

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

So, deprived by the pandemic of many of the favorite distractions of my life, y'know like going out to a restaurant, or traveling frequently to visit friends and family, or even just the joy of running errands, I have been around the house this summer, focusing instead on such important home issues like chasing squirrels from my bird feeder. Now, I have it on good authority that squirrels don't have the blessing, or curse, of thought; that is, they just do things, like raid the bird seed, without thinking. For them, the world is randomly either hospitable or hostile without any spiritual mystery. When the feeder has available seed, they don't stop to give thanks, they just eat. When it isn't, they don't lament the inconvenience. They don't even know how to hope for more; they just go look somewhere else. And, though they react with instinctive purpose when they see me coming after them with my broom handle, they are not consumed with fear of death, or with guilt for their deliberate sins, or regret for missed opportunities, or sadness, or joy, or outrage, or disappointment at broken promises. They just survive moment by moment.

When God created you and me, however, there was apparently an upgrade. At least, I think that's how we could look at it. This awareness, both of self and spirit, with which we are saddled, seems at once to be a both blessing and curse. What was God thinking?! There are days, I must tell you, when I would be gratified to climb back down a couple of rungs on the evolutionary ladder to escape the broom handle of deep thoughts and insidious cares. But, for the sake of argument, let's say that this human life we lead is truly a blessing from the Divine; that our existence in this world, where we are rooted in the physical while our hearts and minds are treading water in some great spiritual soup, is an advantage for which we ought to be thankful. Let's say that God has a vision, a dream, a 'heavenly kingdom', and that the ability to think and care permits us to share in the realization of that vision. That's what the Bible is telling us. That we have one foot on the platform and the other on the train. That when the bird feeder is full, we ought to give thanks, and when it is empty, we share a responsibility to see that it gets filled again for all the other squirrels.

In Genesis Chapter 25 Jacob tricks his twin brother Esau into selling his birthright. And later, in Chapter 27, he and his mother, Rebekah, plot to trick old Isaac into giving Jacob a special blessing which should, by rights, belong to Esau. Why do they care about birthrights and blessings and such? Well, in the ancient world, when life was not so specified by legal documents and clerical registers, such relationships were treated as actual physical things. A concept like a blessing was something which was given, and when once given could not be taken away. A birthright, the signature of inheritance and authority, was an actual thing to be possessed and guarded. There was a need to make such relationships incarnate, to give them flesh and bones, even if they were just ideas or just wishful thinking. Matters like marriage, loyalty, faith, fidelity, the keeping of promises, all things about which squirrels don't give a hoot, needed to be codified. Think of the superstition of curses, for example: that when some witchdoctor put a spell on you, it was a thing which you couldn't escape even though it was really just in your mind. Jacob has one foot on the platform of reality while the other is, awkwardly, in that mysterious carriage full of relationships which is about to carry him away into uncertainty. A blessing and a curse, and something he needs to sort out.

St. Paul, who, mind you, had his own checkered past before his conversion to the spiritual vision of God in Christ, presents us with his version of the dilemma in the Letter to the Romans: He writes, “those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law-- indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” What?! If that confuses you, don't feel all alone! His reasoning isn't much consolation to us squirrels. We want evidence, we want birdseed, or preferably walnuts. We want those four signs of God's Abrahamic promise: Property, Posterity, Provision, and Protection, something physical to hang on to. When God's Grace appears to us, we want it to be in the flesh, a messiah, a Jesus into whose own wounds we can stick our hands, like Thomas. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob isn't just a passing thought, is he? God isn't just a concept, right? We are mortal and we are physical beings, and we *like* outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace.

And the good news is that our relationship with God *can* be sacramental. The Bible is full of Good News, and when Rebekah, like Sarah, is lamenting her barrenness, God takes the initiative. When Abraham laments that he has no heirs, God takes the initiative. When Paul himself was living a life of prejudicial violence, God took the initiative. God has a vision, a dream for the growth and development of creation, and despite flawed human beings like most of our Bible characters, despite pestilence and viruses, despite our awkward straddling of the tracks, God is determined that the vision should be realized, that the dream may become reality, that the kingdom shall come. And the really good news is that we are not meant to be, or created to be, just vague shadows in that dream, but actual players. God has given us both flesh and bone and heart and mind that we may be advocates of the kingdom of heaven. Our lives ought not be just about finding one full birdfeeder, emptying it and then searching for another, but in sharing the responsibility, and the cost, of faithfully filling those feeders.

God is like a sower, says Jesus, who sows the seeds of promise, the seeds which can keep God's word, and spreads them everywhere. God's promises are so abundant that their seeds are not even targeted for any particular situation, they are scattered everywhere. The opportunities God creates are distributed constantly throughout creation. As Jesus says, some will find their way to rocky places, or places tangled with weedy snags, or to be eaten by greedy squirrels, or to ears that just won't hear, but those which find receptive, fertile conditions will indeed flourish. And the seeds of promise will yield results. And the vision, the kingdom, will come. And we have the opportunity to share in its manifestation. Like Adam in the Garden of Eden, we have the opportunity to use our physical labor *and* our spiritual love and care to till the soil and make it ready for the promises to grow. Our faithfulness to the planting, God help us, can help the promises grow. That is our blessing, that is our birthright, and that ought to be our joy. Amen.