

*Based on Psalm 63 and Luke 13:6-9. Love Transforms Desert Longing Into the Garden of God*

There are times when even our most honest, hope-filled, realistic expectations serve as little more than pre-meditated resentments.

COVID has taught us this lesson in droves. In our pre-COVID lives, we could expect to walk into a grocery store and find toilet paper, for example, as much as we wanted, at a reasonable price. Post-COVID, we cannot, and at least in my house we resent it. We used to expect the price of gas would never rise above four dollars a gallon, at least in this part of country. Now we cannot, and at least in my house we resent it. We used to expect the sniffles our kids picked up in kindergarten will generally turn out to be nothing more than the common cold. Now we cannot, and at least in my house we resent it.

Honest, hope-filled, realistic expectations abound, often not even conscious, just there in our minds and hearts, not usually questioned or even consciously admitted, because they don't need to be. Honest, hope-filled, realistic expectations generally have proven over and over again to be true. Right up until the point they are not. And then we get angry. This is not how things are supposed to be!

How much *moreso*, then, is the completely unrealistic, yet equally heartfelt expectation of the absentee landowner demanding fruit from a fig tree that has, in the grand scheme of things, only recently been planted.

This absentee landowner, who by definition is wealthy enough to buy figs by the fistful year round at Whole Foods, has no clue how fig farming actually works. You cannot really blame him. He has never had to know. From his perspective and in his experience you just plant the seed of what you want one day and by the next, *voilà*, the fig is ready to eat. Instant gratification at its finest.

The actual gardener knows otherwise. Fig production takes time. Effort. Patience. Luck. Just the right amount of soil. Just the right amount of sun. Just the right amount of water. Just the right amount of manure!

The good gardener keeps her expectations in check. Even if she does everything right, the good gardener knows the fig tree may fail. And, even if the tree is wildly productive, the good gardener knows there is absolutely no scenario in which she can expect the tree will bear fruit only three years after it has been planted. The good gardener knows, no matter how above average or over-achieving the fig tree is, it simply cannot even fathom producing fruit until at least four years after it has been planted. This is simply the way of the fig tree. Any expectation otherwise is most emphatically pre-meditated resentment.

Yes, there are times our expectations come back to haunt us. The reasonable, hope-filled ones and the ones that are completely unrealistic.

But there is one expectation that can - and does! - become our salvation.

The psalmist learns this when his expectation of God's steadfast love becomes the life-saving drink that rescues him from his desert desperation when he finds himself in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

From the sanctuary to the wilderness the psalmist has come, carrying with him an expectation of steadfast love that he has glimpsed from font and table. Now, in the wilderness, fear and doubt and actual thirst threaten the psalmist's expectation. But the reminder of sanctuary, the touchstone of grace that dwells deep within the soul of the psalmist wins the day. God's steadfast love, indeed, *endures forever*. It is almost as if the very *expectation* of never-ending, never-failing love is, itself, the thing that saves the psalmist. It is almost as if the very *expectation* of never-ending love transforms what begins as lament into a rousing rendition of Amazing Grace.

Not only that, the expectation of never-ending, never-failing love envelops the psalmist with an aura of blessing that becomes a beacon of hope for *others* who wander the wilderness with him.

Today we have come, on this Third Sunday in Lent, on that journey in reverse. From the wilderness to the sanctuary, with our own desert longing yearning to be filled. From the wilderness to the sanctuary we face our fears, we relinquish our pre-meditated resentments, we accept life on life's terms, we ponder the steadfast, never-ending, never-failing love of God.

And as we come from the wilderness to the sanctuary, with our own desert longing, we find a river of the water of life, flowing, flowing, flowing from the font of our collective identity in the Good Garden of God's grace and mercy. As we come from the wilderness to the sanctuary, with our own desert longing, we find a tree - perhaps a fig tree - growing in that garden. As we come from the wilderness to the sanctuary, with our own desert longing, we find the tree somehow somehow bears fruit through every season of the year. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the world.

As we come, on this Third Sunday in Lent, from the wilderness to the sanctuary, with our own desert longing, we find the Good Gardener tending the tree of each one of our lives. And the Good Gardener digs around the roots a little to give us some space to breathe. And the Good Gardener takes the excrement of our lives and uses it as fertilizer. And in this Good Garden of God's grace and mercy and never-ending never-failing love, our fears are diminished, gone as in a dream when we awaken. And our souls are satisfied, as with a rich feast.

Let the church say, Amen!