

## 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

One morning this past week while I was visiting my cousin and her husband in Santa Fe, they wanted to take their dog and me on a two-mile walk through the Nordic Hiking Trail on a ridge above the city. After a short drive, we parked the car and strolled almost an hour through a grove of aspens dotted with colorful wildflowers, echoing with melodious birdcalls, and concealing one determined chipmunk that their dog strove but failed to catch. At home my typical day involves several hours behind a computer screen and countless reaches into my pocket to extract my phone and scroll through nonurgent messages. It was relaxing to put all that away for a while and enjoy the beauty of nature as if I'd never noticed it before. Kansas City has hiking trails, and even the most urban areas have trees, birds and dogs if I would just stop long enough to appreciate them.

Several psalms in the bible sing praises to God for the wonders of creation, and today's responsorial selects key verses from one of them. Psalm 65 marvels at how rain brings forth crops. It says to God, "You visit the earth, give it water... [your] ever-flowing river brims over to prepare the grain. And thus you provide for the earth: you drench its furrows, you level it, soften it with showers, you bless its growth... Abundance flows in your pathways; in the pastures of the desert it flows." Then, taking in the breadth of creation, like hikers on a stroll through a forest, the people singing praise to God imagine that they are not alone: All creation joins the chorus. Psalm 65 concludes, "The meadows are clothed with flocks. The valleys are decked with wheat. They shout for joy; yes, they sing!"

We sang this psalm today in anticipation of the gospel, where Jesus opens his discourse of parables with one about the growth of grain from seed a sower strews. Jesus appreciated the wonders of creation. At seedtime he noticed how a farmer interacts with the soil, casting abundant grain, aware that some of it, enough of it, would grow by the mercy of God. The same parable also appears in Luke's gospel and used to be read on a Sunday before Lent each year. The Church preserves one verse from Luke's version and attaches it to today's psalm: "The seed that falls on good ground will yield a fruitful harvest."

The lectionary also gives us verses from Isaiah that compare rain with God's word. The Lord says, "my word shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it." As rain makes seeds grow into aspens, so God's word makes us grow into exemplars of beauty, strength and life.

The wonders of nature surround us even when we do not notice them. The Word of God is around us, even when we pay it little heed. For many believers, going to church is like hiking through a grove of God's Word. We set aside time, point our steps toward a place, and put away the distractions that compete for our attention. We drink the Word that drenches our furrows, levels us, softens us, and blesses our growth. Whenever we make time for nature or for worship, we open ourselves to see God's beauty and hear God's Word throughout the day. If we practice listening for birdcalls in the woods, we will hear them in the city. If we listen to God's Word at church, we will hear it in the voices of others. God sends abundant rain for the growth of crops. God also provides abundant messengers for the growth of our souls if we would only pause, look and listen.