

Autumn, the Garden, and God

Preached at Our Saviour on Annual Meeting Sunday 2017

Proper 25, Year A, RCL. Psalm 1 (1979 Book of Common Prayer). The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost. October 29, 2017. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

God and human beings in a garden: tell me *that* is not a core image out of the Bible! That's how it starts with God and us in the beginning of the Book of Genesis. And, in the sense of a renewed earth at the end of the world as we know it, that is where the story ends in the Book of Revelation. But in the meantime, there are other garden images in the Bible, full of hope and good guidance—in the very first psalm in the Book of Psalms, for example.

We recited that psalm this morning. Verse three is the garden verse: “They [that is, those who delight in the righteousness of God] are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither; everything they do shall prosper.” (1979 Book of Common Prayer)

Every year I plant some sort of garden, and every year, at about this time, I meditate on the sad state of the remaining plants, struggling as they are while the hours of sunlight grow fewer and the first killing frost looms. I resist putting the last marigolds and petunias out of their misery, tiding up the perennial bed (which means digging up some of the not-so-perennial herbs and moving them inside) and leaving the earth to rest over winter. I survey the remains of the garden and contemplate the contrast between summer and winter, between abundance and scarcity, between death and life, and—because the garden would always have done better if I had not, as at this moment, so often resisted tending it—I also contemplate the contrast between good choices and bad choices, between virtue and vice, between righteousness and wickedness. Which brings us back to our psalm.

Psalm number one has a two-part structure. The first three verses deal with virtuous people and the last three verses deal with the wicked. It looks pretty simple, the way the psalm presents things: good people prosper but the wicked come to grief.

Problem is, that's not the way it often goes. Nasty people can get up every morning feeling great about themselves and go whistling along into the arrogance and cruelty of their day. Happens all the time. It's happening right now, somewhere on this planet. Selfishness has a real public because it so often gets what it wants, and gets it abundantly.

Jesus knew that. He said of the self-seekers, “Truly, I tell you, they have received their reward.” (Matthew 6:2)

And we know bad things do happen to good people. The world is a dangerous place and life is hard to manage effectively. Plus, people practicing virtue are often going to be faced with a costly showdown: good against evil, in small things and large. Not just having to choose whether or not you'll smack your pet (or child) out of frustration, but how you'll respond when somebody else smacks his. Standing up to evil, not simply avoiding evil, is a routine but often unpleasant duty for people who wish to live on the side of good.

And yet...it is not an *unsupported* duty. The thing I particularly like about the first psalm is that it makes clear that God is close to the righteous in a way he is not close to the wicked. The righteous are habituating themselves to God; they delight in his law and meditate on it day and night, as it says in the second verse. And in the sixth verse it says that God “knows the way of the righteous”. That means, in the ancient Hebrew way of using the verb “to know,” that God *acknowledges* the life-path of the righteous; he approves of it and will ultimately bring it to good.

So God approves of good moral choices and approves of the kind of life that makes them real, makes them habitual, makes them constant, steady, reliable. On the other hand, the way of the wicked, which God does not acknowledge, is doomed. One way to say it is that if the wicked don't acknowledge God, how can he have much of a relationship with them? But God is nurturing the righteous like a garden, which he intends to bring to full fruitfulness. This fruitful, well-watered garden in verse three contrasts with the dried up and useless chaff in verse four, just as my lush summer garden contrasts with the withering and frostbitten garden of autumn. Dying

in the frost: that is the destiny the wicked are choosing for themselves.

I don't talk about heaven and hell very often, but if you want a peek through the door of human destiny you could do worse than start with this psalm. Ask yourself: what kind of a gardener do I want to be? What result do I want for my life, for the lives of the people around me? Do I want our lives withered and frostbitten? That is the destiny of selfishness, the end result of letting my choices be ruled by what's in it for me. Or do I want a garden that God and I can walk through hand in hand, and the rest of his friends as well, finding it joyous and beautiful and deeply satisfying beyond the end of time?

This parish is a local microcosm of the garden of God. As Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, God is the gardener *par excellence*. As his stewards of this local patch of spiritual soil, we are both the crop God is cultivating and the cultivators, not only of our individual lives, but also of the community of shared values, beliefs and practices that give Christianity its shape in lived experience, from day to day and from century to century. On this annual meeting Sunday, we gather to contemplate and cultivate, to appreciate and anticipate, the abundance of God's love at work among us.