

Flowers – Beauty, Multiplication, Renewal

Isaiah 35:1-2, Song of Solomon 2:10-13, Luke 12:27-28

July Series: Stop. Look. Savor – Lessons from Creation for the Long Haul

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The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God.

Isaiah 35:1-2

*My beloved speaks and says to me: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away;
for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.*

*The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.*

*The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom;
they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.*

Song of Solomon 2:10 – 13

Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will God clothe you—you of little faith!

Luke 12:27-28

When I was thinking about this summer sermon series and worshipping outside, I thought about people in our congregation who love gardening and are good at making plants grow. I am in awe of you. The gift, skill, patience and care that result in flowers as well as fruit and vegetables and healthy plants inspire me. This summer, in the midst of many challenges in our country and planet, I believe there are biblical images, symbols and metaphors that can nourish and water our parched spiritual roots so we too can be healthy, can grow, can weather the storms and can know we are rooted in Divine love.

So today we look at flowers. There are quite a few flowers that show up in the biblical narrative. Some specific flowers and some more generic. What do they have teach us today and why does it matter?

Let's start with the Luke passage. Consider the lilies of the field.

Jesus was eloquent in his expressions. His expressions have been grafted into our hearts and minds. The context is Jesus' teaching about "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, what you will wear." In Luke, this follows a parable about the reality that life does not consist

of in the abundance of possessions. A man keeps building bigger and bigger barns to store his good and grain, but when he dies, God calls him a fool for storing up all his stuff instead of living a life in love of God and others.

Then Jesus teaches about not worrying or obsessing about our stuff. Instead, look around. See the beauty of creation. The Greek word for “consider” means “to look carefully at” or “closely examine.” The Greek word for “lilies” means “wild flowers” or “wild lilies.” King Solomon in all his glorious finery, never wore clothes as beautiful as the wild flowers, the wild lilies of Israel.

Dr. Ori Fragman-Sapir, who is the head scientist at the Jerusalem University Botanical Gardens, has researched wild lilies in Israel. (1) The Biblical lilies such as referred to in the gospel text for today are part of Genus Allium. There are 250 species of this variety of wild lily and no less than 39 different wild alliums species grow in and around Israel. I like to imagine Jesus picking one of these flowers and carefully and slowly examining intricate beauty, slowly twisting the flower in his fingers and relishing the moment of beauty.

Wild “lilies,” abundant on Palestinian hillsides but dull brown for much of the year, are only brightly colored for a few weeks. Even King Solomon, known for his accumulation of wealth and colorful attire, could not compare to their God-given beauty.

Some scholars argue that this passage is evidence of Eastern / Buddhist influences in the Palestinian culture at the time of Jesus’ teachings and his followers’ later writings. The Buddha's teachings had been emerging for about 500 years at this point, and these points of Jesus seem quite similar to the Buddha's teachings of finding peace and resources within one's self and the contemplation of the smallest parts of creation. Consider the lilies.

Are we too busy to look carefully at the wild lilies of the field? Are we too caught up in our hurried life so that our hearts are no longer captured by the beauty and intricacies of wild flowers?

Contemplation - in silence, with others, indoors or outside, going to that quiet place - is an important part of our spiritual lives. Flowers, wild flowers or flowers in our garden or neighborhood, are invitations to stop, look, give thanks for the beauty. If we are constantly worrying about each crisis, we can miss the beauty. It seems simple, but it is a practice. Notice. Take a picture. Tell someone about it. Give thanks to God for the beauty. It does not mean we are not concerned about the violence or hate or destruction in the world. But it does mean we intentionally take time to treasure beauty of creation and don't be anxious about our stuff and where to keep it and how to get more.

Let's turn to Song of Solomon. Flowers can be an invitation to see our beloved, our partner, a spouse, someone we love, with the eyes of love. Song of Solomon is a rich and sensual love song. Some see it as a religious allegory recounting God's love for Israel. For some Christians,

it is an allegory of Christ's love for the church. Some historians believe it was derived from a sacred marriage liturgy, a Mesopotamian ritual of marriage between two gods. It is also seen as a song between two young people in love and whose union is not yet complete.

It is spring time and the vines and trees and flowers are blossoming. This young love is flowering. Many verses throughout the poem compare the beauty of the young woman to flowers. Some of the passages sound like Shakespeare's love sonnets! A garden was an image of female sexuality. The garden is locked, but the lover hopes it soon will be opened. So flowers can be a way to express our love to our beloved. I am glad this love poem is in the Bible and points us to the joy of being in love. Jeffrey knows I do love flowers. And of course you can always make yourself a bouquet or buy one for yourself. Self love and self care.

Finally, one of the most important lessons comes from the prophet Isaiah. *The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.* These flowers are blooming in the wilderness, the desert, a place you would least expect to see flowers blooming. The prophet is writing in the midst of the exile in Babylon. People felt homeless, adrift. Where is God when we are suffering in this foreign land? The prophet reminds them that their story is not over. Flowers are a metaphor for their return and to a life lived in a relationship with God and one another.

Hope, new life blossoming, the majesty of God in desolate places and circumstances. That is certainly hard. Whether in our lives or in the horrific multiple mass shootings or places of violence or threats to ancient redwood groves.... Isaiah's words are needed. And yet, hard to hold onto.

But maybe there are clues there for us. Isaiah did not know botany but he had a vision. A desert bloom is a climatic phenomenon that occurs in various deserts around the world. The phenomenon consists of the blossoming of a wide variety of flowers during early-mid spring in years when rainfall is unusually high. The blossoming occurs rainfall reaches seeds and bulbs that have been in a latent or dormant state, and causes them to germinate and flower in early spring. It is accompanied by the proliferation of insects, birds and small species of lizards. So desert blooms are dormant and then together they germinate and flower and other creatures come in abundance.

We can be like those flowers. We can be waiting, praying, working, encouraging, writing letters, studying, and deepening our spiritual roots. There will be times we are part of the bloom of hope for someone else and in our community.

God is inviting us

- + Don't be anxious – consider the lilies
- + Give thanks for love when it blossoms and give a bouquet to someone or yourself
- + Trust in the vision of the Holy One to bring flowers and renewal to desert, to you, to us, the world even in times of despair

Close with a piece by Ellen Goodman that reminds us of lessons flowers can teach us during and after they bloom. LIFE & LILACS (excerpts)

The lilacs have gone by. I take note of this with an unexpected snap of regret as I take my morning commute from the kitchen to the driveway.

The flowers had made their annual appearance on the bushes that stand beside my backdoor. For two weeks, they had permeated the air with a seductive promise.

I planned to take up their offer, to spend time in their company. But now the last of the blooms has turned a crusty deadhead shade of beige. And I had paid only the most transient of visits, enjoyed only a contact high, a small whiff of their possibilities.

This morning, it is the absence of lilacs that finally stops me in my tracks. I brake belatedly to pay the toll of attention to what is now missing. A year's worth of lilacs, an entire life span of flowers.

I repeat the phrase in my mind: The lilacs have gone by. It is what gardeners say. But in fact, the lilacs stayed in one place and I had gone by them, hurrying, on the way, on the move.

What happens when life becomes a list, we asked each other? When even the pleasurable things become items to check off? What happens when we are getting through the days? What are we getting through and to?

Sometimes, you catch a glimpse of something in human nature that longs to spend time lavishly. To relish as well as to produce. On a late spring morning, there is a wistful reminder in this natural datebook. How quickly things "go by." Life and lilacs. (2)

What a gift all of these flowers are. Take time this week to notice flowers, to consider the lilies and lilacs, and to live into a God's vision of flowers blooming in the desert. Amen.

1) www.botanic.co.il/english/research/Allium.htm

2) Ellen Goodman, Boston Globe, June 22, 1996, "Life and Lilacs"