

Where Were You...?

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Trinity Church in the City of Boston
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“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” God’s voice comes to Job out of the whirlwind like thunder. Where were you when the earth’s measurements were being determined, its bases sunk, its cornerstone laid? Where were you while the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

“Where were you?” God demands. The answer is pretty clear: Job was not there, and neither were we. The origins of the universe are still a mystery to us, despite many theories which continue to compete and collide in modern times.

It seems that from the very beginning, humanity has looked up and around and asked, “Where did all this come from? How did it happen?” The debate between science and religion continues, with biblical literalists arguing with those who study the physical evidence. This is not our fight in the Episcopal Church: we embrace new learning and scientific discovery as possibilities of God’s complex handiwork. We understand that the biblical texts teach us something beyond science: they give us images and deep truths about God’s relationship to creation.

You may recall that there are two creation accounts back-to-back in the book of Genesis. Each one offers different and profound insight into God and creation. Thanks be to God for the ancient rabbis who preserved both texts for us! This morning I am thinking about the most basic lesson we learn about God in these creation stories of the Bible.

The lesson is this: God creates everything and then gives it all away. Whichever Genesis account you read, you come away with the same conclusion: God created the world, and gave it all to creation. So here is the first thing we know about God, our Creator: God is inherently generous, God is giving.

We see this divine generosity in creation, and we also see it in Jesus Christ. Jesus is God’s own son given to us to mend and restore creation, to draw us back to the Creator. We see God’s generosity in the unexpected power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit moves through the Church to inspire us and to stir our most creative and generous selves. God is continually creating and we are God’s fortunate beneficiaries. Thanks be to God!

With this amazing truth in mind, I ask you to consider your own generosity. As part of this generous creation, how do you give of yourself? How do you spend your time? How do you spend your money? How do you literally spend your life? Is it congruent with what you care about deeply? How do you give of yourself in response to God’s generosity?

As God's children, we were encoded with generosity in creation, but we easily lose it if we are not mindful and prayerful about it. If you have any doubts about that, observe a group of pre-schoolers. See how they vacillate between grabbing and sharing their toys. The first word my third child spoke was "mine," presumably in self-defense from his older siblings. Yet he is one of the most generous people I know.

Consider, now, our own giving in the Church. We have an extraordinary group of leaders at Trinity Church who have been meeting regularly for months to study what the scriptures teach us about giving. Long before the stewardship packets were mailed to you this week, these people have been engaged in prayer and reflection about their own giving to the Church. They will be offering opportunities throughout the year for you to learn about giving your time, your talent, and your treasure to the Church. Today we mark the season for making a pledge to the financial support of the church for the coming year. This morning I ask that you make your pledge in the context of God's generosity in your life.

I should tell you that there have been a lot of books written about financial giving in the church. Clergy must be given pointers about how to talk about money, and ask for money. Many of us are initially nervous about it, but I got over that a long time ago. I have developed a profound respect for how money can be used for tremendous good and tremendous evil. For that reason I believe that it is a fundamental issue in our spiritual life. It is at the heart of how we live as children of God and people of faith.

But I have to be honest about all those books I have accumulated on the subject of giving. I dutifully packed them up in Delaware in August and as I leafed through them, I realized how boring they are. And do you know what? I unpacked them here in Boston several weeks ago and they are still boring. The van ride did not improve them at all. It is because they are all about theory, not about our experience of giving. So here are two things that I want to say to you about your financial support of the church that come from my experience. Both have shaped my own giving.

The first is a rule of life from John Wesley, the Anglican priest who brought the church to the American frontier and in doing so founded the Methodist Church. Wesley basically says that we should gain all we can, save all we can, and then give all we can. I like this because it is simple and I can remember it, and also because it requires self discipline at each point. We are asked to do our very best work, to discipline our spending, and to give with a great generosity that stretches us. Gain all you can, save all you can, then give all you can. We are stretched at every step and that is healthy for the life of faith.

The second lesson I have learned about giving does not come from my library but from an experience in the Appalachian mountains of East Tennessee. As young adults, my brother and I visited a friend's vacation cabin in a little community named Rafter. Rafter is perched deep in the holler, literally, that hollow space between the mountains. At the time of my visit the food supply was limited to what the land and the season could provide.

On this visit we followed the required ritual of stopping by the neighbor's house to say 'hello.' We held tight on as our car bumped along a dried up creek bed and tore through wild rhododendron. Then we arrived in a clearing as bleak as anything I have seen anywhere in the world. A handmade cement block house sank in the middle of a muddy compound. To one side there were snarling hunting dogs chained up and waiting for bear season, while assorted mutts and cur dogs roamed freely. Children and flies were everywhere. I was distressed to see that several of the children showed visible signs of mental retardation. Later I would learn that their malnourished mother lived on sweet potatoes during her pregnancies. The scene was heartbreaking.

As the neighbor, Bill, walked toward us, I looked around for any sign of hope. From the corner of my eye, I spied an array of brilliant color. There by the barbed wire fence was an enormous stand of dahlias growing in the sun. The flowers were of the tall dinner plate variety which thrives as perennials in that climate. They were every imaginable color and they swayed and gleamed in the light. They were stunning, especially in the midst of such desolation.

I could not take my eyes off of the dahlias and I complimented Bill on his flowers. We chatted and then said our good byes. I was puzzled by a knowing smile on Bill's face as he walked into his house while I returned to the car. Then I opened the car door and looked inside. There, strewn across the seats, were the dahlias: big beautiful flowers, dozens of them, perhaps all of them, cut and left for me. I was speechless.

Then I was stricken to think of that yard without its dahlias, and I wanted to return them. But my older brother said to me, "Anne, don't you see, this is one of the few joys that Bill has: it is his freedom to give. Don't deny him this. Receive his flowers."

That scene is as vivid to me now as if it was weeks rather than decades ago, and I have never forgotten its lesson. We have the freedom to give, and it turns out that it is a source of our deepest joy.

I pray that all of us here will grow in that joy as we increase our giving. I ask that you give generously to the church, and make a financial pledge part of your spiritual life. Give out of freedom, give with joy, and give with self-discipline. Give because of God our Creator's amazing generosity in your life.

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" God asked Job. Job was not there and neither were we. You and I have arrived later and we are all receiving from God's abundant creation. We were not even here when this great church was built, its vision shaped for future generations. Men and women have given money to Trinity Church for centuries and they have dreamed about those of us who are here today.

Now we are blessed with this beautiful church and a ministry that stretches across the community. We plan and pray for the generations that will follow us, even as we respond to the call of Christ in our time. Please be generous in your giving. Be joyful and stretch yourself as you make your commitment to Trinity Church.

And as you do, always remember to say, “Thanks be to God.”

Amen.