

Psalm 104:1-9
Mark 4:30-32

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania, 19333
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Fifth Sunday in Lent
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SPRING HOPES ETERNAL

“...so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

Yesterday morning as I left the house, I walked out the back door to be greeted by an explosion of color, a yellow star burst fifty feet away in the garden as bold as a supernova. The yellow forsythia have hit their prime. All the way up Devon State Road and through the meandering turns by the site of the old Conestoga Road toll booth (that 200 year old elfin cabin on the end of the Porsche dealership), sun bursts of brilliant yellow shouted their *Hallelujahs!*

The reason it took my breath away wasn't just the multitude of tiny blooms, it was that the morning was so subdued. Remember how grey the sky has been so much of this winter and how chill the wind, so Saturday was a lovely prophecy of summer. Growing up in northwest England, which has a very rainy and overcast climate for much of the year, so much so that we used to joke, “I remember last summer, it was on a Thursday!” I was often struck by how intensely green the fields were, and how especially bright the flowers under those sullen skies. Contrasts are a powerful thing. When darkness and light are mingled, colors are so much more striking, as when good cuts like a knife through the veil of evil.

It is sad that we have become so estranged from nature. We no longer raise our own livestock, tend the soil, build our homes from lumber we hewed, make our clothes from homespun, or sit often enough at the end of a hard work day watching the sun, God's princely life-giver, as it melts into the horizon. Instead, virtually everything we have comes to us via anonymous hands. I think that's what inclined Jane and me to build and plant a produce garden two years ago. It feels so right and good to work the soil God gave us, for a season. It stirs a deeper gratitude toward God and God's nature when Jane sends me on an errand to harvest basil and thyme, and mint for our leg of lamb, and slice a home grown tomato for my Sunday lunch.

One of the ancient rabbinical stories reflects upon the second Genesis creation story. It's quoted in a book by William Muehl, a provocative book called *Why Preach, Why Listen*.

When Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden, they wasted no time in blaming themselves. Instead, they blamed one another, thus establishing the pattern for married life through the ages. For a time they considered trying to sneak back into Eden. But the gate looked forbidding and the angel with the flaming sword appeared incorruptible. So, with many a backward glance, the man and woman began their journey over the face of the earth, looking for a place to dwell.

Some lands were too hot, other too cold. This place was a desert, that one a swamp. A few that looked and felt just right proved to be shared by large carnivores whose urgent appetites threatened life and limb. The long days of searching dragged painfully into years.

At last Adam and his wife came to a large fertile valley. Sweet grasses grew abundantly in it, and a clear fresh stream ran sparkling through its middle. Gentle herbivorous animals grazed quietly, and fish leaped shining into the sunlight. Far up in one of the valley walls there was a clean, dry cave, with an apron that caught the first rays of the dawn. Here the man and woman settled down.

Things went well for them. Adam tilled the ground and hunted for game. Eve prepared the food, sewed clothing, and grew great with child. Oh, it wasn't Eden. The night a skunk got into the butter crock Eve wept and remembered the garden. The day his plow broke on a large rock Adam cursed and reminded his wife about the apple.

But then one night in spring, when the air was soft and fragrant with the scent of new growth, Adam lay on the apron of the cave, unable to sleep. The sky above him was splashed with stars, the muted lowing of the herds came faintly from the pastures below. Every muscle in the man's body ached from the labors of the day.

Suddenly, Adam turned to his wife.

"Eve!" he said, "this is what we were meant for. To till the ground and raise our grain. To hunt and fish for meat, to work all day in the hot sun and feel the sweat drying on our bodies in the cool of the evening. To try something and fail and try it again and fail. And keep on trying until it works. To struggle to understand things that fill us with fear. To feel hunger and thirst and pain and hope! This is better than Eden, Eve. This is what we were meant for in this time."

Spring has just such a lesson to teach us. A lesson to absorb from nature's resolute faithfulness its unrelenting promise of hope. It's a promise of God's faithfulness. A promise that houses God's deeper promise to grant to us the eternal things as we seek to be faithful. So be mindful in the midst of your fears that this is the way it is. And in the midst of all of our trials and afflictions, things which we often bear so privately, so agonizingly within our own hearts, remember—God is with us! Not to draw us out of the storm before it happens, but to stand with us in the midst of the storm as it happens. God is a sure companion who will not let us go.

The forsythia, the planted seed, the flower's first bud, even the blossoms of the tulip poplar high above our heads where only God can see them, all are a stunning testimony to hope embraced and promise fulfilled. Whenever rough times this way come, or heartache creeps within, or evil steals upon us and ruptures the soul, all of nature and the beckoning Easter spirit of Jesus remind us—*all is not lost.*" For those who live in God, resurrection *always* follows Good Friday.

Nothing can stop spring's coming. Nothing can stop the regenerative spirit of God. It is the same spirit that germinates the flower that powers the risen Christ, and touches us. Nothing can hinder creation's will to fill the earth with good things. Nothing, not war or pestilence, or regional famine, or tsunami, not broken hearts, or sudden death can stop God's spirit from keeping life alive where it is given room.

Beauty is stronger than death; a flower is stronger than evil; the ever replenishing Spirit of God is stronger than any death. God does not die, neither do those who grasp God by one hand and seek goodness with the other.

To God be the glory; spring hopes eternal, and so do the children of God.

Amen.