Sermon **Proverbs 25.6-7**
September 1, 2019 **Psalm 112**
Proper 17C **Hebrew 13.1-8, 15-16**
The Rev. Gary R. Brower, PhD **Luke 14.1, 7-14**

In Disney's retelling of the Chinese legend of Mulan (a movie familiar to many parents and children, and, memorized, by most adoptive parents of Chinese daughters), there is a scene about three-quarters of the way through that encapsulates the close connection between danger and deliverance. Mulan has just fired the Chinese forces' last rocket at a mountainside, creating an avalanche that is burying the overwhelming Hun forces. Deliverance! The problem is that the avalanche also threatens the smaller Chinese contingent. Danger! As the snow and ice quickly advance on the Chinese, burying everything in their path, Mu Shu, the diminutive accident-prone dragon whose job it is to protect Mulan, comes snow-dishing over the avalanche on a Hun battle-shield, plucking things out of the snow in hopes of finding Mulan. One of his "finds" as he skitters over the snow is "Cricky"—a cricket who has accompanied Mulan on all her adventures from the opening of the movie. Somehow, in the vast expanse of moving snowpack, Mu Shu spots Cricky's antennae, plucks him out of the snow, plops him on the shield, and proclaims, "Man, you are one lucky bug!"

Because of the attack of the Hun army, the Chinese forces are in danger—wanting deliverance. In the danger experienced by Cricky—a small, insignificant insect in the midst of a huge avalanche, there is seemingly no hope for deliverance—yet it comes at the hands of an inept dragon. It is a paradox present—even in a Disney movie. Danger and deliverance, linked in odd ways. Condensed in Mu Shu's declaration: "Man, you are one lucky bug!"

Well, I am a "lucky bug." Perhaps not plucked out of an avalanche by a dragon—but in general, overall terms—terms suggested in today's lessons, I am a "lucky bug." I have a respectable job and salary; I am a homeowner in the Denver Metro area. "Lucky" in the wider world of troubled immigration crises, war, sky-rocketing housing prices. I have a doctorate from a prestigious university—this in a world where many don't finish grade school. These factors have allowed me the luxury of being surrounded by wonderfully

bright, urbane people, and to be able to offer hospitality to folks, perhaps to angels, not as fortunate as I. I am a lucky bug.

I am a lucky bug. I have a wonderful wife to whom I've been married for over 35 years. This in a society where serial monogamy is becoming increasingly common. My wife and I have found a way to have children, which included trips to China! Those kids are finding their place in the world that make their parents happy and proud. I am a lucky bug.

I am a lucky bug. All that I have mentioned is coupled with a somewhat privileged upbringing where I was never in want, never forced to turn to crime to acquire basic necessities. Where I was taught the difference between right and wrong, and what respect for one's neighbor meant and required. I was educated in the ways of righteousness and graciousness. I've experienced forgiveness and mercy from family and others. All this in a world that has seemed to glorify self-gratification at any cost; and where revenge or retaliation are seen as responses to being wronged. I am a lucky bug.

Despite the fact that, at a bit past mid-life, I am, in my doctor's words, "on the precipice … of needing a hearing aid," and that my knees don't seem to work as nimbly as they once did, I am a lucky bug as far as my body goes. I am in good health and basically in good working order. Modern medicine can keep me going—theoretically—for another thirty or forty years. Long life, when in parts of the world, many barely make it out of their teens. I am a lucky bug.

And I live in a land of lucky bugs. Where, despite many of our national short-comings (or pratfalls), we are still the global leaders in oh-so-many ways. Our standard of living is the envy of millions—maybe billions—of people—so many that we seem to find it necessary to limit seriously the number of immigrants who seek that standard. We have such national wealth that we can pay people not to grow food, that we can give money to other nations, that our military can pay $600 for a toilet seat. We are lucky bugs.

Indeed we are lucky bugs. While some might have us believe otherwise, we all live in relative peace and security. We have the freedom to assemble as Christians, Jews, Hindus, Muslims. When given the option, we can vote for very different political candidates—be they representatives of the Republican, Democratic or Green parties. Or, we are even free not to vote at all, and then to complain about the choices others have made.

I am a lucky bug in a land of lucky bugs.

But I am—we are—not unique in the history of the world. Many other cultures and societies have been similarly blessed. Certainly many other individuals have been equally fortunate as I, and many even more so. And the attendant tensions accompanying "lucky bug" status are clearly present in the ruminations of the biblical writers.

These tensions are most starkly outlined in the two pre-New Testament writings. The psalmist, on the one hand, seems to remove "luck" from the picture. The equation—the logic—is pretty closed. If one fears the Lord, if one delights in God's commandments, good fortune will be theirs. Lots of descendants, wealth, riches, and the ability to share that wealth—all for the righteous.

In Proverbs, any "luck" is assumed. That is, wealth and status are givens. But despite what WE might think of whatever WE have, it doesn't allow us to presume to take the place of the king. The implication, of course, is that we cannot—regardless of what we have, or what we do—usurp the place of God. Being "lucky" is one thing; flaunting one's luck is another. Arrogance is disallowed.

For the psalmist, then, wealth is a result of righteousness; for the author of Proverbs, wealth cannot beget arrogance. The underlying assumption is that whatever we have is a gift; in the words of another well-known proverb: "The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away." Deliverance and destruction—skittering in an avalanche on a shield.

The author of Proverbs' words are echoed in those of Jesus' words, and in those of the author of Hebrews. Both suggest that desire for, reliance on, or hoarding of, <u>wealth</u> will ultimately lead one nowhere. The author of Hebrews contrasts the fleeting nature of wealth with the steadfastness of God by quoting yet another Jesus—that is, Joshua son of Nun—"I will never leave you or forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5 and Joshua 1:5). And, of course, Jesus of Nazareth is quoted as saying that those who exalt themselves (with wealth underlying that self-exaltation)—those who exalt themselves will ultimately be humbled.

I don't think that any of these biblical authors are anti-wealth. Money is not the root of evil, after all—<u>love</u> of money is (I Timothy 6.10). And, of course, money is simply a medium of exchange, a representation of what we value. That's why it's such a powerful metaphor throughout the Bible. So the use of "money" or "wealth" throughout these lessons is really indicative of

much more. It's code for all that we value and hold important. It's code for all that we tend to believe will deliver us—from want, from loneliness, from aging, from death. But that illusion of deliverance simply masks the underlying danger that we often place all our trust in a skittering shield that will ultimately lose its worth.

I am a lucky bug in a land of lucky bugs. And what the biblical authors are doing today is reminding me of that fact. I am lucky—all that I have, from family to freedom, is a gift. How can I claim them as earned possessions? I am, ultimately, also, a bug. Even my life is a gift—only a bullet, a speeding car, a rampant virus away from being over. That all is a gift brings a sense of perspective.

That path to perspective is what is at the core of the rite of baptism, celebrated this morning. When baptized, [_____ is put] [we set forth] on that path. Through our regular renewal of our vows (BCP, 302-3), we are reminded how to stay on course. In our baptismal promises, whether taken or renewed, we "renounce Satan", the world's "evil powers", and "sinful desires"—all things that would lead us to self-reliance and arrogance. We "turn to Jesus Christ" and "put [our] whole trust in his grace and love"—that is, we put ourselves under the Lordship of Another, One who has given so lavishly of Himself for our sake.

That <u>all</u> is a gift—that I <u>am</u> a lucky bug—defines my relationship to the Giver. It is to that Giver that I owe allegiance, gratitude, and trust—<u>not</u> to the gift. I am simply a steward of whatever I have. God has invited me to be a guest <u>at</u> the banquet. I cannot repay. I can only share my good fortune with the other guests and take the bounty of that table to those who have not yet heard or heeded the invitation.

I <u>am</u> a <u>lucky</u> <u>bug</u>. Thanks be to God.

Amen.