

JOEL 2:21-27

Last Sunday after Pentecost; Reign of Christ  
A Celebration of Thanksgiving

PSALM 126

November 21, 2021; Year A

I TIMOTHY 2:1-7

MATTHEW 6:25-33

### *Considering Lilies!*

The opening lines of a sermon once delightfully delivered by the late Peter Gomes, no doubt tongue in cheek while no doubt waxing most eloquent, “A week or so ago,” we would all agree it has been weeks now, “I saw the Christmas lights being strung up across the city streets and I saw the tinsel and the Santa Clauses in the store windows at Sears, I knew that Thanksgiving could not be far away.” Peter Gomes, Mayflower descendent, Republican, African-American, Gay man, cigar smoker and scotch drinker, and minister at the Memorial Church, Harvard University, an eclectic person seemingly in almost every imaginable way who was one of my favorite people and preachers and as with many left us way too soon. Yes, this is a very dated quote since Sears at the time of the publication of this anthology of sermons was already on a respirator and is now all but dead, though my credit card in their name would beg to differ! Yes, Thanksgiving Day is upon us, the second holiday in the wonderfully festive trilogy of days referred to by one clever observer as part of the season known as “Hallowthanksmas!” And whatever happened to New Year’s? And so, we inevitably come to that time of year when we persons of Christian faith mentally beat ourselves over the head, suddenly consumed with an overwhelming sense of guilt, when our guilt gets the better of us because we possess so much, are victims of our own “affluenza” as greedy American consumers. Our guilt is stirred based on what we own versus what we give, especially in terms of those who go without, who are food insecure, and who struggle for the basic necessities of food, clothing, and shelter. Unfortunately, it is a familiar

ritual that accompanies all our holiday celebrations from now until the end of the calendar year. Even so, we tend to rally, recovering from our personal Thanksgiving Day bashing just in the St. Nick of time so we can live into the immense irony, enjoying the ultimate oxymoron of the most celebratory and commercialized day of the year, the Nativity of Our Lord, also known as Christmas! Yes, let's all put that image into our Yule Log and smoke it! Yes, let's all get into the Yuletide spirit! Furthering the irony associated with this warm and cozy, most special time of the year, is the fact that Thanksgiving, a secular national holiday honoring the survival of our pilgrim mothers and fathers, indeed a high and holy day among Congregationalists whose legacy is hardwired, wrapped, even perhaps enmeshed in what is absolute mythology dependent on some very real history, that Thanksgiving Day seems to have more of a sacred feel about it than does the religious holiday that follows it almost a month to the day later.

And so, as we do every year at this time, we give this secular day its own liturgical dynamics, including befitting biblical texts, usually forced to combine our giving thanks with the final Sunday of the Church Year, this last Sunday after Pentecost formerly known as Christ the King, and now inclusively called Reign of Christ. By virtue of the inflexibility of the Gregorian calendar, very rarely do the two celebrations appear on two separate Sundays. And I am not complaining about the way we reinterpret Thanksgiving, for we need a day, a worshipping day, on which we give thanks to God for all the presumed blessings that are poured upon us, even if in reality we are in actuality, most likely just fortunate or lucky. As Gomes says in his sermon on the subject, "Thanksgiving begins not with our success and not even with ourselves; it begins with God. . . . God is. We are. In spite of our fumbles and because of God's grace we are not daunted by the troubles of this age, nor or we fearful of what is to come. We do not bless God for our wealth, our health, or for our feeble wisdom.

**We bless God that God is, that we are, and that (God's) promise, and love shall be with us when time itself shall be no more." My response to Gomes' insights is that if we are somehow able to acknowledge that perhaps all the tangible things that are ours to enjoy, the supposed "blessings", as we benignly or haphazardly call them, happenstance perhaps, then perhaps we would be free to give thanks to God with no strings attached. It is a trap to believe that the stuff we have been given by God is in any way an entitlement because in our own way we are faithful. And yet we are acutely aware that those who are poor are for the most part simply misfortunate, the victim of circumstances in many respects, are simply unlucky perhaps. They are not being cursed because of any specific behavior, a lack of faith. If we could embrace these ideas, perhaps we really could find appropriate ways to offer our profound gratitude, our sincere thanks to God, allowing for a glorious proclamation, in the words of Gomes that God is and we are and that this affirmation is enough. Yes, hard work never hurts but so often our benefits belong to us as the oft accidental result of mere good fortune or luck and living in the good old U.S. of A. does not hurt, either. Acknowledging that God is and that we are and that this life in all its complexities, good, bad, and sadly ugly, is a blessed gift, with every breath we are privileged to take. Perhaps this is what was intended by the Matthean Gospel writer with the phrase "to seek first the realm of God!! And we, my friends, are part of that divine realm! In grasping this amazing idea, then perhaps all of us, rich and poor alike, could then joyfully join in a thankful dance. Maybe keeping our stuff, our plethora of possessions, out of the thanksgiving equation is a first step to healthy gratitude. Yes, we get to keep our stuff, knowing that sharing part of it does us all good. Guilt and guilty no more!**

The line from the now cult classic movie, the iconic "O brother where art thou" says it best and will forever be etched in my mind, sticking with me as one of the most hysterical lines in moviedom, right up there

with “frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn; and “don’t call me Shirley,” “Consider the lilies of the damn field,” leading to all kinds of similar responses about that white, olfactory challenging, pungent in all honesty, well on its way, a flower soon to become the quintessential symbol of Easter. All our lives we church types have been taught to handle scripture with kid gloves, with care and caution, politely prettying up the texts as best we can, admonished to handle the Bible like the finest and most fragile of crystal, the rarest of gems. Reverence mixed with personal piety always seemed to go hand-in-hand with a polite and passive approach to the biblical narrative, an engagement that failed to challenge and critique any textual content, threatening the veracity, what some have ignorantly called the “inerrant” or “infallible”, or less offensively, “inspired,” words of holy writ. Scripture was a salve to sooth, to assuage, a companion to comfort, never to conflict, much less coerce. For more than two thousand years these canonical books have served as a reminder of humanity’s struggle to understand holy presence in the world, the kind of transcendence that creates awe and wonder, what must be undeniably understood as complete mystery, mysterious reality, what some have defined as numinous or spirit, Ground of All Being, Holy Other, Great Spirit of the Universe or Universal Spirit. These sacred, and not so much, pages have withstood the test of time, through wars and rumors of wars, remaining the most popular book in the world, sales continuing to dwarf every other literary offering. The Bible has survived substantial doubt, skepticism bordering or cynicism and outright denial, disapproval, and disregard. And yet we who gather for worship each week in an effort to build beloved faith community as a local missional church still depend on these ancient words to provide commentary somewhat explaining our contemporary, postmodern sensibilities. **And so today, with all that said as preamble, we are indeed “considering lilies!”**

**In today’s Witness from the Gospels in Matthew we are strongly urged, perhaps naïvely so, told not to worry or fret, instructed to not**

worry about our life, obsess about what we will eat or drink, or about our clothes and I for one am a fashionista! We read these words post-9-11, reflecting on an atrocity now safely secure, or not, in our collective rearview mirror. Only now can we assess the negative residual, the full impact, the aftermath of the horrors of a failed protracted Afghanistan mission that lasted an excruciatingly, painfully, long time, dragged out for more than twenty years while expending untold human and financial resources. As always, the economy seems to loom large with its oft violent swings, taking our wallets hostage, and now we find ourselves living in uncharted, virgin territory, living in the midst of one hell of a rollercoaster ride of a COVID pandemic that seems to change with the fickleness and frequency of the weather, with no end in sight. We are told to look at the birds when songbirds are vanishing, and consider the lilies, pondering the damage to the earth where they grow! Really! Seriously! I am reminded of the old *Mad Magazine* character Alfred E. Newman, complete with the caption, "What, me worry!" Folks, sometimes it seems that worry is all we've got, a constant companion! Indeed, worry we do! We take our worry to an art form! Yes, whether we want to worry or even dare admit it that we do! Add in the fact that we pollute the planet with reckless abandon causing global warming or climate change or whatever designation you wish to give our rapidly derogatorily changing planet. Florida waters are in peril, extremely vulnerable, exponentially compromised, dead fish and manatees everywhere, the result of outbreaking blooms of toxic red tide exacerbated by runoff pollution poisoning the water, gross green algae blooms abounding, killing all life, plant and animal alike, all telling us, warning us that we are all in a world of hurt. Danger, Will Robison, danger! And then we have deniers of all the obvious realities that are staring us in the face and threatening our civility and our very survival. Don't worry? Are you kidding me? And I am so sure that you are glad to have come here to hear all these warnings and negativities right before the first of your trifecta of holiday activities.

**Trust me, I get it! Sometimes being the preacher is not often kind, nor is the truth!**

The prophet Joel tells the soil not to fear. A decade ago I learned that I grew up on a toxic waste dump site, the old Atlantic Steel Company, in Atlanta, thousands of acres eventually cleaned up with your tax dollars at work, Superfund money, creating a wonderful live, work, and play community called Atlantic Station, politely covering up the horrific toxicity that caused so much cancer in many of my former school mates and my brother, affecting me in a variety of ways, no doubt contributing to the strange and suspicious, the unexplainable loss of hearing in my right ear at the age of fifteen. My parents' yard was literally dug up and replaced down to eight inches deep. Do not fear the soil? How many places are like Atlanta and Flint, Michigan, where the water runs brown with lead running through rusty pipes, not to mention countless other vulnerably compromised places not yet revealed, appearing on our country's radar. Consider the lilies? Damn the lilies, they could not grow in some of it anyway! How do the birds of the air and the lilies of the field even remotely capture our short attention span today? We literally cannot see the forest for the trees except where so many of them have been clear-cut in the name of progress! Yes, we are living in a time of greatest fear and anxiety, stressed in so many different ways, many personal hidden examples which some people carry by themselves, hoping to avoid a clear airing, the transparency of embarrassment and shame that unavoidably comes with communal awareness. So often we are encouraged not to talk about our inner most thoughts and feelings, urged to keep a stiff upper lip, "buck up," British style! And so, we fail to acknowledge the troubles that trouble us, hoping and praying that living in denial, and that is not a river in northern Africa, will make everything at least seem alright!

**It seems that if we name our crises de jour, that if we own or acknowledge them, it will inevitably make them real and not a**

figment of our imagination and so it is better if they are simply left unspoken, conveniently removed from the radar of our individual and collective consciousness, never grasping or comprehending that we are the only solution to all that imperils our existence as a human species responsible for and accountable to all God's creation for which we are stopping and giving thanks this week. It is high time we admit that things are not only no longer the same, but that these complex issues demand our immediate intentional intervention, our utmost interaction and engagement. Yes, things are different, even if we cannot put our fingers on just how they are different and how different they are! And in the midst of all that swirls around us at a dizzying pace, we come to church and gather for worship in this sacred space, this holiest sanctuary, and listen to what seems nothing more than trivial biblical pablum, a Pollyanna text at best, these pitifully pathetic, yet strangely promising words from Matthew's Gospel that seem antithetically tone-deaf juxtaposed to all the misery I have forced you to hear in this holy hour. These Matthean words seem shallow. They sound hollow. They "feel" out of touch and a touch irrelevant, and I am not usually about "feelings" in my intellectually based homiletical pursuits. These words fail to meet us where we hurt because they offer, they suggest no solution. We need answers, people! Surely these musings are not literally true? They cannot be, can they? Some would saliently, soberly argue that they are not true at all, not even close. So just what do we do with them? How do we hear and absorb them? Can they speak a relevant word to us today in our contemporary, postmodern, context? Can they give succor? Can they even remotely assuage our restless minds and emotions, relieve our fears and anxieties, offer us aid in our time of need? Can they even slightly calm our nerves, give us hope, help sustain the belief that feeds and nurtures, nourishing our faith?

The answer can only be a resounding "NO" if we fail to understand their original context, unless we grasp the gravity of the cultural milieu that

was confronting, threatening the early Church, persecution gone wild, terror and torture, martyrdom, fueling the irrationally angry course of their day. When we can get a handle of that negative residual, the atrocities faced by the earliest Christians only recently separated from their Jewish forebears, painful in its own right, then, and only then, can we even begin to answer with an emphatic “YES”, to clearly see the immeasurable value this seemingly out of touch, but most timely and relevant text can inherently convey. The first thing we must remember is the very thing we must always recall about any part of the biblical narrative, that these recollections, these stories, these narratives, were not written to or for us. We are thankfully privy for these reflections, but they were not composed for our circumstances or situations, the scenarios that order and disorder our lives. These thoughtful ideas, as with many Gospel quotes attributed to Jesus, but were clearly not his words, were carefully placed in the Gospels, hardwired onto the lips of Jesus after his death, to explain the horrific consequences that were being faced, atrocities coming to pass inflicted on first century Christians who were confronting evil, vilified by both their religious scapegoating forebears in Judaism and by their insidious Roman occupiers, wicked sadists who punished them for entertainment, violent deaths the byproduct of their faithfulness in a loving and gracious God revealed to them in the peaceful and merciful ways of Christ Jesus. Oh, the irony! And so, my friends, if these people, living their own unique calamitous disasters, individually and collectively, could pause and ponder the birds of the air, considering the lilies of the field in their trying context, then surely, we too can lean into these sometimes-somewhat-off-putting words and find solace in their eternal wisdom, their ethereal purpose literally revealed anew to us addressing the realities of our time and place. The first audience was no more immune to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, the rolling of the dice, the turning of fortune’s wheel, any more or less than any of us humans who have followed through the centuries, anyone who reads



them and scoffs at them now, questioning what appeared to be their communal naivete!

**Matthew's hopeful words, despite their deniability, are not empty or vain promises assuring us that we will avoid the shadow of the valley of death as both metaphorical and cruel reality, no matter the cause, whether humanly imposed or naturally evolved. While it may not suffice, the truth is that when a sparrow falls that God only knows when and where the body lies. Lilies, they are but reminders, pointers perhaps, that in their pure, unadulterated beauty, they are both subtle and stark, benign and bold, reminders that God is present in the world, God the creator of it all, all of which we should be, must be, thankful. Life experience has taught us well that we are not immune to anything, no matter our level of faith or even if we have one or even if we do not. There is no hedge of protection surrounding us, despite what the purveyors of theological nonsense espouse on the religious comedy channels and swear on your last dollar is true. Theirs is a false narrative, fake news, alternative facts. Do not drink their toxic Kool Aid! But as Gomes continues to say in his sermon, God is and we are and that alone is cause for appreciation, for gratitude and the greatest thanksgiving.**

Perhaps when we encounter a text such as the one we read in today's lections from Matthew's Gospel, we need the continuous reminder reinforcing the proven notion that the Bible is incredibly, illogically, inconsistent as it constantly contradicts itself, acknowledging that it is very conflicted, not one consistent hermeneutic anywhere to be found throughout its pages. Habakkuk 3:17-18), and nobody reads or quotes from Habakkuk, reminds the reader then and now, "Though the fig trees do not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail, and the fields yield no food, the flocks be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will rejoice in the God of my salvation." Ah! It is easy to give thanks when all is

going well and our cups proverbially are running over with good things, the proverbial manna and marrow from heaven, milk and honey, reveling or wallowing in the midst of plenty. It is a far different prospect to give thanks in the midst of want, when we find ourselves without, when we falsely perceive that we are sorely lacking in divine provisions in any way whatsoever. That, my friends, was the call of Habakkuk to the fair-weathered faithful! This writer reminds us of the dark side, a very real side of life, call it the abyss, that life does not always dole out what we call “blessings,” that sometimes we must face the crucible of our pain and suffering and empty cornucopias. The writer of Habakkuk was showing us a different way, a better way, a way to be consistently thankful and faithful, through thick and thin. Yes, it is easy to praise God when the barns and/or the banks are full and overflowing! Remember the rich barn builder parable. Eat, drink, and be merry! But what about the hard times, the lean times when we must navigate the sparsity, the desert or bane side of life, when we experience the Job vortex that constitutes a very negative equation? These sobering texts challenge our capacity for thankfulness, no warm and fuzzy, and even though they do not appear to be so on a first glance, are indeed great Thanksgiving narratives nonetheless, indicators of a transparently honest, no-strings-attached faith that proclaims that God is, and we are and that this affirmation, this proclamation, is enough because it has to be. In being thankful, devoid of materialism, we are alleviated our guilt, avoiding a bankrupt theology that demands we receive good gifts in order to be thankful, a kind of quid pro quo relationship with God. It is inherently flawed because it is based on stuff! We cannot reduce, turn the Holy One into a supernatural, sugar-daddy in the sky sitting on a white throne dressed in a white robe doling out the goodies, an arbitrary blesser and curser of a human creation represented by an unlimited supply of haves and have-nots.

Do we have much for which to be thankful? Yes, of course we do! Each new day is an exciting gift from above or beyond, full of potential and

possibility, a new day dawning, not a damning one, always full of hope, improvement, and improvisation, of expectation, some realized and some just a dream, a pipedream that is conceived as nothing more than a fabulous figment of our wildest imagination. One of the things that I do believe is that we are not here by chance, per chance, but that we are here by grace, by what our pilgrim forebears called Providence. What a unique gift our very being really is! Call it serendipity! So, on this week of thanksgiving highlighted by Thanksgiving Day, give yourself a break. Do not give in, do not yield, to the temptation to beat yourself up with guilt in order to grant permission to sit around a warm hearth and a full table with those you love. Permission granted, but not by me! Do not “feel” guilty with all you have, even guilt over what you may fail to give, though it is good to remember that “sharing is caring” as the Salvation Army reminds us at this time of year and actions speak louder than words. Guilt will get you nowhere! Guilt only breeds more guilt and there is enough, plenty of that garbage already in the mix to go around! Do not rob yourself of the opportunity to celebrate these annual days of binge and not-so-much-purge. Now, none of this means that we get a pass, that we are not responsible and accountable, yes, we greedy American types, yes, ironically guilty as charged, that we are somehow now exempt from sharing, joyfully and generously from our abundance. Please do not go down that road for it is a dead-end street. What it does mean is that we can give ourselves permission, a break, cut ourselves just a little slack, allowing us a little grace—grace being the operative word, by the way—while we contemplate ways that we can respond, individually and collectively as beloved faith community, seeking to meet needs local and beyond.

**So, take time today and all throughout the week to pause and ponder, to stop and give thanks that God is and that we are, as Gomes reminds us. We are held in the hands of God, firmly embraced in the love that is God’s very being as we live and as we die, when we fly, soaring like the birds of the air and when we fall, when we blossom**

like a lily or name your favorite flower and when we wither on the vine. And sometimes we do fall, sometimes we do fail. After all, it is all about the journey and every opportunity we can seize along the way. It is all about luggage, not baggage! Carry on! We move from Thanksgiving through the judgmental warnings of Advent and the enduring gifts of the Christmas nativity, absolving our fears as we lean into our hopes. That is why an angel, if they really exist, is once reported to have said to a certain supposed virgin, “fear not” followed by a whole lot of pietistic propaganda, but a much-needed word to a young girl who was pregnant and unwed, a child living in a day when it was dangerous and deadly to be a victim of her own circumstances, the risk of stoning a high probability. The only real difference for the descendants of the pilgrims, you and me, is that in recent years, post-9-11, we have now been privy to, and have experienced the challenges and difficulties long tasted by the rest of the world. Welcome to the club! Welcome to the backside of globalization! Our fear can consume us, or we can understand its persistent prospects as simply a very real and inevitable part of this life that is exacerbated by our propensity to be human, very human, a humanity that frequently fails to get the principles of nature that are no doubt of divinely created origin. If we can be sensitive to the still small voice of the still speaking God, a beautiful reminder that God is and so are we, that we can and will, with a lot of effort, find ways to move beyond our debilitating and immobilizing fear, anxious to a fault, to a place of calm collection, satisfaction and peace. Be thankful and rejoice in the God of our salvation, whatever salvation means! Not always an easy thing to do! No, like most things related to God, theological things, these are very real challenges, Paul’s dark glass, anything but rose-colored, kinds of challenges. But where else could we ever place our hope? God is and we are! What a wonderful gift that truly is enough for now and all our days and is the gift that keeps on giving! Thanks be to God!

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and gives us much for which to be thankful, beginning with God and us. Amen and amen!**