

First Sunday of Advent, Year C – December 1, 2024

“A Poet’s Guide to Gratitude”

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church

Vergennes, Vermont

Jeremiah 33:14-16 | Psalm 25:1-10 | 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 | Luke 21:25-36

Thanksgiving is a day set aside to count the many ways in which God has blessed us. This times reveals a lot about the nature of God the Giver.

Hope is at the heart of blessing, and when we give thanks, we tap into hope like a sustainable fuel. Writers and poets tapped into this fuel as well and somehow convert it into words. I’d like to draw on the wisdom of a few New England poets this morning. Some I’m a little familiar with. I had to memorize Robert Frost’s “Walking Through Woods on a Snowy Evening” in grade school in Massachusetts. I was fortunate enough to meet Mary Oliver in Florida through my work at a sustainability center. She gave the Rachel Carson Distinguished Lecture, but because I was so focused on science, I am just now re-discovering poetry, including a new one, e.e. cummings.

Even if you haven’t read cummings’ poems, you probably know that he avoided using capital letters. He capitalizes God and You in this poem.

i thank You God for most this amazing  
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees  
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything  
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,  
and this is the sun’s birthday; this is the birth  
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay  
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing  
breathing any—lifted from the no

of all nothing—human merely being  
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and  
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

e.e. cummings reminds us **why** we should feel grateful. We give thanks to God because we want to live without limits.

New England was Mary Oliver’s adopted home, so of course, we claim her, too. Her poetry teaches all “tasting touching hearing seeing breathing” human beings **how** to be grateful. Her questions are prompts that anchor us in the present:

*What did you notice?*

The dew-snail;  
the low-flying sparrow;  
the bat, on the wind, in the dark;  
big-chested geese, in the V of sleekest performance;  
the soft toad, patient in the hot sand;  
the sweet-hungry ants;  
the uproar of mice in the empty house;  
the tin music of the cricket’s body;  
the blouse of the goldenrod.

*What did you hear?*

The thrush greeting the morning;  
the little bluebirds in their hot box;  
the salty talk of the wren,  
then the deep cup of the hour of silence.

*When did you admire?*

The oaks, letting down their dark and hairy fruit;  
the carrot, rising in its elongated waist;  
the onion, sheet after sheet, curved inward to the pale green wand;  
at the end of summer the brassy dust, the almost liquid beauty of the flowers;  
then the ferns, scrawned black by the frost.

*What astonished you?*

The swallows making their dip and turn over the water.

*What would you like to see again*

My dog: her energy and exuberance, her willingness,  
her language beyond all nimbleness of tongue,  
her recklessness, her loyalty, her sweetness,  
her strong legs, her curled black lip, her snap.

*What was most tender?*

Queen Anne's lace, with its parsnip root;  
the everlasting in its bonnets of wool;  
the kinks and turns of the tupelo's body;  
the tall, blank banks of sand;  
the clam, clamped down.

*What was most wonderful?*

The sea, and its wide shoulders;  
the sea and its triangles;  
the sea lying back on its long athlete's spine.

*What did you think was happening?*

The green beast of the hummingbird;  
the eye of the pond;  
the wet face of the lily;  
the bright, puckered knee of the broken oak;  
the red tulip of the fox's mouth;  
the up-swing, the down-pour, the frayed sleeve of the first snow—

so the gods shake us from our sleep.

Mary Oliver's questions: What did you notice? What did you hear? When did you admire? What astonished you? What would you like to see again? What was most tender? What was most wonderful? What did you think was happening? These eight questions invite us to be attentive to God's creation, to things that bring us closer to God. Take them with you when you go on your next walk with a friend or a few friends and ponder the answers.

When I arrived in Vermont, after twenty years of living in Florida, the mountains were brilliantly green, true to their name, and the roads lined with blue and white wildflowers. I was so caught up in the beauty that my imagination got carried away a bit. Vermont roadsides in summer reminded me of the Swedish countryside and the opening scene in the Sound of Music. Driving down to Vergennes, I passed roads named Pvt. Luke and Pvt. Heather and I thought how beautiful that this community would name its roads after local young men and women who served in the military. When I saw Private South Pasture and Private Butternut, I started to wonder...but you can't blame me for misunderstanding, can you? The summer beauty here is intoxicating.

When I thought it couldn't get more beautiful, the trees transformed into torches and whole mountainsides seemed to catch fire. A few months later, now the curtain has fallen on summer, the trees have dropped most of their leaves, bears are preparing to enter their dens, and birds are migrating south, though some will remain. I wonder what beauty winter will bring. I wonder what I will see, hear, and find the most wonderful when the days grow colder, shorter and living things go dormant. Where will God appear?

I see God on the white mountain tops and the snow-blanketed fields above that specific elevation, while everything below stays tan and brown and green. I see God in the faithful remnant of creatures who stay—birds and people. I encountered God driving to Vergennes this morning, when I had to slow down to avoid hitting a murmuration of starlings, not once, but twice. Like Robert Frost, when the crow shook down the dust of snow from a hemlock tree, that dusting gave his heart a change of mood and saved some part of a day he had rued.

We meet God when we gather with beloved family and friends. I'm feeling especially grateful for my mom who is resting near our family home in the same cemetery as Lydia Marie Child, the poet who wrote a New England Boy's Song about Thanksgiving Day. Most of us learned it as a song. She reminds **when** to feel grateful. My favorite verse is:

Over the river, and through the wood —  
Now grandmother's cap I spy!  
Hurra for the fun!  
Is the pudding done?  
Hurra for the pumpkin pie!

God blesses us with food, with our families, birth and chosen, and God is with us when we are alone. With fewer distractions, we can refuel our spirits with the power that created the green mountains and wildflowers, forests turned fireworks, and the mercifully shorter days of our dark, cold winters.

May God bless you as Thanksgiving week comes to a close and may hope fuel your spirits through Advent, until the days grow longer, until the bears emerge, and our friends return, and the wildflowers bloom again.