

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

²⁹Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will. ³⁰But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

If ever you should find yourself feeling small and insignificant in this world, remember this preaching of our Lord Jesus about the sparrows. You have seen sparrows. They are small and often overlooked. Sparrows are as common as can be – they are everywhere! We make a big fuss over red-tailed hawks and bald eagles, over exotic birds with brilliantly colored feathers, but nobody pays much attention to the humble little sparrow¹. It is hard to tell one from another, they are seldom famous, seldom elected to high office, seldom receive high salaries. Altogether, they are among the small ones of this world. But, Jesus says, not one of them falls to the ground without our heavenly Father knowing of it. “You are of more value than many sparrows!” So, do not be afraid!

It seems to me that there are two sides to this passage about the sparrows — two wonders at play. One is the happy thought that our Maker's love for this world is so vast that it encompasses the forests and the meadows, the lakes and the seas, and all the multitudes of creatures therein. Even when no one is looking, our God is hard at work taking tender care of those creatures... taking joy in them, I bet.

The other wonder is that as little as our Maker would neglect the lilies of the field and the bears of the forest, even less will He neglect you. Others in this world might overlook you, but not the Lord, and he is greatest of all!

So, two wonders: the true God loves even the sparrows of the forest. And the true God loves you even more.

First, the sparrows of the forest. God does not create, only to forget. No, God creates and then loves each of his creatures. He looks upon each of them and smiles with pleasure because to him they are good. He would not be without them. And so, there is no sparrow out yonder falling to the ground all by its lonesome. Rather, even as the sparrow falls, it falls safely in God's hands.

This Gospel text about the sparrows has placed me in a reminiscing mood, taking me back to boyhood days wandering in the woods near our home on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. I did not grow up in a town, but in the countryside, along the good old Choptank River. There were woods with huckleberries, woods intersected by the creek heading off toward the river. On a sunny day, the sun would come piercing down through occasional holes in the tree top canopy, creating a kind of column of sunlight — a shaft of light so bright you could see the little insects flying around. Be pleased to think that the Lord watches over those little insects flying around in the sunshine. He loves reaches to every detail of his creation.

And in those woods there would be the birds: sometimes a hawk sitting on a tree branch, sometimes an owl, and often the little birds of the forest singing their songs and flitting around. The Lord loves those birds. Even when there is no one in the forest to see them, the Lord sees them and cares for them each one.

¹ A nice observation from my wife, Carol.

Some of you, I bet, have a sense of holiness when you are out and about in nature. I think that this is the origin of that sense: the forest reminds us that there is more to God's creation than our human species. Even when we are not on the scene, the Lord is! The Lord is there, taking care of the sparrows and all the creatures of the forest. When we enter into the forest, we are entering into sacred space, for God is there — there with those creatures.

The love of our God is so mighty that it burns brightly even where we cannot see and give no thought. And so, God challenges Job:

³⁹Wilt thou hunt the prey for the lion? or fill the appetite of the young lions,
⁴⁰When they couch in their dens, and abide in the covert to lie in wait? ⁴¹Who provideth for the raven his food? when his young ones cry unto God, they wander for lack of meat (“craning their necks in search of food,” as the *New Jerusalem Bible* puts it.)(Job 38:39-41)

And what of the courage of the horse? It is the Lord who supplies it:

¹⁹Hast thou given the horse strength? hast thou clothed his neck with thunder?
²⁰Canst thou make him afraid as a grasshopper? (“leap like a grasshopper?” NJB) the glory of his nostrils is terrible. ²¹He paweth in the valley, and rejoiceth in his strength: he goeth on to meet the armed men. ²²He mocketh at fear, and is not affrighted; neither turneth he back from the sword. ²³The quiver rattleth against him, the glittering spear and the shield. ²⁴He swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage: neither believeth he that it is the sound of the trumpet. ²⁵He saith among the trumpets, Ha, ha; and he smelleth the battle afar off, the thunder of the captains, and the shouting.(Job 39:19-25, KJV)

Again, there is a whole world of wonder out there — glorious transactions between God and his creation — things we know little about:

²⁶Doth the hawk fly by thy wisdom, and stretch her wings toward the south?
²⁷Doth the eagle mount up at thy command, and make her nest on high? ²⁸She dwelleth and abideth on the rock, upon the crag of the rock, and the strong place. ²⁹From thence she seeketh the prey, and her eyes behold afar off.(Job 39:26-29, KJV)

So, that is the first wonder: Our Maker neglects not the sparrow. His love is so immense that it encompasses forest, meadow, lake, and sea, and all the creatures therein.

And the second wonder is this: Our Maker cares for you even more. I know that sometimes the world can beat us down, such that we are tempted to say that no one cares, no one watches, no one notes that we are feeling low. But God cares, watches, and notes. Why, even the very hairs of your head are numbered. My wife Carol points out that though she and I love our boys with all our hearts, still, we have not taken time to count the very hairs of their head. But the Lord does, and that is a powerful mighty amount of love there. And if we should be stricken by cancer and our hair should fall it, our Maker knows and grieves along with us at that decline. His love is tender and detailed toward us. Do not fear, then, that you are forgotten in this world. The Lord will never forget you.

There is a gospel hymn based on this text called “His Eye Is on the Sparrow.” It was written by Civilla D. Martin in 1905 and was made popular by the actress-singer Ethel Waters who used the title for her autobiography. The hymnwriter, Civilla, tells this simple little story about her inspiration for the hymn:

Early in the spring of 1905, my husband and I were sojourning in Elmira, New York. We contracted a deep friendship for a couple by the name of Mr. and Mrs. Doolittle—true saints of God. Mrs. Doolittle had been bedridden for nigh twenty years. Her husband was an incurable cripple who had to propel himself to and from his business in a wheel chair. Despite their afflictions, they lived happy Christian lives, bringing inspiration and comfort to all who knew them. One day while we were visiting with the Doolittles, my husband commented on their bright hopefulness and asked them for the secret of it. Mrs. Doolittle’s reply was simple: “His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.” The beauty of this simple expression of boundless faith gripped the hearts and fired the imagination of Dr. Martin and me. The hymn “His Eye Is on the Sparrow” was the outcome of that experience. (From Wikipedia)

Some people have this gift: the ability to take a promise from the Bible and to let that promise make life better for them. So it is in this old gospel spiritual — the hymn takes encouragement from this morning’s Bible reading:

Refrain

I sing because I’m happy,
I sing because I’m free,
For His eye is on the sparrow,
And I know He watches me.

In ending, let us note this: Our Maker both loves and needs us. He welcomes our help in his passion, in his work of compassion for this world. This was shown to us last Sunday’s Gospel Lesson. The divine logic begins this way:

And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity. ³⁶When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”(Matthew 9:35-10:23, RSV)

In this passage, we are permitted to perceive the compassion of our Lord Jesus. Furthermore, we are bid to join that compassion:

“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

You are meant to be such a laborer. That is, to belong to Jesus is to join him in love for this world. He knows and he warns us that we will like face some heartache and some suffering in the process of our ministry of compassion in his name. Yet, let it comes, he

would encourage us to think: Because he means to keep tender watch over us, even as he watches the sparrows of the forest.

This is our Lord Jesus, who is worthy of our devotion, who calls us to join him in love for this world, and to whom belongs the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.