that this experiment is not finished. I believe Creation Faith invites us to think about what this alternative community might look like today: one that is not a kinship group, or a language group, or even as a religious group, but a group that exists as an alternative to empire.

Because I believe the need for this community right here in this country may be more urgent today than at any time since those Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock.

To believe that the earth is the Lord's and everything in it, is to think differently about the earth and the land — who it belongs to and what it's for. And it calls us to think differently about ourselves, too, and how we relate to that land, and how we relate to the people with whom we share it.

Which brings us full circle, all the way back to thanksgiving. This national holiday is about something more personal, something both simpler and more complex, than a day devoted to eating wonderful food and watching football.

As the late, great William Safire writes, “Thanksgiving is not only a family holiday, [it] is the holiday of families. the Americans and their guests who come together on the fourth Thursday of November may be related by blood, or by marriage, by friendship...or some combination of all these associations.

“Although some members of the feast may be bound by habit or driven by hunger, what brings almost all of us together at a time of harvest is the longing to be part of a family, real or virtual. Those [who are ordinarily] unwilling or unaccustomed to be thankful to God are at least thankful to be together and to share a laugh and a slice of turkey on a day [when] nobody should be alone (quoted in *The Thanksgiving Ceremony*, by Edward Bleier, ppg. 15, 16).

There are a lot of words for that kind of gathering. Some might call it family. Others might call it community.

Around here, we call this gathering to give thanks the church. And we do it on the regular.

I am brightly aware of the risks involved in saying this. Because given the stories in the news these days, I am also painfully aware that some of you probably believe church is a place where women and even children are preyed upon, where Muslims are viewed as enemies, and the only people who matter are white men, and where the only thing that matters is keeping them in power. Which is to say, a religious institution completely in the thrall of empire.

But that is not how Jesus understood it. And it's not how we understand it. We believe the church was always meant to be an alternative community, where women and children are loved and esteemed, where strangers are welcome, and all are invited to join the feast and to practice Eucharist – the Greek word for Thanksgiving.

Which is why we are glad to gather here to worship and to celebrate, and on this special day to say Yes! and Thank you! and Amen!

And it's why we will gather again in the fellowship hall on Thursday to share in the great feast of thanksgiving and why we extend a special invitation for to anyone who has nowhere else to go to join us on that day.

And it's why, starting the very next day, we will get back down to the business of practicing Creation Faith. Because we also believe that the earth, and everything that lives upon it, belongs to the God who created it.

Amen