

The Old Man and the Sea(gulls)

(GALATIANS 4:4-7 NRSV) *But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, ⁵to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. ⁶Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his* *Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." ⁷So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.*

Next Sunday a new church year begins with Advent. It's fitting that we end each Church year with "Thanksgiving." In 1621, the Plymouth colonists and the Wampanoag shared an autumn harvest feast: the traditional basis of our national holiday; but it wasn't until 1863, during the Civil War, that President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed a National Day of Thanksgiving to be held each November.

A cliché among preachers says we can re-preach a sermon every three years, if we change the illustrations, and your hearers won't notice. Well, I'm going to do the opposite this morning: I'm going to keep the illustration and change the sermon.

It happened every Friday just before sunset: an old man walked along the beach, the waves lapping at his bare feet, the South Florida Gulf breezes playing with the brim of his floppy hat. In his gnarled fingers he clutches the bail of a bucket, full of shrimp.

He approaches a fishing pier, walks out its end, and waits. The wait isn't long. Soon they begin to come—at first just tiny specks against the golden sky. Then a flapping motion is detected, and soon, hundreds of sea gulls share the end of the pier with him—sitting on the rail, waddling along the plank floor, flapping and hovering just over his head—as he begins to feed them from the bucket of shrimp.

Eventually, the shrimp are gone, but the old man and the sea gulls linger, seeming to savor the moment—almost a sacred moment, not unlike Holy Communion.

Now, hold that image in your minds.

Paul begins today's portion of his letter to the Galatian Christians: "*...when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son,*"

A young woman sits up in bed, clutches her swollen abdomen and breathes deeply for a moment; then looks at her watch. A few minutes later the scene is repeated, and she shakes her husband and says, "Wake up, Honey. It's time!"

When it's time, everything in God's creation acts as it should. Trees dress themselves in many-colored coats when it's time. Bears hibernate when it's time. Salmon run; bass spawn; the swallows return to Capistrano when it's time. By definition, music is a blending of melody and timing.

There also are negative aspects. There was 1:21 too much time on the game clock for the Wampus Cats against Bryant. And "time on my hands" is stressful for many people; the effort to fill empty hours leads to trouble and tragedy so often.

In the Bible, timing is almost mystical—it's not abstract; it's very tangible. Two words in the New Testament language are translated, "Time." One is **Chronos**—the root of the English word, "Chronology": "clock time", "calendar time".

The other word is **Kairos**: a specific point in time: determined, fixed, appointed: seasons of the year, festivals and holy days. In the New Testament, **kairos** sometimes is translated "day" or "hour": the "Day of the Lord", or "My hour is come." It almost always refers in some way to the Passion of Christ. There is a sense, almost, of the unavoidable: it's "Divine Agenda".

One understanding of the fullness of time is the doctrine of Predestination: the idea that everything is foreordained—fixed by God. Creation is a celestial clock, clicking off the events God planned and set in motion. The doctrine is associated more with St. Augustine and Calvin than with the New Testament. Critics of predestination point to the "paradox of free will", in which God's omniscience seems incompatible with human free will.

But the Hebrew prophets and Jewish apocalyptic writers did believe God had a specific agenda for all creation and history. "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven." (ECC 3:1) And they believed they knew what that divine agenda was.

In order to show mercy as well as power, God chose to work out this agenda slowly, allowing time for good and evil to grow into their full harvest. A fixed measure of evil had to be filled, and a fixed number of righteous folk had to be gathered during "this present age". Then, in "The Fullness of Time", when the quota of good and evil had been met, a specific, predetermined sequence of events called the "end time" would be set in motion, and Messiah would reign forever.

We know Paul was a leader of the Pharisees before his conversion on the Damascus road, so he knew this teaching about "The Fullness of Time." But in today's epistle, he challenges the traditional understanding: "*...when the fullness of time had come God sent forth his Son, born of Woman, subject to law.*"

This teaching, more than any other, was the fundamental cause of the split between the Jews and the Christians. The lowly status of Jesus' birth—not with a body composed of celestial substance, but born of a human mother; a baby: flesh and bone like any other human; the obscurity of Nazareth, its absence in any of the prophecies; the fact that Jesus was a common laborer; all these factors were a horrible scandal in the eyes of those who expected Messiah to come straight out of heaven, riding a chariot of clouds, brandishing a lightning bolt as a sword.

But in Paul's challenge to that tradition is the basis of the New Testament understanding of "The Fullness of Time." And perhaps the clearest statement of Paul's understanding is in the opening of his letter to the church in Ephesus:

EPHESIANS 1:3-6 (NRSV) *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵He* | *destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.*

Christ is the predestined one; and all who are in Christ share his destiny. In Christ the Divine Agenda is completed, prophecy is fulfilled, the Will of God is accomplished, all of God's intentions and desires for us are met. Nothing remains. In Christ is "The Fullness of Time". And in "The Fulness of Time" there is no boredom, no loneliness, no striving for achievement or success. In "The Fullness of Time" our work, our play, our relationships—all our efforts—take on new meaning.

What a wonderful summary at the end of the church year—the lectionary readings—the liturgical celebrations—all the things that point us to Christ as the fulfillment of God's "Divine Agenda." And given that summary, for the Christian, thanksgiving is not a Day, it's a way of life.

Late in 1942 a B-17 bomber headed across the Pacific on a courier mission. Captain Eddie Rickenbacker was the pilot. A storm hit, and the plane became lost. Eventually, it ran out of fuel and went down in the ocean.

Through the heroic efforts of Captain Rickenbacker, all seven of the crew made it safely aboard a life raft. They had plenty of water, but with only a couple of days of food. Even by rationing the food, it was soon gone, and the crew grew weak as their ordeal dragged on for days. Rickenbacker was fearful for their survival.

One morning he was awakened by something on his hat. He reached up quickly and snared it with his hand. It was a sea gull. They ate the meat, although each had only a few bites. They unraveled threads from a uniform, used a pin to fashion a hook, and used the bird's intestines as bait, and caught fish, and thus survived for twenty-one days, before they finally were rescued.

Where the gull came from was a mystery. They were hundreds of miles from land, and gulls virtually never get more than a few miles from land.

But Eddie Rickenbacker never forgot the source of their survival; so, for as long as he could walk, every Friday at sundown, he made that walk out to the end of that long pier, with a bucket of shrimp, to say, "Thank you."

Today, God wants us to know that *in our union with Christ he has blessed us by giving us every spiritual blessing in the heavenly world.* And God wants us to gather at this Table every Sunday, "In Christ"—and not just the third Thursday in November—to say, "Thank you."