

## **“How Does God’s Garden Grow?”**

Psalm 104:1, 10-17, 24; Matthew 13:3-8, 18-23 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might truly absorb your love for our entire beings – mind, soul, and body. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.*

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You all know that I am not a gardener. My proudest relevant accomplishment is that the philodendrons Tracy potted for me back at the beginning of the pandemic are still thriving. But I will say that I am grateful that for most of my life I have garden- and gardener-adjacent. And I have never been so delighted to be as garden-adjacent as I am now, with this beautiful new space just steps away from my office.

One could argue that any Christian who actually reads the Bible is at least garden-adjacent, even if, like me, they are distinctly lacking a green thumb. We are told Jesus was a carpenter like his father, but have we ever thought about whether maybe Mary’s parents were farmers? We don’t really know anything about Jesus’ grandparents, but the sheer number of metaphors and parables that Jesus tells that involve growing things hints that he had some kind of gardening influence in there somewhere. And it’s not just Jesus.

Some of the most ancient Hebrew scriptures tell us repeatedly that the created world is a testament to the goodness and majesty of God. The psalm is just a small taste of that narrative. When you have a moment, you should go back and read all of

Psalm 104, plus Psalm 19, 8, 95 & 96, 65, and 36. It's not just that the psalmists are talking about how lovely the created world is; they actually describe nature as expressing how wondrous God is. And if we pause to consider our own experiences of nature, I think we can see how clear that is. Even the parts of creation that are mostly terrifying, like earthquakes or huge storms at sea, tell us something about the glory and power of God.

So holding onto that as part of our written heritage, let's bring it into the present moment. What does it mean to declare that nature teaches us about God, now that we're living in times when science has unlocked so many beautiful mysteries? It was such a joy to have so many nature scientists, professional and amateur, with us yesterday. The things that humanity has learned, through careful observation and partnership with nature, offer us a whole new book of "psalms" to teach us more about God. Indeed, science has helped us "unlearn" some of the things that damaged our relationship with the rest of the earth, so that we're now learning new ways to live in better harmony with creation, which definitely sounds holy to me.

There is a tension in this practice of learning from nature. On the one hand, we sometimes look at things like the mountains and the stars, and see reflections of God's permanence and unchanging nature. But on the other hand, observing nature also shows us that change is constant, whether represented in night turning to day, or the seasons shifting week to week, or the ways the earth moves over the eons. In her

seminal novel, “The Parable of the Sower,” Octavia Butler asserts that God is Change, not a static, supernatural being, but a malleable, constantly fluctuating force. It strikes me today how ironic it is that this would be the central tenet of a book with the title of “The Parable of the Sower.” Because I don’t think that’s how most of us read the parable of the sower we just heard from Matthew.

But what if we could? The way this story is given to us impacts what we do with it. The frame is very limited; it just covers one growing season. And we’re told about four different places where those seeds landed. There’s the path – open, exposed, a dangerous place for a seed. The rocky ground, where it’s hard to develop the support a faith that can withstand difficult requires. There’s the thorn patch, where temptation chokes out the good seed. And then there’s the good soil. These different soil conditions are presented as metaphors for the various ways people respond to the gospel.

But if we pay attention to the other things we know about scripture, and faith, and gardening, we will remember that nothing in nature is permanent. Change is always present, always possible. And most blessedly, change doesn’t have to be random; we can create change ourselves. If the plot of land where you want to plant your garden is covered in thorns, you don’t just go throw the seeds out there and hope some of them will make it. You put on your thick gloves, and you get out there and pull out the thorns first, to make room for the seeds you want to sow. If the ground

is full of rocks, you dig them up. We've certainly seen a lot of that over the past few years, as we've reclaimed various plots to cultivate native plants. And so now, we have lovely beds ringed by wonderful stones, which are much more useful as borders than they are buried all down underneath where they would block root formation.

The stories Jesus tells about these various places where the seeds can fall are descriptions, but they're not prescriptions. We've all certainly known people and even been people who get really excited about something at first and then lose interest quickly when it gets more complicated. We've felt how the temptations of pride or greed can pull us away from the gospel. But Jesus isn't saying that we are the dirt itself, unable to do anything to improve our situations. We are not called to be passive soil, but to be cultivators of the ground ourselves. We can pull out the weeds from our hearts and souls. We can do the hard work of digging out the rocks that are blocking our faith from growing deeper, whether those stones are prejudice or shame or toxic positivity or anything else that separates us from God's compassion.

So what does it look like to apply these lessons to our shared work as a congregation, trying to cultivate God's future here as Vista La Mesa Christian Church? What are the rocks we still need to remove? Where are the thorns that might be in the way? What is the change we are being called to cultivate? How can we prepare the soil well, so that the seeds of God's word can take root and blossom and bear fruit? As we enter into our annual stewardship campaign, we are each asked to

consider how we might pitch in to help bring this garden God is planting into being. Our Intentions Offerings invite us to be involved in each step of that cultivation process, from the formation disciplines of worship, prayer and study that weed and water the ground, to planting the seeds with acts of service. Our financial commitments this year are symbolized as the ongoing work of feeding the soil, helping to ensure that the seeds that are planted have the safe, nourishing ground they need to take root and grow.

I truly believe that the new pollinator garden that is now blooming right outside our doors can be a turning point in the life of this congregation. Even if we were just to learn from the living example it gave us of what is possible when people band together to create something lovely, it will make a difference. I think it has the potential to shift our relationship with our closest neighbors, a number of whom I had cheerful conversations with earlier this week, as I went about inviting people to yesterday's party. Change is coming, and if we can commit to cultivating the ground well, that change can bear beautiful fruit. This garden is its own testimony to the goodness of God. But beyond that, it is a testimony to the power of community, the beauty of partnership, the joys of working together with our natural world to make life better for all creatures. In this moment, we are being invited to commit ourselves to following up on that promise, to feeding the soil, keeping the weeds clear, and sharing the harvest, for the glory of God. Hallelujah and Amen!