

St. Thomas
Proper 19B: Season of Creation
September 15, 2024

Sparks from the Radiance of God's Brilliance

One of the last known specimens of the great auk was purchased by a Danish count, Frederik Christian Raben, who, in 1821, traveled to Iceland for that particular purpose. It was to be part of his collection on display in his castle. When it came up for auction in 1971, the Icelandic Museum of Natural History solicited donations, and within three days Icelanders contributed the equivalent of ten thousand British pounds to buy the auk back. It has been returned to its native home, a fitting place to see and remember.

The great auk, as you can see on your bulletin cover, was a bird which looked much like a penguin, although the two are not related. The *great* auk was just that – great – standing more than two and a half feet tall. It was a flightless bird; it had small wings, but was a fantastic swimmer, spending most of its life at sea, with the exception of two months each year, the breeding season, where they waddled ashore in huge numbers. It is thought that they paired for life; females laid one egg each year. Their range extended along the North American coast, including Canada, the northeastern United States, Norway, Greenland, Iceland, Ireland, Great Britain, France, and the Iberian Peninsula, and it is estimated that their numbers were in the millions.

That is, until humans came into the picture. The great auk was sought after as a source of down, for pillows, for meat, eggs, and a source of fuel. They were big and easy to capture, providing many meals; they had lots of feathers, and, in a pinch, could also be burned to provide heat. Sailors captured them by the thousands, merchants gathered them, until by the early 1800's, almost all were gone. The last known pair of great auks was killed off the coast of Iceland in 1844; a merchant wanted the birds to display in his home.

A cautionary tale, as we continue in this Season of Creation.

Two thoughts about this: the first being how we see ourselves in the whole picture of the world in which we live. Where do we fit in? Perhaps a long held perspective is that there is us, human beings, and then there is the rest of the world, seas, plants, animals; but somehow we are apart and above all that; it all exists for our benefit. We can use whatever we need or want, regardless of the cost.

But is that who we are, and how we fit in? Listen to a different perspective, that of Hildegard of Bingen, who lived from 1098 to 1179:

We shall awaken from our dullness and rise vigorously toward justice. If we fall in love with creation deeper and deeper, we will respond to its endangerment with passion. Glance at the sun. See the moon and the stars. Gaze at the beauty of earth's greenings. All living creatures are sparks from the radiation of God's brilliance, emerging from God like rays of the sun.

We are part of God's creation; not something above or apart, but part of creation. And that perspective must inform how we see the world around us, how we live. Our Psalm for this morning, Psalm 19, begins "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows his handiwork." Isn't it amazing, when you see the beauty of creation, sparks from the radiance of God's brilliance, the sun rising, the trees reaching toward the sky, a drop of dew on a flower, a hummingbird sipping nectar, your child or grandchild running toward you to give you a hug? God's creation. All of it. Awe and wonder at the richness, at the beauty, at the complexity.

And we are aware of some of the challenges to this amazing creation. I have no magic solutions to the disappearance of many species of plants and animals, to global warming. Perhaps our part is to be aware, to take the steps we can to live more in harmony with the world, all the world, around us; to realize that if we capture all the great auks to use for our pillows, they will be no more.

In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus asks his disciples and the crowd gathered around an important question: "What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade

your soul for?” (Mark 8:37-38, *The Message*). So, the second thought for today: what do we value? Or whom do we value? What is it that we want more than anything else? What are we willing to give up to get it?

We are human; we are God’s beloved, sparks from the radiance of God’s brilliance. There are things we need: food, housing, clothing, all those kinds of things, but at the base of it all, holding it all, is God. The real you, the real us, is called into relationship with God, the base, the foundation of who we are.

And, if that is so, since that is so, how we live is framed by that relationship. Will it always be easy? Jesus is clear in talking with the crowd: in this version of Scripture from *The Message*, Jesus says, “Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You’re not in the driver’s seat; I am. Don’t run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I’ll show you how” (Mark 8:34). This is clearly a different message from all we hear around us, and from our human nature that seeks to avoid pain at all costs, that does not want to give up anything. There is nothing in scripture that says God will remove all the trials of our lives if we pray hard enough. What God promises is even more: God will be present, in the good times and the bad, when we shine and when we struggle.

Then we have the courage, the assurance, to be open to where God is calling us. With Christ as our foundation, we can have open hearts and open minds; we can listen, we can learn, we can see God’s brilliance in one another, in the world around us. What we value, whom we value, can be reflected in how we live. I would venture to say that none of us is going to solve global warming tomorrow, or magically transform our country into a place where all are valued, where all are respected. But we can do what we can, small steps, sharing in the world which God created and loves. And we do it together; we have each other, offering support and friendship and prayer, the people of God, gathered together, then sent out into the world to be God’s people, to be witnesses to the abundant love and caring of our Creator and Redeemer. Thanks be to God!