

Wednesday Advent Service
December 15, 2021
Matthew 6:25 - 34
Luke 1:36 - 56

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Man was created as a humble being. Imagine those first moments of consciousness for man. God breathed into his nostrils, and the Spirit that gives life to all beings was joined with the image of God in the man, Adam, the one taken from the earth. What was Adam thinking in those first moments, when all of creation was opened up to him, when absolute fittingness, a contentment within creation, was the only reality he knew?¹ Even his aloneness was not a problem he was aware of, though it didn't last long, for God was quick to prevent it. It is God who declared that it was not good for the man to be alone. We learn from this that God is not alone, for the one who was first made in God's image was not left alone. God made a suitable helper, a helper who is man's equal and opposite, and they simply knew how to be in the world. They did not even have names at first. Genesis simply calls them the man and the woman, both terms are derived from the Hebrew word for earth, as is the name, Adam.

We don't know how long it lasted, but Adam and Eve were created and existed without the anxieties we are all so familiar with. No insecurities, no judgments, no social media. They were humble human beings, aware of their existence, but at peace within the universe. It must have been awesome to take it all in and realize, "For me the world was made."¹ However long it lasted, we know that it didn't last forever. God had given the solitary, yet content couple a single command. The temptation used by the serpent in the garden was an appeal to the hubris of the first couple. Hubris is to act without full knowledge, but to assume that one knows enough anyway. Hubris is a rejection of bounded rationality; one cannot know everything, and must admit that all decisions are made with only partial or limited information.² Adam and Eve were tempted through coveting what was God's, and it was the height of hubris for them to believe they could know all things.³ The deception of the serpent awakened a type of discontentment with the world, and Adam and Eve sought to assert themselves within it. One of the consequences of this assertion over and above creation is man's awareness of the possibility of nothing, the possibility that matter itself is meaningless, and the void threatens to overcome all that exists. If God withdraws Himself from the created order, then chaos returns, and all that is taken for granted will be rolled up like a sheet.

We moderns are not so different from that first couple, but our experience of the world is not the same as theirs. The luxury of experiencing creation as beings that fit in with creation is no longer available to man. We are born into a world of anxiety and distress, and there is a sense that nothing feels meaningful, secure, or eternal. A creeping nihilism overwhelms modern man, leaving a philosophical hole in our souls and causing us to wonder if we are anything more than random accidents. Something isn't quite right, but we are not sure where to look for answers. We have advanced beyond fig leaves. Our technology continues to be the source of incredible progress - innovation saves lives, makes our material lives easier, and opens the vistas of virtually unlimited

¹ This comes from a parable taught by Simcha Bunim Bonhart: Everyone should carry two notes, one in each pocket. One for when they feel too low that says, "For me the world was made." And one for when they feel too high that says, "I am but dust and ashes."

² Herbert Simon, (1955), "A Behavioral Model of Rational Choice", *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 69(1): 99-118.

³ The idiom, "good and evil" means all things.

knowledge. God gave us our reason to use to make life better, and in many ways, we have. However, with faith in the traditional institutions waning, technology is assumed to be the greatest source of hope for modern man, for we have forgotten who gave us the mind that could make use of tools to begin with. Man is the ultimate discontent being, for better and for worse. Our increased knowledge and use of technology against nature itself reflects the internal struggle we have in our own psyches. We want peace and quiet, but we use technology to make more destructive weapons of war, bigger noisier cities, and freeways to zip along from place to place. For all our uses of technology, something in us desires to be more than mere matter in motion. Monumental architecture, such as that made famous by Percy Bysshe Shelly in his poem about Pharoah Ramesses, is an attempt of man to immortalize himself or his people in the face of death. The poem, *Ozymandias*, hauntingly describes the vanity of such efforts: "Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare, the lone and level sands stretch far away." Ultimately, we want our lives to be remembered, our laughter to mean something, our loves to be worth something, and our connections with each other to be more than skin deep. Technology and science fail us when it comes to providing a sense of purpose, for these cannot say definitively that anything has objective value and meaning. In other words, what characterizes modern scientific man is that he is a being in search of a soul and an afterlife.⁴

Hubris believes that it is man's task to achieve immortality in spite of nature, over and against nature, and that the natural world itself is our foe. Hubris ultimately leads to insecurity because it tends to make promises that can't be delivered. Hubris goes too far in its certainty, and this breaks down trust when what was certain is revealed to be unattainable. Politicians may be experts in this, but religious authorities can fall into this trap as well. It isn't always the case that false teachers knowingly traffic in lies. Sometimes, they wholeheartedly and hubristically believe what is false. The truth is, hubris, thinking we know more than we actually do, is a part of the human condition, but we tend to avoid admitting it.

Hubris has an unhappy cousin, arrogance. Arrogance is not humble or grateful. It is not forgiving and patient. Arrogance will essentially lead to behavior that is the opposite of love. It doesn't matter who one treats arrogantly because it ruins all relationships. It is pernicious because pride can cause us to react negatively when people are trying to help us, especially if we feel we don't need it. It is destructive because we can develop a higher opinion of ourselves than we ought, and this can lead us to treat others as undeserving of dignity. The arrogant man walks through the world as though the world was made for him, forgetting the other reality of creation, that man is but dust and ashes.

For all our failings, there is good news - serious good news. While modern man remains a being in search of a soul, God has persistently been in search of man. So much so that He actually became man in order to find us, to draw us back to Himself, and to save us from ourselves. He came as our brother, to be God with us, so that we can be with God. What an extraordinary reversal of the corrupt man-made order. Biblically speaking, the first real attempt at man-made order was in Babel. Nimrod sought to assert himself over the community and control it, thereby diminishing the individual. Christ came in humility which is the opposite of hubris, and He upended the low human understanding of power and virtue. Jesus has a message which overcomes both hubris and arrogance.

⁴ Carl Ung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (New York: Harcourt Publishing, 1933), 111.

That is the message Mary sings in the Magnificat. Mary becomes the new Eve. First, Mary is chosen by God, but she responds with humility, accepting the fruit that is provided in her womb without looking for something more. Mary gives voice to the upending of man's failed order, proclaiming that God scatters the proud, takes down the mighty, and sends the rich empty away. The irony is that the voracious appetites of those listed in Mary's song is driven by covetousness and discontent. It is often the case that the punishment for sin is a heaping dose of more of the same malady. Those who seek power, who seek to misuse knowledge, and who try to gain wealth at any price will end up with greater envy and discontent, and those feelings will be directed at those who are humble before God, who are blessed by God, and who have riches beyond compare. The riches beyond compare are God's grace and mercy, the inheritance offered is in the person of His Son, and the ultimate treasure is to be with God.

Jesus has a word for us in this regard. This word directs us to be humble and content. Where the threat of chaos and the imposing void can lead us to be filled with anxiety, Christ tells us not to worry. Where covetousness and discontent can lead to us neglecting those around us, letting our love for others turn cold, and exploiting others for our gain, Christ tells us to consider another way. These words are even more powerful after His life, death, and resurrection because of what they mean for all of creation. What was expressed in the Song of Mary was penultimate. The ultimate was seen in Christ crucified. Christ upends the power structures of man, undoing the conflict between man and nature, man and his ego, and God and man.

Here is what this means for us. We can live confidently but with humility before creation, before our fellow man, and before God. Christ has renewed in reborn man a spirit of gratitude for what is taken for granted, what is underappreciated, and what is lovely in itself. The tendency of modern man has been to see nature as nothing more than a resource, there for our disposal to meet our ends. Jesus tells us to stop and consider the common lilies of the field. No one plants them or tends to them, yet they grow where they are planted, never complaining about the soil where they sprouted to life, or the lack of substance, or the better colors of their neighboring plants. They simply exist and are beautiful in their own way. Christ embodies such a humble disposition from His incarnation all the way to the cross, praying to His Father, "Not as I will, but as You will."

When Adam and Eve were created, they were much like the lilies of the field; they could simply be in the world, sustained by God's provisions. Like Adam and Eve, we no longer have to live in fear of the void, for it has been swallowed up in the incarnation, death, and resurrection. Without the tension between order and chaos, we are free to take a moment to simply be in God's garden of creation. Finding some time for quiet contemplation, not making judgments about what is, but simply taking it in with wonder can stave off the cynicism and discontent we have for the world. When we stop to appreciate the lilies, we can see that much is still right in the world because God is still at work, and He has made room for us within creation at this particular moment. We can't go back to Eden, but we can still have moments of living as beings who fit into creation, rather than feeling uneasy with ourselves and the world around us.

It also means that we can live in humility and confidence before our fellow man. We don't have to know everything. That was the original desire that led to Adam and Eve's unwise taste-test. All we have to know before our fellow man is Christ crucified. If we are confident in our own faith, we need not be shaken by what others around us believe. Adam and Eve thought they could be like God, yet God did not become insecure. Nimrod desired to create a monolithic city with a tower made of identical bricks and constructed by identical conforming men. It is the insecure who

want everyone to be identical, who promote radical egalitarianism, and who resent those who live well. Our technology gave us social media, the tool of narcissism and macho insecurity. Humility seeks real connections with real people that we can know, see, hear, and touch – real three-dimensional individuals that we can make a community with, not just a city of conformity. Nowhere should this community be more evident than in Christ's church.

If we can learn to be humble before nature and before our fellow man, we can also learn to be humble before the God who created it all. And when we are humble, we will live as we truly are, those who have been refashioned into the image of His Son. When God became man, a whole world of possibility was reintroduced, for we can now live in peace since God is with us, and by extension, we are with God. The most remarkable thing about this, is that for some reason, God wants to be with us! I don't know why, but I am certainly grateful that He does. And His being with us means that life is near, death is not the end, and we need not search for our souls, for He has found them, purchased them, and made them His own. He has called us each by name, and we are securely His.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.