

**“Provocative Thanksgiving”**  
**A sermon by Tom F. Driver**  
**at Meadow Lakes, Nov. 18, 2012**

Introduction

My text is from Hebrews 10:24 –

**“... let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds ....”** (NRSV)

Today is Thanksgiving Sunday. So I call my sermon “Provocative Thanksgiving.” I do want the sermon to provoke you, not in an irritating way, I hope, but as a provocation to a deeper kind of thanksgiving.

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On Saturday a week ago Anne Barstow and I went to the Metropolitan Opera at the movies. The opera was *The Tempest*, based on Shakespeare’s play. The best scene was the opening, which depicted a huge storm at sea. Roaring wind. Huge waves. A ship braking apart. People's dying screams. All accompanied by tumultuous music. It was, as Shakespeare might say, a most terrifying scene.

A few nights earlier, we saw something similar in a movie at home. Its first scene showed the *tsunami* that struck southeast Asia a few years ago. A great tidal wave hit 14 countries and killed 230,000 people. The movie showed immense waters coming up from the sea and wiping away everything before them. It showed people sucked under to drown. The scene was nightmarish,

and we knew it was based on fact.

And what about Hurricane Sandy? Here at Meadow Lakes she frightened us but did us no great harm. To others she brought catastrophe. Perhaps the worst thing she brought was awareness of more trouble ahead. Coming on the heels of Hurricane Irene a year ago, Sandy's wrath warns us that because of global warming the entire earth is headed into great danger.

Today's lectionary contains altogether six Bible passages. Two of them are what we call apocalyptic, meaning that they tell of coming disasters that will change human existence. One is from the Book of Daniel, where it says, "**At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence.**" (Daniel 12:1)

Look at the cover of the bulletin. It shows the Archangel Michael triumphant over the reclining figure of the Devil. Jacob Epstein's sculpture carries good news and bad news. The good news is that the angel, the messenger of God, wins out over evil. The bad news is that the same angel brings a time of anguish.

If I had felt moved to bring a traditional kind of Thanksgiving message today I would talk about how much we have to be thankful for even in dangerous times. I would talk about the beauties of Meadow Lakes and how we are cared for here. I would dwell on our good fortune to have been spared the worst of Hurricane Sandy. I would talk about the little things of life, and our families, and our loved ones, and so on. I know that we are indeed fortunate. We enjoy more good things than we deserve. And I do encourage you to give thanks to God

for every good thing in your life.

But that's not the message I feel moved to bring this morning. Instead, my theme is the world that we inhabit, the planet on which we live, the air that we share with everything that breathes, the water on which all life depends, and the soil which nourishes our food. The Greeks called it the *oikumene*, which means "house." From that Greek word we get our English word "ecology" as well as the word "ecumenical." My theme is the house in which all humanity lives, and the danger that it is in. I am thinking about our responsibility for that house, and how we can best give thanks for it.

We must start by seeing that global warming due to human activity is real and threatening. Strange to say, there is debate about this in our country today. I heard Amy Goodman say the other day that arguing about whether human activity is making the earth dangerously warmer is like arguing about whether the world is round or flat. The evidence leaves no room for doubt.

I am not a scientist, and I am not an expert on climate change. We do have at Meadow Lakes a resident, Ellie Whitney, who is very knowledgeable about it. She gave a splendid lecture on the subject a few weeks ago. I think it would be a good idea for her to give the same lecture again, for it is not easy to get it through our heads that unless we make very big changes we are doomed.

We have just been through a Presidential election in which neither candidate said anything about climate change. Nobody running for office wants to mention the biggest problem in front of us.

That problem is not just technical and scientific. It is a spiritual problem.

That is why I bring it up on Thanksgiving Sunday. We will not get global warming under control until we experience a new birth of gratitude for the created world that is our home, our mother, our provider of life.

Christianity, has not always been helpful in this regard. Many Christians have assumed that since God created the world it is up to Him (they always say Him) to keep it from getting out of whack. But that is a superficial way of reading the Bible. The Biblical prophets as well as the Bible's apocalyptic literature are there to warn us that we have no insurance against disasters.. The actions and the ways of life that we choose have consequences. God and goodness are not sentimental thoughts. Moral responsibility is inescapable.

Some Christians have also assumed that the creation story in Genesis gives human beings the right to do with nature whatever they please. "And God said,... let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth .... (Gen. 1:26 ).

We are wrong if we think that this passage is speaking of privilege. It is not. It is speaking of responsibility. It is not telling us that we are better than the animals. It is saying that we can see further ahead and further back, the way an adult can see more of the past and imagine more of the future than can a child. The good parent has "dominion" over the child in the sense of having a love so deep and a heart so wise that he or she can take good care of the child, enabling it to grow for its own sake and not just for the sake of the parent. The bad parent lords it over the child. The bad parent lives off the child. The bad parent takes no thought for the future. The good parent is motivated by love and looks far ahead.

On this Thanksgiving Sunday I want to say that our usual thanksgiving is too small. Most of us give our love to particular things and particular people within the world. We do not give our love to the world itself. Maybe that was enough in the childhood of the human race. It is not enough now, when the world is shrinking and its problems are growing. We need to enlarge the perspective of our thanksgiving. Our hearts need a zoom lens.

The writer Thornton Wilder offered such a zoom in his famous play, *Our Town*, which is set in a little town in New England called Grover's Corners but which has the whole universe in mind. There is a scene in which the girl Rebecca shares her thoughts with George, the boy next door. She says:

I never told you about that letter Jane Crofut got from her minister when she was sick. He wrote Jane a letter and on the envelope the address was like this: It said: Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover's Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America.

George asks:

What's funny about that?

She continues:

But listen, it's not finished: the United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God -- that's what it said on the envelope. ... And the postman brought it just the same.

When he wrote that play, Thornton Wilder no doubt had in mind, perhaps in the back of his mind, a famous poem by William Blake called “The Auguries of Innocence.” The poem counsels us

To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour.

Blake's poem describes a universe in which everything is interconnected – not just physically but morally and spiritually:

A Robin Red breast in a Cage  
Puts all Heaven in a Rage ;  
A Dove house filled with Doves & Pigeons  
Shudders Hell through all its regions ;  
A dog starved at his Masters Gate  
Predicts the ruin of the State.

If Blake were writing his couplets today, he might say

The smoke stack billowing higher and higher  
Sets the polar ice on fire.

Since our lives are all knit together, not only all human beings but the everything in the entire universe, we need to learn to hold all of it dear and give

thanks for it all – day by day.

We need also to remember that being thankful is not simply saying “thank you” and going on our way. It is to link hands with others, provoking them out of their sleep or complacency if necessary, so that together we may do the right thing. We can do something about global warming only if we do it together.

One cannot be properly thankful in isolation. Human life is communal. The universe is interconnection. The earth's atmosphere is shared by all.

On this Thanksgiving Sunday, let us fill our hearts with love for all creation. Let us provoke one another to love the world. Let us preserve the global house in which we live, right here in New Jersey, and beneath the stars, for it is a gift that has been entrusted to us from the mind of God.

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