

This is the first of 4 sermons on thankfulness.

Psalm 34 tells us,

“I will bless the Lord at all times, his praise shall ever be in my mouth.”

That means all that we do as Christians begins with thanksgiving.

Before we “go in peace to love and serve the Lord,”
before we “break bread together on our knees,”
before we accept God’s forgiveness,
before anything else, we give thanks.

BLESSED be God, we say to begin the service - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

GLORY to God in the highest, we say,
and when we pray together over the bread and the wine,
we are praying The Great Thanksgiving.

All of our life as a community of Christians,
inside these walls and out, begins with thanking God,
and today I’m focusing on the very first reason for our gratitude.

We thank God for creation. For life.

Why is there something instead of nothing?

There is something instead of nothing because God loves...
everything God has made.

“Sing praise to God, who reigns above / the God of all creation...”

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If you don’t already have a daily practice of thanking God,

I want to make the case for why you should.

And if you do have that practice already,

I want to give you a few things to think about,
a little check-in to see if your practice of gratitude is all it can be.

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The first reason we thank God for creation

is because life, in all its forms, is precious, is beautiful.

Here's how I remembered life is beautiful on my sabbatical.

This summer Emily and I went to Wales with the Holy Trinity pilgrims,
and then later in the summer we went by ourselves to Oregon.

In Oregon we saw the Portland Japanese Garden.

If you've been to the Atlanta Botanical Garden it's like that

but instead of all these different displays of plants

it's got one unified vision for the whole thing.

A beautiful, elegant green space over several acres.

Everything connected, everything speaking with one voice,
every section flowing into the next. Very classically Japanese.

That garden is...aspirational.

It reminds me of a perfect Sunday liturgy where everything flows,
everything fits.

The garden whispers that this is how life should always be.

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And sometimes life really IS like that garden,

whether it's a beautiful Sunday liturgy

or that season in your life when everything just fits together.

Sometimes life really is like that garden,

and in those seasons it's easy, natural, to thank God for your blessings.

But of course life isn't always like that, at least mine isn't.

I mean, it turns out you can't be on sabbatical forever.

More often life is wild and chaotic;

more often life is confusing and contradictory.

And yet even in the chaos life is still every bit as

precious and beautiful as when it all fits together,

And here's the story of how I remembered THAT truth.

On the trip to Wales some of us got to go hiking along the coast.

Those hikes were the most profound thing I experienced on my sabbatical.

I felt more alive on them than just about anywhere I can remember.

We walked about 10 feet or so from the edge of the cliffs.

On our right the Celtic Sea,

and even though we had very mild weather for the Welsh coast,

some days the wind was still incredibly strong

and you could see in the sharp angles of the cliffs

the power of sea and storm.

On our left we saw pastures - fences and borders.

We saw sheep and cows and horses who had learned

to endure the harsh weather of the coastline.

On our right - the power of sea and sky to tear down the land.

On our left - peace, order, farming and sustenance.

But in between those two mighty forces I saw something else,

something my eye kept being drawn to over and over and over.

Unpredictable, fragile, irresistible life.

Plants of incredible variety sprouting up in spite of the wildness of the shore

and the order of the pasture.

Some of it worked into hedgerows

but most of it just sprouting up wherever it could,
and the more you looked the more life you saw.

At first all you saw were the big, prickly, scary foundations of the ecosystem.

There's this plant called gorse,
which if you've ever watched the British Open
when it's at St. Andrews you know about gorse.

Gorse are kind of like juniper bushes here, but they're meaner.

Gorse is thick and tough and prickly.

Even bigger than the gorse are these thorny shrubs called Hawthorne.

Most of what we saw between sea and pasture was dominated
by tough, thorny Hawthorne and gorse plants.

But the closer you looked the more life you discovered.

In every tiny gap of the gorse,
in every little nook and cranny of the Hawthorne,
a different plant was poking through.

And they all seemed to have their own tiny precious blooms -

pinks and purples, yellows and whites,
and as many shades of green as you could imagine.

If you looked even closer you might spot a tiny little spiderweb,

maybe no bigger than a thumbnail,
and trapped in the web a tiny drop of water.

And if you were really lucky you might even see a tiny little spider.

Our guide stopped us several times to show us where -

in the midst of all this wildness - tiny little orchids were growing.

Orchids! People here pay lots of money for orchids
and then make themselves crazy trying to keep them alive,
but right there, in the wildest climate I had ever hiked in,
tiny little orchids sprouted to life all on their own.

Despite crashing salt water waves, raging thunderstorms,
bitter cold and baking sun,
despite mankind's drive to order everything into pastures,
God continues to bring forth life. Do you not perceive it?

Beautiful, dangerous, fragile, precious life.
God's ongoing, infinite power to create cannot be stopped.

**"All creatures of our God and King / Lift up your voices, let us sing.
Alleluia! Alleluia!"**

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The second reason we give thanks to the God of all creation
is that gratitude, giving thanks for life even in its wildness,
is itself an act of defiance against the forces of destruction
that try to tear you down,
is itself an act of hope against the forces that try to control you,
that try to take the place of God.

Some of you know Fabio Sotelo, the rector of St. Edwards in Lawrenceville.

Last week Fabio spoke at our clergy conference and shared with us
a little about the lived experience of a lot of immigrants
in Georgia right now.

He said they were living through a storm
that was trying to strip away their humanity,
that was trying to reduce their existence to rules and profit.

He asked us to imagine being called essential workers,
imagine being “approved” to put yourself at risk
to keep the economy going in 2020,
then to imagine being called criminals just a few years later,
being called threats to American jobs.

He asked us to imagine leaving everything behind seeking a better life,
and then being told you are violating the law,
even through the truth as I understand it
is that they haven’t failed the law,
the lawmakers have failed them...

But in the midst of it all, Fabio tells us,
in the midst of it all God continues to show up.
God continues to create life for them,
and so they continue to give thanks.

He hears people thanking God every day, he said,
that they made it this far, that they have made it one more day.
After all, they tell him, they left everything behind to come here,
and all that came with them...was God.

God and his promises. God and his people.
God does not abandon you even when our federal agents do.
God does not betray you even when our lawmakers do,
and so in the midst of everything,
they give thanks to God for bringing them this far.

Now, immigration enforcement might not be the storm you face right now,
but I bet a lot of you here face storms of your own.
Whether it’s your health or marriage, children or your parents,
loneliness or feeling overwhelmed,
your job or safety or money.

Whatever the storm is for you,
giving thanks to God EVERY DAY - good days and bad -
is an act of defiance against that which would tear you down,
against that which would try to control you.

When we give thanks to God in the midst of the storm,
we...we are hope despite the times.

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And since a lot of you already have a daily practice of gratitude,
let me close with a couple of reminders of what CHRISTIAN gratitude
ought to look like.

First, and maybe this is obvious, make sure you give thanks TO GOD.
It's not enough for a child of God to just recite in your head
a list of the things you feel fortunate have gone your way.

There's a line in the book "An American Marriage,"
where a mother reminds her son,
"There is a difference between thinking and praying."

Thinking is talking to yourself. Praying is talking to God.
When YOU give thanks,
make sure you are praying to God
and not just talking to yourself.

Second, make sure you give thanks for your real life,
for the life that is, in all its messiness.

Don't just give thanks for the happy parts, the successful parts,
or worse, the parts that are better than somebody else's.

And last, remember that there are always going to be places in your life
where you take up a lot of space,
where you dominate your environment like one of those
big, thick Hawthorne or gorse.

And at the same time there will be other parts of your life
where you are one of those tiny little flowers,
one of those tiny little spiders,
struggling for light and water,
feeling pushed around by forces so much bigger than you,
forces that are way beyond your control.

Whatever part of life you're in right now...you exist because of God.
You are here...because God loves you.

You are precious and beautiful and YOU are absolutely
made in the image of our mighty and loving God.
Nothing can ever take that away from you.

So give thanks.

“All things bright and beautiful / all creatures great and small /
all things wise and wonderful / the Lord God made them all.