

Flourishing The Invitation to Thrive

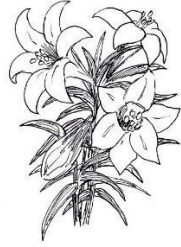


Holy Day Homilies for Lent 2021

Part 2

March 13 - April 4

Love, Penny



Lent blows its feathery ashes
Over our furrowed brow,
And into our eyes,
Drawing rain.

Lent lifts its ragged seeds
Over our parched lives,
And into our hearts,
Taking root.



Mar. 13 Soft and Hard Rains

You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it." (Ps. 65:9)

There were few prayers prayed with more fervency than these two from country churches: "Lord, please send rain," or "Lord, please, protect us from the storm." For the many years, I pastored a country church in Sampson County, my 50-minute commute was prayer time. The land was my prompt. Some hot summer days, I drove past corn blades curling inward from dryness. On cooler summer days, I watched a dark sky bring more rain than was needed, and on rare occasions, hail that left the crops beaten to the ground. Fierce winds could also do great damage. I had seen this all before in Wonderland, and I had heard my father pray those same prayers many times.

It wasn't just farmers that had a vested interest in protecting our land from the impact of harsh weather. Everyone was threatened by storms. Everyone faced the risk of not surviving, of having homes or businesses swept away, of losing access to power, or facing rising costs if the food supply - livestock or crops- suffered. But farmers felt this threat more intimately, more immediately. This was their life and their livelihood. In the South, of course, we faced the yearly threat of hurricanes. The first time I saw my father on his knees, I was around seven years old. It was mid-September and Donna was pressing in with beating rains. The power had gone out, and we spent much of the night up. As soon as the storm passed, I rode out with him to see the damage. Those stalks that had taken a beating were his children too.

According to the *Chronological List of all Hurricanes, 1851-2012*, there are 413 tropical or subtropical cyclones to hit NC, which behind Florida, Texas, and Louisiana, ranks fourth for cyclones

that produced hurricane-force winds. Some of these names may be familiar: Hazel, Connie, Hugo, Fran, Floyd, Irene, and Matthew. Your family or community may remember others. (See www.aoml.noaa.gov/hrd/hurdat/All_U.S._Hurricanes.html).

Farmers don't take for granted God's grace in sending the rivers flowing from Eden in *Genesis* to water the earth -the Pishon, Gihon, Tigris, and Euphrates. Country folk can tell you about the time before God caused it to rain upon the earth. They heard it preached in hot, country churches to sweaty folks who flapped their funeral fans like thirsty birds beating the air and looking for water. When you're hot and your crops are dry, you welcome that blessed "stream" that rose to "water the whole face of the earth" so plants could spring from the ground. (*Genesis 2:5*).

When my father would come in damp from soft rains falling and I would comment, "Oh, you're wet," he would often reply with a grateful grin, "And it's a good wet." When I was baptized one Sunday following a country church revival, my mother was there with a towel to dry me when I came up from the baptistry. The next face I saw was my father's. It was wet too, like I was- a "good wet."

On trips to the deserts of California, my father-in-law, Walt, would explain the arduous process of irrigating farmland and piping water to areas of drought. In the starkness of that landscape, I realized that we Southerners take rain for granted. The fact that it falls at all is a mercy, one of many we have received. Portia, from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, says it this way: "the quality of mercy is not strained;/It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven/Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest;/It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.../It is an attribute of God himself;/And earthly power doth then show likest God's/When mercy seasons justice." (IV, i)

A farmer once asked me to put together some scriptures for him to use as he prayed for rain. I wish I had done that for my

father, but he knew many of them. I share them now with you in his memory and in honor of anyone who longs for rain, but not too much, or anyone who savors the smell of afternoon showers coupled with the scent of sweet corn in the early evening.

*"You visit the earth and water it,
you greatly enrich it;
the river of God is full of water; you
provide the people with grain, for so you
have prepared it." (Ps. 65:9)*

*"Rain in abundance, O God, you showered abroad; you
restored your heritage when it languished;" (Ps. 68:9)*

*"May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,
like showers that water the earth." (Ps. 72:6)*

*"And the Lord will continually guide you,
And satisfy your desire in scorched places,
And give strength to your bones;
And you will be like a watered garden,
And like a spring of water whose waters do not fail." (Isaiah 58:11)*

*"Ask rain from the LORD in the
season of the spring rain,
from the LORD who makes the storm-clouds,
who gives showers of rain to you, the vegetation in the
field to everyone." (Zechariah 10:1)*

"But Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on the cushion. So, they woke Him and said, "Teacher, don't You care that we are perishing?" Then Jesus got up and rebuked the wind and the sea. "Silence!" He commanded. "Be still!" And the wind died down, and it was perfectly calm. "Why are you so afraid?" He asked. "Do you still have no faith?" (Mark 4:38-40)

Prayer: Lord, we thank you for the cleansing waters of baptism, the provision of soft rains and protection from hard ones. Teach us to shower others with the mercy you've given us.



I Have Not Seen Ten Thousand Rains

I have not seen ten thousand rains,
But enough to know the ways of water- The
mists that float spineless like a gnat,
The drizzle that is not sure it wants to come or go,
The shower that shimmers through rainbows,
The steady pour that cleanses,
The downpour that purges,
And torrents that pound against flesh, stone, and heart.

I have not seen ten thousand rains,
But enough to cry for joy when
Water reaches every corner of
A parched body and spirit,
Enough to savor the smell of humus
Baptized in love's river, and
Coming to new life,
When mercy falls.

Come, Flow Through Me

Come, flow through me,
Like a lute cooled by rain,
For I am a curled-up reed,
Braying in the desert,
My hopes, parched and cracked.
Come, wet my throat
And let me sing again!

All Who Are Thirsty, Come

All who are thirsty, come find it,
Draw it,
Carry it,
Pour it,
Share it-
Living Water.



March 14 Pruned

"Before the harvest, as soon as the bud blossoms, and the flower becomes a ripening grape, then He will cut off the sprigs with pruning knives, and remove and cut away the spreading branches." (Isaiah 18:5)

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:1-5)

My grandmother was a master pruner. I didn't always understand what she was doing, but one thing was obvious. Stray branches that had fallen in the mud were clipped free. Dead leaves and branches were cut away, as she explained, so they would not take up food the rest of the plant needed. Other foliage was just thinned out.

Years later, I find myself thinking more and more about spiritual pruning and how many times we let dead wood hang from us and onto us, draining us of the strength we need. What kind of dead wood and leaves are we toting around? Take a few moments to make your own personal list.

What about fear?

Or guilt?

Or ingratitude?

Or worry?

Or busyness?

Just because we are busy does not mean we are productive. Or if we are, *what are we producing?*

Many of us resist mandatory pruning. Many have shared with me that COVID has been such a time when much has been "cut away." What has been removed from your life in the last year that you don't need? What has been stripped away that has made you stronger or more resilient? Think about all the ways God has pruned away thoughts, attitudes, tendencies, actions, or habits that hinder spiritual growth. What still needs cutting back or away?

Prayer: God, remove whatever prevents us from growing with and in you. Pull us away from anything that hinders your mercy, love, and grace.



March 15 One Person's Weeds

"Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵ but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way. ²⁶ But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared. ²⁷ So the servants of the owner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' ²⁸ He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Do you want us then to go and gather them up?' ²⁹ But he said, 'No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn.'" (Matthew 13:24-30)

You have heard the expression, "One person's weeds are another person's herbs." I'm afraid we have forgotten that God is the Sower and that some "weeding" is best left to the One who grows all things.

I remember once a woman telling me she detested weeds and spent much time pulling them from her flowers. She also told me when she "got on a tear," she went in high gear, and in her manic drive to "just get rid of it," did just that. She started out removing just a few weeds but ended up ripping out some of her

treasured flowers. How many of you have gone on a cleaning frenzy and ended up just tossing it all to get it over with?

Sometimes when we "go on a tear," thinking we are doing good, we risk destroying the whole crop. We can't always tell the difference between what we need to root out and what we need to leave growing. Or, we get too heavy-handed and careless. Sometimes, the weeds are vines which twist around and there is no way we can remove these without stripping the stems or flowers from the plant.

In our frenzy to do good, we also do much harm to God's creation, God's creatures, and our relationship with others. We can do harm to what God is trying to grow in someone else's life or accomplish in the world. How many times have you tried to help someone but were so heavy-handed with words, advice or actions, that you damaged the fragile life growing in another?

What's more, sometimes we mistake wheat for tares. I ran across an interesting article entitled "Five Healing Weeds Your Doctor Probably Mows Over." While I cannot speak to the scientific accuracy of the medical power of these "weeds," millions attest to the healing power of some herbs. My grandmother used chamomile tea to settle an upset stomach. To take one example among many, some parts of the plant foxglove, for instance, have been used in prescription medicines to strengthen heart muscle contractions.

My father would have lost it to see the first herb on this list of five - his nemesis kudzu! George Thigpen informed me kudzu had been planted during the Depression to create jobs and to prevent soil erosion. Even before that, kudzu, with its sweet-smelling purple and white flowers, was introduced at a Japanese garden exhibit at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. Kudzu took off - in more ways than one. According to Danny's Flanders' online article, "Kudzu Conundrum," by 1928, agricultural experts were warning about the potential

disadvantages of the plant. Still, Flanders notes, kudzu has been used to make clothing, paper, and as you might imagine, strong baskets. It has also been used to treat migraines, allergies, and diarrhea. Its roots can be used as thickeners, its flowers for jelly, syrup, and candy, and its leaves can be deep fried or baked in a quiche; although, Flanders warns, make sure the plant has not been sprayed "before you go out and harvest a mess for dinner." (See Danny Flanders, "Kudzu Conundrum: How to Deal With This Invasive Plant," hgtv.com/outdoors/flowers-andplants/groundcover-and-vines/kudzu-vine).

Sometimes it's hard to tell what's a tare and what isn't. Sometimes, it's a bit of both. These tares, according to the parable, however, have been sown by "the evil one." One of the great traps we fall into as humans is the quest to root out evil. If you want a long read on how that turned out, I suggest Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. In this classic American novel, Captain Ahab, convinced the whale Moby Dick is the embodiment of evil, develops this maniacal obsession with catching and destroying it. In the end, the one destroyed by evil is Ahab himself. He eventually goes mad, destroys others, as well as himself, and loses all his humanity.

This parable offers much wisdom in our present moment when Americans are more polarized than ever, each side sure the others are the tares, the "evil" ones. When we become obsessed with demonizing the other and trying to rid the world of these "evil ones," we become the demon we wish to destroy.

According to some historical accounts, in September of 1813 during the War of 1812, our Navy won a battle over the British fleets in the Battle of Lake Erie. In reference to this victory, Master Commandant Oliver Perry wrote to Major General William Henry Harrison, "We have met the enemy and they are ours." This has since been passed down as "We have met the enemy and he is us." Sometimes, we become the tares we are trying to rip apart, yet as the parable suggests, such "weeding"

can destroy goodness. Separating tares from wheat is best left to the One who created all things.

Prayer: Lord, protect us from tares and "going on tears."



March 16 Blight

"...You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." (Gen. 50:20)

Farmers endure seasonal failures. Winds, storms, ice, hurricanes, periods of drought, infestations, and crop disease threaten whole crops. *I Kings* lists locusts, caterpillars, mildew, and hail as examples of some destructive forces which destroy crops. Now imagine these problems endure longer than one season and spread over great areas of land. This has been the tragic situation in many places throughout history. Both historical and Biblical narratives chronicle how widespread famine can destroy large groups of people and cultures, bring death, and initiate widespread migrations and immigration. Abraham and Sarah go to Egypt during a famine in *Genesis*. Naomi and her family migrate to Moab during the time of the Judges (12th to 10th century BC).

Sometimes blight is interpreted as God's punishment upon Israel's enemy or in some cases, upon Israel for their disobedience. A plague falls upon the Philistines in *I Samuel* 5 and 6 when they capture the Ark of the Covenant. Daniel's vision of the fruitful tree which will be chopped down in *Daniel* 4 refers to the woes which will fall upon the Babylonian monarch Nebuchadnezzar for his role in opposing Israel. *Ezekiel* 17 is an intricate allegory about two eagles, a cedar tree, transplanted branches, seeds, and vines chronicling the history of the blight which falls both upon Israel for being disobedient and upon its adversaries for their oppression.

The most memorable examples of blight, of course, are the plagues which fall upon Egypt in *Exodus* when the Pharaoh refuses to set God's people free. When Pharaoh enslaves the descendants of Jacob, he not only destroys the sanctity and dignity of human life, he also threatens the harmony and balance God spoke into existence when creating the world.

John Tullock, in *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, one of the texts we used in our college classes, notes that each of the plagues corresponds to a different Egyptian god or goddess. Similar information is available from an online article from Rice University, "Ten Egyptian Plagues for Ten Egyptian Gods and Goddesses" ([stat.rice.edu/~dobelman/Dinotech/10/Egyptian gods](http://stat.rice.edu/~dobelman/Dinotech/10/Egyptian%20gods)).

This source notes that just as the Ten Commandments "express the fullness of God's law, the ten plagues express the fullness of God's justice and judgment against the oppression of Egypt and the Pharaoh." Pharaoh refuses ten opportunities to show mercy to the slaves. Each of the plagues demonstrates God's power over the Egyptian deity. Hapni, the god of the Nile, the water-bearer, has no power to stop the water from being turned to blood. Heket, the god of fertility and renewal who is pictured with the head of a frog, has no power to stop the plague of frogs. Geb, the god of the earth, cannot stop the lice which come from the dust. Khepri, one of the gods of sun and rebirth pictured with the head of a fly, has no answer for the plague of flies. Hathor, god of love and protection often depicted with a cow's head, has no magic to stop the plague on cattle and livestock. Isis, goddess of medicine and health, has no potions for the boils and sores that set in. Nut, god of the sky, has no storm to call off the hailstorm (although perhaps there is some mercy in the fact that the crops in the field destroyed by the hail - flax and barley- are used for clothing and not the main food sources). Seth, god of storms, has no power to stop the locusts. Ra, sun god, has no authority to bring light to the land during the 3 days of darkness. And finally, the

son of Ra, who is reputed to be immortal, finally has no power over life and death.

Mercifully, the slaves in Egypt were protected from these plagues. Passover takes its name from the way death "passed over" the doors marked with the blood of the sacrificial lamb.

Israel herself, however, was not always exempt from famine, blight, or plagues. The Exile itself and Israel's deportation from the land were accompanied by destruction and blight which several biblical prophets attributed to God's judgment. (See *Amos 4:9* and *Haggai 2:17*).

So, why do we have plagues and blight? Millions all over the world have contemplated that in the last year. Why have so many died from COVID 19 or other plagues throughout history? Are plagues judgments, and if so, upon what or whom? The idea that the righteous are spared and the wicked suffer pervaded much of the theology of the *Hebrew Canon*: If you do well, you will do well. If you don't, you will be punished. That formula, however, does not hold up in the *Book of Job* or in many of the complaints of the *Psalms*. There the righteous suffer and are not spared. Neither does it hold up in the *Gospels*. John the Baptist is beheaded for his righteousness, and who suffers more than Christ? Who is more righteous than Christ? And what about all the other innocents who suffer?

Why did we have COVID 19? There is no easy answer. It leaked from a lab and spread from there. The world was not prepared, and many did not take the right precautions. For some, answers became political and socio-economic. Some explanations were found in demographic studies and the age, health, and location of populations. As we look back, there will be plenty of blame to go around, but where do we go from here? Assigning blame may not be as productive as accepting responsibility for trying to ameliorate this problem and doing what is humanly possible to prevent its recurrence.

What may help us is how Joseph responds in *Genesis 37-50* when the seven years of abundance fell upon the ancient world followed by the seven years of blight and famine. First, he chose trust over revenge. He could easily have played the blame game - blaming Potiphar and Potiphar's wife, blaming his heartless brothers, even blaming his father for favoring him, but instead he chose something more productive than revenge.

Had that goal consumed him, had he listened to his own indignation rather than God's vision, millions would have starved. His decision to move forward prevented him from getting trapped in the past. In response to his brothers' fear of retribution, he simply says, "...You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." (*Gen. 50:20*)

As we begin 2021, we need to spend some time reflecting on this question: How did God turn COVID to good in your life? In your family's life? In your parish family? In your community? How may it still be "turned to good?"

Romans 8:35 reminds us that nothing has the power to separate us from the love of Christ - not hardship, not distress, not persecution, not famine, not nakedness, not peril or sword. Every one of those, sadly - even peril and sword - are endangering America *from within* as I write this meditation on February 6, just a month after the Capitol was stormed and lives were lost. How can we store up the wisdom, faith, and strength gleaned from this particularly challenging year for other lean times we may face?

Prayer: God, deliver us from our idols, plagues of the mind and spirit, and the tendency to shift responsibility onto others and away from self.



March 17 Where Have All the Flowers Gone?

"The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of

the turtle-dove is heard in our land."

(Song of Songs 2:12)

Who - except those extremely allergic- doesn't love flowers? Most open in the light imperceptibly. Some open near dusk or dawn. Some bloom at night. There is something sacred about seeing a small bud form, then grow, then begin to open. As flowers burst open, something in us breaks free. It's fascinating to watch flowers unfold using cameras with special motion speeds. There is something exquisite and holy about seeing a bud beautifully blossom and open itself to the world. (Maybe that is what we all long to do).

And when that flower develops into a delicious fruit or vegetable, we are even more grateful. One of my favorite vegetables never had a home in our huge family garden in Wonderland. In fact, I never savored eggplant until I was in college. Carolyn's in-laws, Pat and Andy, are excellent cooks and just spent a month visiting. One of eleven-month-old Charlie's new favorite dishes is eggplant!

Years ago, I planted several eggplants. I excitedly downloaded recipes from the internet. Most called for tomatoes. No problem, thanks to dear Barbara Gray who shares her canned tomatoes with me. And olive oil. No problem. And smokey paprika. Got it. Some called for grated cheese. On it. I was ready and it appeared my plants were.

Each day, I watered them and watched. They were thriving. Green luscious leaves formed, then flowers! I could almost taste my bubbling eggplant casseroles. Then nothing and more nothing. The flowers continued to keep their bloom, but no fruit formed.

I mistakenly judged my plant's power to bear fruit from the outside. By the time I found out what the problem was, it was too late. It looked so healthy and when the flowers formed, I

thought it was inevitable those tiny, luscious purple wonders would follow.

I was wrong. Later, I discovered they were lacking certain nutrients. I know better now. Those plants provided me with beauty and joyful expectation, but I never ate any eggplants from them. I wonder if God feels the same way about us sometimes.

There are several spiritual lessons here. First, things may appear healthy on the outside, but something is missing. Second, flowers are beautiful just for what they are. The lily, Jesus preaches in Matthew 5, "neither toils nor spins," but is more beautifully arrayed than Solomon in all his glory. (Matthew 6:28-29). Still, most flowers have more than loveliness to offer world. Some botanists believe every plant is fruitful, even if that "fruit" is the seed for more plants. In addition, the roots offer nutrients to the soil once the plant is no longer bearing. The Bible doesn't instruct us to bear lovely flowers, although flowering is usually a pre-requisite to bearing fruit, but it does call us to be fruitful. Thus, many flowers and trees not only bear, but eventually, return seed back to the earth. That puts "going to seed" in a better light. Actually, if plants didn't eventually go to seed, we and our world would soon die. (www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/go-toseed)

Where have all the flowers gone? Some hopefully to fruit and some eventually to seed. Our lives were created to be both beautiful and bountiful, lovely, and fruitful. We pray God will bless us with both.

Prayer: Lord, show us how to be fruitful.



March 18 Killing Everything That Squirms

"God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good." (Genesis 1:25)

The serpent who spoke to Eve in Genesis, no doubt, has given all snakes a bad name. You can see why. But just as we can't stereotype all descendants of a person who made some poor decisions, maybe we should give snakes a break. I know, they look suspicious and cunning. They look like they can't be trusted, but maybe they and their wild friends feel the same way about us!

As a young child, I lived not just near the soil, but in it. I did not just grow up on a farm, I grew up "with" a farm. When you grow up with a farm, you grow up with its creatures.

I came to see firsthand how we need earth and its creatures to sustain life. I have a vivid memory of playing one day with an earthworm. I had no fear of it. I loved to see it wiggle and move in the garden Grandmama Wisianna was working. Suddenly, I heard her voice, "Not so hard, let it be." I guess I was pulling it out of the earth. She explained how it was our friend. As the years went on, I learned about other squirmly things that were our friends. My father would not automatically kill any snake he saw, especially if he could identify it. "That's a garter snake," he would say, "a chicken snake, a black rat snake," and the most colorful was the king snake. Most snakes help keep the rat, mole, and insect populations down, which left unchecked, could harm crops and grain stores. The king snake also ate other snakes to keep the farm from being over-run with too many other critters. Nature has a rhythm and balance, and snakes were farm workers too.

Now I also learned about copperheads and rattlesnakes, but they had their value too, even though we did kill these when they posed a threat.

What happens when we stereotype everything that squirms as evil? If we decided to annihilate all squirming life, we soon would destroy our whole ecosystem.

What happens when we apply this to other living beings, including certain humans we decide to label as "dangerous?" Certain groups of people make other groups of people "squirm." Why? The answers include ignorance, false information, prejudice, or fear which leads to paranoia. Somewhere along the way, when did we lose the ability to disagree with someone without despising them? Fear begets fear. What happens if others label us as "dangerous" because we make them squirm? And why wouldn't they if they knew we were "out to get them before they get us?"

Maybe when we grow up *with* a farm, we learn as the VBS song puts it, that "all God's critters got a place in the choir," and if we *ever learn that*, we may have an easier time celebrating the place every living being has in God's kingdom.

This Lent, we need to ask God to show us attitudes and practices that might make us "squirm" and then ask to be healed from prejudices "below the surface" we have denied or suppressed which are inherent in many of the institutions and systems we participate in.

There's no Telling

There's no telling the worm not to squirm,
The squirrel to play possum or the possum not to.
There's no telling the crow how to caw or keep from it.
The bloom how to blossom,
Or how to hang its head
After showing its glorious face to the world.
There's no telling.



March 19 Reaping What We Sow

"For they sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind." (Hosea 8:7)

We are always sowing, every moment of our lives, whether we realize it or not and whether we are intentional about it or not. Words take root and sprout. Thoughts take root and sprout and over time, growing into attitudes and predispositions. Actions, unchecked, grow over time into habits. Ingrained habits, attitudes, predispositions, and repeated actions over time might grow into inherent assumptions, systemic ways of organizing life, and institutional policies and laws, which are both written and unwritten.

Before we talk about what we are sowing, we may want to remember that we also reap what has been sown into our lives. Some of these seeds have been planted in our lifetimes, and some have been growing long before we were ever born. Some are planted by others. Some are planted by God. Some are planted by "the evil one." Some are planted by systemic institutions and ways of doing things. We may never identify the source of some seeds which have grown in our families or communities. We just know some things have been transplanted in our lives and families which we wish were not there. Addictions have taken root and grown. Depression may have taken root and grown. Attitudes and tendencies familiar to certain families continue to flourish. Attitudes which underlie systems and institutions often grow like a toxic ground cover which those in power barely notice; it's such a part of the familiar landscape. What do we do about these?

First, we intentionally ask God to uproot every day what hinders health in us and all our relationships. These may be predispositions for cardiovascular, pulmonary, neurological, or reproductive illnesses, genetic markers for certain cancers, addictions, or patterns of emotional/mental health. These may be patterns in behavior or relationships, or a host of other things.

These may come down in complicated ways we may not always understand. They may come through nature and through nurture. And sometimes, we have no idea all that is "growing." Maybe tendencies or conditions skip generations, the way some trees may bear in alternate years. Some of these, like systemic racism, continue to grow unless we take time to identify where and how they grow and how to uproot them.

Someone once described prayer as "words on our knees" and advocacy as "words on our feet." Sometimes our prayers and advocacy may be the only spiritual work being done daily on earth to uproot some things from the past God hopes will not go on for generations to come. I need to say that once more: *Sometimes our prayers and advocacy may be the only spiritual work being done daily on earth to uproot some things from the past God hopes will not go on for generations to come.* Our "words on our knees" and "words on our feet" could be the greatest legacy and inheritance we could ever give generations to come.

Some of you may be familiar with a song written by Howard Kingsbury in 1869 entitled "Sowing and Reaping"? It begins with two questions:

"Are we sowing seeds of kindness?
They shall blossom bright ere long;
Are we sowing seeds of discord?
They shall ripen into wrong."

That may be a place to start. In addition, it's important to begin looking around for "seeds of discord" which have already ripened "into wrong," and find ways to remove them, making way for kindness to flourish. (Howard Kingsbury, in *Echo to Happy Voices* (New York: American Tract Society, 1869), number 93, assessed through www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/s/o/w/i/sowingre.htm).

Prayer: Lord, show us what you want to transplant to generations coming after us, and teach us, in every moment, how to sow and transplant your goodness.



March 20 Not Reaping What is Not Sown

*"When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.*

*² Then our mouth was filled with
laughter, and our tongue with shouts of
joy; then it was said among the nations,
'The LORD has done great things for them.'*

*³ The LORD has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.*

*⁴ Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the
watercourses in the Negeb. ⁵ May those
who sow in tears reap with shouts of
joy. ⁶ Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing, shall come
home with shouts of joy, carrying
their sheaves." (Ps. 126)*

As we acknowledged in our last meditation, we are always sowing, whether we farm or not. We are always planting, even if we have never set foot in a garden. In our last homily we looked at the importance of becoming aware of all that has been sown into our lives, whether good or bad, and the importance, not only of intentionally uprooting some things, but being intentional about what we plant. Today, let's go in a slightly different direction. Do we ever reap what is never sown?

*Ask a farmer this and you will receive a variety of answers. Sometimes the wind blows in seeds that were never sown, in the same way the enemy sows tares among the wheat in the story Jesus tells from *Matthew 13*. Sometimes, we enjoy a rich life we cannot take any credit for; as the writer of *Deut. 6:11* puts it, we have "houses full of every good thing ... we did not fill, wells we did not dig, vineyards and olive trees we did not plant." In general,*

though, any farmer will tell you if you don't plant it, you don't harvest it. Planting is intentional. It takes preparation, forethought, and hard work.

How does that relate to other areas of our lives? The writer of Ps. 126 is surprised when God restores lives. It is like a dream many never thought would happen. God is the source of all good things, but later in the psalm, the writer emphasizes that God's people must continue to sow.

We may have dreams for our lives, but if we never lay down some seed to grow those dreams, they will never reach fruition. Just hoping something will happen does not ensure it will. In fact, just hoping something will grow probably will ensure it won't.

Everyone remembers the swelling chorus of "Bringing in the Sheaves" which was inspired from this scripture. It's easy to rejoice over a bountiful harvest, but many hours of labor, thinking and rethinking, second guessing, fear it may all be gone in a moment, and heart-wrenching prayer go into any fruit we grow and gather. Do you remember how the song begins? "Sowing in the morning, sowing seeds of kindness,/Sowing in the noontide and the dewey eve,/ Waiting for the harvest and the time of reaping,/ We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves." There is solid theology here. Early every day and early in our lives, we need to sow kindness and not just once, all throughout our day, and throughout our lives, we need to *keep sowing kindness*. And there's more: we need patience to wait for the seeds to mature and bear fruit.

Kindness is related to the word for "kindred," or kin, and shares the same root as "kind" in the expression "humankind." Do humans acknowledge a kinship with other humans? Are humans inherently "kind" to one another or inherently suspicious? (*A long discussion of human nature might be helpful here, but that is beyond the scope of this meditation, although an important*

one to have at some point.) Though often attributed to Mark Twain, it was Christian Bovee who wrote in *Thoughts, Feelings, and Fancies* (1857): "Kindness is the language which the deaf can hear and the blind can see." (accessed through marktwainstudies.com/apocryphaltwainoptimism)

Just wishing for something is not productive. A good country cook taught me something more precious than her favorite recipe. She said this, "If you want sweet potato fluff at the covered dish, don't whine if it's not there. Cook it and bring it." I have never forgotten her words. If we want love, we need to bring love to the table and not just a small dish of it- enough for those who don't bring any. If I want kindness, I need to plant it.

We are planting all the time, all the time sowing. Morning, noon, "dewey eve," and in between, we are planting many things, some intentionally, many unintentionally. What if we determined what we want to grow in our gardens and fields and then, with God's help, plant those things. What if we kept a list of these in the same way we make out our spring seed and plant orders? If we want love, we must love. And more than that, we must plant love's seeds. If we want others to be patient, we need to be patient. If we want to be forgiven, we need to forgive. There is no guarantee everything we *put into* our lives will come back out to us. No matter. We just need to keep sowing and planting good seed, just as the Sower kept throwing out seed over areas where it likely would often grow shallow roots, be choked out or eaten by the birds. Still, he kept sowing!

What do you want to grow in your life? Plant it. What do you want to grow in your family? Plant it. What do you want to grow in your church family? Plant it. What do you want to grow in the vocational settings God has placed you? Plant it. What do you want to grow in your community? Plant it. What do you want to grow in your country? Plant it. What do you want to grow in the earth? Plant it. The world? Plant it.

We have the seeds, an abundance of them. We are seed bearers. We must plant them extravagantly, not stingily, not fearfully or pessimistically. We must plant them with joy and hope, knowing we will never live to see some even sprout. If we saw everything we planted grow, we are probably not sowing far enough or wide enough.

We plant with our thoughts. We plant with our words. We plant with our actions and habits. And we also must expose our plants to the light, water them, and weed them.

Verse two of "Bringing in the Sheaves" reminds us we need strength to sow in the "sunshine and the shadows," not "fearing the clouds, nor winter's chilling breeze." Verse three encourages us to keep on sowing, even through our tears: "Going forth with weeping, sowing for the Master, though the loss sustained our spirit often grieves." Why? "When our weeping's over, He will bid us welcome, we shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves."

(Knowles Shaw, "Bringing in the Sheaves, 1874, accessed at https://hymnary.org/text/sowing_in_the_morning_sowing_seeds).

Remember, up until our last breath, we are seed-bearers. Will we continue sowing? Yes, the question is *what will we sow?* May God keep replenishing our sacks with seeds of kindness, mercy, faith, hope, and love, and give us the grace and strength to keep planting, even in places it seems to us nothing could ever sprout. Along the way, we may also see plants others sown that need watering or repositioning in the sun. As I Corinthians 3:7 reminds us, growing is a communal affair, with God giving the increase. Whatever our vocation, we are called to be gardeners: preparing the soil, planting, gently pruning and uprooting, enriching, watering, bringing to light, and celebrating all the fruits grown in our gardens and in other gardens.

In some soils, it's hard to imagine anything can grow. In such places, we need to remember the Messianic hope grew like a puny, tender, unimpressive shoot from an old stump most had thought

was long dead. Just like God to grow the most precious life, just like that.

Prayer: Lord, show us what you are planting, remind us how to be intentional about what we are planting, and how to care for what others have planted.



March 21 Workers in Whose Vineyard?

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; ⁴and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. ⁵When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. ⁶And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" ⁷They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." ⁸When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." ⁹When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹²saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." ¹³But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last."
(Matthew 20:1-16)

Flourishing is not self-advancement, solitary success, or individual achievement. Flourishing is widespread, communal, systemic, and inclusive. Flourishing happens when all of life is

connected to all of life in a rhythm which brings shalom, health, wellness, and wholeness. That is what the first workers in this vineyard - and maybe we - struggle with.

Traditionally, this story has been interpreted as a parable about the resentment the children of Abraham had for those *Johnny-come-lately* Gentiles who God foolishly welcomed into the family when they really don't "deserve" to be there. After all, they have not put in the hard work of suffering through countless persecutions. They have not followed a grueling, demanding regime of laws and commandments. They have not put in the time, the sweat, and tears. The first workers cannot envision the vineyard as anything more than, or other than, it is. These workers are like the charter members of a very traditional church; they hold a privileged position. Those who want to belong to this exclusive place must work for it.

This is an especially timely parable for COVID days when companies are going under and workers are losing their jobs. In some ways, *this vineyard is the workplace those out of work are looking for*. In a day when thousands are applying for a few positions, when unemployment lines are long, when people spend hours on their computers trying to craft just the right resume to catch the attention of someone they don't know and will probably never hear back from, *the owner of this vineyard would be a dream come true*. This owner never waits for workers to beg or compete for a job. *He goes out to find them. No one who really wants a job in his vineyard is turned away.* When would that ever happen in a competitive marketplace?

To be sure, this is an idealized vineyard. You won't find it in Goldsboro or California or Calais, France. In those places, the grinding laws of economics rule. Supply and demand and the pressure to maximize profits for powerful shareholders at the expense of human rights or safety take priority for huge corporations. Others who are suffering in the "vineyards" today are small business owners. These hard-working folks are not

trying to make huge profits. In fact, they are struggling not to lay people off, and to do so, they have not "profited" financially. If their business closes, many will be affected. And many of those businesses have closed. They are the ones who have shown mega-businesses that money is not the measure of all things. They are the ones, following Jesus' teaching from Luke 14:13, who are generous to those who can't pay them back.

In some ways, the first workers long for what they *perceive to be an ideal workplace*. They represent the economic norm in our society. They want a set wage they can depend on. They are clock watchers. They know when to start and when to quit. For them, the work is a job which should be regulated according to the economic rules of most marketplaces. Everyone comes to work on time for a set wage, works and then leaves. This is a way to earn enough to live on; it is not their livelihood and certainly not their life. They check in and check out. They go and come. What's wrong with that?

The concept that all living beings are part of a whole ecosystem comprised of earth, sun, water, plants, animals, and humans called to flourish as one life would seem foreign, even wacky, to someone who sees work as routine, boring or rote. How can every job be an organic part of God's great household and vineyard? Isn't a job just a job? A piece of work? Something we get a wage for, and nothing more? These first workers just wish the owner could see things the "right" way - their way.

On the other hand, the owner wants this place and everyone in it to flourish. He needs workers who are willing to trust the owner, workers who are willing to reimagine this place as something far different from the marketplace and Wall Street. This owner does not seem interested in maximizing profits by laying off workers. He is not trying to squeeze blood from a turnip. He is not interested in firing two and giving their work to one. This is not a fortune five hundred company.

In fact, quite the contrary. What seems to concern him is hiring as many as he can, giving work to as many as he can find. That seems more important than anything else. He wants to let everyone have a place here, have work here. Rather than operating under a presumption of scarcity - that there is not enough honest work and wages for everyone, that he better skim off the cream before the whole thing goes sour and south - he seems to believe there will always be more work for committed workers than anyone could ever imagine.

This owner sees the vineyard as far more than a marketplace. This owner envisions the "workplace" as something completely different. This owner is God, the One who created sun and moon, seedtime and harvest, plants and animals, and humans to live in a covenantal bond of mutual responsibility compassion.

Which of the workers are we most like? Do we, like Adam and Eve, want to run the world on our terms even if that means deflating or collapsing God's vision for all life? How can we begin to see the "vineyard," God's household, the way God desires it to be?

Perhaps we might begin by deciding to give up the most sacred of our cows: the notions that competition is more powerful than cooperation or individual recognition and rightness are more valuable than communal well-being. Perhaps we might begin by following the example of small business owners in valuing the well-being of all over the luxury of a few. Perhaps we might start by reclaiming some responsibility for doing what we can to help as many as we can have meaningful work and the necessities for life.

How would our lives be different if we decided to trust God to govern creation, the world, the garden, the vineyard - and all therein? How might our lives change if we genuinely believed that we can't flourish if others aren't flourishing too? What if we stopped watching the clock, checking in and checking out,

and really saw this work in the “vineyard” as a grace-filled opportunities to discover together our best vocations?

Prayer: Lord, this is your creation, worlds on worlds. This is your vineyard. Thank you for welcoming us here. May we welcome all you welcome. Teach us to flourish as one.



March 22 Bringing in the Sheaves

So I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.' (Joshua 2:13 NIV)

"When the LORD your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build,¹¹ houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten your fill,¹² take care that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (Deut. 6:10-12)

One of my fondest memories was rising long before it was light to go fish creeks or inlets of the Pungo and Pamlico Rivers near where we lived with my dad. The smell of the river, the first sighting of the sun streaking the grey-blue morning, the merciful coolness of the early air, the burst of the spray of water on the face when we bumped along in the boat, the almost inaudible sound of my voice singing in the wind to the hum of the motor, the slowing to anchor in the serenity of a fresh day, the thrill of that nibble on the end of our lines, the joy of being together - *all these were my earliest experiences of grace.*

I started out with a pole but by the time I was 6, I was using a small rod and reel and casting off. As soon as we came back to shore, we would dress out the fish, and closer to supper time, grate some cabbage for slaw (with my grandmother Wisianna's secret concoction of celery seed, vinegar, salt, mayonnaise, and sugar), and fry up some cornbread in a skillet. When family and

friends joined us, we added to our fish feast the joy of fellowship.

We were enjoying such a fishing trip early one sweltering day in August, during what some might refer to as the "dog days" of summer, just a week or two before I began the seventh grade. My father, a friend, and I had gone out early to fish an inlet of the Pamlico River about 18 miles from the small town of Belhaven and after some hours, we returned to dock. We were steadying the boat while my father, then 36, lifted the motor from the boat onto the low pier. Just as he pulled it up, he collapsed unconscious and slipped back into the water. My friend and I grabbed him and kept him out of the water while my mother, who was nearby, thank God, ran to help us. She was at our little camp, and fortunately, we had two vehicles with us.

My mother did CPR on my father and then rushed him to the nearest hospital in Belhaven. We were told later her efforts saved his life. My friend and I had grown up driving up and down country roads, and though it may seem reckless now, we immediately hopped in my father's truck and headed to the hospital as well. She, just a week away from 14, did the driving.

My father had suffered a massive heart attack and stayed in an oxygen tent for about a month and the hospital for 6 weeks. I stayed with my friend during this time. Heart attack protocols have certainly changed. The doctor caring for him sent our pastor, Rev. Roland Jones, out three times during that period to break what seemed inevitable to everyone - daddy was not going to make it. A year ago, I had the opportunity to see this dear pastor at a nearby ordination service, and he shared the story again we both knew so well: "Whenever I drove up to where you were staying, I tried to tell you how bad it was, but could not bring myself to say what they were asking me to say." Instead, we prayed and waited.

There are many ways to bring in the sheaves. That year, several rallied around my father, helping harvest his crop. I never read *Deuteronomy 6:11* or *Joshua 24:13* about mercifully "eating from vineyards and olive groves" we did not plant without remembering this season of our lives. Our "vineyards and groves" were our corn, soybean, and wheat fields, and through the love of family friends and community, we experienced God's mercy and the compassion of neighbors who lived out the commandment to love others as they hoped to be loved. Though my father planted that year, a community of neighbors harvested.

Grace comes in unexpected places and moments. Grace loves to sing and always drowns out fear when it does. Every time I sing "Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves, we shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves," I thank God for the mercy of those who harvested for us that year. I thank God that my father did make it, and though we were told he would never return to manual labor, he did. By God's startling grace, he did.

Prayer: Lord, for the grace that lifts us when we are most desperate, we praise you. For the grace that flows through us when we are most delighted, we thank you.



March 23 Not Bringing in All the Sheaves

"When you harvest the crops of your land, do not harvest the grain along the edges of your fields, and do not pick up what the harvesters drop. Leave it for the poor and the foreigners living among you. I am the LORD your God." (Leviticus 23:22, New Living Bible)

"You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge. ¹⁸Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore, I command you to do this. When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the LORD your God

may bless you in all your undertakings. ²⁰When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. ²²Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this." (Deut. 24:17-22)

The year of my father's massive heart attack, we were fortunate to have a loving community help us bring in a harvest that otherwise would have stayed in the field. But God does call us to leave *some of the sheaves* in the field.

The *Book of Ruth* explains the dire situation Naomi and Ruth faced. Unfortunately, famine has been, and continues to be, a harsh reality. Such is the situation Naomi, her husband, and her two sons faced in a biblical story set in the time of the Judges (approximately 1150-1025 BC). To survive, the family migrate to Moab, where the sons married Moabite women, but in another tragic turn of events, all three men died, leaving the three women behind. What would they do? The famine in Israel finally subsided and Naomi wanted to return to her home but counseled her daughters-in-law to stay back in Moab in the hopes of remarrying. Orpah follows her advice, but Ruth refused to let Naomi return alone. Back home, Naomi sent Ruth to reap in the field of her distant kinsman. To free the poor from the burden of famine, a Levitical law provided that some grain be left behind in the fields.

In addition, according to the Levirate law ("law of the brother"), if a man died without a child, it was the responsibility of the nearest kin to take the widow into his home, have a child with her, and give that child the name of the deceased. This practice ensured the dead man would not pass to Sheol, the place of the dead, since his name *lived on*. Boaz, a family kinsman, noticed Ruth gleaning in his field, had compassion on her and her family, and acting as the *ga'al* or redeemer, married her. In Ancient Israel, the *ga'al* or kinsman redeemer, was usually a relative who, according to David Bramer in the *Baker*

Evangelical Dictionary of the Bible, acted on behalf of a family member who was in "trouble, danger, or need of vindication." This person may redeem or buy back a family member from slavery, or as in the case of the widows in the *Book of Ruth*, redeem them from poverty and lives of destitution. While the nearest kinsman to the family was not willing to act as the *ga'al*, Boaz was. Ruth and Boaz gave birth to Obed, the grandfather of King David.

Who needs the sheaves we leave behind in the fields? The New Testament church recognized the challenges widows faced. Jesus condemns the Pharisees in *Luke 20:47* for "devouring widows' houses" and then in the next chapter, he praises the sacrifice of the poor widow who put two copper coins in the Temple offering, a gift worth far more than all the others. In his first sermon in *Luke*, Jesus pointed out that God's faithfulness extends not just to the widows of Israel. Using language that angered his hearers, he that in Elijah's day, when it had not rained for 3 years and 6 months and there was famine and many widows in the land, "Elijah was sent to none except the widow of Zarephath of Sidon." (*Luke 4:26*). God calls Israel to be compassionate to alien and foreign widows, not just to Israel's own.

Widows lacked the freedom of being secure once their husbands were gone. That problem still exists today. About four years ago, an article entitled "Life After Loss," from the Feb. 2017 issue of *National Geographic* (79-103), described the plights of widows worldwide who are pushed from their homes after their husbands died - often by the husband's own family. Some widows in India are driven to special areas and dropped off. This problem is intensified by the fact that these women are often advanced in age and disabled from years of heavy labor or other health problems. Many suffer sexual abuse and have their property and even their children seized.

Sometimes we come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves. Here are some ways we can rejoice "leaving some sheaves in the field":

1. *Be generous with our Week of Compassion offering in February and throughout the year.*
2. *Practice "BOSO," buy one, share one. From time to time, we collect various things to share with local shelters or our soup kitchen.*
3. *Some grocery stores have "leave behind" bins where we can purchase items for sharing.*
4. *Share a meal or food with someone who needs our special care in this time.*
5. *Call, write, text or email those experiencing special challenges.*
6. *Your ideas*

Prayer: Holy God, thank you for your abundant provisions. Move us to share from our great storehouse.



March 24 First and Best

"As soon as the command was spread abroad, the people of Israel gave in abundance the first fruits of grain, wine, oil, honey, and of all the produce of the field. And they brought in abundantly the tithe of everything." (2 Chronicles 31:5)

Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the first fruits of all your produce..." (Proverbs 3:9)

"But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth." (2 Thessalonians 2:13)

The winter is passing, and spring is near. Soon you will put into the earth some early seeds or plants- things like lettuce, snow peas, radish, and broccoli. These are hearty and can withstand

the chilly weather that comes before the warmth soaks in the land. Then you will plant many other things and eagerly await the moment you first see life growing—that first tiny green tomato or cucumber or squash breaking out from their yellow flowers, which now look like tiny parachutes. Soon these will ripen, and you will pull and taste your first tomato, bean, pea, onion, or okra, remembering why fresh is best. In the country, we rinsed those first tomatoes with a garden hose and ate them like fruit, tasting all that was lost when greenhouses tried to grow them.

In our Advent meditations, we celebrated the gift of Jesus, God's first born. God gave the best to us and we, in turn, are to return our best, our first fruits, to God. There are over 100 biblical verses on first fruits and while they are more concentrated in the Torah, (*Genesis 4:3-4, Exodus 23:16, 35:22, 9-14, 16, Leviticus 2: 12-16, 26:10, Numbers 15:20, 18:23, Deuteronomy 18:4, 26:1-19, and 28:26*), they continue throughout the *Hebrew Canon*. See these references in the *Historical Books* (*II Chronicles 31:5, 2 Kings 4:42, Nehemiah 10:37, 13:31, 12:39-44*), in the *Prophetic Books* (*Ezekiel 44:30, Jeremiah 2:3, and Malachi 3:10*), and in the *Writings*. (*Proverbs 3:5*)

The call to tithe also continues through both testaments. Early on, the patriarchs Abraham and Jacob tithed (*Genesis 14:19-20 and 28:20-22*), a tradition also referenced in *Leviticus 27:30-34, Exodus 34:22 and 2 Chronicles 31:4-5*. You might find interesting that *Deuteronomy 12:5-6* distinguishes between tithes and free will offerings. The tithe was the minimum, God's requirement. Free will offerings were gifts given in gratitude over and beyond this.

We might wonder if Jesus spoke on tithing. In a sense, he did. In *Matthew 5:17*, Jesus emphasized that he had not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. It's important to keep this verse in mind a few chapters over in *Matthew 23:23* when Jesus

reprimanded the Pharisees: 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.' Jesus did not abolish the practice of tithing, but rather acknowledged it's possible to tithe without being merciful, just, and faithful in other matters. At another point, Jesus noted that those who give to impress others don't impress God. Who impresses God? The poor widow who humbly gives not a tithe but all she has, a single coin. (Mark 12:41-44). Jesus' teaching in the *Sermon on the Mount* from Matthew 5-7 does not abolish such practices as tithing, prayer or fasting, but only the legalistic tendency to do any of these for show.

In the New Testament, first fruits are not just things we grow and offer. *We* are God's first fruits. In *2 Thessalonians 2:13*, for example, Paul writes that God, through grace, chose believers as the first fruits "for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth." For that, Paul gives God thanks. We find a similar teaching later in the *Book of James*: "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures." (James 1:18) Just as Jesus' life, death and resurrection are first fruits offered by God's firstborn and only begotten son, we respond by offering ourselves back to God, as a "kind of first fruits."

Now, just at the beginning of the planting season, we may ask ourselves some important questions and sit awhile thinking about them:

Does God have my first offerings?

Does God get the first and best of my life, my creativity, my energy, my efforts, my work, my devotion?

Or does God just get something leftover?

Is that the difference in the first offerings of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4? Does Abel bring his best, while Cain just brings an offering? Is Abel, representing Israel's early identity as nomadic herdsman, being preferred to Cain, father of the agricultural Canaanites who credit their farming success to their fertility gods?

What about us? Do we bring an offering, just any old offering, just something, or do we bring God our best - our best energies, our best prayers, our best creativity, our best efforts, our best faith, and commitment?

Prayer: God, you gave us your best, Jesus Christ. May we bring our best gifts to you.



God, You Are

You are the heat inside the flame,
The cool inside the water,
The smooth inside the peace,
The green inside the bulb,

Lord, you are life passing through me,
Through us,
Through all.
What joy-
When I cannot tell if I am flowing,
Or being carried,
Holding,
Or being held.



March 25 From Field to Table

"Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you." (Luke 6:38)

Many good measures have been given to each of us- measures which are "running over" are placed into our "laps." Growing and sharing our sustenance are communal, social and spiritual affairs. In the past few years, we have heard more and more about living "from garden to table." What does this mean?

It means that we live in covenant with God, each other and the earth. We live reciprocally and responsibly. Local farmers and growers partner with local restaurants who strive to use freshly grown or locally harvested food (fruits, vegetables, meats, fish), agreeing to also respect their relationship with nature and the environment to farm in ways that protect the land, air, and waterways from harm. Growers are not isolated from distributors or chefs. In Waco, Texas, I visited such a sustainable community called the Homestead. They grew their grain, ground it into meal, baked their bread, and served it in their restaurant. Their potters made the cookware. They raised their own livestock on open, grass-fed fields. Everyone, from the very young to the very old, had a part in this sacred cycle.

When we live "garden to table," we model the theological unity of the one table. Around the one "table" are gathered the One who created all and sustains all, the one who grows the wheat, the one who threshes the grain into meal, the baker and those who break the bread. Each sees the other; each is a part of the other; each contributes to a process which is holistic and whole. The chef knows the persons who fish, where they fish, and how they fish. They share a mutual purpose, respect, responsibility, bond, and accountability.

Living round one table is something farming families understand. They share life with living things that give them life. They have put things in the ground, cover them with dirt, watered them, weeded them, gratefully watched them sprout up, flower, and begin to fruit. They have gathered and washed the fruit with their hands. They may have raised their own meat, which can present its challenges. They know pork comes from pigs, beef

from cows, veal from lambs. They know tomatoes and butterbeans grow on vines above ground and potatoes, onions and carrots grow underground. They know blueberries grow on bushes and peaches and pears grow on trees. They understand the difference between stem, leaf, and root vegetables. They know the difference between a pickling cucumber and a table cucumber. They know a "dumpling" is usually cornmeal boiled in a pot with another vegetable, not some pastry filled with apples and fried. We have those; we just call them "applejacks," and we eat more *fritters* than most folks. They know a roasting ear is from a plant - corn - not an animal. They know that individual silks are attached to each kernel of corn like tiny umbilical cords. They know how to shuck both corn and oysters and how to silk corn without destroying it. They know that a pressure cooker is not just an expression conveying the stress you feel at work, and thanks to Linda Thigpen, "blanch" is more than a woman's name. They know that smoke house is something other than a place for firing up cigarettes. They may even know things they wish they could forget - how to grind sausage, and make chitlins, souse, and liver pudding!

Maybe they watched more agile family members shinny up peach or pear trees to collect enough fruit to peel, cut and cook down with sugar and lemon rinds for jams, jellies and preserves. Many have had the joy of gathering in one place to "put up" enough corn, beans, peas, tomatoes, and pickles *for everyone*, or gather at someone's house to make breads, cakes, sea foam, fudge -or *what you need many hands for* - pull candy. Before we ran into Harris Tetter to get our favorite ice cream and before there were electric ice cream makers, making this dessert was a communal affair - grandma cooked the custard; someone bought the ice and salt; someone brought the towels; the very youngest started out cranking until it was too hard to turn. Then someone a little older took over. Everyone had a turn. This

was like the love feasts of the early church. Everyone brought something, gave something, became a part of the whole process. These are just a few examples of life shared round one table. Round one table, whole selves and whole relationships were nourished and strengthened.

The story of our faith journey is a pilgrimage from one garden to one table. God forms, then fills and blesses each being to flourish. Life begins in a garden, with God as the Creator/Gardener/Farmer who creates sacred spaces -sky, earth, seas, and humus/humans from the soil and then fills each space or entity. Birds fill the sky; animals cover the earth, fish swim in the water, God's breath fills humans.

God's vision is not merely for humans to have sustainable lives as they maintain their separateness, not merely for bread to be broken in isolated places, but for the whole of creation to live connected with, dependent upon, and grateful for the gifts of the other. So, what hinders this gathering? In the story of the Great Banquet from Luke 14, apathy and "busyness" threaten it. In the story of the Prodigal Son from Luke 15, pride, impatience, greed, and jealousy threaten it. What about us? What hinders us from living "from garden to table"?

Prayer: God of the Garden and Table, inspire us to live as one people, led by your Spirit.



March 26 A World for "Daisy"

"The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." (Psalm 24:1 NIV)

She ran in from her Girl Scout meeting still dressed in her blue Daisy outfit, but all I could see was green. Her mouth and tongue and face were covered in it. The wild look in her eyes I attributed to sugar, and the fact she was circling around the room at rocket speed. Mrs. Penny, she squealed, "Are you green?"

Apparently, she was working on some "earth" badge, and her leader must have led off with that question and finished off with a snack of some green things only children under the age of 10 would put in their mouths. Squirming and twisting, she proceeded to tell me all the "green," fun things they had done that day.

Children, like "Daisy," that grow up with gardens or on farms, start out *green*. They see lots of it everywhere. They watch living things being planted, grow and mature into fruits of vibrant colors -red peppers, watermelon and tomatoes, yellow corn and squash, purple beans and eggplant, all sorts of green delights - cucumber, cabbage, okra, beans, peas, and celery, and even "speckled" things. One of my favorite dishes growing up was a pot of "speckled" butterbeans with potatoes and cornmeal dumplings.

Children that grow up "green" grow up not just seeing vegetables lying in a grocery bin with some water sprinkler timed to spray them. They see them grow up. They see that green is not just a description, not just a color, it is a process unfolding before them which mirrors their own growth. They don't just read about photosynthesis, they witness it.

My "little Daisy" showed me her cup of dirt. "What's that?" I asked. She stared at it and said, "It's a seed that will grow!" I'm not sure there's any research that children who grow up alongside green things are any more patient than other children, but it stands to reason that watching nature unfold little by little is a wonderful antidote to our "let's have it now" mentality. For many children, green things are objects in a plastic bag their parents bring home from some store, not green, living things that grow from humus, the same substance we were made from. Some spiritual kinship must develop between children and the small seeds they plant and watch sprout and grow. In addition, there is surely some strength that develops over the disappointment from staring at that cup that never

produces anything green. Sadly, all those seeds we plant will not come up, and the sooner we learn that life lesson, the better.

My little "Daisy's" assignment was to water her cup with her mom's help, putting it in a place with sunlight. She also had to pick up five pieces of trash that week.

I remember working with a group of young people at camp one summer. My co-counselor and I were brainstorming about how to teach care for creation and "landed" on the idea of following our campers around, picking up the trash they left behind! Meanwhile, during our outdoor sessions, they were busy building "the world." It was amazing. With some sticks, dirt, rocks, twigs, and flowers, they created gardens, flowers, mountains, rivers, and trees. It was their "Garden of Eden!" When they finished, we slipped in while they were out and put *their trash on their garden*. Imagine their reactions! They were hurt, angry, and disappointed. "Who did this?" they asked. Then we told them where the trash came from, and together, we cleaned it up and started over.

Every day we are on the earth, we can start over. I have often thought of my "Daisy's" question, "Are you green?" It calls me to re-examine my life and habits. What am I doing to care for the same earth my children and grandchildren will inherit? In her simple way, she was asking me a deeply theological question, "How am I being a good steward of creation, as God asked me to?"

As Disciples of Christ, we have many resources to help us care for creation available through the Green Chalice Program sponsored by Disciples Home Missions. Lest some folks are offended at the word "green," it might be good to explain what Green Chalice isn't. It isn't a political agenda or movement, although both practices and policies certainly can help or hinder "creation care." Instead, it originates in the theology of ecological responsibility. Both liberals and conservatives live on

the same planet and care about sustaining life for future generations. Some of the options for living "green" may not appeal to you or be immediately feasible. What the Green Chalice Program offers is an opportunity to renew a covenant of care as God's stewards by making some important changes within our reach. The program involves three initial steps even our young Daisy could participate in. First, form a group who cares about creation. Next, sign a covenant of renewal to be more intentional about caring for God's world. Then, select three things to do from a long list which includes the following:

Get an Energy Audit, Start or Enhance a Recycling Program, Use Real Dishware, Stop using Styrofoam and disposable dishes, Changing to efficient light bulbs, Install programmable thermostats, Start a community garden, Serving local foods, Plant Native Species plants, Plant Trees in the community, Participate in the Disciples Coffee Program, Purchase Eco-Palms for Palm Sunday, Weave Creation into worship in prayers, hymns, liturgy and sermons, Use Eco-Friendly cleaning products, Provide Eco-Tips in Newsletters, Install Rain Barrels for watering, Host a Farmer's Market, Have a Green VBS theme, Partner with Local Organizations for Advocacy, Do a creation care study series, Observe the Sabbath.

For more information, see

www.discipleshomemissions.org/missions-advocacy/greenchalice/green-chalice-program

"Daisy" was around six years old when she asked me if I was green. Imagine she is your child or grandchild. I see Margaret's and Charlie's faces when I remember her. I wonder how green her world, their world, or the world of millions of other children will be. I wonder how many will have potable water or grow up with gardens. I wonder how many will grow daisies and have whole, fresh food to eat and place on their children's and grandchildren's plates. The answer is up to us. "Daisy" and her Creator just raised the question.

Prayer: Lord, the earth and the fullness thereof are yours! Have mercy on us for stripping, depleting, polluting, and destroying that world. Help

us renew our commitment to care for the creation you brought into being and love.



"The First Blossom"

When the braces came off in spring,
Her legs, like stems,
Grew strong,
Winter's wither gone.
She was the first blossom
We saw -
Twirling her bright skirt round,
Bouncing in the breeze and
Fragrancing the earth with something fresh,
Smelling like grace.



March 27 The Deepest Freezers and Pantries

"I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. ⁷ So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. ⁸ The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. ⁹ For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building. (I Corinthians 3:6-9)

We are co-workers in God's service. The King James Version of this passage says, "You are God's husbandry." Husbandry usually refers to the cultivation of plants and animals, but also, according to Merriam Webster's Dictionary, it also includes the "judicious use of resources" or the "care of a household." (www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/husbandry). God's household consists of the earth and the fullness thereof - land, air, water, creatures, plants, animals, humans, and the charge to humans to care for the whole household.

I grew up in a community that envisioned itself as one household who lived as neighbors in the best sense of the word. Now, I'm not going to say no one on the phone "party" line with three other neighbors ever listened in. And I'm not saying having everybody know your business is always a good thing. You might get a call asking why the light was on the back bedroom all night, or why your screen door was hooked on Saturday (no one locked doors or took keys from their cars in Wonderland), or did we hear Henry got in an hour later than usual? Why, in years past, it was not uncommon to open the local newspaper's "society" page to read about you and your aunt going shopping in Greenville, for goodness sakes!

Still, we grew together in many ways as one household, for better or for worse, and one of the joys of growing up in the country and serving a country church was the joy of sharing an abundant growing season with neighbors in your household.

It was not unusual to drop off extra tomatoes, cucumbers, and if it rained a lot that year, okra, to nearby neighbors. It was also not unusual to find bags of things you didn't have at your door. Many at First Christian remember the "vegetable table" in the breezeway before it was closed in, and after, where you brought something extra. A can or basket was placed on the table for offerings for the general church or a special CWF/DWM project. The unspoken rule at the country church I was privileged to serve was "leave your car unlocked" so it was easier to drop things off. Our oldest parishioner, Mr. Richard, in his nineties was still hauling several watermelons to church each week -watermelons he sometimes fell in the ditch pulling. When it became challenging for him to "pick" over his garden by himself, you might get a call to come pick and go halves with him. Barbara Gray, a dear friend who continues to share her freshly canned tomatoes and beans with me, remembers getting these calls on hot humid days. One day, they picked butterbeans from a wet garden. She explained, "When we

finished, I was completely covered in mud. That was no problem for Mr. Richard. He was on hand to hose me down. I will always cherish the feel of that water rinsing me on a hot summer day." Planting, growing, picking, freezing, or canning were community affairs. George Thigpen and others shared during our Lenten Book Study last week how farmers shared labor. Maybe Monday, you would head to Brantley's house to harvest his crop and then go to Dennis' house on Tuesday and someone else's house on Wednesday. Like a barn-raising, you needed each other, and if you worked together, no task was too hard. Or, as Grandmama Wisianna used to say, "Many hands make light work."

If you grew up with the land, what do you remember? I remember picking tomatoes and helping my grandmother boil them to the point of removing the skin and then following certain procedures to can them. I remember the feel of the wet blades of corn whipping across my face as I moved through the corn field just before day and holding a tow sack to receive the broken ears of corn, testing the kernels with my thumbnail, tasting that sweet milk that followed, shucking and silking, blanching, cooling, cutting, bagging, sealing, and freezing. Many country folks had two or more deep freezers for all the bounty of vegetables and meats. Depression grandparents and those before them "put up" everything they could in cans, freezer bags, or the "smoke" house, where meats were salted, hung on hooks, and smoked.

Whether we realized it or not, we were preserving so much more than fruits or vegetables on those early mornings and late afternoons - the joy of God's bounteous provision, the joy of pulling together, the joy of working hard and playing hard, the joy of connecting deeply to the people God had blessed us to share all of life with. Those are some of the things we were storing away in some place deep within.

Of course, if we piled too much in, soon we had too many "old things" with freezer burn. This was a sign we were hoarding. Some friends shared they found things 20 years old and older "down deep" and they claimed they were still good. Hmm. Some were barely recognizable. Some told me they thawed things out to identify them! The general rule was to bring other things to the top when you put more in, but there was a better rule than that: "give away" every time you "put away." Don't let that freezer get "too deep."

One of my clergy friends shared a story I will call "the enticement of expiration." The church had started a food ministry, and there was a tremendous response. Cans of this and that poured in. Those overseeing the project, however, noticed a pattern. Many of the cans were expired or near expiration. Also, the home canned offerings looked a little "long in the tooth." A friend who works at a local soup kitchen had a similar observation. Often people did not bring in their best, or even second best, but what needed throwing out! She made the comment, "Obviously they would not serve this to their family, so why would they bring this to our family?" She went on to say that many of the people they serve don't eat particularly well the rest of the day and really need wholesome, healthy food.

So, God gets the best of our labors. Who gets the next best and who gets the rest? Jesus also has some helpful guidance. Once when asked about the greatest commandment, he responded, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:37-40).

Israel left some grain behind for the poor, but what happens when the poor don't find our fields, or freezers or cupboards? A produce truck farmer from Sampson County lamented all the good vegetable and fruit rejected by stores because of a

blemish or spot. Ministries have been developed for the purpose of getting good food to people who may never find our fields.

If we live out the greatest commandment, and the one next to it, we may discover our freezers and pantry shelves have become *too deep*. We may remember *putting up* is a virtue but *putting completely away* may be a vice. We may discover that while we are piling in another year's bounty, the person just down the street may have bare cupboards. There is a rhythm to honor in God's household:

1. Since God brings life to us, fills us, blesses us to be seed-bearers, sowers and reapers, we bring to God the first and best of our harvest. We bless God's table with our first and best, just as God blessed us with God's first and best, the beloved son Jesus.
2. We share our bounty with other neighbors nearby.
3. We continue to "make new neighbors" by practicing the model Jesus introduced in the parable of the Good Samaritan. We look for opportunities to become people of greater compassion and mercy who reimagine God's household as any opportunity to transform strangers into friends and family. By creating new ministries of neighborliness, we deepen our understanding of what true *koinonia* looks like and lives like.

Prayer: Lord of all our fields, God of the whole earth, Holder of the House, teach us how to serve in your holy household. Expand our understanding of what it means to live compassionately and responsibly in your one "House," as we gather around one Table.



Holy Week

March 28 The Leaf Collection Palm Sunday

"When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.'⁴This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, 'Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, 'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!' ¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' ¹¹The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.' (Matthew 21:1-11).

It was a cool fall afternoon the September of my sophomore year in high school and I was on a mission - to find and identify leaves for my leaf collection. I needed good specimens to tape onto separate sheets of typing paper. Though they existed, erasable paper or whiteout were not in my bag of supplies, and so I pounded out my information (scientific name, common name, type of venation and whether it was a simple or compound leaf) on a non-electric typewriter. When I made a mistake, I just erased with a pencil eraser, leaving behind that little pink/red smear and a small crater in the now see-through paper which I tried to cover by typing over. Most of the time, I just had to start over.

So, the first order of business was locating and securing the leaves. Everyone knew sophomores were on this mission and

word got around who had what. Everybody had lots of pine and elm. Several had weeping willow trees. A couple of aunts had apple and pear trees. A man nearby had more varieties of oaks than you could shake a stick at. You knew who had the pecan and walnut trees. They were the ladies who always brought the pecan and black walnut cakes to homecoming. A family friend who had moved away mailed me some leaves from citrus trees. It would have been swell if I had known Carey then; he could have picked lemon and orange leaves from his back yard. (Of course, since he would have been 11 then, helping a high school girl with her leaf collection was probably not on his bucket list. Back then, who in the world had bucket lists?) The leaf I was proudest of was from one of the oldest trees in my collection, the ginkgo.

On this one afternoon, my grandmother Wisianna, who was always keen on getting ice-cream without my daddy finding out, enthusiastically volunteered to drive me around. On the way, of course, we wheeled in Lucy's Store, where I was instructed to buy two ice cream sandwiches and keep quiet about it. That afternoon, we had quite a successful run. She drove. I jumped out, asked permission, clipped samples, and hopped back inside, hopefully but not always, before she was tearing away squalling her tires, which she usually did, though not intentionally. Once we got home, she asked what was next. I went to get several Sears and Roebuck catalogs I had been collecting for just this project, yelling back over my shoulder, "We need to press them." Before I could retrieve these, however, she had turned on the iron and proceeded to do just that, screaming after a few seconds, "Penny, what in the heck is this mess?" When I returned, I found Wisianna holding a warm iron and some shriveled, curled-up leaves! Like Amelia Bedelia, she had "pressed" the leaves. I accused her lovingly of doing that so we could retrace our steps, stopping for more ice cream, which, of course, we did.

I go into this narrative because this was my first memory of not only caring about but cherishing branches and leaves. This was the first time I broke them off for an important purpose. Each one was precious. Each had an identity, a context, a history. They had individual names and locations. They, like you and me, lived somewhere - somewhere nearby. They were our neighbors. We came to know these leaves better than we know most people, even to the shape of the veins running through them. Some were pinnate. Some were palmate. Some were simple. Some were compound. Each was special, framed on its own special page.

Our leaf collections involved observation and research. We could immediately see some of their features but needed to learn much more about them. Leaves may look so similar, but on examination, they bear significant differences. It's the same with examining biblical accounts of the "same" event. When we study the Palm Sunday stories from the *Gospels*, for example, we learn that while *Mark* and *Matthew* include the throwing down of the branches and garments, *Luke* only mentions garments while *John* omits garments, but is the only one to give the name "palm" to the branches. Also, in *John's* account, those who are present wave their branches rather than lay them down. *Luke*, on the other hand, is the only one to provide the moving detail of the Pharisees ordering Jesus to quieten the noisy crowd, to which Jesus responds, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out!" (*Matthew 21:1-11, Mark 11:1-11, Luke 19:28- 44, and John 12:12-19*)

When the people crowding the streets of Jerusalem picked up those leaves on Palm Sunday, they thought they knew what they were. Their families before them had told them what they knew. These branches were broken and waved or thrown down to honor a conquering king returning victorious from battle. They also knew more. Their ancestors had lived in the desert for 40 years and to commemorate this, each year they too

fashioned and lived in tents from broken branches during the Festival of Booths.

Still, as they made their "leaf collections" that Palm Sunday, did they know that while the Romans were entering the city from one side, on the opposite side of the city, they were laying down their triumphant laurels before a man who would enter Jerusalem on a simple donkey without flare or fanfare? As they cast down their leaves and garments and proclaimed, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord," did they know what this Lord would have to face this week?

Later, after Jesus died and rose again, would any recall the words of Jesus about the branches staying connected to the vine which *John* will later write down? What will this day mean for them, as they continue to *collect* different stories and perspectives about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection? What will this day of "leaf collecting" mean for us?

My biology teacher had a deep faith, and once we had gathered all our leaves, taped them in, and analyzed them, she told us there was much more to learn about trees than we would ever learn if we focused only on individual leaves. A single leaf would never show us the rings and rings encircling the bark and the hard winds, infestations, or even blight some trees endured. A single leaf would never show us the massive community of roots beneath the surface spreading out and finding other roots which enabled groves of trees to remain strong and thrive. A single leaf would never show us what might prevent a tree from flowering or bearing fruit season to season, or the joy of canning a fruitful harvest when it did. A single leaf would never show us what this tree means to the other flora and fauna in the area, to the soil or the water table. A single leaf might never show the medicinal secrets of healing deep within the bark, roots, branches or leaves of some trees.

A single leaf might never reveal both the excitement and anguish of Adam and Eve as they ate fruit from a tree they were not supposed to pull from. A single leaf pasted on a page might never convey what both the prophets Ezekiel and John envisioned -a miraculous tree whose "leaves will not wither nor... fruit fail," being watered from the rivers flowing from the sanctuary, a "tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit," one for each month, whose leaves are "for the healing of the nations." (Ezekiel 47:12, Rev. 22:2)

When they threw down their leaves on Palm Sunday, they could not clearly perceive who this humble man riding into Jerusalem that day had been and would be. They could not yet see the way his love would "root" within a broken people new hope or the way his mercy would flower and bear fruit, despite the treacherous winds of betrayal and hatred that awaited him. As they lay down their branches and leaves, they could not yet envision the way he would lay down his life for the healing of the nations.

Today, we will come to the sanctuary for the first time in over a year on Palm Sunday. I'm not sure who will lay down branches that day, but they will be spread out to honor the Savior who will bring us something we cannot collect, invent, fashion, or find - God's forgiveness and reconciling love.

And so we will gather in joy, grateful we can come to a place we haven't been inside for a year, and we will come proclaiming, "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"

Prayer: Lord, teach us what it means to break our branches and lay them before you today. Teach us how to lay down our lives before the One whose love will raise us up.



March 29 Watering with Tears

"One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. ³⁷ And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. ³⁸ She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. ³⁹ Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.' Jesus spoke up and said to him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.' 'Teacher,' he replied, 'speak.' ⁴¹ A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?' Simon answered, 'I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.' And Jesus said to him, 'You have judged rightly.' Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.' ⁴⁸ Then he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.' ⁴⁹ But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?' ⁵⁰ And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.' (Luke 7:36-50)

God first waters the garden with rain and the rivers that flow from Eden. Sometimes, of course, we have more rain than we need. Optimally, rain nourishes life. What if our tears worked the same way? What if they could be used to grow life and to nourish hope?

The Bible includes some powerful images of tears used to "water." In some cases, they flood our pillows or beds. The psalmist in 6:6 is "weary with sighing" and "watering his bed

with tears" each night. Another writer has fed on his tears, despairing at God's absence: "My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all day long, 'Where is your God?'" (Ps. 42:3).

In most of these cases, tears just flow and we're not sure where they go. All we know is that the one weeping is worn out, exhausted, and done in with all the crying. "My face is flushed from weeping," the writer in *Job 16:16* laments, "And deep darkness is on my eyelids." It's possible to *cry rivers*, and in the end, have nothing to show for all that except dark circles under the eyes, sleepless nights, red, swollen faces, and bodies and spirits that are spent!

But, thankfully, there is another option. Sometimes the tears, like rain, water something which is growing or might grow. Sometimes, tears nourish life. The writer of *Ps. 39:12*, for instance, feeling estranged, hopes his tears will elicit God's response: "Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry; do not be silent at my tears, for I am a stranger with You, a sojourner like all my fathers." The writer of *Ps. 56:8* asks God to preserve his tears: "You have taken account of my wanderings; Put my tears in Your bottle. Are they not in Your book?" This is a *far cry* from tears that just flow away.

During Holy Week, most will remember the woman who washes Jesus' feet with her tears and dries his feet with her hair. There are four *Gospel* accounts of women anointing Jesus' feet. In the accounts from Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9, and John 12:1-8, they anoint with a costly ointment, which Jesus interpreted as a loving preparation of his body for death. In Luke's account, Jesus has come to dine with a Pharisee who fails to extend even the smallest welcome to his guest. Whereas the host has shown Jesus neither hospitality nor love, this unnamed woman who joined them, bathed, anointed, and kissed his feet when he entered the house. What's more, her tears, springing

from a penitent heart, are transformative, nourishing forgiveness, gratitude and love.

Jesus never wasted his tears. The writer of *Hebrews 5:7* notes while Jesus was on the earth, "he offered prayers and pleadings, with a loud cry and tears, to the one who could rescue him from death. And God heard his prayers because of his deep reverence for God." (*Heb. 5:7, NIV*) Near the end of his life, when he saw his dead friend Lazarus in the tomb and his sisters' broken hearts, Jesus wept. (*John 11:35*) When he looked over Jerusalem during the last week of his life, Jesus wept. (*Luke 19:41*) In the garden, Jesus wept. (*Luke 22:41-44*) None of these tears were wasted. From their bitterness sprang new life and hope. All his tears "watered" sacrificial love and forgiveness.

At the end of time, *The Revelation to John* proclaims in 7:17, the "Lamb in the center of the throne" will shepherd his people to "springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes." Rev. 21:4 goes on to add: "...and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away."

Meanwhile, Jesus never wasted his tears, and neither should we. Tears can merely fall, or they can be placed - on Jesus' feet, in God's ear, in God's book. They can just flow away, or they can be used to "water" God's new life in us. Jesus' tears "watered" hope. So should ours.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the fervency of your tears and prayers. May our tears reach your ears and heart. May they flow from grateful lives to glorify you for your loving grace and may you use them to make all of life flourish, according to your will.



March 30 Cursing and Churning and Turning

"On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry.

¹³Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether

perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. ¹⁴He said to it, 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again.' And his disciples heard it.

Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves; ¹⁶and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. ¹⁷He was teaching and saying, 'Is it not written,

"My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations"?

But you have made it a den of robbers.'

¹⁸And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. ¹⁹And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city. (Mark 11:12-19)

The story of the cursing of the fig tree and Jesus' purging of the temple are connected. Just as plowing turns over and breaks up the soil to enrich it, Jesus identifies some things during Holy Week that need 'turning over.'

It may seem strange that Jesus curses the fig tree for not bearing fruit out of season, but it's important to understand the Biblical context. Throughout the stories of the *First Testament (Hebrew Canon, Old Testament)*, Israel has been compared to a fig tree that is "all show," promising fruitfulness but instead running after idols, many of which were gods of fertility. Ironically, these actions bring barrenness. (See *Jeremiah 8:13, Jeremiah 7:9-11, and Hosea 9:9-17*).

In a similar way, Jesus' overturning of the tables expresses his strong, visceral repugnance to those who have desecrated the holiness of God's house by turning it into a den of robbers. In what ways is God being robbed?

First, it may be they are robbing the pilgrims who have come to exchange their currency during Passover. The moneychangers are there to change out Roman coins which bore offensive images either of the Roman emperor or the god Melkart. Are

these moneychangers "robbing" God by charging commissions for their service, or is there something more?

A second way the moneychangers are robbing God may have to do with where the tables are located. By all accounts, the tables are in the outer area of the Second Temple, known as the Court of the Gentiles. According to Matthew Hare in his *Matthew Commentary for the Interpretation Series*, Jesus is bothered most that these moneychangers have set up shop in the only place non-Jews might gather for conversation or prayer. This is the only place they can observe Israel at worship, and what will they see? Some moneychangers haggling about money exchanges!

What if the sacrificial system itself serves as a substitute for genuine repentance? The prophet Jeremiah used the expression "den of robbers" to refer to the desecration of worship by those who believed the sacrificial system made them "safe...to do detestable things," such as murder, adultery, perjury and idolatry. (Jeremiah 7:9-11). We remember King Saul was criticized by the prophet Samuel for covering his sin with sacrifices. Samuel asks Saul, "Has the LORD as great delight in burnt-offerings and sacrifices, as in obedience to the voice of the LORD? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams." (*I Samuel 15:22*. See also "Why Did Jesus Curse the Fig Tree?" Jesus Film Project, jesusfilm.org/blog-and-stories).

Like Jeremiah, Jesus is sickened by the way Israel has robbed God, and the cleansing of the temple is more a purging. While the verbs are different, the action of expelling and driving out the moneychangers is more an "emesis." I first learned from my mother at a young age. If you were nauseated, you needed an "emesis basin." (Yes, she was a nurse!). *We have seen this sickness before. When the earth received Abel's blood, it cried out in revulsion. Creation can't stomach the innocent blood one brother extracts from the other. Hatred, injustice, murder, and disobedience nauseate nature. Leviticus 18 calls God's*

people to obedience, lest the land "vomit" out its inhabitants. (See *Leviticus 18:25, 20:23 and Job 20:15*).

Thousands have come many miles to Jerusalem for Passover to commemorate the time God freed Israel, then a poor group of oppressed slaves, and established a lasting covenantal bond with them and their descendants. How could such an event become ho-hum or insipid? How could anyone take this miraculous, transformative experience for granted? Is this as holy as it gets? Is this worship as usual? Is this what Passover has become - some transaction where money "passes" hands?

Sometimes, we associate desecration with widespread violence against religious groups. If someone bombs a sanctuary, well now, that is sickening! How could someone attack a place of worship? That's repulsive! How could someone take a wrecking ball to holy sites? Throughout Israel's history, foreign powers like Babylon, Greece, Rome, and others, have both desecrated and destroyed the Temple. In the second century BC, the Seleucid monarch Antiochus IV did some sickening things. He burned a pig on the altar. He burned the Torah. He persecuted Jews. All that is worthy of an emesis basin and more.

But these foreign desecrations aren't what seem to anger Jesus in this story. Instead, what sickens him seems to be desecration from *within the Temple*. It's not the violence done to religions from *without* that is most damaging. It's what we do *within*. It's what we do to destroy our witness, not what someone does to harm us from the outside, that threatens faith communities. Sometimes in the church when we set up shop and go about business as usual, we lose God. Sometimes we worship our rituals more than we love God, and certainly more than we love neighbor.

And, it's the simple things that do the most harm- the insidious apathy, the rugged regularity, the inflexible legalism, the presumed righteousness, or moral superiority. We ignore the tiny holes we have allowed to develop in our "holiness," and little by little, God slips out, so subtly we barely notice until the day

Jesus shows up, turns the tables on us and shouts, "Hey, what are you doing here? This is not worship!"

When Jesus gets nauseated, it's not pretty. It's *even more sickening* when we never see it coming. In the *Revelation to John*, Jesus writes letters to several churches in the first three chapters. You would think Jesus would get sick at the egregious things we humans might do. What sickens Jesus most is not what non-Christians do, but what nominal Christians do and don't do. The church at Laodicea we might describe as a solid congregation. It's successful. It's stable. It more than meets its budget. This church is rich in things, but that is not the bar Jesus uses. It's possible to be rich in things, but poor in spirit. Here's what Jesus says to the church "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou were cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth." Several commentaries note that the word used here is not the word for "spit," but rather a form of "emeeo," to vomit. We can try to pretty it up by saying Jesus needs an "emesis" basin, but that won't wash.

Maybe this is what the moneychangers are - rich in things but poor in spirit. Maybe they are more interested in keeping the Temple funded than they are in keeping its people faithful. Maybe they are a bit prejudiced toward Gentiles and don't want them in their space anyway. Maybe they have lost their evangelistic passion and are less concerned with having conversation or prayer with someone who has never known Israel's God than they are with having a successful spring Passover fundraiser. And maybe we are more like them than we care to admit.

On days, I am feeling fine myself, I stop to ask Jesus, "how are you feeling?" Are we willing for him to "purge" out what needs to be removed from our lives? Are we willing to let him overturn behaviors which lead us farther from God? Lent is the time to ask ourselves these questions.

Prayer: Lord, show us what needs overturning in our hearts, our lives, and our worship. In your mercy, turn us round right.



March 31 The Greatest Yield

"But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy." (James 3:17)

On Sunday mornings, my father always enjoyed singing one of his favorite hymns, which was written in 1906 by Adelaide Pollard: "Have Thine Own Way, Lord." The first verse asks God to mold us "after they will," while we are "waiting, yielded and still."

He needed that "yielding" to carry him through the week, for he, like all small farmers, spent much of the week thinking about another use of the word "yield." On that small paper pad he carried in his front shirt pocket, he did all his "figuring." This "figuring" was crucial since he needed to know how much grain he could expect to harvest per acre and what price that yield might bring.

Yielding is a complex theological practice. The earth in some ways yields itself to the actions of both nature and humans. We took the earth, like a child, to where we wanted it to go, with or against its will. If we abused it, it suffered. If we cared for it, it flourished. In a similar way, the powerful sometimes still lead the poor against their will. "The field of the poor may yield much food," the writer of *Proverbs 13:23* laments, "but it is swept away through injustice."

Creation is our ward, entrusted to us, its stewards and guardians. Sometimes we have done what we thought we could get away with - strip mining, deforestation, over-cropping, polluting air and water. Sometimes, under our harsh hands,

nature has rebelled. When an adult abuses a child, we have social service agencies which serve as advocates. We usually think this is a good idea. Following this analogy, it makes sense we would also support regulations that encourage us to care for creation properly. If someone were to say, "You stay out of my business, I'll beat my child if I want to," most people would be uncomfortable.

Most people resist being regulated. No one wants the added expense and time some regulations require, but we need to remember a bygone era when child labor was not regulated. Last week, I learned on an NPR broadcast that "factory teeth" was the name given to a child's second molars. Why? When they cut these, they were old enough to work in factories. As mentioned before, COVID has introduced a whole new set of human safety concerns, especially since some workers have been required to work in small spaces with others without masks or other safety equipment. Wet markets (or open air) markets, where seafood, meats and other produce are sold, are the only source of income for some people around the world. Farmers' markets offer many opportunities for local growers to sell their produce locally. But what happens when those are unregulated? We know investigations are underway to see if there is a link between COVID and the slaughter of live animals in some places.

Farming and livestock practices today are more regulated than they were when my father was farming, yet even then, he recognized the value of protecting the land. His proverb, "Leave something better than you find it," is a good maxim to follow if you are required to. It's also a good maxim to follow if you are not required to.

The truth is, we don't want to yield. We don't want to be regulated. We don't want to be told what to do. Our human nature, like Adam's and Eve's, is to kick against restrictions that limit our freedom and dip into our profits. We often forget that these regulations (laws, boundaries, and restrictions)

protect our ward, the earth, and allow us all greater freedom and protection.

Jesus has come to show us what it means to live a life "yielded" or surrendered to God. Jesus could have refused to die such a grueling death. After all, he was innocent, and as the old hymn goes, "he could have called ten thousand angels" to deliver him from the bitterness and ignorance of human cruelty. What prepared him for offering "the greatest yield" on Calvary is his obedience throughout his life. The vine-branch metaphor is not just applicable to humans and God. Jesus himself stayed connected to his father and listened deeply to him at each stage of his life. At 12, he stayed back in the temple because he was "about his father's business." At the beginning of his ministry, he sought out John the Baptist to baptize him "to fulfill all righteousness." He prayed all night before selecting his disciples, before feeding the five thousand, before raising Lazarus. According to several *Gospel* accounts, several times Jesus insisted he "must" or "needs must" do something, including the decision to go through Samaria the day he met the woman at the well.

Jesus does not just decide at the end of his life to yield to God's will. He has lived a "yielded" life. If you or I never get in the habit of yielding at a yield sign, how likely will we be to develop that habit later in life?

Jesus does his greatest "figuring" in the garden in order to provide "the greatest yield" for the earth and all its creatures. In the end, when we yield to ultimate love, the harvest will be abundant. That was what Christ decided to do.

My father always loved singing all the verses of favorite hymns. Here is the closing stanza of "Have Thine Own Way": "Have thine own way, Lord/Have Thine own way/Hold o'er my being/absolute sway/Fill with thy Spirit/Till all shall see/Christ only, always/Living in me."

Prayer: Savior, thank you for yielding your life to God's will. Teach us how to desire God above all.



April 1 Growing on Rocks Maundy Thursday

"Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.' ³⁷He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. ³⁸Then he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.' And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.' Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, 'So, could you not stay awake with me one hour?' (Matthew 26:36-40)

It's hard to see much growing in the hardness of Gethsemane's garden. Jesus may have named Simon "Petra/Rock," hoping to build his church on Simon's bold proclamation that Jesus is more than a prophet crying in the wilderness, but now Peter is asleep, like the other disciples.

Sometimes we are stone deaf and stone blind, even though the miracle is right in front of us. We remember the day a blind man cries out to Jesus for healing in *Mark 8:22-26*. In that story, Jesus spits upon the earth, and, taking some dust in his hands, forms mud to place over the man's eyes. Humus on human. At first, the man sees only shadowy forms. Even when the Word made flesh comes-especially when the Word made flesh comes- it is not clear at once. Here in the garden too, much is blurry and uncertain; the shapes of men are stalking in the shadows. Judas and the others appear like specters in the night. Peter's rock-solid confession seems a faint echo now. By morning light, Peter will shrink away in the shadows, denying he ever even knew Jesus.

The rocky soil of Gethsemane is hard. What can grow there? Desert plants, like cactus, don't just grow in the rock, they

grow on it. For something to grow on rock, the rock itself must be rich in nutrients and porous, so water can pass through to the roots. Ironically, one of the richest rocks for plants to thrive on is created from volcanic eruptions. Volcanic rock is rich in minerals, and the tremendous compression and heat have opened up many air pockets which provide room for plants to grow.

Jesus' earthly life was not only rocky, it was also cataclysmic. Tonight, he prays in anguish in Gethsemane, ("gat shemanim"), which means "oil press." Tonight, he will be pressed on all sides. He will be arrested, betrayed, denied, and abandoned by his own followers.

Sometimes at Maundy Thursday services, we have sung a mournful song written in 1854 by Love H. Jameson, a preacher who had ties with the Christian Church, "Night with Ebon Pinion." It begins, "Night with ebon pinion, brooded o're the vale,/ All around was silent, save the night wind's wail." *Ebon pinion*, literally "dark wing," refers to the dark shadow cast like a black bird's wing over Jesus. Even so, the brooding also suggests the presence of the Holy Spirit, who also brooded over creation.

In this dark, hard place, love will find a way to grow. Maundy comes from the word "mandata," *commandment*. Tonight, may we hear Jesus speak again the words from John 13:34: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

In country revivals, we left the doors open for a breeze to pass through. What we really needed was the Spirit to blow our way. On those nights, we prayed and listened and sang many songs, including one about Jesus being the solid rock we would stand on when all other ground sank like sand.

Can anything grow on rock? Jesus proves it can. (Ps. 18:2)

Prayer: Lord, you were pressed by human sin, yet you remained obedient to God's will. On this dark, hard night, teach us to watch and pray with you.



April 2 Finishing the Season Good Friday

Jesus is the "first fruit" of God's love. At the Cross, mercy is harvested. We witness this offering through Jesus' last words from the Cross:

The First Word "Then said Jesus, 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.' And they parted his raiment, and cast lots" (Luke 23:34).

The earth groans under the weight of sin. Just as the earth cried out, wounded by the blood of Abel, Jesus, wounded by the totality of human sin, will cry out too. His cries, however, will not call for vengeance, even though his blood stains the earth too. This time, as Jesus' blood flows, he will cry out: "Father, forgive them."

Sit with Jesus and meditate upon this Word.

The Second Word "And Jesus said unto him, 'I say unto thee, Today thou shalt be with me in paradise.'" (Luke 23:43)

Two thieves are also "planted" in the ground of Golgotha. Is it too late for anything to grow from their lives, or is there no "green" in them which yet may sprout as they wither in that desolate place? Remarkably, it is never too late. There is still some hope sprouting in one of the thieves. This hope prompts him to ask Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom. Imagine his surprise at Jesus' answer: "Today thou shalt be with me in paradise."

Sit with Jesus and the two thieves and meditate upon this Word.

The Third Word "When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, 'Woman, behold thy son!'" (John 19:26)

She was his firstborn, God's only begotten. What agony to watch her son die. The prophecy from *Luke 2:35* about having her soul "pierced" becomes a reality as she watches the soldiers pierce her son's sides and the blood and water pour out. Just as her waters once broke to release Jesus to the world, now her heart breaks to watch him die. Just as she first dressed him in swaddling clothes, now she watches as his clothes are stripped from him. Human sin brought forth briars and now Jesus bears upon his head a crown of thorns, and so carries the burden of sin's chaotic disruption to all of life. Jesus speaks both to Mary and to John, asking each to be family for the other.

Sit with Mary, John, and Jesus to meditate upon this Word.

The Fourth Word "And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' which is, being interpreted, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'" (Mark 15:34)

Jesus is planted on Golgotha on a tree. We often miss that. Jesus hangs on a Cross, which is planted in the ground, wearing thorns born of the earth from human sin. He hangs on a tree, but a tree which has been ripped from the earth and cut into pieces. The first fruit of God's love is born from this tree, "...like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground, he grew, wounded and crushed for "our iniquities." (*Isaiah 53*)

Jesus is wounded and bruised and broken. He experiences total forsakenness, for that is what sin is, total separation from God, complete wretchedness. Jesus voices this anguish: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Sit with Jesus and his Father and meditate upon this Word.

The Fifth Word 'After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, saith, 'I thirst.'"
(John 19:28)

The One who spoke the rivers into being to water all of creation is now dehydrated. The One who brought rain to the parched earth and parched spirits now cries out for water. The One who watered the earth with his tears and poured out his blood as an offering now is offered only sour wine.

Sit with Jesus and meditate upon this Word.

The Sixth Word "When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, 'It is finished'": and he bowed his head, and gave up the spirit."
(John 19:30)

Seeds are planted to be harvested. Every farmer looks forward to finishing the season well. Jesus Christ, who planted his life firmly in God's will, now harvests an abundance of mercy and grace for the world. He accomplished everything God sent him to do. He finished his season in God's will.

Sit with Jesus and meditate upon this Word.

The Seventh Word "And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, 'Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit'" (Luke 23:46)

Out of humus, God formed humans and breathed in them the breath of life. Now, after redeeming all of creation, Jesus' breath returns to God. Creation has come full circle. It began in God's hands. It ends in God's hands. Now that breath, that Spirit, will be reunited with the Father.

Sit with Jesus and his Father and meditate upon this Word.

Prayer: Today, Lord, we return once more to the Cross, where we bow in sorrow to listen to your Last Words.



April 3 Unless a Seed Dies

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."
(John 12:24)

It's Saturday and he has been taken from us, it would seem. In truth, *he has become us again, completely like us*, by assuming our sins. Today, Jesus is nearer who we really are than he has ever been. Feel his nearness. We are humans from humus, earthlings from dust. From the earth, we came, and so Jesus came. To the earth we will return, and so Jesus today returns to the earth. He suffers all things common to us. How else could this end?

In dying, Jesus falls back to earth, God's only begotten son and only begotten "Seed." When a seed is planted, it disappears for a time. We stare at the soil and wonder if it will make it. That must have been the despair Jesus' followers felt after he died. They could not yet see what another day would bring. They did not have the whole story. They did not realize he was God's Seed planted. *How else could this end?* Tomorrow, we will see.

But today, we wait. Spend some time in silence today sitting beside the tomb of Jesus. I began our homilies with some of the sayings of the philosopher Matshona Dhliwayo. Let some of his insights guide you as you stay with Jesus today in the earth (dirt, tomb). *(These might be accessed through www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/seed-quotes).*

"When life hands you dirt, plant seeds."

"A seed neither fears light nor darkness, but uses both to grow."

"When people [or life] try to bury you, remind yourself you are a seed."

"Be like seeds, do not see dirt thrown at you as your enemy, but as ground to grow."

"Throwing dirt on a seed only increases its value."

"It is dirt that lets seeds know how beautiful they are."

"A seed refuses to die when you bury it...."

"Seeds never lose their potential, not even in dirt." (In fact, we might say, they discover their potential in the dirt.)

"When seeds want to rise, they drop everything that is weighing them down."

"It is better to plant good seeds than to mourn bad weather."

"A seed is a forest inside out."

"Show me your seed and I'll show you your harvest."

"A seed never gives up on its dream to flourish."

Prayer: Lord, today you lie in the earth for us.

We humans lost our humanity and buried you.

Lord, have mercy and forgive us.

We humans continue to lose our humanity,

When we refuse to love you or neighbor,

You or stranger,

You or enemy.

We continue to bury you

When we hate,

Or abuse

Or despise,

Or ignore,

Or beat down.

Or try to manipulate you and all you have created -

Lord, have mercy.

We wounded you,
And you healed us,
We despised you,
And you loved us,
We, the guilty, blamed you,
And you forgave us.
Lord, have mercy.

We humans buried you, but you arose-
You arose because you planted yourself in God's will.
And died there,
God's only begotten Son and Seed,
Surrendered to God's will.

Help us plant ourselves in the soil of that grace,
So we might die to self,
And live in you;
So we, blighted by sin,
Might flourish.

Women at the Tomb

They made their way before day,
Doing what they knew how to do,
Always at birth, sometimes at death-
Wash the blood away,
Bathe off the struggle to live,
Wipe away the struggle to die,
Swaddle, wind and bind, From
wombs, for tombs.

They are always there for us,
When we begin,
When we end-
The women.
Weeping to get us here,

Weeping to let us go,

Until the morning He was there,
Until the morning He was there for them,
And beyond all hope,
Not there for them,
Jesus,
Risen.



Biblical and Lenten Gardens

We have been celebrating the flourishing life God brings to the world. During our Hanging of the Greens at Advent, we always include some of the traditions associated with evergreens and poinsettias. As you might imagine, there is also a rich history of flower symbolism which grew up around the suffering and resurrection of Jesus. We find many of these first in Catholic and Orthodox traditions. Some of these symbolic flowers have been planted in many Biblical Gardens, Resurrection Gardens, Lenten Gardens, and in Catholic tradition, Mary's Bower.

Concentrating on the transitoriness of life and the desire for immortality, Renaissance poets also reimagined through their verses the symbolism of flowers, and during the 15th, 16th and the first half of the 17th century, gardens flourished. The Romantic poets of the 19th century also celebrated nature as a mirror of our spiritual landscape. While many of the associations with flowers are both literary and legendary, some resources include scriptural references for meditation, and I have included these. Though there are others, my sources include:

"Blossom Theology,"(<https://udayton.edu/imri/mary/b/blossom->) and
"Flowers in Christian Symbolism,"
<https://saintscatholic.blogspot.com/p/saint-symbols.html>).

Here are some of the plants and flowers you might find in Biblical Gardens, or plant in your own:

Daisy - representing our original innocence Romans 3:27-28

Almond Trees - associated with prophetic power. In Numbers 17, Aaron's rod blossomed and bore almonds.

Jesse's Tree - representing the fulfillment of the Messianic promise which came down through David through the "shoot" from the stump of Jesse Isaiah 11:10

Shamrock, Fleur de lis, Pansy and Aloe -tri-petal or colored flowers depicting the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit)

Bird of Paradise - representing the Holy Spirit (that descends as a dove)

Columbine - representing the Holy Spirit. Columbine comes from the Latin word for "dove." The seven flowers on a stem represent the seven gifts of the Spirit. Isaiah 11:2

Evergreen and Mistletoe -the eternal presence of God even in seasons of deadness

Marigolds and Sunflowers - flowers upward facing that turn toward to the sun (symbolic of looking to the "son" Jesus)

Mustard Bush/Tree - representing faith and trust

Grape and Grape Vine - representing the blood of Jesus given in sacrificial love

Cactus and Prickly plants - representing the curse of the fall and also the mortification of Jesus

Mallow -representing the forgiveness of God Job 6:6, Job 30:4

Narcissus - representing our self-centered sin and need to be remade in the image (reflection) of God. Romans 16:11, Isaiah 35:1

Violet - representing humility ("shrinking violet") 2 Samuel 13

Hyacinth - representing constancy and peace of mind Song of Solomon 5:14, Revelation 9:17

Vines and Climbing Flowers - representing our need to "cling" to the true vine, Jesus Christ John 15:5

Ivy- as a clinging vine, also associated with abiding with Jesus and in some traditions with the promise of immortality beyond death John 15:5 I Corinthians 9:25, 2 Maccabees 6:7, 2 Maccabees 14:33, 3 Maccabees 2:19

Hyssop - representing penance and repentance. Hyssop grows on rock and in solitary places and is associated with Jesus' time in the wilderness and in the Garden of Gethsemane Leviticus 14:4, 52, I Kings 4:33, John 19:29-30

Red Rose - representing the blood of Jesus. In literary traditions, Joseph of Arimathea collected the blood of Jesus in a vessel referred to as the Holy Grail. The Arthurian legends centered on the search for this Grail. Song of Solomon 2:1, Proverbs 27:2, Hebrews 13:8, Isaiah 35:1

Iris - Sharp leaves are associated with the sword used to pierce Jesus' side. Exodus 2:3, Matthew 6:28, 6:29, Luke 2:35, I Kings 7:22

Anemone - representing sorrow. The red spots on the leaves symbolize the shed blood of Jesus. Matthew 5:1-2, 7:28, 6:25-34, 10:5-20

Orchids - representing sorrow. The streaking red/purplish marks on the petals of some varieties symbolize the blood of Jesus flowing down.

Passionflower - The tendrils in the center have been associated with the lash marks on Jesus' back. The central flower represents the whip itself. The 72 filaments depict the crown of thorns. The top three stigmas symbolize the three nails used during the crucifixion and the five lower anthers represent the five wounds resulting from the nails.

Lily of the Valley -According to some legends, this, along with other varieties of lilies, grew from Eve's tears as she left Eden. A member of the asparagus family, this delicate stem with many tiny, bell-shaped flowers, has been associated both with Jesus' suffering and the marriage feast of the Lamb, when Christ will be reunited with his bride, the Church. This flower is used in many weddings, especially royal weddings. It was also used as a remedy for gas poisonings during World War 1 and has been used as a treatment for burns and some cardiac disorders.

In Catholic tradition, several flowers are associated with the Virgin Mary:

White Lily - Associated with Mary's purity. In some medieval art, the angel Gabriel is pictured with lilies when he announces Jesus' birth to Mary.

White and Red Roses are also associated with Mary. The famous Medieval poet Alighieri Dante described Mary as "the rose, in which the divine word became flesh."

Strawberry - Associated with the Virgin Mary since the strawberry remains in flower while it bears fruit. (Most plants lose their flower when fruit forms.)



Apr. 4 In the Bulb

"He is the lily of the valley." (Song of Songs 2:4)

We will sing it again this Easter, the 1986 song by Natalie Sleeth celebrating that "in the bulb there is a flower," and in "our death a resurrection." We will sing it as we remember that morning the women came to the tomb early expecting to find a stone placed by human hands in front of the place where Jesus is buried. There is a tradition this stone, like Israel's altar stones, was unhewn, not cut by human hands. Only unhewn stones, according to Exodus 20, were to be used on the altar. Whether or not humans chiseled it, this stone covering Jesus' tomb *still cuts* to the heart.

The Hebrew word for altar in Exodus 20:21, according to the 11th century medieval French Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaku (Rashi), can mean both "sword" and "tool." Rashi notes that while a sword shortens life, the altar, created to achieve atonement, is designed to lengthen life. (See Grossman, Avraham, and Joel A. Linsider. *Rashi*. Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012. 152-161).

Here at the end of Lent, the "lengthening of days," Jesus lay upon this wooden altar/tree and died, planted in the earth. Upon

the barest rock, this precious Seed surrendered His life back to the earth from which earthlings were formed. Here, in the coldest earth, the hardest earth, the most barren of places, hope still grows. Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection seed something which has never flourished here before.

The Easter lily is often associated with Jesus because, like him, it begins as a bulb in the cold earth. The earth that Adam and Eve- and all of us- were called "to dress" we lost to thorns and briars. Jesus will not only bear that crown on Calvary, he will also carry all the pain and weight of human sin, a sin which has wounded Jesus, neighbor, and nature.

On Easter, Jesus rises to "dress" the garden again, but in a way Adam and Eve never could. Raised by the Spirit to life, he brings a new flowering, not from rock hewn by human hands, but through love and by God's own power.

And so, each Easter we make our way across the land we live on in the damp, dark morning looking for some colorful buds to brighten the Cross. We gather what is flourishing in our yards as we pray even a few of the seeds planted in our hearts will root and sprout. Then we come to those two wooden beams crossing heaven and earth that stand silhouetted against the amber morning. We move towards those beams, one moving from earth to heaven, the other moving from humans to the wider world. We move towards the center, which represents the union of flesh and Spirit, and remember Jesus' heart was, and is there, at that intersection, at that center, at that crossing.

On Easter mornings, we think we have come to flower the Cross, but really, it's the other way around. We don't flower the Cross; we witness the Cross flowering us! We see our life springing from the cold earth. We see what happens when Jesus, God's Seed, flourishes even in the most toxic of soils- hearts polluted with greed, resentment, pride, idolatry, and hatred - hearts, as the prophet Ezekiel put it, which are stony and need to be

softened, broken up and transformed into hearts of flesh. (*Ezekiel 11:19, 36:26*). Only hearts of flesh can be cultivated.

Last spring when closed the physical doors of the sanctuary, God called us to open the doors of our hearts in new ways. Seeds of faith can grow anywhere, and faith always finds a way to thrive under harsh conditions. Many of our traditions changed. Last Palm Sunday, we lay down palms along our walkways, and on Easter, we decorated our own Crosses with flowers we grew. Pictures of these were posted online. No longer able to sing together, we have learned how to "make melody to the Lord with our hearts." (*Ephesians 5:19*) The building was dark, but not our faith.

We just had to celebrate what the writer of *Acts* has been telling us for centuries - that God lives in a house not made by hands. (*Acts 7:48, 17: 24*). The Temple is not the brick-and-mortar structure we try to keep up, but rather the One who predicted that, even though not a stone of the old building would be left standing, a new Temple would be raised up (*John 2:19-22*), the temple of his own Body. Jesus, the High Priest, whose own life was the paschal offering, would create a new being and a new place where we, "like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." (*See John 1:29, Hebrews 4:14-5:10, I Peter 2:5*)

When our worship moved outside in nature, something moved in us we had not known before. Outside, our feet touched earth and our prayers ascended to heaven. Outside, we could feel the Spirit in the wind across our face and hear God whisper in the dance of a breeze across the grass, in leaves, and birdsong.

Whether we knew it or not, *we too were moving back to that time and place where we all began*, where we humans first found God "outside" those places we built. We first found God not in walled cathedrals, but in a garden. This reunion with God

"outside" in the dew and grass, among the trees and flowers, in that place we humans, still fresh humus, first encountered our Creator- brings more hope than we can imagine.

Even though we have not placed fresh flowers in our altar vases for almost a year, one day last spring just outside our church doors was evidence that "in the bulb" there is a flower! A vibrant lily was growing there by the table in the center of the grassy area which became our "sanctuary" for a year. Even though we were not able to be inside, God was still "inside" our worship. There by that table this vibrant lily glistened, not on an altar hewn by human hands, not in a floral arrangement made by human hands, but in the earth and in the sun there beside the table -a lily reminding us that the One who was dead is now alive! All of creation has been redeemed! Mercy has restored a fallen humanity. We have always been and will always be a people of the Table! And not just any table, a Table which is a living Presence that always embodies the power of many who gather as one through the sacrificial and reconciling love of Jesus.

Jesus is the "lily of the valley," (*Song of Songs 2:4*) and the valley he walked was a lonesome one. As hard as it was, he stayed planted in God's will. Will we? That is God's great desire, and Father and Son paid an inestimable price so that you and I together with all creation - might flourish. May nothing, "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation," ever hinder that by separating us "from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (*Romans 8: 38-39*)

Prayer: Lord, plant us in your grace and give us the resurrection hope that "in our end is our beginning, in our time, infinity...unrevealed until its season," something You alone can see. (Natalie Sleeth, In the Bulb There is a Flower, 1986, Chalice Hymnal, St. Louis Missouri: Chalice Press, 1995, 638)



Come With Me

"Come with me, out of the tomb."

Sometimes, when we hear *God's* voice,
Clear as the clarion,
Calling us forth from death,
We gather the shroud tighter around us,
The long sleep, the tomb, the room we know,
Sometimes, when the stone is rolled away,
So suddenly and light cracks the shadows,
It pierces us like a knife
And we turn away,
From a light too bright,
Grabbing strips of linen,
Like bed sheets
We are reluctant to surrender,
The cold of the rock the only bed we remember,

So, Lord, don't give up on us.
Give us a moment to adjust our eyes to Your Light,
And an eternity to live in it,
With you,
When you call,

"Come with me, out of the tomb."



Lord, As You Rose

Lord,
As you rose,
May we rise,
Full of hope and love
And wise.
As you rose,
May we rise.

