



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

The Imperfect Paradise

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

July 13, 2014

On our way back from our trip to Maine, we stopped to visit our sister-in-law. She asked me to help with some prayers or maybe an appropriate poem for her mother's memorial service. So when I got back into the office on Tuesday, I dove into my poetry collection and soon got lost in the beauty and variety of what I was reading. Artists and poets give us portals into the nature and mystery of God in ways that we don't usually experience in the prosaic day to day happenings of our lives. So I have decided to dedicate the sermons of this summer to poetry, looking for appropriate verse that will help to inform our regular scripture readings.

For this first week, I had several from which to choose. The psalm first spoke to me with its word as a "lantern to my feet and a light upon my path," which is poetry in itself. Robert Frost came to mind immediately, *The Road Not Taken*. What inspires us to choose one path over another and what difference does it make?

Then I looked at the passage from Romans, one of my least favorite bits of Christian thinking - that somehow our flesh, our bodies are full of sin and I wanted to refute that with Walt Whitman's *I Sing the Body Electric*, which is exquisite but a little racier than I felt I could be in this setting.

But what I settled on is found in a lovely anthology called *Invisible Light; Poems About God*. *The Imperfect Paradise* was written by Linda Pastan, who is an award winning poet living in Maryland where she has been honored as the state Poet Laureate. *The Imperfect Paradise* appealed to me in light of the passage from Genesis. I always think of the Book of Genesis as a study on the complexity of relationships, with God, with the rest of humankind and with ourselves. So here's the poem.

*If God had stopped work after the third day
With Eden full of vegetables and fruits,
If oak and lilac held exclusive sway
Over a kingdom made of stems and roots,
if landscape were the genius of creation
and neither man nor serpent played a role
and God must look to wind for lamentation
and not to picture postcards of the soul,*

1100 Main Street, Branford, CT 06405

www.trinitybranford.org

203-488-2681

e-mail rector47@trinitybranford.org



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

*would he have rested on his bank of cloud
with nothing in the universe to lose,
or would he hunger for a human crowd?
Which would a wise and just creator chose:
the green hosannas of a budding leaf
or the strict contract between love and grief?*

The story of Jacob and Esau has lots of recurrent themes--genealogy, a barren woman, sibling rivalry, the reversal of the culture of primogeniture, the automatic granting of the largest share to the firstborn. The story plays out from birth to scheming with Jacob desperately seeking to overcome his plight as the 2nd borne. None of the people in the household of Isaac are particularly commendable. There is competition everywhere you look. Even the parents have their favorites which add to the drama.

It is a mythic story, told of course from the Israelite point of view that explains the historic animosity between the nations of Israel and Edom. Jacob, later to be called Israel is the clever one, the one who perseveres and ultimately prospers, the way that the people of Israel would describe themselves. Edom is characterized like Esau, limited in vision and motivation, left behind without all that he could have had. He is the one who did not value the family and its connection to the covenant.

Jacob and Esau are a gentler revision of the story of Cain and Abel in which the first brothers become the first murderer and the first victim. Their story sets the scene for all sibling stories to come. The next generation after Jacob is a murderous lot as well and sibling rivalry will blossom in the story of Joseph and his coat. And lest any of us think that the Old Testament is just bunch of gory stories of about murder and violence and injustice - let us pause for a moment and see ourselves reflected in it.

So, Linda Pastan wondered why God bothered to round out creation with such a battling, bumbling, violent species. After all, without our actions, creation is certainly a more peaceful place. But she points out the flatness, the one-dimensional, unsurprising nature of it all "if landscape were the genius of creation." Yes, it would be beautiful but would that be enough for God? When we look at what God creates, we must ask, why did God create? If there is a point to creation, what is it? Remembering that using human language to describe or attribute motive and feelings to what we call God is fraught with error, I am wary of claiming as outright truth that the Divine Mind chose or desired to expand and experience itself in all of the ways that creation would provide. The ultimate creation - as we so modestly declare - is the human - the being endowed with consciousness and self-awareness. But, as the stories of Genesis reveal, humankind has yet to live into its potential. We are still poor imitators of Christ. We are not there yet. Is our immaturity a surprise to the Divine Mind; are we the original proof

1100 Main Street, Branford, CT 06405

www.trinitybranford.org

203-488-2681

e-mail rector47@trinitybranford.org



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

of the law of unintended consequences. All we know is that we do exist and somehow, something made it so. One could ask if it well thought out.

*"Would he have rested on his bank of cloud
With nothing in the universe to lose,
or would he hunger for a human crowd?
Which would a wise and just creator chose:
The green hosannas of a budding leaf
Or the strict contract between love and grief?"*

That last line, the "strict contract between love and grief" is breath-takingly true. Love equals risk. We visited another relative up in Maine, a cousin who had recently lost his daughter. She was 29 years old. We talked about the difference between sadness and grief. We can be sad about any number of things but grief only happens when there is suddenly an empty space, a space previously occupied by something or someone that we held dear. Grief is adjusting to the empty space and that space doesn't exist unless we have loved.

The connection between love and grief is fundamental in creation. Fortunately for us, God has not stopped loving any part of creation, even those that have disappointed the most. To love is to risk and God is the ultimate risk taker, loving us with all of our faults and failings in this imperfect paradise.

1100 Main Street, Branford, CT 06405

www.trinitybranford.org

203-488-2681

e-mail rector47@trinitybranford.org