

*The Third Sunday of Lent
Revised Common Lectionary, Year C*

March 11th, 2007

*Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California*

Our Constant Gardener
by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer, Rector

Going back “home” to Kansas a few years back, I took time to drive past my childhood home. My parents had moved to Missouri when I was away in undergraduate school, so a number of years had passed before I once again saw the one-level ranch-style – no longer sitting on the edge of an alfalfa field, but surrounded by big homes and condominiums that had gone in as the edge of little McPherson was pushed back for new development.

Ours was still the most modest house on the block, a row of hedge trees running up the side, that would throw big, sticky, green hedge apples in the summer time – good only for getting caught in the lawn-mower and blunting the blades. Not even the squirrels would touch them for seeds, unless they were desperate. But behind the house, something was now missing. The clean, neatly-trimmed lawn now covered what had once been my parents’ big garden plot, and how I remember that came about.

It began with my mother digging hard into the dense, clay soil of South-Central, Kansas. Turning over clod after clod of the red, hard soil. And how a dentist and farmer of our little mission church brought in a whole truck-load of manure from his farm, reeking to high heaven. But my mom and dad strongly shoveling the muck over the soil and then plowing it in with a brand-new, red, shiny roto-tiller. . . while I watched and wondered at a safe distance.

And how that soil turned rich and loamy, full of earthworms, bugs, and garden crops year after year: peonies and potatoes, bumper crops of tomatoes and cucumbers that would have the kids out in the neighborhood with Radio Flyer wagon-loads distributing the extra to anyone who would take them. Vines of beans growing up improvised stakes with string between, corn in the autumn, marigolds I’d plant by seed around the perimeter to keep the bugs away, and squash and even the occasional pumpkin. And the weeds! Yes, the wild morning glory – what we less affectionately called “bindweed” as it would rapidly take over during hot, wet summers. One year my mother plowed the stuff straight back into the garden and all the fragments germinated into a layer of stifling, almost-impossible-to-break vine.

But it was the garden I grew up with – the rich soil that would get caked under my fingernails and cling to my shoes. It was the garden of a family’s joyful labor and love, with all its successes and failures year after year. And now it’s all gone, but my less charitable thought is that I hope, with all the years of mulching, turning, and cultivation, the grass where the garden soil was grows extra fast, so the new owners have to mow it more often than once a week.

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Today, we remember some of the garden images of our Christian tradition, the rich loamy soil where the story began to sprout. Most true this way, of course, is the story of Moses and the burning bush – a primordial, almost, story of our Judeo-Christian faith, where this fugitive far away from his people has a life-changing mystical experience on Mount Horeb with a burning bush and the call of a mysterious God who claims dominion over not only the people of Israel and all of Moses' ancestors, but existence itself.

When Moses asks this strange God's name, the answer is not some lofty-sounding or even beautiful name. God doesn't even say to him, "I live here," or, "I live there." But God says simply and profoundly: "I AM." No further questions needed for this God of ours who lives in the reality of our bones and in the spaces between the stars. No further evidence required than simple being itself. God is. More than mere existence, God is the Reality upon which everything can exist. God is the framework, the Maker, the Gardener of the Cosmos. God is Being from whom all personhood flows, the strength and weight of the rock, the power behind all power, greater than the sea, hotter than all fire, more present than our breath. "I AM Who I AM," God says to Moses -- a God who will not be reduced to human names or definitions, and a God who will set us free from all our self-imposed limitations.

Fast-forward to first-century Palestine, long after the exodus, the founding of Israel, the ascendancy of David's lineage, and the exile in Babylon and return. Jesus has been speaking to the crowds, and a group of people approach him with a burning question that might have been taken right out of the headlines of the *Jerusalem Times*, had there been one in the first century.

They bring up the apparently well-known story of Galileans, Jesus' geographic kin, who had been slain by Pilate, possibly while offering sacrifices in the Temple in Jerusalem – a violent act that would have provoked any good Jew of the time into profound anger. And a tragedy – a tower in the city that fell, crushing eighteen people.

So, Jesus, why do bad things happen to good people? Or, more accurately, they were asking him, why do bad things happen to people, period? A bit like them, today, we are caught in the delusion that bad things happen to people for a reason. That maybe those of us who are good enough will receive sufficient favor to avoid sudden catastrophe. It gives us, just as it gave our ancient spiritual ancestors, a sense of control over capricious life in a dangerous world.

But Jesus, in his usual rabbinical style, turns the story around on them, reminding them that while they worry about the sins of the victims of Pilate, or the falling tower of Siloam, that they have forgotten their own sinfulness. That they were lucky enough not to fall victim to these two calamities doesn't mean they are any better than those who did.

It's a spooky teaching, really, but a plaintive reminder that comes up again and again in Scripture, as it does in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, where Paul is telling the Church at Corinth to learn from the lessons the ancient Israelites learned the hard way while wandering in the wilderness and failing to root themselves in the God named, "I AM," and instead pursuing the more tangible gods of food, drink, licentiousness, and self-indulgence. But even if those lessons

are well-taken, the ancient Corinthians and we are told to constantly be wary of the sin of pride: “So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.”

The Lenten journey is like that. Every time we think we have life figured out, we are to meet a burning bush, a God who refuses to be named, or told by our Savior to look back at ourselves before judging others. . . to remember with humility the bindweed in our own lives, the soil clods that remain infertile and heavy in our hearts. . . the fig tree that is rooted, but has not yet borne the fruit of salvation for us or others.

Jesus closes today’s gospel with a beautiful parable about a frustrated landowner who knows, it seems, very little about gardens, and even less about trees. His desperate impatience with the fig tree that has still not borne fruit is so familiar. It is like our frustration with ourselves and each other because of the unexpected and failed expectations as we meet the “pride and hypocrisy” of our lives. Our frustration gets even more pointed sometimes, and we want to be like the landowner: “Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?” Why am I wasting my time? Why I am I struggling again to put things right when I know they will go wrong? Why do I bother with a relationship, a community, or even my own heart when it will let me down?

But the landowner is smart enough to hire a gardener. The gardener knows what is required. He turns the soil, puts in the manure, and holds out hope for another year that the tree might bear fruit.

Mid-Lent might come with our own spiritual crises that echo the spiritual crises that haunt our lives: our frustration with God at times and often with our fruitless endeavors, as they often seem to us. Like the corn crop I grew one year in our family garden that was overtaken by worms. Or the bindweed that we could never seem to overcome. Or the apricot tree that grew next to the garden that wouldn’t bear fruit for year after year, succumbing to late frosts and defying my mother’s best efforts, her Ph.D. in horticulture notwithstanding.

Jesus is the gardener of our hearts and lives. Our “constant gardener” even – maybe some of you have seen the movie? Like a devoted husband out for truth, God in Christ is constantly turning over the soil of our hearts, relationships, and communities, looking and hoping for the fruit that will come in due season. The stone and clay of our lives is slowly turned by the Gospel into rich, loamy soil where the seedlings take root, and the apricot tree one season will bear a huge crop. Ours did at last one year. I will never forget it.

So keep hope alive and watch for the Gardener in your midst. The One who says, “I AM who I AM” when we ask, “Who are you? What is your name?” The One who walks and teaches us even when we are on our beds in frustration and fatigue. The One who comes among us and turns our bad soil into good, seeking the truth in us with patience and long-suffering love, so that we may grow up and bear fruit in due season, well and good for God’s glory and God’s people.