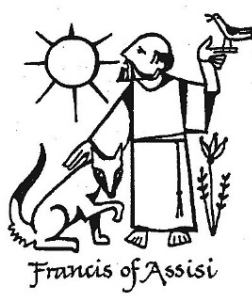


Dear friends in Christ



June 12, 2022, Trinity Sunday

“For the Beauty of the Earth”

The Rev. Dr. John C. Forney, St. Francis Episcopal Mission
Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Canticle 2; Romans 5:1-5
John 16:12-15

Well, this Monday Jai and I head off to the East Coast to meet our future in-laws. We have a couple of other stops on this excursion. Washington, D.C. to visit the National Museum of African American History and Culture, if we can get tickets, and one of my favorite bookstores, Politics and Prose. And that’s right next to two pretty good restaurants.

The other stop is New York City to see some plays, visit Strand Bookstore and some museums.

But, HOLD ON! I read in the NY Times this week that Las Vegas-style gambling might be coming to New York City. The paper announced that their legislators, in their infinite wisdom, had opened the path for three such casinos in the area of the city. What could possibly go wrong? Here’s the opening blurb:

“Before too long, New Yorkers and the millions of tourists who visit the city every year may have a new way to test their luck — and part with their money — amid the

bright lights and skyscrapers of Midtowns...all the trappings of Las Vegas, down to the incessant ringing and fluorescent flashing of a sea of slot machines.”¹

The part that got my attention was the bit: “—and part with their money.” Only a simpleton would believe that so-called “luck” is involved.

Trust your luck? Trust your luck??? NO! Hold on to your billfold. There is no luck.

As Christopher’s Tee-shirt says. “The lottery is a tax on people who are stupid at math.” And so is this racket.

Repeat after me: THE HOUSE ALWAYS WINS. THE HOUSE ALWAYS WINS. THE HOUSE ALWAYS WINS. (Unless, that is, it’s one of Trump’s mismanaged and looted Atlantic City casinos). But like Rick Wilson says, “Everything Trump touches dies.” Pssst – hope you saw the January 6th Committee hearing on Thursday late afternoon.

So, now, we’re clear about “luck.” The house does not leave winning up to chance. It always wins (the Trump caveat taken as an exception and its BK).

That is not the inalterable certainty of the brand of theology we celebrate on Trinity Sunday. The Mystery we celebrate this Sunday is an expansive God. As the SciFi author Octavia Butler proclaimed, “God is Change.” It’s a love relationship writ large we affirm.

For that reason, we look for expansive metaphors to inform our hearts and minds. However, language ultimately fails. We speak in poetry and story. Yes, I know, we have the Nicene Creed attempting to button it up. However, if this attempt had succeeded, why is it that the Church went through a bunch more councils attempting to get it right.

And had we believed that we’d succeeded in nailing it down -- that God wouldn’t have been an actual God – it would have been an idol. Pilate thought he’d nailed it down on Good Friday, but it was too elusive for Imperial Rome.

Our conceptions and intellectual constructs ARE NOT GOD. That’s why Jesus spoke in parables. Not in Greek syllogisms, which would not have saved anybody. Tillich got it right. The minute we say “God,” we have created in our

¹ Nicole Hong, “If New York City Gets Las Vegas-style Casinos, What Else Will It Get?” *New York Times*, June 4, 2022.

mind THAT WHICH IS NOT GOD. The best we can do is point and repeat the ancient story.

So, what is this Trinity? Look about. The Psalmist points to God's handiwork. For the beauty of the earth. Sing, o sing always. The writer of the Book of Proverbs instructs – handprint of the Holy is beheld in creation's majesty. The Divine is given witness to in THE GREAT UNFOLDING.

“The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth...then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.”²

[It might be good to point out that this is WISDOM speaking, quasi the fourth person in the Trinity!]

A GREAT UNFOLDING.

The beauty is infinite, only look at the snapshots from the James Webb Telescope. Just spend a few moments in your backyard with a majestic monarch butterfly as it rides the air currents, flitting from one flower to another.

My friend Dick Bunce told me a marvelous story that captures the infinite mystery of this Triune expression of the Divine. An understanding unfolding through the long-drawn-out experiences of the Holy by the People of the Word over the generations.

So, on with Dick's story:

Upon high school graduation, a father asks his sons what his plans might be for going forward. “What's next for you, son?” The clueless lad has no idea. [How about a less redundant: “The lad was clueless!”] Finally, he blurts out something like, “I'm just going to have to trust God.”

“Well, let me know how that works out for you, responds his skeptical father.”

²² Proverbs 8:22 ff., New Revised Standard Version.

No sooner has the father left the son's room than the boy hears God speaking. God tells the boy to pack up clothes, get his car gassed up and drive to Las Vegas.

Now it's the boy who is skeptical, but he does as God asks. He packs up and heads out to Vegas with a full tank.

Upon coming to the main drag, God directs him to park the car at one of the casinos he passes. Upon entering the main room, God directs the boy to go over to the cashier and empty out his wallet, buying as many chips as possible.

Then he is instructed to go over to the blackjack table and lay his bet down. He receives his five cards and God tells him to discard the one that doesn't fit an inside straight. The boy objects, the odds being almost astronomical against making an inside straight; but he does as God instructs. Amazed, he wins that hand upon completing the straight.

After following God's prompting for the next hour or so, this young lad is sitting on top of almost a million dollars of chips. At the next opportunity God tells him to bet the whole stack.

With his heart in his throat, the boy does as God tells him. Upon receiving his cards, God instructs him to discard one and take the next. As the other players and the dealer are finished with their bets, God tells the boy to **being** [begin] to lay his hand down. The boy turns over one card, then another, finally coming to the last card God had instructed him to take.

The young fellow, to his shock and surprise discovers that that last card **was the completed a winning hand**. [check phrasing] WOW!

WOW!!! God exclaims. "I'm as surprised as you." WOW!

All of which is to say, that all created order is **["a"? or "full of"?]** delightful surprise. **Contingency has no limits**. [meaning unclear to me] And that includes the Divine.

The only guarantee we get is that GOD IS CHANGE, and will, along with creation unfold in the most beautiful, delightful, awful and unexpected ways.

This Trinity Sunday, we must concede that this formula is only our poor human attempt to wrap our hands around a mystery, to tell a story which can't finally be explained.

We know experiences of this mystery: Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer – in more traditional language: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But each of those words must be provisional as my friend Rosemary Radford Ruether would remind us. Had we been fortunate enough to have had women at the Council of Nicaea, we wouldn't have been burdened with this excessively male, patriarchal mentality – but that's another sermon. Fact is -- the surprise is always in the last card. UNTIL THE NEXT IS DEALT. [Yes, but in Greek Pneuma is neuter!]

Several weeks ago, I came across a new paleontological article in the NY Times. It was about an early limbed fish which struggled ashore out of the shallows.

The creative headline writer put it, “When the Troubles of the World Ambled From out of the Ooze.” All life moves towards ever more complexity. This three-to-nine-foot-long tetrapod with both gills and nostrils on top of its head, came ashore 374 million years ago. To escape a predator, to search for prey, to leave a drying lagoon? – we don't know.³

Tiktaalik rosae was a wild impossibility that came ashore. It was the surprise of that last card. And from such, or a similar creature, [add “came”] all reptiles, dinosaurs, mammals – and finally us – we are its descendants. The glory and the liabilities, from Mozart to stratospheric gas prices and global warming. For the beauty of the world, sing, o sing today.

Graduate student Ben Otoo, opines; “It's a lot of galumphing, wriggling, slithering, huffing, flopping.” The Late Devonian could be called the “flop” era.⁴

“Tiktaalik's flat head, with two eyes resting on top like blueberries on a pancake, made it perfectly suited for gazing above the water...’it looks like a muppet,” quipped another researcher, Yara Hardy. All radical contingency. That's what makes up the splendor of creation – all moving to new intended and unintended configurations. That freedom is the definition of divine love.

I close with a final story that comes out of the tragedy of the Vietnam War. Most of you know that iconic photo of a young, naked girl in great anguish, running down a dirt village road amidst other fleeing refugees.

³ Sabrina Imbler, “Is Four-Footed Fish to Blame for World's Woes? – When Trouble Ambled Out of the Ooze, *New York Times*, April 30, 2022.

⁴ Ibid.

That Pulitzer-Prize-winning photo, the “napalm girl,” taken on June 8, 1972, fifty years ago, became the defining image of the horrors of that war.

Thanks to the South Vietnamese photographer, Nick Ut, who dropped his camera, covered her with a blanket, and got her medical help – that story, fifty years later has unfolded in a beautiful, life-affirming way.

Ms. Phan Thi is not that terrified nine-year-old girl any longer but a stately, competent woman in her sixties. The picture of her reclining on her sofa radiates poise -- both an outward and an inner beauty of character.

“I tried to hide my scars under my clothes. I had horrific anxiety and depression. Children in school recoiled from me. I was a figure of pity to neighbors and, to some extent, my parents. As I got older, I feared that no one would ever love me.”⁵

“I helped establish a foundation and began traveling to war-torn countries to provide medical and psychological assistance to children victimized by war, offering, I hope, a sense of possibilities.”

She knew what it was growing up among so much death, seeing friends and family members die and seeing neighbors laying mangled in the street. She knew utter devastation, losing **your [her?]** home and school.

It was only later, after defecting to Canada and supported by a husband and friends, that she began to blossom as she grew into her mission in life, her calling.

“I am grateful now for the power of that photograph of me as a 9-year-old, as I am of the journey I have taken as a person. My horror — which I barely remember — became universal. I’m proud that, in time, I have become a symbol of peace. It took me a long time to embrace that as a person. I can say, 50 years later, that I’m glad Nick captured that moment, even with all the difficulties that image created for me.”⁶

⁵ By Kim Phuc Phan Thi, “It’s Been Fifty Years. I am Not ‘Napalm Girl’ Anymore,” New York Times, June 6, 2022.

⁶ Ibid.

Nick's picture so long ago, for Ms. Phan Thi, was the surprise of the last card, the WOW which would unfold into the majesty and glory of what would become her accomplished life. She in her mission over the years is indeed, the Glory of God, a woman fully alive!

As James Baldwin says of the splendor of this unfolding universe, "For nothing is fixed, forever and forever and forever, it is not fixed; the earth is always shifting, the light is always changing, the sea does not cease to grind down rock."⁷

This marvelous and wondrous life is captured in one line of the hymn, "I Bind unto Myself Today,"

"I bind unto myself today the virtues of the starlit heaven, the glorious sun's life-giving ray, the whiteness of the moon at even, the flashing of the lightning free, the whirling wind's tempestuous shocks, the stable earth, the deep salt sea, around the old eternal rocks."

Sing, o sing today. Amen.

⁷ James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket "Nothing Personal"* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 393.