

Good Morning! Let us pray... *Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and kindle within us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and we shall be created And you shall renew the face of the earth. O God who by the light of the Holy Spirit did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy your consolations, through Christ our Lord. May the words of my mouth & the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight...rock & redeemer of us all. Amen*

“The Grace of Les Miserables: The Blessed Garden”

Lectionary: Matthew 21:11 (Palm); Psalm 31; Matthew 26:14 – 27:66;(Passion);

Series: **Philippians 2:5-11; Isaiah 51: 3; Revelation 22:1-5**

God’s grace and peace be with you, friends! How is it with your soul?

I speak with you today fully aware that my soul has been stretched and pulled, tossed and turned, worn and weary in the challenge of this season of a novel Coronavirus, COVID19. The impact of its spread and work to mitigate its spread has forced us into separation and distancing unlike anything we’ve encountered.

For many, the shift from gathering in community to connecting as community has been hard. We are now exploring new ways to do familiar things. As we acknowledged last week, change is hard. Friends, change can also be good.

I arrived to serve this Saint James community 4 years ago. The key image I held for the change in ministry was like I was being transplanted into a new garden. I was leaving one appointment, packing/wrapping and relocating to a completely different place... leaving a familiar county, roads, scenery, & people to grow roots in a new county with different roads, scenery & people to get to know.

In the story of Les Miserables, one of the motifs is change, forced change, characterized by the need for Jean Valjean (JVJ) to move. He does so to find safety and new beginnings, both as an individual, and later as ‘parent’ for Cosette. In the story, gardens are a recurrent element. In the novel, much of the action occurs in a garden setting.

Gardens are also key in Scripture. There are five major gardens¹ in scripture: **Eden** (found in Genesis, garden of creation), **En Gedi** (in Song of Songs, a garden of Love; an oasis in the desert), **Gethsemane** (in the gospels, a garden of loneliness and death), **the Garden Tomb** (John 19:41, a garden of resurrection and new life), and **Second Eden** (Revelation, garden of a New World).

These gardens tell our story as God’s people. Humanity begins in peace in Eden. But disobedience & pride fracture our relationship with God. From that point forward, God is in unrelenting pursuit of restoration of this relationship.

En Gedi is the vision of this love God has for us...a place of refuge, renewal, and love.

Enter Jesus, God’s expression of restoration & grace, living among us. Jesus sacrifices himself to deliver us from sin and death. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays and agonizes over the path that lies ahead, tears turn to blood, and he chooses to do God’s will. The garden tomb becomes the place of new life and restoration, as Jesus meets Mary.

In the book of Revelation, John describes the unity of all things, a new heaven and new earth, a new city of God, and a new Tree of Life. All creation is brought in line with God’s will.

There are, and have been, many gardens in my life. If I hold fast to the metaphor, I’ve been engaged in a lot tilling, and sowing seed, and pulling weeds, not to mention picking rocks, to see the fruit of my labor, in flowers, in blooms, in harvesting lettuce, and tomatoes and such.

There are two key understandings in gardening:

- 1) The need to prune, to thin, to split. There are times that healthy plants need trimming & clipping the old growth (the hardened stalk) to promote new growth.
- 2) The need to lay fallow, to rest. This speaks to the need for renewal so that all the nutrients are not depleted, but can be restored. Frankly, friends, even God rested! We also see this practice in Jesus life and ministry...going away, separated from others to pray.

So what can we learn from God’s gardens and apply in this wilderness & chaotic season of COVID19?

First, God seeks us in all times and all seasons. God came looking for the first humans, even though they had disobeyed. There is nothing that can separate us

from God and God's love. God even sent Jesus to be present with us and to reconcile with us.

Second, perhaps this time of separation is an opportunity to reconnect with God through Jesus. As we enter this Holy Week of remembering the path Jesus walked from a time of sacred meal, prayer, and betrayal, trial, suffering and death, we can create new moments to reflect on how God has been present in our lives. We can recall how we have been blessed with God's grace and mercy. And we can give thanks for the gift of Jesus' work on the cross to bring all things to oneness with God.

Further, I wonder if we might reframe this 'stay-at-home' period as a 'sabbath' time... a time of rest and renewal from the busyness of life as it was. This time apart can provide an opportunity to re-prioritize God's call to rest in God's will and God's ways. Perhaps there are things to prune in our lives, so that we might have room for new life.

How is it with your soul, friends? I pray that you and I can find space for maintaining the gardens in our lives... such that new growth appears. What about your garden of faith? How will your roots of faith be nurtured in this time?

Know that my prayer time includes:

Remembering you and the deep desire to gather in community again;

lifting prayers for the frontline workers in healthcare & emergency response, essential services such as grocery stores, stockers, cashiers, and attendants; those who serve others by running errands, making masks, and providing donations for food and supplies;

lifting prayers for our government officials and leaders as they make decisions for the welfare of ALL people; and lifting prayer for the healing of all nations.

As God's children, let us join our voices in the prayer we've been taught to pray:
Lord's Prayer.... Amen

ⁱ Murray Andrew Pura, *Rooted: reflections on the gardens in Scripture*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010.