

Like a Watered Garden

From Like a Garden by Sara Covin Juengst

Proverbs 8:22-31/Luke 6:17-19 by Patty Friesen (May 22/16)

We feel the need for rain about this time every spring, which is why we plan church weiner roasts and Sunday School campouts to tempt it to rain on us. Rain is life and while we can't control what's happening in the fields, in town we hook up perforated hoses, watering tubes and oscillating sprinklers for our struggling tomato plants. Water is not an option for gardens, it is a must. In the Bible, the importance of water for garden life began in Genesis. Even before the rains began, an underground stream rose up to water the whole face of the ground in Genesis 2:6. Water was and is very precious in the Middle East. The climate has changed little since biblical times. The average rainfall in Jerusalem is 22 inches a year but at Jericho only two inches a year. In biblical times, they used cisterns and terrace farming to conserve run-off. Modern Israelis and Palestinians have devised brilliant water recycling and conservation strategies. Of course water is contentious there as Israelis control water flow to Palestinian territories.

Given the importance of water in this dry land, it is not surprising that it became a central metaphor in biblical poetry, sermons, proverbs, curses and blessings. There are over 100 references in scripture of drought and the famine that accompanied it. In the time of Ruth, Elijah and Elisha, Solomon and Jeremiah there were severe droughts that caused many prayers and deal making with God. Jeremiah described the devastation of drought in chapter 14:3-4. "They are dismayed and cover their heads because the ground is cracked. Because there has been no rain on the land, the farmers are dismayed."

Time and time again in scripture, the provision of rain is an indication of God's love and care. The psalmists extolled God as the one who blesses the earth with rain as in Psalm 65 "You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it, the river of God is full of water, you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it. You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers and blessing its growth. The prophets also, in calling the people to obedience and loyalty used the symbol of rain as a reminder of why they should be grateful to God. Zechariah 10:1 "Ask rain from the Lord in the season of the spring rain, from God who makes the storm clouds, who gives showers of rain to you, the vegetation in the field to everyone.

People who live close to the land often associate God with rain. In Congo, the Sango word for rain is God-water. And their prayer expresses this association: Rejoice in the Lord, for God has caused the parched earth to be refreshed, and where there was nothing but brownness, hardness and death, there is now greenness covering the soft earth. Where there was death, there is now newness of life, hope has been restored throughout the land.

Those of us who live in highly technological societies, however, frequently lose this sense of dependence on God for rain. We rely on city reservoirs and the miracle of tap water but those of us who have been canoeing on the South Sask River know it's record lows last year and this year and as we get hung up on sandbars, we think about our city's connection to the glaciers in the Rockies and the dry land across Alberta and Saskatchewan.

Like physical drought, spiritual drought is not an uncommon experience for even the most devout Christians. Prayer lives dry up, interest in spiritual things droop for us as

they did for even the spiritual giants like CS Lewis, Henri Nouwen and even Mother Theresa said her real experiences of God only happened to her in her youth. Julian of Norwich suggested that in times of spiritual drought to pray even though you find no joy in it. For it does good, though you feel nothing, see nothing and even though you think you cannot pray and when you are dry, empty, sick and weak.” She also said that while the wilderness happens, it is never meant to be permanent. In God’s time and in God’s way the desert will give way to a land flowing with milk and honey.” Isaiah 58:11 says parched places are a part of life but the Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places and make your bones strong, and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water whose waters never fail.”

Isaiah 58 is speaking of more than just physical and psychological renewal. He is speaking of the water of life, the miracle of God’s grace that goes abundantly above all that we can ask or think to make our parched lives like watered gardens. It is that gentle rain of God’s mercy, the miraculous fountain of God’s forgiveness, and the deep well of God’s steadfast love that bring us out of our despair, our emptiness, our meaninglessness, our hopelessness and that make our gardens live again. To benefit from this life-giving water, we must be ready. Hardpacked garden soil is unable to receive the spring rains. Our soil must be made ready in openness, in hope and trust. Hosea understood this when he wrote, Break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the lord, that God may come and rain righteousness upon you. (10:12) The Gardener is ready; the rains will come, and our parched places will become green and alive again.

Jeremiah 31:2-40 is a beautiful passage that has been referred to as the Little Book of Consolation. It spells out in the clearest possible terms the certainty of Israel’s

hope, grounded in the message of salvation. It was a message that the scattered remnant in exile desperately needed to hear. Even though they sat down by the rivers of Babylon, those rivers did not quench their thirst. Jeremiah reminds Israel that the one who made them will not abandon them but will let them walk by brooks of water, adding, “They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord, over the grain, the wine and the oil and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again. (31:11-12)

It is an end to our dry spells, our languishing, our discouragement and disappointment. It is a 3 day rain that we can only dream of, a shower of blessing described by the prophet Hosea, Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord, for God’s appearing is as sure as the dawn; God will come to us like the showers, like the spring rains that water the earth. (6:3)

In the New Testament, James uses the hope for rain as a symbol of encouragement for Christians experiencing hardships and difficulties in faith. Be patient there fore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You must also be patient. Strengthen your hearts for the coming of the Lord is near. (5:7-8) James’ message is important for us to hear. Each time we pray, Thy kingdom come, we are making an affirmation of hope. We are saying that we do indeed believe that our times are in God’s hands and that the future belongs to God. This hope is not for pie in the sky, by and by but is a statement of trust in God. We are called to be patient but not

passive. We are to strengthen our hearts, to live as farmers, going about our tasks, trusting God to sustain us in painful spiritual droughts.

As droughts and rains are seasonal, so we begin to realize that our lives in God are seasonal as well. Sometimes, we wish there was only one season in the Christian life, harvest but we're never in the same season. Even when we are baptized, we've never completely arrived. Most of us probably would say, we're not the same now as when we were baptized. God is always breaking up sod, adding fertilizer, seeding and re-seeding, watering, weeding and harvesting. Poet Maya Angelou said, "I'm trying to be a Christian and it's not an easy thing to do. When people walk up to me and say, I'm a Christian, I say, Already?"

Throughout scripture the spiritually alive person is pictured as a growing person. This kind of growth demands humility. The kind of arrogant attitude that assumes it already has all the answers stifles growth. A growing person has a thirst that must be assuaged, like the ground that drinks up the rain falling on it repeatedly – Hebrews 6:7. The water of life keeps us always greening that we remain young and strong in the practice of our faith. Just as plants cannot live without water, our souls shrivel up and die apart from the life giving fountain of God's love. Isaiah, says, Come everyone who thirsts, come to the waters and live. Jesus says, I am the water of life. Let's pray...