

This Garden, This Sanctuary

Binkley Baptist Patio-Garden

Stephanie Ford ~ 24 April 2016

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church -
I keep it, staying at Home -
With a Bobolink for a Chorister -
And an Orchard, for a Dome -

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice -
I, just wear my Wings -
And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,
Our little Sexton - sings.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman -
And the sermon is never long,
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last -
I'm going, all along. --*Emily Dickinson*

It's all simple, really. It's the story we've heard all of our lives. In the beginning, the Divine One created a garden, a lush garden full of plants and all sorts of creatures, and looking around, as we are today, thought, "my, this looks mighty fine." But no, something is missing, something is still not quite right. There is a need for a gardener, likely a pair of gardeners to help each other with a rather big task. And so taking some soil, the Creator of All breathed the life-breath into a unique creature, calling him *Adama*, "one from the earth."

So here we are, back outside in that original sanctuary, grateful for the building behind us and all it means to us, but honoring today what was first given to us: this Earth, a garden of amazing diversity, and as the Psalmist declared, a habitation full of God's word to us: the sun running like an athlete to fill our days, the stars cheering us on our nighttime path;

the wind, constantly whispering in our ear, the very breath of our Creator the Spirit of God, speaking in and through us and all creation.

When we use the word “church” or “sanctuary,” it is natural to think of a human-made structure—until we are corrected that **no**, the church is really the people inside, and today, we would also add the people *outside*. “Sanctuary” is perhaps even more limited than the word “church” in our imagination. We may picture in our mind’s eye, as I do, of the lovely arching wood ceiling and window views of our little forest at the corner of Willow and Fordham. But this, too, is a bit of a misnomer, for we are never out of God’s sanctuary. All around us, this sky, these trees, these flowers and plants, these birds, and the small anoles playing and mating in the garden—all of it, Sanctuary! And we are called to delight in it, honor and tend it, and care for it with devotion of the One who thought it all up in the first place.

But as a species, we humans have sinned against the garden. We have hurt the soil, using it like a blank check; in the U.S. alone, topsoil is disappearing ten times faster than the rate at which it can be replenished.¹ Global sources of fresh water, once plentiful, are becoming insufficient for growing populations; the Indus River, one of Asia’s most important rivers, no longer flows as it did because of shrinking snow packs, industrial waste, and deforestation.² The economics of an entire regions are in jeopardy. And then, we think of our atmosphere. Accumulated carbon and methane gases are leading to a potential climate disaster—artic ice melting and seas rising, severe weather events all too frequent. I did not know until recently that a drought in Syria from 2006-2010, drove farmers to crowd the cities, and the resulting unrest was one of many factors that led to the terrible, unending war. We have added a new word to our vocabulary: the Age of the Anthropocene—the human era, when human activities have had

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded* (HarperOne, 2015), 45-6.

² *Ibid*, 86-7.

significant effects on earth's geology and ecosystems. No, not the best of gardeners can we humans claim to be!

All of this bad news could become a recipe for despair, but *did you see* the photo of John Kerry on Friday, on Earth Day? There he is, holding his little granddaughter and formally signing the Paris climate deal at the United Nations, along with 175 senior world officials. Or did you see 20-year-old Destiny Watford in Baltimore winning an international environmental prize? This once shy high school student organized a campaign that stopped a dangerous, polluting incinerator from being built in her neighborhood. And have you heard the news of coal plants being retired, and proposed ones not to be built? And did you know that almost 3/4 ths of new investment in electricity last year was in renewable energy, mostly wind and solar? Or that community gardens, like our new partner Anathoth, are burgeoning around our country, and that local food movements are making a difference, farmer's markets becoming a priority in shoppers' routine?

In these stories, we hear the echo of Marilyn's words from the Wisdom of Solomon: "Wisdom is radiant and unfading, and she is easily discerned by those who love her, and is found by those seek her." Indeed, wisdom does not wait in the wings; instead she "goes about seeking those worthy of her, and she graciously appears to them in their paths, and meets them in every thought." What does this wisdom like? Surely such wisdom is not flashy, nor does it work all by itself, but it is the Word of God written upon the lilies of the field, who neither toil or spin in needless worry. Wisdom is what we witness in the words and life of a 1st Century Rabbi, who saw the kingdom of heaven in the farmer's life and who knew the truth that one's family could no longer be limited to one's family of origin—but must include all who listened and acted upon the word of God—thus every person on this globe.

Wisdom personified looks down the road, imagines those coming after her; in Native American traditions, she acts with the thought of seven

generations to come. Of course, Wisdom lobbies for big changes, but does not look askance at the potential of small, daily acts. Wisdom whispers the Word of God within each one of us. What is the next thing for me or you to do, for our families to do, for Binkley to do on behalf of our great-great-great-great grandchildren? Yet, Wisdom is not just a dreamer. She sees the flora and fauna in the garden now and wants them to flourish on this very day. She trusts in ripple effects.

Wisdom is the Holy Spirit alive in this patio, this garden of God's good earth that we worship in today. A dove of peace at the center of this Celtic cross tells us the truth: that we are all beloved, each blade of grass, every leaf, each gurgling baby, and every creature that calls this corner of Chapel Hill home. The Hebrew word "Shalom" is translated as peace, but it does not just signify the absence of violence (though we desperately long for that!). Rather, shalom also sings joyfully when we are active, installing solar panels so that for years to come, Binkleyites will use less of the vital resources we all share in the garden of Earth.

In the end, what makes wisdom unique among the facts and knowledge that can overwhelm us—is that true wisdom involves love. What we love, we tend. What we love, we give sacrificially to so that it might flourish. What we love, we listen to when we are tired and change ourselves when we would rather not.

So let us love this precious garden of Earth, let us each love the gardens in our backyard, and let us smile in hope and work faithfully so that the bigger garden called Earth, this Sanctuary God created, might be enjoyed for seven generations and more.