

I want to talk to you this morning about gratitude.

I have lived a sheltered life.

I've never been to war, never been in prison,
and I've never known the kind of deep suffering
or life-threatening experiences that some of you here have endured.

The closest I've come to being scared for my life
was when I got lost hiking at Camp Mikell,
which sounds silly except I was leading a group of 6th-7th graders
and we really were lost in the mountains
and I was supposed to be protecting them.

There was a moment on that little misadventure
when I realized that these 6th & 7th graders
could be hurt or even killed and it would be my fault.

And in that moment I experienced a profound awareness of God's presence.

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What I experienced in that moment, though,
was not an awareness of God's protection.
I wasn't expecting God to step in & make everything turn out fine.

What I had the certainty that God was there with us.
There in the mountains, there in the water, in the wildness.
There in us. Whatever was going to happen, God was there with us.

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I haven't always been able to hold onto that awareness. It comes & it goes.

The closest I get to recapturing it, though,
is not in times of danger, but in times of gratitude.

Now that the mornings are cool again
I'm sitting on my back deck for Morning Prayer.
After the psalms and scriptures,
it's time for my personal prayers to God.

I start with thanksgivings,
but before the words come I try to quiet my mind enough
to stare at the tops of the trees in my back yard.
I squint to see the gentle swaying of the tallest branches,
even the slow movements of the pine needles.

I try not to think but rather to...notice the lives of those trees,
the lives IN those trees,
Somehow it reminds me that God is present.

So I watch, and then I listen:
listen to birds and squirrels and school buses
and helicopters and ambulances.
God is present in all of it. I am just one small part of God's creation.

In those moments, there's no mystical assurance
that God will protect me or intervene to fix whatever is troubling me.

One of those swaying trees might fall on top of our house.
One day the ambulance will be for me.
But whatever happens, God will be there for all of it.

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I say all this because sometimes the world really is
a scary and dangerous place
and this feels to me like one of those times.

The news is filled with school shootings and political assassinations
that demand our attention,
with places like Gaza, South Sudan, and Nigeria
that deserve our attention,
and of course our personal lives have their own tragedies.

It's natural in times like this to plead with God to respond,
to beg God to intervene, and to walk away from God if he doesn't.

But God is more than the occasional provider of miracles,
more than a supernatural intervener in the ways of the world.
God is also present in the natural world,
in the mundane and the chaotic,
in the peaceful and the predatory alike.

God is the creator and sustainer of ALL things,
and our gratitude, our love,
shouldn't depend on whether divine intervention comes our way.

No matter what the world brings us,
we are wise if we pause and give thanks to God for all of it.

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A few years ago the words of Psalm 104 grabbed my attention,
and since then every few weeks when it comes back around,
it reminds me to be thankful for what the world is,
not what I wish it were.

So this morning, rather than trying to make sense of the latest headlines,
or even worse telling you what to think about them,
I'm stepping away from this morning's lessons
and offering you a reworking of Psalm 104,
my clumsy attempt to express what I'm trying to say to God
when I sit on my deck and read that psalm
and then stare at the trees and try to be thankful.

It sounds a little like this.

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Soul! Soul, wake up!

Wake up! Look up! even if you don't feel like doing either one.
Look up and bless the Lord.

Thank you, Lord. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

I see you wrapping the light of the universe around you for your robes,
imagine you setting the foundations of heaven
in the mysteries of the space,
spreading out a tapestry of stars and galaxies to decorate your home...
You ride across the sky like the clouds are your chariot.
The wind is your messenger of peace, and fire a sign of your power.

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God, you give us force and gravity:
to set the earth on its foundations,
to make it a home that will never be shaken.

You give us the sky, high above the mountains,
and water that fills the deep places of the earth.
Fresh water for secret mountain lakes,
and running water to flow through the valleys.

You balance water and land so that life can flourish in both.
You balance day and night for all your creatures to have their time.

In the night, lions and owls and even lowly coyotes and possums
rise up to hunt and feed. The roar of the lion is the glory of God!

When morning comes,
we go out to labor and love,
the beasts of the night lie down to rest,
and the birds sing their Gloria even more beautifully than the lion,
even more beautifully than us.

The seas whisper the depths of your being,
the seas filled with creatures we will never see -
microscopic plants and giant, hidden squid.

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God, whole eco-systems exist as evidence of your love.

Gazelles, badgers, falcons...
the wild animals rely on you, our creator and sustainer.
The trees and stones and sand that make our homes,
they, too, are gifts of your goodness.

Even the bread and wine that unite us today were first a gift from you.

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Physics works because of you.

Clocks work because you are God.

The earth revolves around the sun,

the moon revolves around the earth,

because you give us time and space,

because you are the God of the universe where light and time
and gravity are constants we can rely on.

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God, all creation relies on your mercy, your goodness, your love.

When you open your hand we feel safe and content,

and when you hide your face from us, we panic.

But even death is part of your creation,

and you send forth your breath over and over
to renew the face of the earth.

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God, I will sing to you as long as I live.

I will praise you while while I have my being.

May our words, our actions,

may our very lives be pleasing to you, O God our creator.

May the fullness of my being bless the Lord,

and may your justice continue forever.

Hallelujah!