When our daughter Meredith was born, we were given a copy of the book *Goodnight Moon* by Margaret Wise Brown. For those of you familiar with the work you know that it is a very simple story. It basically involves a bunny saying goodnight to various items in their bedroom like socks, clocks and a bowl full of mush. It sounds a little dull but for some reason the book is mesmerizing. There is beauty in the innocence and sense of wonder at creation that it expresses. There is beauty in its wonderful illustrations and finally there is beauty in its simple structure. I once heard a musician say there is nothing more difficult than writing a simple song. This book was one of those simple things that was done just right and as a result of being done just right it is beautiful. And there is something of that same simple beauty in the passage we have from St. Paul’s letter to the Philippians today. At its heart, the sentence I want to focus on, is really not much more than a list, making it structurally similar to *Goodnight Moon*. But just like *Goodnight Moon* it is beautiful and inspiring and whatever else you want to call it. The sentence comes in the context of Paul giving some final instructions to those in Philippi and reads, “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

Now I do not want to spend a lot of time analyzing why this passage is so lovely because in so doing it would probably lose of some of its loveliness. So, here is my very quick analysis: This passage is lovely is because it focuses on lovely things. Which I know sounds kind of obvious, but it is all I could come up with. So, rather than go through each thing and explain why it is lovely, what I would rather do is ask a larger question and this has to do with why Paul instructs us to think on these lovely things in the first place. That is, why would Paul be so concerned with what we do in the recesses of our mind? Well, here is what I have come up with and hopefully it is less circular than my explanation that lovely things are lovely.

As you all know our minds can be occupied with all sorts of stuff. Sometimes this stuff is practical – what are we having for dinner, where’s the dog, what will get nacho cheese out of the living room curtains and so on. Other times we may ponder more existential topics like what makes for a meaningful life, how can a good God allow evil in the world or who put the ram in the rama lama ding dong? But, whatever our thoughts, there tends to be something which sits behind them that is not directly related to the topics we are contemplating and has more to do with our general outlook or attitude. For simplicities sake, I will just label this outlook or attitude as positive or negative. That is when we think about things, we can think about them in a positive or negative way. And I know this is an oversimplification, but I am trying to keep my sermon at its allotted 1,400 words. So, let’s stick with positive and negative. Now, if for example, we come home and find that the water heater is broken we can react in any number of ways. A more negative approach would be something like self-pity; wondering why bad things always happen to us. Whereas, a more positive way would be to go into problem solver mode, dealing with the issue itself and not dragging it into some sort of personal abyss where we get to recount every wrong every done to us. Or, we could even go so far as to be thankful we live in a time with water heaters and can afford to fix or by a new one. Put another way do we look towards God’s beauty and holiness or do we look inward and focus on the things that rebel against God? And I know that may sound a bit extreme when we are reflecting on a water heater, but I do believe that there is a godly and an ungodly way of navigating most everything in our lives. And that is what Paul is asking of us. It is not a superficial request like telling us to whistle a happy tune, rather he is imploring us to always see God in His creation. The things on which he asks us to reflect are attributes of God and when we think about them we can see glimpses of Him.

What Paul is asking is for us to approach this life from a higher place. A place where we look to the pure and just. And I think he asks this so as to heighten our senses to the things that are of God in this world. In many ways the approach that Paul lays out is the opposite of what we are fed in day-to-day life. There is an old phrase in the newspaper business that says, “If it bleeds it leads.” The idea being that whatever is the most horrific thing will get the most space and the most attention. Now, before I go on, I should make a slight caveat and say I am not suggesting, nor is St. Paul suggesting that we ignore the problems in the world and go about in some sort of soma fueled bubble where it is all sunshine, lollipops and rainbows. Rather, what I am suggesting is that we open ourselves up to experience the things of God that are in this world. If we look there is great beauty.

Now I believe there is more to Paul’s recommendation than just feeling better or being happy. Here is what I mean. If you look at the state of Christianity in the United States it is kind of depressing news. Fewer people believe and even of those who believe fewer think it is important to belong to a faith community. And I think part of the explanation for this is how much we spend time thinking on a list of things that are the opposite of what St. Paul tells us to think on. We think on the dishonorable, the unjust and the impure. And is it any wonder that when we focus on the things that are not of God that we do not actually see God in our lives. We think on things that are not of God and happily conclude that there is no God.

I want to end this discussion with a plug for what we do every time we worship in this space. The whole experience is, in many ways, meant to help us focus on what Paul tells us to focus on. Ask yourself why we worship in such a beautiful building? We do because as the psalmist tells us beauty is part of holiness. Why do we use the words of the prayer book and not just sort of wing it? We do this because we are trying to not use common words but excellent ones; words that have stood the test of time. They may be in a book titled “Common Prayer”, but they are anything but common. Why do we praise God in the worship service? Because as St. Paul tells us we are supposed to praise things that are worthy of it. All week long we hear of terrible things. Whether it is the tragedies in Israel or dysfunction within our own government. Our Sunday worship, by extolling the virtues of God, helps us realize that there is something greater toward which we strive. Sure, we could sit around and gripe about the state of the world, but church is about something greater; something pure and holy. It is about almighty God. So then, “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” so that we may be God’s own this day and forevermore.