

Church of the Holy Cross
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Reviving the Rogation Tradition

Does anyone know what today is? Yes, it's Mother's Day, and so I wish all mothers a blessed day. And it's the sixth Sunday of Easter. But on the church calendar today also has a special name, one we haven't heard much in recent years. How many longtime Episcopalians remember Rogation Sunday? Okay, do you remember what it means, what it celebrates? Any guesses?

The word "rogation" shares a Latin root with "interrogate": rogare, to ask; we ask God's blessing. In the older Episcopal lectionary, and indeed for centuries of the Anglican tradition, the Gospel lesson for today was a well-known passage from John: "ask and you shall receive." So Rogation Sunday and the Rogation Days during the week before the Ascension were days on which we asked God for blessings and thanked God for what we had received. Originally an agricultural observance, a blessing of the fields for the start of the new planting season, Rogation Sunday, especially in England, incorporated the pagan practice of beating the bounds, walking the boundary of the parish behind the rector to remind the congregation that they were stewards of that land, given by God.

So what happened to Rogation Sunday? Why isn't it a familiar part of our church calendar? Well, we've come a long way from our roots, in the Old and New Worlds, as an agricultural society. Our 1979 Book of Common Prayer includes some prayers for agriculture, for the right use of creation, and for the natural world, but they aren't explicitly connected to Rogation Sunday. In fact, the BCP has dropped almost all mention of that tradition, aside from an entry on the list of "Days of Optional Observance." And the Common Lectionary we now use, as you've heard this morning, no longer aligns with Rogation Sunday.

And maybe we don't miss Rogation Sunday, as many of us have lost not only our ties to the land but our sense that we are stewards of God's creation. What I want to suggest this morning, however, is that the time is right to bring back the Rogation Sunday tradition, adapted to the 21st century and expanded beyond just one Sunday on the annual calendar. We can honor our Anglican roots and at the same time be in tune with positive trends in our society: caring for the environment, conserving energy, learning more about the sources of our food.

Some Episcopal churches already celebrate a modernized Rogation Sunday. I even came across a Rogation Sunday liturgy that incorporates a procession; an urban parish in Boston walks through its neighborhood, blessing the hospital, the fire and police stations, the parks, the apartment buildings, and all who live and work there. I'm not proposing that we march around Tyson's Corner. And I'm very conscious of the things Holy Cross already does to honor God's creation: recycling, for example, and having a recognized bird sanctuary on our property. But most of us spend far more time at our homes and offices than we do here at church, and so I want to focus on what we do as individuals rather than as a parish community.

Now, I'm not going to stand here and rattle off a list of things you should or shouldn't do to be good stewards. For one thing, I'm not exactly a role model; I fall short of my environmental aspirations every day. Many of you are far better environmental stewards than I. Secondly, you know as well as I do, or maybe better, where to find ideas for conserving, reusing, recycling.

But I do want to make some suggestions that I think will help all of us in this area, ideas that at least in my mind emerge logically one from another. First, we should think of ourselves as stewards—not owners, not masters—but tenants, caretakers entrusted to preserve God's creation. God has given us the marvelous gift of "this fragile earth, our island home." We are called to protect it, to use its resources wisely, to show reverence for it as part of creation.

Second, shouldn't we think of that stewardship as another of our offerings to God? And, since we consider our offerings of time and treasure in terms of sacrificial giving, shouldn't we think of our environmental stewardship in the same way? If we give only from our abundance—if we take only easy steps but don't make tougher choices—are we doing as much as we should? If our environmentalism doesn't pinch a little, if we don't at least suffer a little inconvenience, are we showing true reverence for God's creation?

Third, if we approach our stewardship of creation as an offering of thanksgiving to God, we should be as prayerful about it as we are about our offerings of time and treasure. We often think about environmentalism as solely a secular activity; instead, we should strive to remember that it is as much a way of worship, as much an expression of thanksgiving, as offering money or time. When we face a major decision, our thinking about it and our prayers for guidance should consider our stewardship of creation as well as of our wealth, our families, and all our other gifts from God.

In the final step, we should strive to make environmental consciousness one of our spiritual practices. Some of us, in Adult Forum and book groups, are reading Dorothy Bass' *Practicing Our Faith*. In her preface to the new edition, she says she considers "caring for creation as a distinct practice...a local practice with global reach that is deeply rooted in Scripture and important in the historical and contemporary witness of many Christian practitioners." Her chapter on Household Economics touches on these issues, but we can go further and be more specific: we can thank God for the beauty of creation as part of our daily devotions, bless those who grew our food in our grace over meals, pray as we plant a flower or mow the lawn, think of recycling as an offering of thanksgiving.

So I invite you to take the opportunity of Rogation Sunday to reflect on the wonderful gift of God's creation and our role as its caretakers. Smell a flower. Hear the birds. Feel the sunshine. Taste the bread and wine. Look at the stars. Give thanks. Amen.