

Season of Creation

Num 20:1-13 Ps148 Rom 13:8-14 Matt. 18:15-20

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church Sep.6, 2026

On this first Sunday in our six-week celebration of the Season of Creation, I would like to suggest that everything we will ponder, pray, sing, lament and celebrate over these six weeks can find its beginning, its ending and its deepest meaning in the Christ candle that lights our chancel area this morning... The candle that is usually reserved for Easter and the Easter season, as well as for Epiphany, All Saints Day, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and whenever we gather for funerals...

But here you see it lit on the first morning in our celebration of the Season of creation, not primarily because of the significance of the flame, which reminds us of the light of Christ that shines in the darkness, but because of something rather unexpected that's included at the very end of the "Exultet" in the Roman Catholic Easter Vigil liturgy ... (The "Exultet" being the exquisite chant that's sung as the Christ candle enters the darkness of the sanctuary on Easter morning, giving thanks for the presence of the risen Christ to banish darkness and save us from the power of sin...)

But listen to the words that end the "Exultet" as it's sung in the Roman Catholic liturgy...

*On this, your night of grace, O holy Father,
accept this candle, a solemn offering,
the work of bees and of your servants' hands,*

*an evening sacrifice of praise,
this gift from your most holy Church.*

*But now we know the praises of this pillar,
which glowing fire ignites for God's honor,
a fire into many flames divided,
yet never dimmed by sharing of its light,
**for it is fed by melting wax,
drawn out by mother bees**
to build a torch so precious...*

*We pray you that this candle, O Lord,
hallowed to the honor of your name,
may persevere undimmed,
to overcome the darkness of this night.*

*Receive it as a pleasing fragrance,
and let it mingle with the lights of heaven...*

Who would ever imagine that the ending of the “Exultet” (the most holy song of the Church, sung on the most holy night of the year) would extol the beauty of melting wax drawn out by mother bees, and the fragrance of the flame as it rises in the darkness and mingles with the lights of heaven?

Suggesting perhaps, that telling the story of Jesus “the light of the world” is somehow dependent upon the honey bee...

Suggesting that if we were to be silent enough... and if we were able to use our senses to their fullest, we would be able, in the presence of our Christ candle lit this morning,

- to hear the humming of the bees on a summer's day...

- to feel the breeze that emanates from their wings as they fly from blossom to blossom...
- to smell the fragrance of the nectar they carry on their very bodies as they move from those blossoms to the hive...
- to see the intricate hexagonal cells they build to store their wax...
- to taste the sweetness of the honey they make from that nectar...
- And to know that in the alchemy of God's infinite, intimate, earthbound love it all works together to open our ears and eyes and hearts and lives to something we might not otherwise know...

All because of the bees... Who not only make the wax used to make the Christ candle, but who also have other things to teach us about the life of faith... Which I know may sound like a bit of a theological stretch...

Although maybe not that big of a stretch if we take the words of St. Augustine to heart, when he said we have two sacred texts... one being the Bible and the other being the natural world... and that both are essential for us to "read" if we are to even begin to know the creator, lover, liberator God we profess to follow...

St. Augustine giving me permission then, on this first Sunday in the Season of Creation, to use the "text" that is the "natural world," and allowing me a bit more "air time" to speak of honey bees than of Jesus, although I don't think Jesus would mind a bit...

And I will do so by beginning with words from a little pamphlet bearing the name "Praised Bee" (b-e-e), created by the folks at the Marklin Candle Company in Contoocook, New

Hampshire, the company from which we get our beeswax Christ Candle...

On the last page of the pamphlet it says, in part, *“While some species of bees are solitary creatures, the honey bee is not. It thrives in community, reminding us of the early Christian church as recorded in Acts, where believers were together and had everything in common... In a beehive, tasks are undertaken by all, food and natural resources are held in common, and the survival of the colony supersedes any individual’s particular interest... Observing such a selfless lifestyle prompted St. John Chrysostom in the fourth century to write, ‘The bee is more honored than other animals, not because she labors, but because she labors for others.’”*

And the owner of Marklin Candles, Martin Marklin, who keeps and tends the bees that make the wax for the company’s candles, writes this on their website... *“This one singular creature has transformed how I choose to live my life, how I operate our business. It really has pervaded many aspects of my life – in virtue of the facts of sustainability, stewardship of creation, living in community, and social justice.”*

“When you think of a bee as a forager,” he writes, “what does it do? It seeks in the world that which is fragrant, colorful, beautiful, and she visits those flowers and ingests the nectar, adds some enzymes to it, and makes honey. And the analogy is that we similarly should be like the bee. We should be in the world, seeking out that which is beautiful, noble, true; and we should be, in our own lives, transforming it. But not for our own personal enrichment, because everything about a bee is for the society... The phrase ‘be the bee,’” he continues, “is a good directive to follow, because the honey bee has much to teach us about community and serving others”...

A word of wisdom spoken by a candle-maker in New Hampshire and taken seriously by Redeemer Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, whose members have for years kept bees on the roof of their building... making honey that they then put in jars to give to newcomers and to sell at fundraisers to benefit the large immigrant community in which Redeemer is located...

How cool is that? A church that keeps beehives on the roof of their building... (granted, the roof is flat, and can support such an adventure)... But still... I think it's such a creative outreach effort, the congregation also sponsoring backyard bee classes so others in the neighborhood can keep bees and thus support and enhance the pollinators that will help vegetable and flower gardens to thrive... (Reminding me of the bumper sticker I saw recently that said, "No bees, no food"... pollination being essential to the propagation of plant life)...

Michael and I visited Redeemer Lutheran Church in Milwaukee a few years ago, and brought back the bumper sticker the Redeemer folks put on their cars... A bumper sticker that says, "BEEVANGELISTS." (Making me wonder about a possible new idea for our outreach ministry here at St. Brendan... I mean, really, how hard could it be to make our roof flat? Allen and John, it's just a small project I have in mind for you to tackle...)

On this Sunday when our text from Romans extols us to love one another and our text from Matthew outlines a careful, thoughtful and extensive process for dealing with someone in the faith community who has transgressed in some way and is in need of forgiveness, the honey bee offers wisdom about what it means to live in community for the good of all, not only inside the community but in the world beyond, the fate of one dependent upon the other...

But there is another reason I think the metaphor of the honey bee is helpful for us to consider as we ponder the mystery of God's presence in our lives... A reason spoken of in Antonio Machado's poem "Last Night," whose first two stanzas read this way...

*Last night, as I was sleeping,
I dreamt – marvelous error! –
that a spring was breaking
out in my heart.
I said: Along which secret aqueduct,
O water, are you coming to me,
water of a new life
that I have never drunk?*

*Last night, as I was sleeping,
I dreamt – marvelous error! –
that I had a beehive
here inside my heart.
And the golden bees
were making white combs
and sweet honey
from my old failures...*

*...The golden bees
were making white combs
and sweet honey
from my old failures...*

So the thing is, in case you didn't know, I often think of myself as the queen bee, called and equipped to bring God's saving grace to the world... (Which, truth be told, is the identity many Christians live by)... And it was with that understanding of myself that I went last week to visit a young woman I've known since being a teacher in the Sedgwick Elementary School more than thirty years ago... a young woman who lives in a basement home with her dying mother... A basement home to which she and her family have intended to add a first floor for the past 27 years, but never had the resources to do so...

Katherine asked me to come because her mother was dying. And so I did, bringing my little red Episcopal prayer book for such times... Thinking of course, that I was carrying the nectar of God's love and grace to that dark hole in the ground and the people who lived there...

But when I pulled into the driveway and got out of the car, I saw, outside the open door that leads to the stairs going down into the darkness of the basement, dozens of mud buckets filled with bright red tomatoes, purple violets, yellow snap dragons, orange marigolds... and in another part of the yard a garden surrounded by a tall chicken wire fence full of morning glories reaching for the sky... and inside red tomatoes, green peppers, tall stalks of corn, yellow summer squash, and small electric light

bulbs hanging from every place possible, which Katherine later told me, light up the garden at night, making it so magical and so beautiful that parents on their road bring their children to see it when it gets dark...

And I realized in that moment that even as I was intending to bring the sweet nectar of God's love to Katherine and her mother, it was already there, right on the Kingdom Road in Blue Hill, Maine... (the Kingdom Road... did you catch that?) It was already there as Katherine worked all summer to create beauty and light, pollinating everything she possibly could in her hardscrabble life with color and hope... and then brushing her hope-filled heart on anyone who visited, including me...

And I realized, in my finely polished Queen Bee identity, that I was not only sorely in need of Katherine's gifts, but also in need of Antonio Machado's golden bees... those golden bees that make white combs and sweet honey from our old and very present failures...

Antonio Machado's poem thus extending the metaphor of the honey bee, offering it not only as an example of what it means to live in Christian community, all of us working on behalf of the whole world (no exceptions), and as an example of those tiny little winged creatures who go from blossom to blossom bringing what's needed for pollination and propagation and verdant greening of the world...

But offering us as well an image of God as the great bee-keeper... the one who sends out the golden bees that make white combs and sweet honey from our old and very present failures... coming to us in a thousand thousand ways to transform us, to set us free, and to send us out into the world in the name and in the way of Jesus...

Coming to us in the Katherines of our lives, who teach us that the fierce and tender love of God is present in places we would never expect... Coming to us as well in the beauty of the natural world, as we will celebrate for the next five weeks... And in the context of our faith tradition, coming to us

- in the broken and beautiful community we call church,
- in the ordinary waters of baptism,
- in the down-to-earth gifts of bread and wine,
- in the God-forsaken symbol of death + that shows us how far the God of love will go to accompany world God so loves,
- in melting wax, drawn out by mother bees used to make the Christ candle carried into the darkness of a sanctuary on Easter morning as the cantor sings, "The light of Christ... the light of Christ, the light of Christ"...

God as the great beekeeper who is always and forever coming to us to make white combs and sweet honey from our old and very present failures... Transforming us and setting us free to be Beevnagelists... singing "Praised Bee" in both word and in deed...

Trusting that in the alchemy of God's infinite, intimate, earthbound love it all works together to open our ears and eyes and hearts and lives to something we might not otherwise know...

May it bee so, dear friends.. May it bee so...