

Rev. Alice Hildebrand  
St. Brendan's Episcopal Church  
October 26, 2025  
Psalm 65  
*"To You belongs the song of praise, O God"*

When I was a child, my family lived in a small, rural suburb of New York City, in the Hudson River Valley. Our street meandered along a flat place between two soft ridges of land covered with tall maples and oaks. The sun didn't spill its light over the eastern height until it had been up for quite a while, and it vanished behind the western treetops long before the sky showed any sunset color. Growing up there, accustomed to it, I should have been a child who liked a landscape that nestled, that enclosed. Instead, when my parents weren't around, I climbed out my bedroom window to sit on the porch roof, trying to get high enough to see over the trees. When I got old enough to explore farther away, I found a hill on the back side of a nearby golf course, where, on weekdays and in the winter, I could perch undisturbed and look over a sweep of land to the other side of my valley. I always looked for edges.

I was a lucky child of the suburbs, because my father's grandfather had made friends with a man named Owen Flye, of Brooklin, Maine, when Owen came to Hartford, Connecticut to teach Latin, back in the late eighteen hundreds. Owen encouraged my great-grandfather to bring his family to Maine for the summer, where Owen was turning the old family farm on Flye Point into a boarding house and cottages, for rusticators. My school-year seasons in that narrow valley were balanced by summers under the widespread sky, on Blue Hill Bay, where I could watch weather move from west to east, stand with the toes of my sneakers at the tide line as the water receded and secrets were exposed, lie outside at night with my parents to watch northern lights and meteor showers cover the whole sky.

So much of our spiritual heritage, based in scripture, etched out in centuries of writing and reflection, relies upon the wild, untamed, splendid world to provide for us the backdrop against which we can see God, or at least, indications of God. In the rich Celtic Christian tradition, these places are called "thin places;" places where the familiar, everyday world and the unseen, inner world of the Spirit seem to touch one another. We are so often drawn to edges, to thin places when we are seeking God. We so often want to go where we can pick our way along uninhabited

cliffs, where the nighttime sky is unblocked by buildings, unobscured by lights; where we can see untenanted island shores, and animals in their natural habitats. In these places, “the tumult of the peoples” [from the NRSV translation of Psalm 65] is muted, and we are awed by signs of God.

But most of us need to balance that sort of experience. The very grandeur, the silence, the solitude, that we relish can at times overwhelm us. We also seek experiences of community, of connection, where the scale of things is closer to our size. We’re pretty puny, compared to the nighttime sky, or the sea stretching towards Europe and South America. The psalmist says, “Blessed are those whom you choose and bring near to live in your courts.//We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, your holy temple.” This psalm is an expression of gratitude from a gathered community, a community that can stand together in a safe place, in the goodness of God’s house, and look at the wonders of God.

This, too, is a foundation block of our spiritual heritage—the beauty and the wildness of the thin places that can reveal God to us are balanced by the order God establishes. Seasons follow each other, the rich material gifts of land and sea have, for centuries, been evidently unending. God cares for people, offers us guidelines on how to live with each other in justice and harmony. When we are overwhelmed, we can turn as a community towards God. It is impossible to imagine what our religion would look like if these backdrops—the non-human world, and gathered communities of mutual respect and trust were to disappear. If we lost the balance. We need wilderness **and** safe, sheltering spaces for our little human selves. We need to be able to see God’s hand revealed both in unspoiled nature and in our civilization, our daily lives. In the prosperity of our work, historically and metaphorically as farmers, gardeners, fishermen and women, hewers of wood, preservers of foodstuffs, carriers of water. In the ethics and reasonableness and respect of our societal structures and our leaders. In our compassion and humility towards our sisters and brothers, towards our fellow creatures, all of whom, like us belong to God.

Allen and I spent a week on Grand Manan back in the early 2000s, at the mouth of the Bay of Fundy. We saw not only the splendors of wild wind and surging waves, of sun-soaked calm in

deserted coves, but also the bustle and energy of the local fishing economy. All along the quieter side of the island, in protected coves, and even in some places that weren't very quiet or protected, were active herring weirs. The harbors were lined with wharfs and fish houses, there were stacks of nets and buoys and traps for lobsters and crabs, there were fleets of boats for different kinds of fishing. The dulse season was just ending and lobstering was about to begin. Of course I was looking at all of this with the eyes of a poetical theologian, not the practiced eyes of a fisherperson, so I might not be interpreting correctly the details of what I saw. But the island was prosperous, no question. And its prosperity came from the sea.

As we know only too well here on Deer Isle, the prosperity of today's fishing communities is fragile; some fisheries have all but disappeared. When I visited Grand Manan in the 80s, scalloping was the thing, and there were piles of scallop shells 6 feet high. When we went there in 2004, there wasn't much of a scallop fishery. We've seen that here too, as we've seen the urchin fishery come and go. There isn't a shrimp fishery in Maine anymore. And the fabulous fish that so much of New England and Maritime Canada prosperity was based on, the codfish, is virtually gone. With the codfish gone, there are more of other kinds of fish, fish for which the cod was a predator, including lobster. But those species are vulnerable, too. On Grand Manan we saw many pens for farming salmon, a controversial commercial fishery that may be the wave of the future, but that many believe is ultimately destructive.

It is unimaginable to us that the wild world that nourishes our spirits, and the bountiful world that feeds us and gives us life, could actually be destroyed. It is horrifying to realize that we can harm and destroy the wild, generous world, and that the world of human society can also actually be destroyed. We live on the surfaces of things, for the most part, and that is not a failing, it's just the way we humans are. The moment presses in on us, shortening the focus of our vision. We know we are in a bad drought right now, yet we are probably also genetically hard-wired to respond with joy and feelings of well-being when one clear, mild day succeeds another. The progress of western civilization has given many of us more and more good things. But, left over from centuries gone by, we still have a certain mentality, one that may be killing us, and killing God's good creation; more is always better, the gifts of earth and sea are inexhaustible, God has given all of this to us, humans, above and beyond all other species. Specifically, for many

generations here in the USA, to Euro/American/white/Christian/US citizens. And tragically that also means that we lose track of the vast suffering of the non-human world, and the vast suffering that humans inflict on each other through greed, war, revenge, prejudice. We lose track of how very rare privileges of peace and quiet and space and prosperity and safety are in the world of human society.

How easy it is for those of us who do not live close to the natural world to take for granted the way we live, our “lifestyle,” and think that it will always be the way we like. To forget how vulnerable it actually is. Even when we are struggling with the other vulnerabilities of being human—illnesses, losses, griefs—we tend to assume that the backdrop to our lives will always be as it is described by the Psalmist. But what would our lives be like if there was no wilderness? What would our lives be like if the land and the sea could no longer produce our food, if our water was undrinkable, our air unbreathable? This is already true in some parts of the world, where pollution from over-development, from industry and agricultural runoff have poisoned the environment. What would our lives be like if we could not make our own living, if we had to depend always on the charity of others, because the resources we depended upon were gone? What would our lives be like if we tried to move to a place where we had a hope of supporting ourselves and our family, and were turned away, deported to a country not our own, or imprisoned? What would our lives be like if we could not see the moon and stars at night, the sunrise, wild animals and birds? Who are we if we forget that we are only part of God’s creation, if we think that we are gods, and that the world is subject to our desires? If we set out to rule the world, according to what we think of as our interests, who will we become?

There are ecological challenges to climate change, and even more, there are political challenges. People in the world’s countries most threatened by climate change once thought that their lives would continue in the ways they were accustomed to. People in the world’s war zones thought that, too. People who are immigrants and naturalized US citizens thought they were safe but are now under threat as being of the “wrong” racial/ethnic/religious background. People thought that our democracy was unshakeable—liberty and justice for all. People thought we would continue to seek to use our God-given talents and treasure for the well-being of the planet and not for

personal gain. And now that we are seeing that those assumptions are fragile and vulnerable, just like the natural world, what is our recourse?

I said that I looked at the world of the fishing community with a poetical theologian's eyes. But even seen with those eyes, it seems that at present folks who make their living fishing are lucky; the fish are still there. If we listen to the prophet Joel, if we listen to the words of Jesus that we have heard from Luke this morning, we know that our sense of being in control is an illusion. We know that we are not wise or righteous by our own virtue, but by the power of God, to whom we belong, in whom we live. God's spirit is poured out on all flesh; yet if we do not take the time to recognize that, to get to know what it means to belong to God, we are like the Pharisee, so sure that our plans, our ways, are right that we cease to feel vulnerable. We may be so sure of ourselves, of our own priorities, that we cease to be open to the priorities of God. Without that openness, can we have vision new enough, or will strong enough to answer the challenges of our time?

“O you who answer prayer [O God]. . . To you all flesh shall come. When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us, you forgive our transgressions. . . We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house. . . [You are] the source of trust of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest islands . . . you make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy.” Amen.