



The Angelus

after the painting by Jean-
François Millet (1814-1875)

—1854-59—

The Angelus of evening, distant bells,
Three for Ave Marias, versicles,
And nine for every collect low-entoned
By priests inside the far-off village church

Built up from Norman stone. The sky stays gold
Although the sun is gone and shadows pass
Over potato fields where standing still
In attitudes of prayer a man and wife

Think of the Incarnation of their Lord,
The flesh redeemed, a graced creation saved,
Bells pealing from the New Jerusalem
Through history back to Eden's speaking leaves.

Yet here between these dreams of paradise
Potatoes must be planted, tended, dug,
Then sacked on barrows pushed to winter bins
To feast on till the final angels come.

This week marks the final leg of our Lenten journey discovering the “Signs of Life” of our church and worship. I share with you this week a poem written by St. John’s parishioner, David Middleton, which receives its influence from Jean-Francois Millet’s painting *The Angelus* (pictured above).

“The painting -- and, thus, the poem” as David explained to me, “are about the endurance and faith of peasants who worked long hard days, from dawn till dusk, in the fields of rich owners in pre-industrial France.”

In this moment that we are experiencing, I found it impossible not to share this poem with you. Sometimes a poem, a painting, even a few words, are enough to illuminate our present grief. Sometimes enough to remind us simply that our immediate community, our spouse, our child, our pet, the earth God gave us to till, are enough to position us with a real understanding of our hopeful redemption.

Indeed, how we faithfully endure this moment we are in will be crucial to us, and it will help depict how we rise out of the ash we are in – and there will be a time to more fully discern how this is a part of our journey to the New Jerusalem. Before we arrive there, maybe our first step is to till the hard soil and plant the seeds of God’s love with our nucleus.

“Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.” Perhaps there is no healthier Christian motto than this. Yet we, in a post-industrial modern American world, have often made our neighbors someone who lives across the globe. Or maybe someone in our community who is not even a part of our friendly circle. But now we may realize that our neighbor includes those with whom we are directly related. How are we reminding them of God’s love, of their redemption in these in-between dreams of paradise? How are we working with them toward our larger purpose as part of God’s creation?

One thing is clear, though peasants, though tasked with backbreaking labor, the two individuals in the painting have each other, they have purpose and community even amid great trial. Do you have this? Do you have safety and shelter? Do you have food? Do you have water? Do you have light in your life? Have you spoken about, prayed about, given thanks to God about these things in your life with your immediate community if you have them?

If you do and your closest neighbors do, when our world reawakens, how will you ensure your other neighbors have these very same necessities?

Fr. Stephen+

