

The Rev. Thomas M. Murphy
St. Thomas' Episcopal Church, Owings Mills MD
September 11, 2022

Year C, Proper 19: The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28
Psalm 14
1 Timothy 1:12-17
Luke 15:1-10

The God of Renewal

I've mentioned to you before that I really like taking early morning walks along the NCR Trail, about a twenty minute drive from here.

And when you follow the same route day after day, you start to notice small changes, things that might escape the eye of someone who was walking along there for the first time.

So, a couple of weeks ago, I noticed that just a few gold and brown leaves were beginning to fall, beginning to dot the trail under my feet.

By now, there are leaves along the trail, lots of leaves have fallen all over the place, including here around the church, where they will soon become a nearly daily challenge for our sextons, Ricky and Chris.

And we all know what's to come.

Soon enough most of the trees will be bare, standing starkly against the sky.

Our part of the world will lose much of its color, growing colder, at times seeming almost lifeless.

You won't be surprised to know that we have a herd of deer that spend a lot of time around the rectory. Now, I know how many of you feel about deer! But, since

Sue and I are not exactly avid gardeners, we enjoy seeing them, especially the three fawns who love to run and bounce all around but still usually stick close to mom.

For now, at least, it's a kind deer paradise over there. But I've wondered what the fawns will make of their first fall and winter, their first touch of coldness, the time when the grass and foliage are much less abundant, the time they feel the first pangs of hunger, loss, and fear.

I don't know what a young deer thinks about any of this – or if they do think about it – but I wouldn't be surprised if they might just assume that this is the way it's going to be forever.

But, we – even those of us who are not avid gardeners – we know better.

We know that, while everything seems cold and quite dead, in fact new life is being prepared in secret, just waiting to rise again, like Jesus freed from the tomb on the first Easter morning.

God is the God of Renewal.

We see the God of Renewal at work in nature, and if we've been around for any length of time, we have all experienced the God of Renewal at work in our lives, during the times when suffering seems just too great to endure.

We encounter the God of Renewal at work during times of lost-ness, when it feels like we have lost too many or too much, when we can no longer see clearly the way forward, when it sure feels like all hope is lost.

And yet we discover strength we didn't know we possessed – we receive help from friends we didn't even know we had – we receive the grace of courage and fortitude that only God can give – we were lost but now we are found.

I'm mindful that, In the midst of our day of celebration, this is also a solemn day, as we recall the terror attacks on our nation twenty-one years ago.

And yet, those of us who remember that terrible day and the frightening and uncertain days that followed, also remember the spirit of goodwill that bloomed here in our land and throughout much of the world.

As it happens, it was Queen Elizabeth II who offered some of the wisest words during that terrible time of lost-ness, wisdom that has stuck with me. The Queen who, despite her great privilege, knew something about loss reminded us that, "Grief is the price we pay for love."

And, whenever I read or hear that quote, I can almost hear St. Paul adding, "Love never ends."

Especially in times of lost-ness and loss, God is always at work, offering us love, renewing the love between and among us.

All of us have been through a time of lost-ness over these past couple of years.

Venerable Institutions and norms of behavior that once seemed rock solid, have been revealed as shockingly wobbly, in decline, unreliable, and rejected by many.

We have endured a pandemic that stunned us, forcing us to face our fragility and limitations – a pandemic that took precious lives from us - a pandemic that

forced us to take steps previously unthinkable, like keeping the church doors closed on Sunday, keeping the doors closed for many Sundays.

But, just like the shepherd who, let's face it, kind of crazily leaves the 99 to go search for the one lost sheep, just like the woman who relentlessly cleans her home until she finds that one lost coin, the God of Renewal does not give up on us.

In a time of so much suffering and loss, God has remained at work, opening our hearts to be even more loving and generous, giving us courage to keep going even when we double-masked and fanatically sanitized our shopping carts and grocery bags.

And you know that the God of Renewal has been working overtime here at St. Thomas'!

I first fell in love with this church when I heard how, back in the early days of the pandemic, some of you made masks and hung them up on the parish hall door so that anyone in the community – people we don't know and will never know – could have some comfort and safety.

The God of Renewal has been working overtime at St. Thomas', lifting up exceptional lay leaders, especially Tony Seville and Jesse VanGieson who held this place together during a long and occasionally contentious time between rectors.

The God of Renewal has been working overtime at St. Thomas', sending us two wonderful old friends, two loving shepherds, Ann Copp and Caroline Stewart, who we thank and honor in a special way today.

And, for the past 14 months or so, I've seen the God of Renewal hard at work here at St. Thomas' – as people who had left for a time have made their way back to

us, as new people have taken the big step of crossing that well-worn threshold into this old holy place.

The God of Renewal has been at work as lay people take turns leading Bible discussions on Zoom, as a determined group persisted in the dream of offering hospitality to people from Afghanistan, a dream that seemed almost out of reach until just last week when at last we welcomed our brother Hizbullah to our community.

The God of Renewal has been at work as we created a beautiful new website, a website which in just its first week has already drawn at least one new newcomer to our church!

Even for the God of Renewal, this is all pretty amazing, wouldn't you say?

Both of today's parables end with celebration.

After the shepherd finds the lost sheep and after the woman finds her lost coin, they don't keep their joy to themselves. No, they invite people over for a party to celebrate that what was lost has been found, that hope has been renewed.

So, that's what we're doing here today on Renewal Sunday.

And, since for us Christians, renewal begins in the water of Baptism, in a moment we will renew our baptismal promises.

And, here's the thing. If, with God's help, we continue to take these big baptismal promises seriously, then the God of Renewal will continue to use this old church - God will continue to use us - to renew our weary and worn world, from Owings Mills to Baltimore City and beyond.

So the young fawns frolicking around the rectory may not know it – and, especially in moments of loss and fear, we may forget it – but God is the God of Renewal.

Amen.