

Pole Beans

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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September 10, 2023

Psalm 104, Selected Verses

1 Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, you are very great. You are clothed with honor and majesty,

2 wrapped in light as with a garment. You stretch out the heavens like a tent,

3 you set the beams of your chambers on the waters, you make the clouds your chariot, you ride on the wings of the wind,

4 you make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers.

5 You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken.

10 You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills,

11 giving drink to every wild animal; the wild animals quench their thirst.

12 By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches.

13 From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

14 You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth,

15 and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart.

16 The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that God planted.

17 In them the birds build their nests; the stork has its home in the fir trees.

18 The high mountains are for the wild goats; the rocks are a refuge for the coney.

24 O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.

Genesis 2, Selected Verses, adapted

These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created. In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— then the Lord God formed a human being - an earth creature - from the dust of the ground, and breathed into the human's nostrils the breath of life; and he became a living being.

And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there God put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The Lord God put the earth creature in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

Out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the human being to see what he would call them; and whatever he called every living creature, that was its name.

The earth creature gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field....

—

I am kneeling in the dirt,
in the late afternoon sunshine,
one day in August,

looking up at green bean vines,
Pole beans to be specific,
They were named pole beans by some wise farmer along the
way because they climb poles..
Beans that have clustered and twined around bamboo guide
sticks and through the fence that marks their boundary.

The Interfaith Garden is quiet. Indeed, I am all alone in the
garden because I have snuck in early. Our fearless leader Carla
is on a well deserved vacation but she has left loving, detailed
instructions. So I am all alone, with the green beans. I have just
one task, in this moment: to pick green beans.

And so I kneel, and sometimes sit, in the dirt, in the sunshine, at
harvest time.

And I pick a bean.

And I pray for the person who will eat this bean,

One whose name I do not know,

Who will arrive at the food pantry on Saturday and select a
pound of pole beans.

And I pick a bean.

I pick a bean, and I think back to May, when Mary Mackie and I planted seeds in this very spot, clearing the weeds, planting a triangle of beans at the base of each pole. I pick a bean and I think back to that day and I pray for Mary, and for Carla who has taught us how to cultivate this crop, and for each other Pilgrim who has tilled this soil in order to raise food for our neighbors, and for new friends made here in the rows of beets and asparagus and green beans.

I pick a bean, and I give thanks for the azure sky, and for the sunshine this day - and the rain that has soaked in to the garden.

I pick a bean and I pray for the folks that pick beans and broccoli and peppers every day, laborers who have to work much harder and faster than I can imagine. I pray for the people whose work fills farmers market stalls and grocery store shelves, those who make my family's abundant meals possible all year round.

I pick a bean and I give thanks for the mystery before me: the soil that has been carefully nourished, the ground that has received seeds that can take in water and nutrients in the dark of that good earth and break open and shoot up out of the dirt and find sunlight and grow, and grow, and grow until it puts forth fruit.

I pick a bean and I wonder how a plant thousands of generations ago changed and evolved and became this plant.

I pick a bean and I pray, in awe. I pick a bean and I pray, thank you God. Thank you, God, the first gardener, thank you Holy One, present even in this little Lexington miracle garden.

I pick a bean and I pray for the whole of the earth, and for land that has dried up in drought and been overcome by flood, for the crisis of climate change hurting the land and everyone that lives upon it.

I pray, and I pick a bean, and now there are two baskets of beans...

And now there are also voices all around me - other volunteers who have come to harvest and weed and compost and water.

One, perhaps also praying - loudly and exuberantly - one calls out WOW!!! Each time he tenderly lifts a potato. WOW sounds like a prayer to me. And WOW sounds like a promise, to gently lift up these miracles of the garden and offer them as a gift to someone who is hungry. WOW, indeed.

This is our fourth September observing a Season of Creation - along with our siblings in many churches around the world. In this season, we put the focus on the gift of God's creation, and on God's commission to humanity to steward the earth, to till the earth and *keep* it. Not to dominate the earth, not to use it up for our own self-interest, but to keep it and be responsible for it.

I don't have to preach to convince you of the crisis we are in - nature is preaching that sermon through fire and storm. This season, I'm wondering about how we learn from God's creation, and where we draw strength and courage in a time of crisis.

Where do we find wonder and goodness in these days? One place is the garden.

This season of creation, I invite us to pair beauty with care, wonder with worry, study with action, because what we love, we protect. So I do not just mean gardening literally - I mean it as a spiritual practice, the way Julian of Norwich preached:

“Be a Gardener. Dig a ditch. Toil and sweat. And turn the earth upside down. And seek the deepness. And water plants in time. Continue this labor. And make sweet floods to run, and noble and abundant fruits to spring. Take this food and drink, and carry it to God as your true worship.”

The more our fingernails are lined with soil, the more we know about the beauty of creation; the more we know the more we love it; the more we love it the harder we'll work for it.

Writer Barbara Mahany says this:

The garden of course, is just about the oldest metaphor in the holy book. It's where it all began, at least in the Bible.

In the thick of creation, God reached right down, and from a handful of dust there on the ground, adamah in Hebrew, God made Adam so there would be someone to tend the acreage. And then God planted the garden, and put Adam there ‘to till it and keep it.’ ...You get the sense...that God wants us in the garden to learn a thing or two.¹

Gardening, too, is the work of Easter people. The sacred work of people whose

“faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11). Again from Barbara Mahany: “It’s mighty hard not to believe, when tucking in a seed, sprinkling it day after day with your watering can, and catching sight, glorious sight, of that first hint of newborn green pushing through the earth. To plant a seed, to bury a bulb, is to practice resurrection gardening.”²

We are Easter people, and we are gardeners, even in September, even in the hottest September days anyone can remember. Even

¹ Mahany, Barbara. *The Book of Nature: The Astonishing Beauty of God’s First Sacred Text*. Broadleaf Books, Minneapolis, 2023. p. 35.

² Ibid.

in September, we plant and till and cultivate and believe that the story is not over yet.

Amen.