

Proper 10, Year A
July 16, 2023

The Rev. Barbara Ballenger
Preparing a Place for the Seed to Land

Many, many years ago, when I was young, I went with my family to the Home and Garden Show in Columbus Ohio. Amid all the flowers I was particularly impressed with the Bird of Paradise plants. That's this large tropical plant with orange blossoms that look like a bird in flight. Breathtaking.

In the excitement of the moment I had the idea that I would grow one of these amazing plants myself. So for \$2 I bought one large, beautiful Bird of Paradise seed in a plastic envelope. It was like a little brown nut with an orange tuft coming out of it, like a shock of red hair.

Now I need to tell you that I do not have a green thumb. Rather I'm something of a danger to plant life – just as Dave Kipphut and Bob Hartung who have rescued plants from me. I have at times been fascinated with plants – like the time I sprouted a potato in a margarine tub of water for a rather lame science fair entry in fifth grade. But experience has shown that I should not be trusted with house plants or gardens.

This is because when it comes to plants I'm very weak in faith. I am shocked when a seed I plant comes up. Despite all the evidence around me that seeds actually work and that plants do grow, I am always a bit surprised that springtime happens, that plant life finds its way back out of the ground.

If I look a bit more closely at my lack of faith in seeds, I can see that it's more about my impatience with the process of growing them, my disinterest in learning about maintaining the right conditions to tend them. And I might have a tendency to hold a tiny grudge against a plant that rejects my efforts.

I'm confessing this knowing that many of you are great gardeners, and I love you for it. It's just not my gift.

Still I bought the Bird of Paradise seed and took it home and I read the instructions on how to plant it. That's when I learned that the plant likely would not bloom for seven years. In my ignorance I had it in my head that it wouldn't break ground for seven years – in fact it would have germinated in about three months. But all I could think about was hauling a pot of dirt around year after year for seven years waiting for a Bird of Paradise to emerge.

And I couldn't do it. I could not plant that seed. It stayed in its little plastic envelope in a drawer in a desk. Seven years passed. And my fears were realized – no Bird of Paradise plant emerged – not because I planted it and it failed to grow, but because I failed to plant it.

Friends I'm happy to report today that God is not like that.

Today's Scriptures remind us that as a sower of seeds, God is prodigious, tenacious, patient – and God is completely unafraid of failure. Our metaphors of rain and of seeds in Isaiah and Matthew so beautifully capture what we know about how God releases the Divine Word and Divine Will upon the world – God scatters it widely knowing that it will not take root in every place that it lands, but it will grow in some places abundantly – and that is enough.

If we look at our world today we see that this is true. We can point to the people and communities and efforts that yield the beautiful, effective, healing work of Love in this world. And we can point to the people and the communities and the efforts that reject it utterly. And I'm sure that we can find ourselves in both situations, at different times.

Listen! A sower went out to sow some seed. This parable is found in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Clearly Jesus knows his way around agriculture – an activity that just about everybody would have been involved in in his day, when it required year-round, constant toil that depended on rainfall and good conditions to make for a sustaining yield.

In rocky, hilly Palestine, seed was usually planted by what was called broadcast sowing. You tossed seed out by the handful, and then you plowed it in. The terrain was varied and the yield was as well. If there wasn't enough soil over the rocks beneath, that seed wouldn't root. If you didn't plow the seeds in properly, the birds would eat it. And thistles and thorns and other weeds were quite likely to grow alongside everything you planted.

Now this of course is not a story about Palestinian planting techniques. It's about God's Word and how God broadcasts it into the world. In the various Gospel versions of this story much is made about who is meant to understand the Word of God and who is not. But I think for us today, it's too easy to go there. As Christians we've gotten really good at pointing to all the people who we feel are resisting God's will and saying "See! Obviously those are the ones that Jesus said can't hear or understand the Word of God. But look at us; we've got the teacher's edition. We've got ears to hear."

So I don't want to go there. Instead I want to consider a God who is willing to send the Word that creates, loves, forgives and redeems everywhere in our world, even though God knows the terrain of humanity's hearts better than anyone. And I want to think about that, given my own tendency to hold one seed in my hand and never plant it for fear that it won't grow. And I want to ask myself, who am I in this story?

Who are we in this story? Who are we in the creative, redemptive work of God?

In the passage from Isaiah this morning we are helped by another gorgeous metaphor for the Word of God. It is like rain and snow that waters the earth, making the seeds to sprout and the plants to grow, thus feeding us.

“So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

Keep this in mind when considering that sower and his seed. The Word of God is the same as the Will of God and the Love of God. It has a purpose, and a vision and a driving force to bring it to completion. And God asks us to participate in it.

We are among the places where the Word of God lands, like water that softens us, like seed that germinates in us. That means we are the dirt in this story.

But we are not simply part of the landscape. If we are earth meant for the sowing of the Word, then we are earth that has agency. We can make ourselves more or less receptive to the Word that visits us. If we are gifted with ears to hear the Word of God and take it in, then we must also admit we have the choice to tune in or tune out.

And we do both of those things – we tune in and tune out, we take in the word and we resist it.

But experience tells me that the life of the Sower and the Seed is not a one-time encounter. God does not just plant once and walk away. But God sows and sows and sows again. This is how an incarnate God continues to create the world. And that repeated act of cultivating us changes us. The rocks break, the soil deepens, the thistles decrease. And we become a fertile medium for the Word of God.

We call that medium, faith.

The quality of our faith can be measured in this way: when the Word of God lands in our hands, what do we do with it? Whose voice do we ultimately obey:

When Humiliation says I’m full of rocks and thorns and dust and God’s word will never grow in me?

When Fear of failure worries that the seed will never sprout?

When Ignorance confuses human time with God’s time, and wants to move on to other more immediate projects?

When perfectionism despairs when the yield isn’t 100 fold?

But well-tended faith says bring on the plow and the rain and the snow. Plant the seeds anyway – again and again if need be. Until the Kingdom comes. Until God’s will be done.

Amen.