

**18th Sunday After Pentecost**  
September 23, 2018

Rev. Nancy Lincoln Reynolds

**Psalm 1**

**James 3: 13-4:3; 7-8a**

**Moments of Grace**

Just two weeks ago my son, who is living in Budapest until October, asked me a question by text. Like Pastor Susan, I must pay my children for inclusion of their life experiences in my sermons, so you should know that I am forking over 2,760 forints for this story. The question was an inquiry about what I saw when I heard the saying, “Kill two birds with one stone.” I replied that I envisioned a bush...probably like an azalea...in which there were two birds that I could not see. A rock was being thrown into the bush and the visual ended there. Subsequently he shared with me that he had asked his sister the same question and that, while she also envisioned a bush, she saw the stone being thrown into the bush, and herself quickly rushing to the other side to catch the birds, one in each hand, and keep them safe from any harm. I will pay her in US dollars the sum of ten bucks. The visuals are indicators of our different personalities. I’m more interested in the experiences and not so much results, while she is all about understanding, protecting, and helping the vulnerable. I asked Andrew what it was that *he* saw. “I see two birds standing on the flat ground and I’m standing over them with a large rock which is dropped on them so they are squished and die, thus killing them both with the same stone. I’ve always wondered about why it was they didn’t catch on to what was about to happen to them and fly away.” My daughter teaches psychology at Harvard. I will pay her an extra amount for a full psych eval of her brother.

Intrigued by these revelations I asked some of our staff what *they* saw. Generally, I found a difference in left brain and right brain perspectives. Keisha Gill, our administrative assistant for Worship and Sacrament, and John McLaughlin, our director for property and facility management, independently “saw” people getting things done and working together to achieve a purpose. Very practical and efficient, their “visions” went straight to meaning and interpretation of the metaphor. Others, more right brained, saw birds in trees, flying through the air, on branches, or standing by the lakeshore, etc. I have wondered about and concluded that I should venture into a research project on the visioning of metaphor because informal evaluation on my part found that those with inclinations toward networking and ADD tended to see the birds and their demise involving a ricochet effect as stones bounced from one to the other, and elaborate divisions of one stone being split and then bouncelining to the birds sitting on branches. Tom Lerario, our financial director, said he “saw” nothing but the interpretation itself. He just thought about the meaning. No visual whatsoever. He has an appointment with me at the counseling center later this week.



Into the Seed by Jan Richardson

The exercise got me to thinking about how differently we are wired in how we approach meaning and images because of our diverse personalities, histories, and brain make-ups. These things all combine to guide our responses to how we understand things in our world...and, for our purposes this morning, how we understand the meaning of God and moments of grace from God. Jesus spoke in parables and metaphors often, and did so likely, at least in part, because people can use examples and images to personalize them through visuals...what a great research project that would be, for example, to ask this congregation what you see when you hear the various parables about sowing and planting, harvesting and reaping. The message, "*one plants, one waters, but God gives the growth,*" is depicted in the seed planted in the image on today's bulletin cover... an artist's rendering of the Apostle Paul's words recognizing that only God can give growth to what we plant and water. Designed to remind us that God is behind everything, James' mandate that we live good lives that arise from wisdom that comes only from above...from this image we see ourselves planted firmly in the earth, but still connected above.

Moments of grace are also defined as epiphanies: moments of sudden revelation/insight/understanding that change us in some way. Someone once said that there are two epiphanies in life: the first is when you are born and the second, when you find out why. Moments of grace, epiphanies, tend to have just such an impact upon our understanding of that "why" if we recognize them for what they are and take them seriously. They are life-changing in some cases and reassuring/confirming in others. They may singularly or cumulatively help us understand why we were born...why we are here.

James Joyce, Irish author and poet born in the 1800's, said that these moments of grace are "...moment(s) when the soul of the commonest object...seems to us radiant and may be manifested through any chance word or gesture." One hundred years ago he coined the phrase, "epiphanies of the ordinary," and by that he meant an ordinary moment defined by "suddenly seeing." We might call them "aha" moments today. Joyce's ordinary epiphanies are the times when insight and God's spiritual presence combine and cause us to stop in that moment of grace and wonder at the message of grace we are receiving. These moments, if we let them, give us courage and inspiration, encouragement and direction, and confirmation.

Not long ago Pastor Susan pointed out that there are two kinds of time: chronos time, which essentially measures the regular passing of time/the sequencing of the events in our lives; and Kairos time, which is time that is known by these epiphanies and moments of grace. It interrupts our chronos lives, and they are spiritual in nature for us as they are shared with and known by God alone. There are two things about kairos time and moments of grace: they are mysterious, and they require humility from us. Here's how I think that works.

The text in James helps us see that when we live our lives in the Spirit/live by faith, we are able to recognize and value these moments. We are able to see these epiphanies because we know that God is a God of mysteries. Knowing that, faith allows us to accept those mysteries/ expect the unexpected and to respond. Moments of grace are mysterious and awe-inspiring. The difference between living by faith and not, is the difference between seeing moments of grace vs seeing coincidence. When we receive an epiphany, we want to respond and act upon it. This is where the humility part comes in. It is interesting to note that we often have epiphanies at times that are most challenging and difficult for us...times when we are most vulnerable. Likely this is because our defenses are down and we are most in touch with our reliance and dependence upon God as we come to terms with our weaknesses. The authority and power of God's mystery

enters into our lives so powerfully that we realize how dependent we are and, in humility, start acting on the revelation.

It's at this point in this kind of sermon that I could invite you to begin sharing your own epiphanies and their impact on your lives...don't get anxious, I won't, but we should do that sometime. Let me offer instead the incredible experience that Handel had. Purity and brightness are common in epiphanies, and George Frederick Handel had just that. He wrote the famous Messiah in 24 days, working day and night and hardly eating at all. One day his servant opened his door and found him in tears. Handel looked up and said, "I think I saw all of Heaven before me and the Great God himself." That moment of grace resulted in music that has inspired us for generations.

Life in the Spirit/life by faith receives these moments of grace and then the WALK of faith lives them/applies them. Live by faith, then walk by faith. In other words, the kairos of life is evident in how we live life's chronos. James tells us in the text this morning, "*Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom from above.*" We, as Christians, should be constantly asking ourselves, "What am I preaching/saying by the way I am living?" As Theresa of Calcutta said, "Preach the gospel at all times and, if necessary, use words." These moments of grace are to be lived out in real time as we apply the insights to our living.

There are numerous examples of lives that were redirected by moments of grace, as in Handel's experience. The Bible is full of them, and I guarantee that if you took a moment to speak with people around you this morning, you'd learn about others. Perhaps you could even identify them in your own life. We make changes, small and great, in response to these epiphanies and their insights. We are compelled to live our lives then, in ways that reflect our faith and the reality of whatever epiphany we have had. Good works are inevitable in such a life.

I've discovered one more thing remains beyond a change in our actions and our living that follows an epiphany or moment of grace...and that is our attitudes. Initially I had ended the sermon here with the focus on good works which emerged from epiphany...moments of grace yielding insight, yielding a changed life of good works. But the lectionary in James included two verses I've not addressed: 7 and 8. They mandate that we submit ourselves to God and thus keep evil at bay. "*Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.*" What does it mean? What does it mean to submit and draw close to God, and how do we do it?

Take what comes next here...what I'm about to say... however you want, but it was about the time that I was concluding this message earlier this week in spite of the nagging feelings that I'd not dealt adequately with the submitting to God part of the text in verses 7 and 8...Developing attitudes of submission isn't easy, and I struggled with how to get there. It was about that time that I had the first encounter with a hawk...a red-tailed hawk, to be specific. I saw him up close five times in the course of two days. He would swoop over my windshield, land on a fence next to my window while I ordered coffee, and follow me while I walked from the church to the counseling center. The last time I saw him I had complained out loud that I wanted a close up picture, and he landed in the bushes about ten feet from me. (Yes, I have pictures). Being in epiphany mode, I looked him up as to symbolism and meaning. He is understood in Native American tradition to be the messenger of Grace. Grace...and gratitude. So it is that I suggest the culmination of the good life lived in response to God's wisdom from above to be gratitude.

I'm slow to understand sometimes and a little reticent because I kind of freaked myself out with the whole hawk thing...so when I got back to my office, and I began doing a bit more research, I turned to a book by one of my clinical supervisors and a pastor and former professor, Dr. Bill Oglesby from Susan's seminary, Union, in Richmond. I thought I would see what he had to say about grace and how we psychologically process it and submit to it...and I found what I was looking for...in an entire chapter entitled: Grace ... and Gratitude. Ok so the hawk was right.

It seems that gratitude...genuine gratitude...is the only right response to epiphanies and the lives that they engender. Because genuine gratitude is not like reactive gratitude (which is being thankful for a present, for example, but which tends to dissipate rather quickly as the gift fades). Genuine gratitude participates in an ongoing relationship with God. Such gratitude submits gladly to God's mystery and authority and humbly anticipates more and more blessing. Like James says, as we draw closer to God, God draws closer to us.

Friends, we are surrounded here at Woods by people whose lives are lived by faith, and who anticipate moments of grace, and are so grateful. For this is what makes us a community of faith.