

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander  
Proper 17 (B) ~ 1 September 2024  
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda  
Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9  
Psalm 15  
James 1:17-27  
Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

*The Lord spoke to Moses, "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you and you reap its harvest, you shall bring the sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest. He shall raise the sheaf before the Lord, that you may find acceptance... This is a statute forever throughout your generations in all your settlements."*  
~ Leviticus 23:9-11a, 14b

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*

According to Torah, according to Hebrew Scripture, the ancient People of Israel were commanded to give the first fruits – which is to say, the finest of their crops – back to God. Think about the significance of that for a moment: In an agrarian society, in an economy dependent on the produce of the land, handing over the very best that one has grown is a considerable sacrifice. It is an act of surrender, acknowledging to oneself and to God that that bounty, that harvest, came from and belongs to God in the first place. It also is an act of trust, believing that God will *continue* to provide that bounty, going forward. It signifies God's abundance in the face of the very real human fear of scarcity.

You may remember that we enacted this tradition liturgically here at St. Dunstan's back at the beginning of August, around the Feast of the Transfiguration of our Lord. Deacon Mary invited us to bring in grapes and apples, peaches and plums and figs, bread and nuts and honey, to offer back to God. We processed these "first fruits" into the Nave and laid them at the Altar for blessing – not to *appease* God, but to demonstrate to God that we know, we understand, that God is the Source of all that we have.

This is a lovely ritual and a powerful way of embodying our thanks and praise. And, one hopes, it reminds us of our ultimate dependence on God.

That said, we humans need always to check our egos at the door.

What do I mean by this?

What I mean is that we must be cautious, we must be on guard, lest we lose sight of Who is Creator and who is creature. Put another way, if we are not careful, we might just confuse ourselves for God.

Judeo-Christian theology teaches that we humans are created “in the image and likeness of God” (Genesis 1:26) – which, with all due respect to the Divine, may be a bit of a setup. Because it’s just a short step, isn’t it, from understanding ourselves as a reflection *of* God, a lesser part of a greater Whole, to believing that we are the *same* as God.

And that, my friends, is a dangerous slippery slope.

Think about it: In just a few minutes, our ushers will process forward with today’s offering of money collected from the congregation gathered here this morning. We will stand and sing “Praise God, from Whom all blessings flow,” publicly proclaiming that we know full well where all of this comes from.

Yet: The *optics* suggest something altogether different. If we’re not paying attention, if we lose focus and turn away even for a second, we might just misread what’s actually going on. We might succumb to the temptation to believe that we are giving something to God or to the Church that is ours, in the first place. And it might well appear that way – but just as we could not possibly have created the grapes and apples, nuts and honey that we presented at the Altar last month, neither have we created anything else that we give to God.

Not our money.

Not our time.

Not our skills and gifts and talents.

Not, in the language of the Rite I Eucharistic Prayer, “ourselves, our souls and bodies” (*BCP*, 336).

None of it comes from us. We may be partners with God, instruments through which God creates and acts in the world, but we are *not* the Source. We are not the Creator.

We make that mistake at the peril of the whole created order.

As we enter into the Season of Creation this morning, it is far too easy to see ourselves as somehow separate from, as *above* and *apart from*, the rest of what God has made. We humans have been seduced into believing in our own exceptionalism.

And why wouldn't we be? After all, the language is right there in Genesis: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and **subdue** it and have **dominion** over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Gen. 1:28, *emphasis mine*).

But this is where we get confused, where we tend to take our foot off of the theological gas pedal and coast a bit too much. Because, as Australian Anglican Bishop and Old Testament scholar Michael Stead writes:

The kind of ‘rule’ over creation that humanity is given is to be patterned after God’s ‘rule’ – that is, a rule that protects and nurtures, not a despotic rule that exploits. Our rule over the creation is a delegated rule: we rule under God’s authority, to exercise a rule that is modelled on God’s rule...God has not granted to us an *absolute right* to exploit the creation for our own

ends. Rather, [God] has delegated to us a *responsibility* to protect the creation and care for it.<sup>1</sup>

This, according to Bishop Stead, is what it means to be created in the image and likeness of God.

Which brings me back to first fruits:

In this morning's Epistle reading from the Letter of James, the author refers to "us" – to humankind – specifically, to those who follow Christ – as "a kind of first fruits of [God's] creatures" (James 1:18).

Did you catch that? We ourselves are first fruits, just like the grain of the harvest offered back to God by the ancient People of Israel. Just like the grapes and apples, nuts and honey that we processed into the Nave last month. All belonging to God and offered back to God. It is hubris, it is ego, that leads us to see ourselves as separate from, as above and apart from, the rest of Creation.

The writer and environmentalist Wendell Berry puts it this way:

We must abandon arrogance and stand in awe. We must recover the sense of the majesty of creation, and the ability to be worshipful in its presence. For I do not doubt that it is only on the condition of humility and reverence before the world that our species will be able to remain in it.<sup>2</sup>

In this Season of Creation, may we come before God with humility and reverence, repenting of our ego and giving thanks for all that God has made – including, but not limited to, "ourselves, our souls and bodies."

*Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> The Rt. Rev. Michael R. Stead, "To 'Rule Over' and 'Subdue' the Creation" (Sydney: The Anglican Church of Australia, May 2019)

<sup>2</sup> Wendell Berry, "A Native Hill," in *The World Ending Fire: The Essential Wendell Berry* (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2018), 22-23