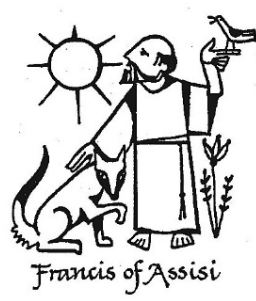


Dear friends in Christ



May 15, 2022, Easter 5

“What A Difference a Day Makes”

The Rev. Dr. John C. Forney, St. Francis Episcopal Mission
Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1-6;
John 13:31-35

On any given day one's prospects can change radically. Any day can be the one that makes all the difference for the rest of **ones'** life.

Dinah Washington sang it so well:

“What a difference a day makes
Twenty-four little hours
Brought the sun and the flowers
Where there used to be rain”¹

“What a difference a day makes” rose to the top of the pop charts in 1959 and won Dinah Washington, with her rich, silky rendition, a Grammy. Its popularity testifies to that truism, a day, any day, can make a difference – possibly, a huge difference.

A monster asteroid can ruin your entire day. Ask the dinosaurs. A recent

¹ Originally written in Spanish by Maria Grever, a Mexican songwriter in 1939, Stanley Adams adapted it in English, 1934.

discovery seems to have revealed the exact day they began their extinction.² Paleontologists in North Dakota have found the remains of a dinosaur leg that has been preserved almost perfectly intact, even with mummified skin attached. This along with a jumble of other life buried in the wall of water and mud that swept across the shore of their habitat, burying all in an instant.

Scientists believe that it was killed by a massive tsunami on the day the asteroid struck Chicxulub in the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico. In an instant a mile-high tsunami rushed outwards roiling planetary oceans. This wave swept up the inland sea that once divided the American continent, sweeping the shores of the North American continent, sweeping away all in its path. All within minutes of the impact.

Much of the impact crater along with the asteroid itself was vaporized and began to fall back to the earth as small glass spherules. "Those fish with the spherules in their gills, they're an absolute calling card for the asteroid."³

Chemical analyses of several of the spherules intombed in amber bear the same signature of the rock native to Chicxulub and the asteroid itself. All this in a twenty-four-hour day. A terrible, horrible, no good very bad day for planet earth.

Winds as if from a blast furnace charred forest land and thick clouds covered much of the planet for a decade or two, killing off most plant life. Sulphureous gasses and rain absorbed by the oceans killed much of the sea life. The few remaining dinosaurs had nothing to eat and their demise was assured within days. At that point the dinner bell for T. Rex and other carnivores was un-rung. They, too, starved. What a difference a day makes, indeed.

But in the aftermath, little burrowing and hibernating mammals and other small creatures survived the cataclysm. Seeds and spores of previous plant life soon germinated and within a century life found a way back.

We saw that scenario payout after Mount St. Helens erupted. Another horrific

² Dave Kindy, "Discoveries Shed New Light on the Day the Dinosaurs Died," *Washington Post*, May 9, 2022. The PBS program is available on NOVA, "Dinosaur Apocalypse."

³ Ibid.

day. But a day in which all that had looked like the landscape of the moon was within years renewed in a carpet of green. In the twinkling of an eye as far as geological time goes.

In the twinkling of the mind's eye comes the revelation of a new creation. No, nothing to do with dead fish and dinosaurs or asteroids. The writer has a very different reality in mind – a day that will make an entirely new difference.

“I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”

For John the Revelator, what, indeed, a difference a day made as he was translated to a seventh heaven to behold the mind of God.

Meanwhile, for us lowly mortals, we plod along, subject to time and chance. While we have no control over what extraterrestrial bodies may be careening towards earth, in some matters we have a choice. However, all is being made new even when we're not in control.

Don't discount chance and opportunity. One day our youngest son got on the internet machine and arranged a date with a wonderful, young woman. And soon we will be headed off to meet our future in-laws. She is that beautiful object of our son's heart of which Dinah Washington croons:

My yesterday was blue, dear
Today I'm a part of you, dear
My lonely nights are through, dear
Since you said you were mine

Yeah, they are smitten and we delight in the joy they have in one another.
What a difference a day makes! A new heaven and a new earth.

Lately, events in Ukraine have caused my mind to dwell on things Russian. One of the books I read as a young fellow after having discovered the pleasures of good literature was Solzhenitsyn's ***One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich***.

Written in 1962, it was an extraordinary publishing event in the Soviet Union, revealing the massive injustices of Josef Stalin. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn had spent time in the Soviet chain of Gulags in Siberia at hard labor himself. In this novel, he writes of one innocent prisoner, Ivan Denisovich Shukhov, sentenced to hard labor as a spy for having been captured by the Germans in WW II.

This short novel unfolds in the span of one single day of this prisoner, one day of a ten-year sentence. Though set in a labor camp, the work ends on a hopeful note. In that day, he has secured sufficient food to sustain life. He has kept his integrity in his labor. He **as** acted as a decent human being to his fellow prisoners, and he has said his prayers to God. The narrator ends the story, noting that Shukhov has lived one of the 3,653 days of his sentence.

What a difference a **Day** makes – in the life of this fictional character, who could be a stand-in for “Everyman.” And while we would not readily equate the terrors of one of Stalin’s gulags with “a new heaven and a new earth,” yet even in those dire circumstances was the possibility of a life lived with integrity.

Such a life is the unfolding of Solzhenitsyn’s spirituality, which grew out of the heart, not out of church dogma. Though the spirituality of the Old Believer’s Russian Orthodox permeates his writings, his is a deeper version. One said to being born out of the “belly of the whale” during those years of imprisonment in Siberia. As is any true spirituality born, out of our own life experiences. And any twenty-four-hour day can make all the difference.

Here is the encapsulation of Solzhenitsyn’s belief “...the only church remaining was that church which, in accordance with the Scriptures, lay *within the heart*.”⁴

“Your soul, which formerly was dry now ripens from suffering. And even if you haven’t come to love your neighbors in the Christian sense, you are at least learning to love those close to you. Those close to you in spirit surround you in slavery. And how many of us come to realize: It is particularly in slavery that for the first time we have learned to recognize genuine friendship...”⁵

⁴ A. Solzhenitsyn, *Letter to the Soviet Leaders*, p. 77. From Donald Roy, “Solzhenitsyn’s Religious Teaching,” *Christendom Media*, Vol. 4, No. 7.

⁵ Roy, op. cit.

What a difference a day can make in the belly of the whale, in a **soviet** gulag prison camp. Even the unfolding of a “New Heaven and a New Earth.” Maybe Ivan’s Twenty-four little hours didn’t bring the sun and the flowers but it brought the choice to be a decent human being. As they do to us all.

“It is our choices that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities,” the wise, old Dumbledore, headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry counsels the young Harry Potter at a moment of self-doubt. A difference that a single moment of any day can make.

Community is a blessing we can choose, and what a difference that day made in the lives of those who gathered daily to prepare meals for those on the street.

Peter, in Acts chose to sup with the uncircumcised and it made all the difference for the church.

One day, for Amy Frykholm, Bill didn't show up at the church, so “we went to find him.”⁶ His absence made all the difference for a small church community.

“How are you related to this man?” the EMT asked me as he put Bill in the back of the ambulance. I climbed in after them. There was no good answer. Friend? Not really. Colleague? Coworker? He was more than an acquaintance. “He . . . we work together I **“finally said.**

“Bill was the front-walk shoveler, meat-loaf maker, coffee brewer, Saturday night grumpster-in-chief at my church. Every time I arrived at the church, he was busy doing something. He filled the steam-table pans for our community meal. He made sure the stairs were clear of snow. He helped install the handicap ramp. He cleaned the bathroom.

“When I first met him, he showed me how to light the stove for the community meal, smelling like stale beer and unwashed clothes. He knew where everything was stored. He complained about everyone and everything—about the people who stood too long next to the coffee machine, who left their cigarette butts on the front porch, who loitered in the hallway, who talked too much, or who were so quiet they must be crazy.

One spring, one of our regular guests at the meal died of liver failure. Kenny’s belly was swollen, and he lost his mind, screaming with terrible tremors, as if

⁶ Amy Frykholm, “A Stitched-Together Community, *Christian Century*, February 28, 2018.

accumulated ghosts were tormenting him. He vomited and had diarrhea until he was unable to eat at all. His ordeal went on for weeks, and at last he died.

After that, Bill seemed more withdrawn as he went about his tasks. Then one day, he disappeared. He did not come to the meal. We arrived at church to find the snow had not been shoveled. We didn't know where he had gone

"After a few days, George could stand it no longer, so he went to look for Bill. He searched every apartment, knocked on every door, until he found Bill, barely conscious in the back of a trailer where he had gone to drink himself to death. As far as I could tell, his reasoning was something like, 'I don't want to die like Kenny. If it is too hard to stop drinking, and liver poisoning is too slow, I am just going to kill myself quickly.'

Bill was taken to the hospital and proved to be a most uncompliant and difficult patient. One night, delirious, he pulled out all his IV lines and catheter. The next morning Amy and some friends gathered at Bill's bed, taking turns holding a hand, shedding a tear or two. Amy continues:

"We sat around Bill as we waited for the urologist to come to fix Bill's catheter. We talked to him through the sedation. "I want to go home," he said.

"Bill, these machines are keeping you alive. Staying here is keeping you alive."

"There was a pause. Finally, I said, 'Bill, do you want to go home to die?'

"'No,' he said. 'I want a Pepsi.'

"As we waited for a doctor to speak with us, there was plenty of time to contemplate

"Bill and I shared labor and days. We shared space and coffee mugs. Who is this man to you? He makes coffee for me. Pretty good coffee, too. Somehow, over the space of years, our relation had become a given. The days had been like stitches—some well made, some poorly made—but they had created a mantle that we would now have to assume. I belonged to Bill. Bill belonged to me. And now, I—we—were going to make a decision that only family members typically make. We were going to do this without labels or prescribed roles.

"We spent the day contemplating the Bill we had known, who he was, what he loved, and what he wanted from life. As we talked about "our" Bill, we also gradually saw that he belonged to something bigger, something greater than us. We wordlessly came to act as if we knew that he was going into that something, and it was our job to walk him to the door. We did not claim to know what was on

the other side. We had no shared language, took no comfort, told ourselves no stories.

“One word kept coming up for Bill: *home*. At first we thought he meant his apartment. We talked about perhaps transporting him there, caring for him there. But gradually, the word took another meaning, one that claimed a place we both knew and did not know. The only way that we could move forward was to believe and to act as if this other place, this home, was love.

“We stood around his bed. ‘The Broncos are going to be in the Super Bowl,’ someone in our group said.

“‘Good,’ Bill grunted.

“‘Bill,’ I said. ‘We are working on bringing you home.’

“Good,” he said again.

We each held his hand. The staff told us later that he was peaceful that night. We started making arrangements with hospice the next morning, but the nurse on duty called early in the afternoon.”

“‘He is leaving fast,’ she said. By the time George arrived, he had gone.”

Bill and his church family, in those brief, precious moments, entered a New Heaven and a New Earth. What a difference a day can make when marinated in Gospel Goodness. Amen.