

Hosea 14:4-7
Mark 4:26-34
Text: Hosea 14:5a

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Time

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary

September 3, 2006

BLESSINGS AS THE DEW

In just a few short weeks the modern scythe of the combine and the automatic harvester will sweep the fields clean with incredible efficiency, and the nation's larder will be well stocked—at least *our* nation's, that is. For all our understanding we still stand above the planted seed and the harvest like the Galilean farmer in Jesus' parable, and watch it grow, we know not how. Within its tiny frame, each seed bears the capacity to reproduce itself a multitude of times in marriage to water, soil and sun, a potential which still makes our best accomplishments look like the stumbling work of a first year apprentice. The harvest is an immense gift. Either in retrospect or prospect it is good to give pause and say thank you.

How like the Hebrew writer to capture the essence of this gift with an image from nature itself: the image of the morning dew. Hosea was a Hebrew prophet of the seventh-century BC. Like all his Hebrew contemporaries, he has that wonderful propensity of the Hebrew mind—a profound grasp of visual imagery. When the Hebrew mind wants to communicate it tells a story or it conjures something visual. These stories are meant to trouble us with the power of recollection. And they are legion. In turning randomly to the prophets in the Bible I came to a chapter in Isaiah, and in a single column of scripture counted over forty visual images drawn from everyday life and utilized to convey some truth about God and ourselves: land, wings, messengers, vessels of papyrus on the water, mountains and sunsets, sunshine and dew, and so it went, line after poetic line (Isaiah 18).

So Jesus, raised in the soil of Hebrew culture tells stories, visual parables. He sows images like grains of wheat growing to maturity—or not growing in inferior soil; lost sheep left in the vulnerable wilderness while their diligent shepherd goes looking for a single stray; a lamp hidden in a closet; a lost coin; rain pounding on a house with weak foundations, vines that produce abundantly, but yet need to be pruned to be so fruitful.

Hosea tells the story of his beloved Israel in the most vivid and shocking terms. He pictures her as a woman, Israel, who despite the love of her husband, God, gives herself over to harlotry, and so is to be given into exile. All the while her husband waits patiently and lovingly for her return. Yet it is a sign of Hosea's faith in the Lord that, notwithstanding the inevitable destruction of the nation at the hands of Assyria, he ends his book on a soaring note of promise and hope. God will still be there for Israel, he writes, when the terrible exile is over. God "will be *as the dew* to Israel," says Hosea.

For the original hearers—so dependant on and intimate to the rhythms of earth and harvest—it is a compelling image. It was the morning dew that slowly, discretely enabled the full harvest to mature in the field. For four months from May to September in Israel/Palestine there is virtually no rain. It is not for lack of moisture in the air, the conditions are simply not right for rain, even though the summer humidity may be two to three times that of winter. This humidity

regularly collects a dense and benevolent dew on the ground and its vegetation in the early morning. The grain crops would earlier have been harvested, but without this regular dew to cool the foliage in the early part of the day, and to moisten the earth, the fruits and olives and vineyards of the later harvest would be devastated. And upon these Israel depended for its commerce and subsistence.

The dew, they believed, fell as a gentle, imperceptible rain from heaven in the night—like Portia’s image of mercy in Shakespeare’s “A Merchant of Venice.” It was a daily presence symbolic of the God who gave it. Most of all, it was a blessing. It came in modest, incremental gifts day after day, in the sort of regular bequest that daily speaks of God’s ever discreet presence.

Such discretion also speaks of a God who can easily be missed. One might easily forget God, believing instead in a sort of natural economy of things: the way bread used to appear on the family table when we were children; or mother standing sentinel with clean dry socks when we came in wet from the snow or rain; or fuel for winter’s fire. Remember how we took such things for granted. They were just there, and wasn’t all of life like that? I recall Katherine, when she was young, asking for something that we could not then afford. She looked at us quizzically, and with all the innocence of childhood said, “Well, let’s go to that machine at the bank and get some more.”

If there is a secret to the Christian life, I think it must be our having the ability to detect the unobtrusive, nourishing, dew-like presence of God in the midst of all the ordinary moments of life. The sort of gratitude for life, for its Creator and its Savior, that enables us to disentangle ourselves from the hurtful and the disappointing, and even—perhaps hardest of all—from moments of soaring personal triumph, and still pause to say, “Thank you, Lord!”

Our lives, for all their shortcomings and stresses, are daily blessed with a rich harvest of God’s goodness. Some blessing, like the dew, are the slow secretions of the shell of time, like the layers that form a pearl around some tiny grain of sand: the steady influence of a parent imparting values and character over the years to a child; the nurture of Scripture over time to one who attends it, wherein God slowly layers upon us a wisdom not our own; the gift of healing which overtakes our sickness with such steady progress; or God’s regular forgiveness of our otherwise accumulated sins, when we ask for it. Constantly we benefit from a supremely charitable God. I cannot look at my plate at mealtimes without looking at the harvest of the earth. The meat that I enjoy was itself fed from a harvest of the ground. The family I love is nourished by the harvest God’s blessings that infiltrate the natural and cultivated harvest of the earth. The way, for instance, the earth takes in the air I breathe through its fund of plant life, refines and purifies it, and makes it breathable again. And, as we are finding to our deep concern, this delicate balance of vegetation on the earth holds the very fate of our planet in the balance.

I recall a young elder once, in my first parish, after a church meeting when called upon to pray, panicked and struggling for the words, saying, “O Lord, thank you for all the blessings which thou hast imposed upon us.” And if I ever wanted to shout “Amen” to a prayer, it was then.

In the Bible we are constantly reminded that the people of God—that’s us—are given this knowledge and nourishment for a purpose: that we might be priests of God,; people who in turn give away the blessings we have received and encourage others to do the same. We are, as our Protestant heritage reminds us, *all* priests of God. Now a priest is one who detects and conveys God’s presence and blessings and leads others to perceive them. That’s not me, it’s all of us.

Lovette Weems tells the true story of a priest in London years ago, named John. Father

John felt called to work with the city's poor. However, he was never assigned to a poor parish, which was his heart's desire. Finally he decided to withdraw from his priestly duties, while not forsaking his ordination, and take work as a street sweeper in London. Each day he went out to work with the street sweepers, never revealing to them that he was a priest.

One of the most popular of the street sweepers became ill, and after a short illness he died. The other street sweepers were shocked. They had no idea that their friend was sick. "If only we had known," they said. "If we had been told that he was sick we might have been able to do something for him. Now we cannot do anything for him.

John suggested, "Why don't we give him a good funeral?"

The street sweepers all replied that they would never know how to give him a good funeral. How would they begin. John told them that he would help plan the funeral for their friend, and he then revealed to them that he was a priest. They planned a funeral, and on Saturday hundreds of street sweepers filled a parish church. Father John came out in all his splendid robes and led a beautiful funeral.

Toward the end of the funeral, one befuddled and dazed street sweeper stood up near the front of the congregation, faced his fellow street sweepers and said in amazement, "Are there any other priests among us."

Amen.