

Message for August 22, 2021

Genesis 28:10-17

Psalm 139

Matthew 10:26-31

Two of the most common birds to be found in North America today are the house sparrow and the starling but it comes as a surprise to many people to discover that neither of these birds really belong here. Over one hundred years ago a group of Shakespeare enthusiasts imported one hundred starlings from England and then released them in New York City. They did this because they thought it would be 'nice' if everyone could enjoy these birds which are mentioned by Shakespeare in some of his plays. These one hundred starlings are the ancestors of the numerous starlings that are to be found in Canada and the United States today. And as for the sparrows? They were brought to Canada from Europe in an effort to try and keep the insects under control and, as they say, there was no looking back. These two species are amongst our most common birds of all but not everyone of course likes them. One person who certainly doesn't like the sparrows is the author, Jim Taylor. As he writes:

“On summer mornings they set up such a twittering soon after dawn that they make sleeping impossible. They awaken in me – normally a non-violent person – murderous rages. I have to remind myself that even a sparrow's life has some value. For that reason I have never had any problem with Jesus' assurance, 'You are worth more than many sparrows', until it occurred to me one day as I looked out at the lawn covered with feathered pests that God might have a similar view of us. Maybe we humans are worth more than sparrows – but how much of a privileged position does that give us? Considering what we've done to God's backyard, poisoning the water and air, paving over farmland, squandering our resources, and generally overpopulating the place even faster than sparrows – God might well think of us as pests.”

So writes one rather cranky author, but this of course is not how God regards us. In the eyes of God, we are anything but pests, rather we are his

precious children. That in fact is the message of today's New Testament passage.

It appears that at the time of today's passage some of Jesus' disciples thought that just because they followed Jesus they had it made; no more worrying or suffering, instead they would have riches, honour, power and dominion forevermore! But such was not the case, Jesus warned. Far from shielding them from suffering, being his faithful disciples practically guaranteed that they would in fact suffer. And yet despite this said Jesus, there was no need for them to fear. There wasn't because no matter what ever happened in life's journey, they were still in God's hands. Consider the sparrows, said Jesus. They were amongst the humblest of God's creatures and in the eyes of most people they were virtually worthless. If you wanted one for a pet, you could buy two of them for a penny in the market. If you bought four of them, then a fifth was usually thrown in for free. That was how worthless they were and yet said Jesus, God cares so much about the sparrows that he even knows when one of them lands on the ground! And if God cares that much about a humble sparrow, then we can be absolutely sure that he cares about us too. Indeed we are so precious to God that even the very number of hairs on our heads are known to him! Even if we don't always realize it or appreciate it, God is well aware of us and what is going on in our lives. This being the case, no matter what ever happens, there is no need for us to be paralyzed by fear. There isn't because, as the song puts it, "we never walk alone". And this is a message that we all need to hear from time to time and especially now perhaps as the pandemic drags on with its wearying restrictions, both physical and mental. As a person has written:

"It is perhaps one of our greatest longings in life, to know that someone will walk beside us through the passing years, who will commit to walk beside us for the long haul. But if we are honest, we know that walking alongside us is not for the faint-hearted!

For all kinds of reasons, people who seemed to fall into step alongside us change their minds, move on, or just simply fade out of our lives. Sometimes it has been the very rawness of our need that has made them turn away.

It would be a lonely world, a hard road without companionship. But, cliched as this comment may sound, Jesus Christ is the only one who can truly make that commitment to walk beside us through the passing years.”

The fact that we do not walk alone is one of the messages and promises of this morning’s Old Testament passage. It tells us about Jacob’s special vision at Bethel when he saw the angels climbing up and down a ladder between heaven and earth.

There has been a lot of debate over the years as to what this vision means, but I find it more significant *when* Jacob had the vision. At the time Jacob was on the run, trying to escape from his brother Esau’s righteous wrath after he had defrauded him of his rightful inheritance. Jacob was going into exile and was leaving behind his family, friends, and everything else. He was facing an unknown future in an unknown land and so, quite naturally, he felt lost, scared, and even overwhelmed. Then, in the midst of it all, he had a wonderful vision where God not only promised a glorious future for his descendants but, even more importantly for Jacob himself at that point in his life, also promised that “I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go.”

There was Jacob, weighed down by a guilty conscience and fleeing into an unknown future, and there was God, promising that despite all that Jacob had done, he still loved him and would be with him. This was God’s promise to Jacob, and this is also his promise to each one of us too. In the wonderful words of today’s psalm:

Where can I go to escape thy Spirit?
Or where can I flee from thy presence?
If I ascend the heavens, thou art there,
There too if I lie in Sheol!

No matter what we have said or done or no matter what may or may not be happening in our lives and the life of the world around us, we are not alone. A doctor Lawrence Jones, who was the Dean of the Howard University Divinity School, once used this analogy for us and our relationship with God.

Jones said that at the university where he taught, there was a stone wall that ran the entire length of the campus and his little boy liked to run along the top of it. The wall however ran underneath some huge oak trees that cast long dark shadows. Whenever the boy came to the shadowed parts, which he found so threatening and intimidating, he would jump down off the wall, run over to his father and take his hand. They would walk through the darkness together but then, when they came back into the sunlight, the boy would let go of his father's hand and jump back up on the wall.

Now this, said Jones, is the way it is with us, life, and God. When it is 'light', when everything is good, we often like to run along by ourselves. Who needs our Father? Once it gets 'dark' though, we like to run back to our Father for his comfort and protection. The important thing that we ought to remember though is that whether it be light or dark, God our Father is always present and more than willing to take our hand, if we will offer it to him. We may be fickle and changeable, but God is not. Indeed that is the message and promise of this short passage that was printed on a birthday card that I once received. It is certainly a fitting ending to today's message.

You are My child.
Your times are in My hands.
My thoughts toward you are precious.
I will love you with an everlasting love.
I will bless you.
I have placed My hand upon you.
I hold you with My hand.
I do everything for you in love.
I am for you.
I will not fail you.
I am your provider.
With Me, all things are possible!

And so they are.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, we give you thanks for the gift of this day and this very season itself which is so unlike all the others. We give you thanks for the goodness and beauty of your creation too, even as we remember and pray for all those who are finding the heat and humidity a challenge to cope with, especially those who have no access to air conditioning or have to work outdoors.

We thank you for everyone who means so much to us, praying for their well-being and safety in these challenging times.

We thank you for the many things that bring so much joy and pleasure to our lives, such as our work, the music we listen to, the shows we watch, the books we enjoy, and our other pastimes that give us a sense of pleasure and accomplishment.

We thank you for the holy wonder that is you. You are God, so righteous and so different from us. Even so, you still love us, redeem us and share the journey with us. Help us we pray, to discern you in all the things of earth this day. Whatever the circumstances may be, help us too to put our hope and faith in you.

We pray this day for all who are oblivious to you, your reality, presence and working in the world around them.

We pray this day for your healing in the lives of all those who are ill, whether it be in mind, body, or soul.

We pray this day for your guidance for all who are perplexed, your strength for all who are feeling overwhelmed, your peace for all who are troubled, and your comfort for all who mourn.

We remember this day the people of Afghanistan, especially the women and children, as the Taliban regains control. We pray too for all those who, fearing for their lives, are desperately trying to escape and find refuge elsewhere, including in our own country.

We once again remember in prayer the people of Haiti after experiencing yet another earthquake followed by the torrential rain.

We remember too our own nation with the beginning of the election campaign. We thank you for all of those willing to stand for office, thus giving us a choice as to who we can vote for. We thank you that we have the freedom to choose those who would govern us.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen