

**September 3, 2017**  
**Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 17, Year A, RCL**  
**The Rev. Keri T. Aubert**  
**St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT**

**Exodus 3:1-15**  
**Psalm 105:1-6**  
**Romans 12:9-21**  
**Matthew 16:21-28**

In New England, the seasons always always seem to sneak up on me. I have lived in five climates, each very different from the others. This sneaking of the seasons happens to me only in New England.

Sneaky fall tagged me on Tuesday, via the trees on the other side of the classroom wing downstairs. I walked into the garden and froze, startled by the sight of their leaves in a golden blaze. "When did that happen?" I asked aloud to no one in particular.

As the week passed, other fall magic appeared: my morning and evening dog walks got cooler and less muggy by the day; I found some plant species' reproductive pod, its hard brown shell open, its wispy white internals exposed, and its seeds long gone.

And so it was that on Friday, I found myself feeling pensive. That sneaked up on me, too, though I should have been waiting for it. I always get pensive in the fall. Neither happy nor sad, I might characterize it as peacefully thoughtful. It's as if nature forces me to take a breather from my usual mental gymnastics. I don't mind it; generally, it's a relief—and this year, especially so. For me and for many of you, the last several months have been an emotional roller coaster. There is so much to be happy and excited about; there is so much to be worried and angry about.

Our preachers try to consider the news, so for weeks our sermons have been heavy. That's okay, but sometimes we all need a break. Therefore on Monday I decided I would offer a happy sermon today. I had no idea what that would look like; I hadn't even checked today's readings.

Well, I should have known better than to test fate: by Mondays intent was by Friday derailed. As usual, fate won: the preaching decision made on Monday was derailed by fall's arrival on Tuesday. Mix two parts Hurricane Harvey, one part transgender military service ban, one part Nashville Statement, and one part pensive, and you get ... a blank computer screen as of yesterday morning. Rather than keep staring at it, I decided to set happy aside to immerse myself in pensive. And that's why I spent a quiet hour just watching the birds.

There are four bird feeders in our backyard. The best place to watch is from a reclining position on the loveseat in our small den. The distance from there, through the sliding glass doors, and to the action, only fifteen or twenty feet. Our feeders attract the usual suburban species: cardinals, nuthatches, chickadees, sparrows, blue jays, doves, woodpeckers, and way too many of the immigrants we *should* be worrying about, those bullies of the bird world, the infernal starlings. We won't even discuss the ground hogs and skunks.

Observing activity at our feeders is like watching an ongoing tragicomedy. The best part of the show is the summer-long parade of bird fledglings. Like winged toddlers, they are both pathetic and funny. Disorderly and inelegant in flight, they crash to an unsteady perch and wobble there, downy puffballs of uncertainty. Spying a parent, they seek attention with rapid wing flaps and loud squawks. Their ruckus pauses only for the moment required to receive and swallow a seed popped from beak to beak.

Those bird toddlers soon increase in size and mobility. They become demanding teenagers trailing behind exhausted and often crabby adults. Even *starling* fledglings are cute, maybe even the cutest of all. They are bullies like their parents, but their target *is* their parents, and that is oddly satisfying.

Now, most of the fledgling birds are all grown up. Some retain juvenile plumage, but they feed and fly with ease. The parents need simply watch as they become more confident in their independence.

In Earthly cycle of transition, the spring season of arrival has turned into the fall season of departure. That goes for birds, and for humans, too. We fly from our parents, and our children fly from us. For human young, the pattern of growing and leaving happens repeatedly, each time more profoundly. This has been well documented in my recent Facebook feed. Parents have posted photos of their children on the first day of kindergarten, on the first day of high school, and on the first day they left them alone college. In addition, the children who are new college graduates have posted photos of themselves, as they begin the next adventure. Our daughter is one among that group.

We generally think of *parenting* as something that goes on between adults and children in the same house. But let's try to think about it differently. If we do, we might see that a sort of parenting happens in today's readings.

In our reading from Exodus, Moses acts like a toddler prophet; he soon becomes a fledgling that God kicks out of the nest. In our reading from Matthew, the ever-reckless Peter and the other often-foolish disciples also act like toddlers; Jesus warns them that they, too, will soon be kicked out of the nest. In Exodus, God parents Moses. In Matthew, God as Jesus parents the disciples. As for us, the pattern of growing and leaving will happen repeatedly, each time more profoundly.

Last Sunday, hearing the story of baby Moses, I wondered this: Does God engineer events to save the baby Moses specifically, in order to work with him later? Or does God work with the adult Moses, because Moses was the only baby saved? I kind of like to think it's the latter: that God works with what God has, and at the moment God has Moses. Similarly, in Matthew, God—this time as Jesus—works with what God has. We know how it goes: imperfect though they are, Moses and the disciples end up doing just fine.

Today's reading from Romans most clearly illustrates the implications of this trajectory for us. A persecutor of Christians, Paul is an unlikely prospect. But God parents Paul, and Paul parents the struggling young community of Christ-followers in Rome. He ends up doing just fine, and they do, too.

God works with what God has. God has *you*, and therefore God works with *you*. You are created in God's image; God is always your parent and you are always God's child. As parent, God nurtures you as toddler, mentors you as fledgling, and sends you as adult and parent to others. Unlike our parenting of children, it's not sequential or linear. Even as adults, you and I remain in some ways fledglings or even toddlers. God works with you as you are, where you are, and as you need. God is your co-parent as you work with others.

When God sends you on the path of Paul, to nurture, mentor, and send others, you also will work with what you have. God calls and prepares *you*, to be one who nurtures, mentors, and sends—working with your children, other children, others right here, and all the children of God who come before you. *This* is the *true* labor of your life. With God's continuing participation and guidance and participation, you, too, will end up doing just fine.

In my backyard, on the opposite side of the feeders, and about as far away, stands a huge bush. To be precise, it's a beautiful example of the species we call burning bush, so named for God's flaming appearance to Moses. Yesterday morning at 8 a.m., our bird feeders were tightly packed with a large flock of sparrows. Their feeding frenzy was interrupted occasionally, when some cue of peril, undetectable by me, sent them jetting off to plunge into that burning bush. A few seconds later, yet another mysterious signal brought them out of the bush and back to the feeders.

Despite the interruptions, the sparrows were so numerous and so quick that the other birds were forced to yield to their combined frenzy. Most of those sparrows were young. Their toddler bedlam seemed to further annoy the always-crabby blue jays. The starlings simply gave up and went elsewhere.

In the great cosmic order, I suppose we are much closer to birds than to God. But maybe it's not so bad being a sparrow, as long as there are a lot of other sparrows around, and a burning bush in which to retreat. A chaotic mix it may be. But the sparrows are winning.