

“Seeds Sprouting”

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Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-26

Do we sense the anticipation of seeds sprouting?! By now, earnest gardeners among us may have planted and watered good soil in compartmentalized trays under grow lights or on windowsills at home. While we drive by hoop houses baking seedlings until the last frost date passes. Snow drops have hung delicately for weeks, joined by crocuses and a few daffodils already blooming beside our walk. While others we know dream and scheme with seed catalogues, can't wait for a delivery person to walk up with a treat to make our little hearts leap! As winter fields lie fallow, trees still barren, friends, it's a season of hope for life about to shoot and burst into bloom. Though I hope this isn't making anyone feel stressed, late, behind because of whatever life has delayed the order, or seeding trays. Especially true if you're online from Georgia, North Carolina, Texas ... someplace warm, weeks ahead of Michigan. And I hope we're not feeling left out if our thumbs have no hint of green (even on St. Patty's Day!) and our only connection is annoying black bits out of our watermelon. Seeds. I wonder what comes to mind—grass blends to thicken our lawn, an orchard full of blossoms that become the fruit we savor; any form of bulb or rhizome; any green volunteer shoot appearing through leaves or poking out of a sidewalk crack.

“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,” Jesus said, “it remains just a single grain.” As John tells the story, Jesus refers to how he's given his life, soon will be executed. It's just after he paraded into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. *Sense the anticipation.* In much the same spirit as he's been walking all over ancient Palestine plowing a furrow in people's ordinary lives. Calling the first disciples going about their daily work. Conversing with a Samaritan woman at the town well seeking living water. Welcoming religious leaders who come to him under the cover of night, seeking Divine Light that no darkness can overcome. Maybe gifts and goodness in them have been lying fallow for a season. Maybe they feel more utterly barren. Jesus plows through their sadness, loss, fears, anxiety, boring mundane routines, all the boundaries of society that warn otherwise. He comes, John urges, he pours out himself in showers of grace that others may flourish with life abundantly.

As winter turns to spring this week, here's a question at the heart of our texts today. Yearning to flourish, can we trust God's faithful presence when vitality seems scarce? When evidence of God's faithfulness seems absent? How does God's new life grow in us when our lives seem fallow or barren? Can we sense any anticipation of seeds sprouting?

That's what Jeremiah tries to convey to his people. The two great symbols of God's faithful presence and power among them are gone. Their holy temple reduced to rubble. Their line of kings ripped up at the root. Much of their civilization destroyed. Some languish in a post-apocalyptic

land. Some seethe, exiled in Babylon. Good life as they've known it, gone. Jeremiah's lamented all the inequities and abuses in society, mourning community life lost. Now he envisions their nation rebuilt and city flowering in beauty, bearing fruit anew. Try to sense the anticipation, or at least the desire, the yearning for it. That's our journey through Lent.

Here's the critical leap of faith Jeremiah makes. Often, we talk about how God's Spirit moves in this world like wind, some special superpower; "a sphinx-like arbitrary force bearing down on us" Thomas Merton writes,¹ maybe in some extreme like a person, a sort of puppet master pulling strings. Yes! I say. Sacred Grace exists and moves beyond any person, any way we can conceive, let alone have conceit to control. Still, Jeremiah makes an audacious assertion that no longer will abundant life the way God wants it in the world be imposed from the outside—by external instruction and control, as by some king who keeps the peace. That's what the Law tried to nurture and accomplish, written on tablets of stone, to shape stone-cold hearts. From now on, this Sacred Life will arise from internal motivation and commitment.

Here's the promise that makes it possible: God will write, paint, encode in their hearts all that brings justice, peace, fulfillment, security, the power of Holy Love. Maybe John and Jesus would imagine beaming rays of sun and showers of grace making seeds sprout. If words or seeds don't work for us, maybe it's a song we just know by heart and hear repeat. It's an exercise high that never ends. It's total ease / peace in the company of others we just trust will always endure. No longer will we need to teach, correct, cajole, strive for something that seems beyond us, Jeremiah celebrates, for all people will know me. I will be their God. They will be my people. Can we feel that intimacy?! Imagine what glorious good news this would seem to people whose lives have been crushed, confined, coerced. Can we sense anticipation for seeds of new life? Amid all our personal fears, losses, hurts, limitations; all the people in our society and places in our world that so need it. Do we dare hope for it as explosions still kill innocents in Gaza and hostages remain captive and gunfire rings out in our schools and city streets terrorizing our own kids? Do we dare hope for this life amid biases we know and partisan rancor soaring for another election season, all that's still wrong in our society? Do we dare hope that we may flourish again after whatever illness and ailments, loss and brokenness seem to make a winter chill, thick clouds depress our spirits? Do we dare hope our hearts could be so open and touched?

The "heart" in Hebrew understanding includes feelings and much more. It's head and intellect kindled by all our passions and emotions to ignite our wills, choices, purpose. Beyond cozy feel-good sentimentality, this holy intimacy propels us to act in our community life. You see, friends, that's faith Jeremiah urges the people to live—from personal inspiration to communal manifestation of grace, love, life shared in peace.

Yes, I expect as a faithful Jew, Jesus knew well Jeremiah's vision. And it's a good way to get how God's saving grace works in all his ministry. Jesus embodies Holy Love so heart-fully, intimately, completely God's Spirit enlivens others he touches—raising them, sprouting new life in them.

Here's how Thomas Merton expresses his own yearning, like Christ: God's will to bring life grows so freely that he becomes God's love fully. And in the generous flow thousands and millions grow together into a huge golden field of wheat, bearing the fruit of God's praise and glory.ⁱⁱ Which is human beings and all creation flourishing fully alive.

Now here's the paradoxical crux—Jesus' cross and the crucial turning point in our living faith. A grain of wheat is just a lone grain, Jesus says, until it dies, gives up itself completely; and then it bears much fruit. You see, horticulturalists will tell us that every seed has a hard shell that protects it. But the new shoot can't come out, grow new life until that shell is cracked, broken. It essentially gives up life in the shape it is, for it to grow, bear fruit, and seed anew.

Now this is where I'm no expert. I don't really know what I'm talking about—how this growth happens. In an early attempt to grow veggies years ago, I planted a small triangular patch. Carrots in the front, then lettuces, and then a few zucchini plants. Yeah, by the time those vines got going tiny lettuce heads and carrot shoots had no hope ... totally overrun! We know growth in living faith doesn't always come as we plan and imagine. I'm sure we could play with this seed metaphor in many ways. Some of you may have much more experience—I look forward to your insights. I'm no master gardener. But I know a little something about the good soil we share here together—in warm sunshine, occasional storms, and innumerable gentle showers of grace. Friends, we are a field for God's purpose just waiting to sprout and bear fruit. We think we're in pews! They're actually furrows already seeded just waiting to sprout. Can we sense the anticipation?!

Today we welcome new members—each person with stories of love, meaning, hurt and perseverance on their life journey come to grow and serve with us. Maybe so eager and involved they're already knee high and the 4th of July is four months away, others cautiously poking their little shoots above ground, looking for a way to leaf out. Every one of us with good fruit to bear! Today after worship, we'll gather in our Dining Room for our annual meeting. Maybe it seems like a harvest celebration—all the good life together and witness we shared in the past year. Yes, and our shoots are already extending again ... and just maybe listening, electing leaders, chatting casually over lunch someone else's seed will begin to sprout and yearn to bloom in some new way.

Maybe you caught the great news article about our CtV / Red Door Dinner. There's bearing fruit of love, relationship, life abundant ... something like the beaming smiles captured on servants and neighbors alike. And friends, I believe there's so much more possibility among us like our Pine Island garden, just waiting to be full of life again. Like our Pine Island Chapel getting close to complete for all the worship, faith conversations, fun events, weddings, funerals, community groups where people will find there too a sanctuary of living faith proclaiming to the world: You Are Loved!

Friends, we could play with many more seed growing analogies. Times when one of us zucchini plants in this very human garden gets a bit too big and crowds out a few lettuces and carrots among

us. Or maybe like what Bob Poehl asked this week. He's planning what to put where, and get us on our way again to 5,000 pounds of veggies for people who most need it. He asked if there's anything to know about landscaping and other finishing touches that may infringe on the garden area. I say it's a good metaphorical question of sorts to ponder about society. What constructs of assumptions, biases, patterns of living get built up and crowd out, make it harder for other people's garden to sprout and bear fruit? We could make many more metaphorical connections. But this sermon has sprouted quite a lot already. Let's get to potluck fruits below!

So as God's love is written on my heart here's good news I really want to us know. These seeds of love and grace, friends, they're already within us. Don't need to be planted again by some external magic power to come and fix us. I believe the Great Divine Sower cast good seed at our birth, settled in our hearts, our souls, waiting to come alive. Yeah, sometimes we're not giving them good soil to flourish. Sometimes we're too darn hard of heart to even let the new shoot come out. So how can we let the waters of grace soak in? What needs to crack open, even die as such for us to flourish, bearing good fruit?

Frantic choices, pressured work, caregivers that don't get a break, all the ways we may feel late, behind, left out, not good enough. Anxieties or criticisms we feed when life doesn't meet our conceptions and desires. Illusions about who we are. Expectations we've accepted from others (or maybe we've made up) that don't jive with what's really in our hearts. Ways of living that don't really bring life. Things society says we're supposed to do that stifle what we really yearn to be. Biases baked into systems of culture. Even things we do, patterns of operating, assumptions in our church life together. Open our hearts today, this Lenten season to let God's Spirit of grace seep in and help that new sprout take root. Break open any shell that keeps us from being honest and vulnerable enough to let what we truly love, that gift in our heart come out. That gift which will ultimately be received by others in such a way that their seed starts to sprout, too. Do we sense the anticipation? Dear friends, trust that Holy Love seeks us however unplanned and imperfect our lives—to seek our good our true awakening. Trust even if it means letting go of the familiar, the usual, a surface self, opening to grace that grows something new and unknown by which a rich harvest will be sown.ⁱⁱⁱ Trust that in the bulb there is a flower, in the seed an apple tree ... unrevealed until it's season, something God alone can see.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, (New York: New Direction Books, 1961), 15.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, 17.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, 15-16.