

Tending the Mystery of Grace

Meta

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Date: May 15, 2023

Readings

Deuteronomy 11.10-15

Psalm 147

Romans 8.18-25

Mark 4.26-32

Opening

Maybe it was Advent or Lessons and Carols, maybe it was Lent or Holy Week, maybe, like me, it was Ash Wednesday that drew you into an Anglican church for the first time. If you weren't born into the Anglican tradition, and then, what do you know, an Anglican church is now your church home, it's *likely* that living with the liturgical calendar had a major impact on that decision. At least, that's what I've heard over and over again these 16 years I've served at Apostles. Sure, other factors like weekly communion may be *most* important to you, but over the years, the rhythms of the Christian calendar are easily one of the top reasons people seek the Anglican way in the first place.

You enter the doors on Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday, or the first Sunday of Advent, you have a general idea of what to expect. Stay around for an entire yearly cycle and you'll enter the doors into services entirely unfamiliar. Like February 2nd, Groundhog Day to Americans, but Candlemas to Anglicans; or the 40th day of Eastertide, Ascension Day, which we'll celebrate this Thursday evening; or Rogation Sunday, which sounds very strange, a bit intense and official on the surface, and then you're walking in a field, the priest is blessing seedlings and plants and the Nave has grass clippings all around from the procession. This, too, is what it means to embrace the rhythms of the liturgical year, the Christian calendar. Some of these unfamiliar feast days may be entirely new, but they're not minor observances. We've revived some of these services, native to our Anglican tradition, that have been lost in our modern, technological world. We've revived these services, not because we happen to love tradition, not because history is interesting or symbols inspire. No, every service, whether ordinary or festive, whether familiar or unfamiliar, means to baptize your heart, your mind, your body, and your soul in the grace of God in all seasons. The Christian year, with its seasons of feasts and fasts, gives us a shape to map the story of our lives onto the story of Christ and his Church. It is a trellis for growth, if you will. We are saved by grace and we are meant to grow in grace into full maturity in Christ, both personally and collectively. That's what the Christian year is for, even a strange Sunday like Rogation Sunday.

Of Soil and Soul

A few years ago, I considered the question ‘why did God give liturgy in the first place?’ Read Exodus and you find the Lord not only gives the Ten Commandments, he gives liturgies for worship, he gives elaborate instructions to build his tabernacle, he gives the Sabbath, he gives an annual cycle of feasts, times for fasting—all for the sake of making grace visible, tangible, tactile. Grace was grounded, you might say.

And that was most tangibly evident in the annual cycle of Israel’s feasts. The spiritual rhythms of Israel’s feasts followed the agricultural rhythms of her land; of seed time and harvest. *God desires the rhythms of the soil to shape the rhythms of the soul.* The Feast of Trumpets (Rosh Hashannah) signified a new year, the time for plowing, sowing, and planting. Feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles occurred at harvest time, occasions to celebrate and give thanks for God’s abundant provision and goodness. Again, all this is given to ground us in the mystery and wonder of God’s awesome grace. We ask and seek God’s grace in our beginnings; we thank the Lord for his faithfulness and abundant goodness at our endings.

Rogation Sunday derives its name from the Latin verb ‘rogare’ which means ‘to ask.’ Like the Feast of Trumpets, Rogation Sunday occurs at the beginning of the growing season. We ask the Lord for favorable weather, for steady, regular rains to nourish seeds and plants growing in the ground.

Rogation Sunday has a counterpart in the agricultural year, which is the time of harvest, or, in North America, Thanksgiving. Rogation Days are to seed time as Thanksgiving is to harvest time; just as the Feast of Trumpets and Tabernacles mark the beginning and end of the agricultural year, respectively. Grace at our beginnings, grace at our endings. One of my favorite novelists, Georges Bernanos, wrote, ‘Grace is everywhere.’ We might improvise on Bernanos and say ‘grace in every season.’

The Gift of Paradise

Certainly that was how Israel was shaped from their beginning. When Moses preaches to Israel on the border of Canaan, the Promised Land, the sermon that is the Book of Deuteronomy, he declared they would enter a land flowing with milk and honey:

the land that you are entering to take possession of it is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you sowed your seed and irrigated it, like a garden of vegetables. But the land that you are going over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water by the rain from heaven, a land that the LORD your God cares for. The eyes of the LORD your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. (Dt. 11.10-12)

The land was all gift, all grace. Just like Adam woke up in a garden paradise that was all his after God breathed his life into him, so Israel entered the garden paradise of Canaan they would call home. Not Adam, not Israel, not any one of us could create such wonder, such beauty, such abundance. Look around you and see that all this world is gift. But just like Adam, like Israel, the gift, the treasure, you have received freely, now requires your effort. The gift of abundance is free, but the gift requires abundant care—the greatest care. And what is that care? Keep the commandments. Keep the grace of God in your midst. Remain humble, stay grounded. Be gentle with one another, like the morning sun sheds gentle light over a meadow. Remember that you have received great possessions and now you are the trustee, the steward, the caregiver of the grace God has given you.

Of Grace and Effort

In the agrarian parables we heard in the Gospel this morning, notice how our Lord describes that the Kingdom of God is like a farmer who cares well for his ground. He sows seed on the ground, he watches it sprout and grow. He goes to sleep, he rises. In this mundane routine, a great mystery happens. The farmer isn't the cause of the mystery, but he participates in the mystery. He's not the most powerful force in the story, not by a long shot. Neither am I the most important figure in my own faith. No, the farmer is both a participant and a witness of a spiritual force, a marvel, that defies his understanding:

*The earth produces **by itself**, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear.*

The farmer of Jesus' parables co-operates with the grace of God. He is neither the author of germination or growth, but he tends each stage of growth. As the farmer tends the growth, he witnesses a mystery that grows from the ground up. His intelligence, his experience, his skill do not produce the harvest. God takes our small beginnings—the seed time of our lives—and the mystery of grace begins working in hidden ways. It would be in vain to accelerate growth, manipulate the process, impose our own timeline. 'It is in vain that you go to bed late and rise early for he gives to his beloved sleep.' The farmer knows and embraces that. He does not depend on his own abilities, he depends on the mystery working beneath the surface. He knows the mystery of grace is greater than any work he can do. So he goes to bed. And rises again. And tends the work of grace until the harvest comes.

Patient Attention

I have three main hobbies—cooking, woodworking, and gardening—which have a common thread: each activity requires a quality I have not attained, patient attention. If you are not watching the pan when sautéing vegetables, at best, you lose all good flavor and texture; at worst, you've burned your dinner and you're going to Cracker Barrel instead. If you care about your fingers, you'll be focused each and every time you use a power saw. But woodworking requires your focus when nothing is plugged in; when you are sighting a board, working with the grain, marking, joining, sanding, or finishing.

Gardening is an activity wherein plants flourish with patient attention and absolutely flounder with sustained neglect. Ignore weeds for one week in April and you can still recover. Ignore them for the month of July and you might not see your plants anymore.

I think it's why I like these activities—they reward patient attention and they frustrate me (I need it) when I want to do things on my terms. They humble me, keep me grounded, both literally and spiritually speaking. They teach me dependance in ways that few other experiences can. The farmer cannot make the sun shine or the rain fall. He depends on God. He cannot *be* God. So he prays. He asks. Rogare. Mystery. Grace.

When a cut flower garden blooms at high season, when baskets are full with vegetables, you can't possibly take pride in your skill. You're a witness of God's mystery—not its author. You receive the joy of beauty, the bounty of provision, yet all you've done is tend the mystery at work, a work so much greater than yourself and your abilities. That, my brother and sister, is what the Kingdom of God is like.

Tending

No Rogation Sunday would be complete in my mind, at least, unless we read the words of my favorite Kentucky writer and poet, Wendell Berry. Hear these verses from Berry's 'Sabbath Poem XVII' wherein he describes an old man walking to a beloved place of peace:

*In the lengthening shadow he has climbed
again to the ridgetop and across
to the westward slope to see the ripe
light of autumn in the turning trees,
the twilight he must go by now
that only grace can give. Thus far
he keeps the old sectarian piety:
By grace we live. But he can go
no further. Having known the grace
that for so long has kept this world,
haggard as it is, as we have made it,
we cannot rest, **we must be stirring
to keep this gift dwelling among us,
eternally alive in time.** This
is the great work, no other, none harder,
none nearer rest, or more beautiful.*

Yes, indeed, 'we must be stirring to keep this gift dwelling among us, eternally alive in time.' It is not theoretical, abstract grace we are given. It is made visible, tangible, tactile. It is a free gift of God—all is gift from his hand—a gift that requires humble and holy tending. 'This is the great work, no other, none harder, none nearer rest, or more beautiful.'

So tend the work of grace today and be, not only witnesses, but be partakers of the mystery; the mystery that the firstborn of creation, Jesus Christ, promised his presence, his grace to us in tangible forms—in wheat harvested and become bread, become his life-giving Body; in grapes crushed and become wine, become his life-giving Blood. For such is the Kingdom of God. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.