

April 15, 2018
Colossians 1:9-15
Pastor Rosanna McFadden
Creekside COB

“In the Garden”

Good morning! There’s a Jewish proverb which may be familiar to you; it goes like this: Man plans and God laughs. This applies equally to women, of course; we make plans using the best information or the best speculation we have, but those plans don’t always work out the way we’d hoped. This is not actually the topic of the sermon this morning -- although there would be plenty more I could say about it -- but I share it now to explain why I’m going to be talking about gardens and flowers while it’s still 40 degrees outside. I know that a late spring messes up other plans, too -- track meets, softball games and opening day at Wrigley Field. God has plenty to laugh about.

As you know, and I have said before, the biblical account of God’s relationship with humanity begins and ends in a garden. Most of us know the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and have heard the vision of the City of God in Revelation 22, with the water of Life flowing from the throne of the Lamb, and the tree of life on either side of that river. These two images of Paradise: the first which is lost and the other which is eternal, are the bookend of the Bible. They illustrate growth, faithfulness and being connected to God. You may be familiar with the poem “God’s Garden” by Dorothy Frances Gurney

**Kiss of the sun for pardon.
Song of the birds for mirth.
You're closer to God's heart in a garden
Than any place on earth.**

It turns out Ms. Gurney was drawing on centuries of Christian tradition with this sentiment. When we think of Christian art, and especially art which represents the message of Christianity, the image

which may come to mind is a cross -- especially a crucifix with a representation of Jesus on the cross. But this hasn't always been the case, and still is not the primary image of Christianity in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. In their book, *Saving Paradise*, Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker decided to see when the image of Jesus on the cross first came into use in the Western Church, and were surprised to find that it was more than 600 years after the beginning of Christianity. Before that, the most common image for Christianity and salvation was -- a garden. A place where people work together, where God brings growth, and where there is enough for all.

So I'm going to take you on a virtual garden tour this morning; it will also be a biblical tour, because we're going to begin by talking about flowers that are mentioned in the Bible. There are actually not that many flowers mentioned by name in the Bible, and that the ones which are were all familiar to me. In fact, I have planted all of these on the property at my house -- and many of them have actually survived. Flowers -- that is wildflowers or flowers of the field -- are referred to fairly often.

[Slide 1] Usually in this context from Isaiah 40:8 "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. " Especially in a desert environment, flowers come up quickly and die off just as quickly. Flowers like this are a symbol of human life and human ambition, especially when compared to the eternity of God's word and God's faithfulness.

[Slide 2] This flower is mentioned just once, in Isaiah 35:1, which reads, "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly." Even in our more temperate climate, seeing crocuses blossom is a cause for rejoicing, because it's one of the first flowers of spring. Some members of Pletcher's deacon group rejoiced at the crocuses we saw at the De Fries Calendar Garden last month.

[Slide 3] If I asked you to name a flower in the Bible, this is probably the first one you'd think of. Lilies are mentioned in the Old Testament, but Jesus uses them as an illustration in his teaching. You can find this both in Matthew 6 and Luke 12 where Jesus says, "Consider the lilies, how they grow: They toil not, neither do they

spin, yet Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.” This verse is abbreviated to “consider the lilies” and is carved on a stone near the entrance of Creekside’s prayer garden. Lilies and a few other specific flowers in the bible are used to illustrate the beauty of nature and Creation. A white lily like this one is called an Easter lily: we had a bunch of them up here a couple weeks ago. A white lily is a sign of purity: many images of Mary, the mother of Jesus, especially medieval images of the Annunciation, show Mary holding a lily when the angel Gabriel tells her that she has been chosen to bear the Son of God.

[Slide 4] There are two more flowers, both which come from the same verse in the Old Testament, Song of Solomon 2:1 This is the rose of Sharon -- which is not actually part of the rose family. We in N. America know it as this member of the hibiscus family; biblical scholars think it might have been a kind of crocus. Sharon is name to us, but in Hebrew, it was a place -- originally not a specific place, but a kind of geography: Saron was an open place, or a plain. So this is a rose of the plain, and its partner is

[Slide 5] the lily of the valley. I’m sure some of you know the song, “Everybody Ought to Know” (I had to go back in the mental Sunday School archives for this one) which has the verse “He’s the lily of the valley . . .” The song is talking about Jesus, the passage from Song of Solomon is not about Jesus specifically, but uses this flower for images of beauty, fragrance, and humility.

[Slide 6] I want to show you a few non-biblical flowers which have become associated with Christianity. The word ‘rose’ appears in the Bible dozens of times, but usually as “when it was morning, they rose and went to Galilee . . .” or “then they rose up in anger . . .” clearly that’s not what we’re looking for. Only in that passage which I just referenced from Song of Solomon, which mentions the rose of Sharon do we hear about rose as a flower. Still, the rose has become part of Christian tradition because of its fragrance in the beads of the rosary, its beauty and intricate structure, and because roses have something which many other flowers don’t: thorns. Legend has it that the roses in the Garden of Eden did not have thorns, but thorns are a symbol of pain and suffering, and the rose reminds us of the beauty which can still blossom in the adversity of life.

[Slide 7] Daffodils are a symbol of spring and new life and resurrection, since they die back completely and lie buried in the ground for months. They are the official flower of the American Cancer society for the same message of perseverance and hope. Some of you donated the daffodils which are coming up along the driveway here at Creekside.

I mentioned the gardens at the beginning and end of the Bible, but there are important gardens in between. One is the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus went to pray with his disciples, and was betrayed and arrested. The other is the garden where the tomb was, which was empty when the women went there on Easter morning. You'll remember that in John's account, Mary Magdalene is weeping in the garden, and mistakes Jesus for the gardener until he speaks her name. Resurrection is the promise of the Christian story -- new life after death. It's appropriate that the disciples discover that in a garden.

[Slide 8] This is the last image I have to show you this morning, and it isn't a flower at all -- it's a blossoming tree: a dogwood tree. I hope we'll be seeing these blossoms in a few weeks; they can be white or pink, and they're beautiful in the woods or as cultivated trees. There is a Christian legend associated with the dogwood blossoms; they represent Christ's sacrifice for us. There are four petals -- two longer and two shorter, arranged in opposition in the shape of a cross. There's an indentation at the end of each petal which is deep red or brown, like the wounds in Jesus' hands and feet. In the middle of the blossom is a crown of thorns.

As we are in the Easter season, the weeks after the resurrection I believe it's important for Christians to look for signs of life and growth and beauty. God knows, there is plenty of reason to be concerned about what's going on in the world and in our country and in our communities. You don't have to believe that God created flowers with specific meanings in order to associate them with the Christian story, but that story is our promise and our hope in difficult times. It is worth remembering Jesus' words that if God cares about the lilies, how much more does God care about us, his people. Our text from Colossians says that God's purpose for each one of us is

that we lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to God as we bear fruit in every good work and grow into the knowledge of Christ. And for that, brothers and sisters, we all need a place where we are planted and cultivated and watered, so that we can grow into the people whom God wants us to be. May God make us wise and strong and beautiful through his glorious power. I pray that we will seek and find places where we can grow close to the heart of God. Amen.