

Sermon for Sunday, September 13, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Yesterday
was a day of contrasts.
It began
with the ordination to the priesthood
of Diane DeBlasio,
and ended
with the wedding of a couple
that I had seen for marriage preparation.
In between
I visited Maria Bataller,
because, as many of you know,
her husband Bill, who has been ill for a long time,
died on Friday night.

It reminds me of a song
written and recorded by a duo
who called themselves the Miserable Offenders -
those of you who grew up on Morning Prayer from the 1928 book of Common prayer
might recognize those words from the confession -
the Miserable Offenders sang a song called
“Pay Attention.”

And the final verse goes like this:
“Someone tells a joke
Someone marries, someone else is giving birth
Someone's praying, someone's buried in the earth
All of us must pay
Pay attention, pay attention
This is it, more or less
And who would ever guess
This is the best of times
This is the worst of times
And it's passing
Pay attention.”

Pay attention.

To what is happening around you,
and to where God might be in it.

And that's really
the theme of our psalm today.

The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the firmament shows his handiwork.
One day tells its tale to another,
and one night imparts knowledge to another.
Although they have no words or language,
and their voices are not heard,
Their sound has gone out into all lands,
and their message to the ends of the world.
In the deep has he set a pavilion for the sun;
it comes forth like a bridegroom out of his chamber;
it rejoices like a champion to run its course.
It goes forth from the uttermost edge of the heavens
and runs about to the end of it again;
nothing is hidden from its burning heat.

Sometimes we wonder
where is God?
Where is God
when I'm jumping for joy?
Where is God
when I'm weeping with grief?
Where is God
when I'm...well, just meh?

And the psalmist's answer is,
look around you.
Look around
at the sky that arcs above you,
the sun
which never ceases to rise in the east,
and the stars that shine so brightly
in the dark sky,
and the moon
that drifts across the night.

Look around
and see
the glory, the beauty, the wondrous creativity
of God.

It reminds me of a poem,
a poem that John Mc Ginty, the Dean of the Mercer School of Theology, who preached
and celebrated here a couple of weeks ago,
a poem that he read
in his sermon yesterday
at the ordination.

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.
-“God’s grandeur” by Gerard Manley Hopkins

The grandeur, the glory of God
pervades our world.
It runs through everything,
even when we have abused, misused, destroyed creation,
traces of God
are still there:
in the trees in St Paul’s Churchyard in lower Manhattan
that were stripped bare by the blast of the falling building on 9/11
but which greened up again the next Spring;
in the weeds that resolutely push through the tiniest of cracks
in the concrete jungle of cities;

in the sand dunes
that have slowly begun to build again
after the devastation of Superstorm Sandy.
And in the reliable patterns
of sunset and sunrise,
summer and autumn and winter and spring.
All of them
testimonies written not in ink
but in nature
to the creative power of God.
And underlying it all,
the life-giving presence of God
whose Spirit was present at the beginning of creation
and continues to breathe life
into our world
and into us.

Pay attention.

But the psalm doesn't stop there.
It continues
with what seems almost like
a disconnected treatise
about the law of God.

The law of the LORD is perfect
and revives the soul; *
the testimony of the LORD is sure
and gives wisdom to the innocent.
The statutes of the LORD are just
and rejoice the heart; *
the commandment of the LORD is clear
and gives light to the eyes.

This seems a long way
from the celebration of God's grandeur in the first half of the psalm,
almost as if
the psalmist had run out
of things to say,
but felt

that six verses
 was too short,
 and so filled in
 with a few lines remembered, more or less, from psalm 119,
 that enormously long psalm
 that spends one hundred seventy-six verses
 praising the law, the word
 of God.

But what if,
 instead of this being accidental,
 the psalmist is answering the question
 that naturally comes out of that celebration of God in creation.
 How do we recognize
 that this is God at work?
 How will we know
 when we see God?

And the answer is
 a single line
 in verse eleven,
 a line that refers back
 to those words about the law, the word of God.
 “By them also is your servant enlightened,”

By the law of the LORD ,
 by the testimony of the LORD,
 by the statutes of the LORD,
 by the commandment of the LORD,
 is your servant
 enlightened.

And what is that law, that testimony, those statutes, that commandment?

They are what
 we read in Scripture.
 As we read scripture,
 as we pay attention
 to the word of God written,
 we will see God, we will know God,

we will recognize God
all around us
in creation
and in every other part of our lives.

Last week,
our bishop recorded a message to the diocese
for the beginning of the church year.
I will hopefully have it playing at the ministry fair later.
In it, he calls us, all of us,
every member
of this diocese
to focus this year
on studying scripture.

This is his message:

It's the beginning of September
and there's lots of excitement here in the diocese of Long Island.
We've just appointed a new dean for our cathedral
and the program years are staring across the parishes and ministries of the diocese,
and I thought I would take a moment
just to offer a word of encouragement to all of our lay leaders and clergy
as they begin the new academic year the new
program year of our parishes and our ministries
with a word of encouragement:

I would like to ask everyone if they would begin meetings with bible study, a study of scripture.

If I can remind the clergy that clericus should begin with scripture study or lectionary study

that is a shared opportunity

to break into the word and have God's word be the focus and the fuel for our work together.

We know instinctively that that's always the case,

but my request is that everyone be intentional about it across the diocese and that we spend this next program year delving deeply into Scripture and have it inform the way we make decisions,

the way we speak with each other,

the way we plan for our ministries in the future, and particularly as we

approach our Convention in November.

I think that we will all find

if we're intentional about this,

about breaking open God's word

sharing those opportunities with each other,

and revealing to each other our learnings and our discoveries in Scripture

that it will strongly encourage,

support and inform our ministry moving forward.

So I am encouraging everyone across the diocese to break open the scriptures at the

beginning of vestry meetings, at committee meetings, at clericus meetings,

that in fact,

all can be washed deeply in the word of God

as we move forward in this diocese

My prayers are with you all as we begin this program year

and know that you're each being held in prayer daily

by members of the diocesan staff here in Garden City

and across the diocese.

God bless you.

The Right Rev. Lawrence Provenzano, Bishop of Long Island

So, as we begin a new program year,

pay attention.

Pay attention

to God's word in Scripture.

Pay attention

to God's glory in creation.

Pay attention

to God's presence among us.

Pay attention.