

A Time to Grow: Restoration

April 3, 2022

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Job 14:1-9

So, up until now we have been talking a lot about things that we need to do to care for a garden. Things like planning and preparing for what we want to grow. Caring for the soil. Making sure the garden gets the proper amount of water and sunlight. Thinning the garden, or pruning the plants to be sure they have enough space to grow in healthy ways. And we have talked a bit too about our own souls, and ways that we might take these lessons from the garden and apply them to our spiritual lives. Approaching our relationship with God with intentionality. Giving ourselves good spiritual nourishment in the form of water and sunlight – making time to spend in the presence of God, and also in the presence of people who point us to God. Thinning out those things that make life too crowded and that don't allow us space to nurture relationship with God. Paying attention to the reality of sin, because that can be destructive to the garden of our souls.

Today we are going to shift gears a little bit, and turn to a frustrating reality of gardening – as well as a frustrating reality of life – and that is the reality that sometimes, we can do all the right things, and things might still go wrong. Things over which we have little to no control.

Maybe our garden plants get hit with an unexpected disease. Or bugs or other insects come in and decimate it. Maybe we get a late freeze and the early spring blossoms get hit. Or flood conditions. Or a drought. A hailstorm can decimate an apple crop in no time.

I have a friend who, one time, decided that she wanted to plant a couple of blueberry bushes in her garden. Now, this friend is a pretty good gardener. Not like me. She did all of her research. She knew what kind of fertilizer she would need, given the soil conditions in her area. She knew what variety of blueberries would grow best where she was. She knew where to plant her bushes. And she knew what to expect.

So she bought two blueberry bushes and planted them in her garden, and the first summer she got a tiny – but delicious – crop of blueberries. Just enough that she was really, *really* excited for the following year.

Summer came to a close; fall came and went; winter came, and one day she went outside into her yard and gasped. Because both of her blueberry bushes were gone. Like, not there. Completely vanished.

So she stood there in shock for a little while, wondering who in the world would come and steal two blueberry bushes in the middle of winter. And as she took a closer look, she discovered that right around the ground level she could find the places where the trunks had been chewed off. As it turns out, her yard had become the home to some hungry and mischievous bunnies who had decided to turn her bushes into their midwinter snack.

So my friend decided to start over again. She dug up the first bush and pitched it. But the second bush wouldn't budge. It decided to stay stuck in the ground, and so finally, my friend admitted defeat and gave up. Decided that blueberries weren't worth the hassle.

But wouldn't you know it...that second bush may have been chewed down to the nub. It may have been seemingly utterly destroyed. But there was still life in that bush, even though my friend couldn't see it at the time. It started putting out shoots. And then, more shoots. By the end of summer, the bush was back to the size that it had been when she first planted it. And the following summer, she once again had blueberries.

Our scripture reading today is one that I have preached on before. But we are coming back to it again because its message for us is an important one. It's important in the context of our topic for today of restoration and hope, and it is also important in the context of life in today's world.

So, our scripture today comes from the book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel is one of those books of the Old Testament that most people know are there, but generally don't tend to spend a whole lot of time in. In this case, mostly because it is a pretty confusing book. It serves kind-of like the prophet Ezekiel's dream journal. And I don't know if this is the case for you, but I know that my own dreams can be wild and confusing and messy and complicated and hard enough to figure out, and the same thing is true for Ezekiel.

So, Ezekiel was a prophet in the southern kingdom of Judah, during the time of the Babylonian exile. He was one of the people who was physically removed from the land of Judah by king Nebuchadnezzar's armies, and was forcibly marched around the desert and into the city of Babylon, and then was subsequently forced to worship in secret, under penalty of death.

For Ezekiel and the rest of the Israelite people, life was not going according to plan. In the middle of the night, the bunnies – also known as the Babylonians – came out and ate all of their blueberry bushes. They burned the temple; they burned their homes; they burned up all of their hopes and dreams.

Until there was almost nothing left but a trail of carnage in their wake.

And Ezekiel has a dream one night that God takes him out onto a cliff overlooking a huge valley, and in this valley are dry bones, as far as the eye can see. Sun-baked and scattered, you couldn't even tell where one human skeleton ended and the next began. There was no way to count them all, or identify them; no memory of their stories or their families; no records of their lives or their contributions to the world.

All that Ezekiel could see was death and destruction and pain and suffering. A lifeless stump that served no purpose except to be dug up and thrown into the trash heap.

That is, until God steps in. And to God, this is not a lifeless stump. This is not a valley of sun-baked bones with no stories and no memories. This is a valley of people – every one of whom had a name, and a body, and a life, and a story. God knew which bone belonged to which person, and how they all fit together. And with a big breath of life, God put every bone back together again. Every vertebrae in its proper order. All 27 tiny bones in each hand, right back where they belonged. Tendons, and ligaments, and muscles formed, holding everything together. Vital organs re-grew. Skin formed. Blood pumped through the bodies. Breath entered and exited the lungs. Neurons fired. Souls came alive.

What had once looked dead, lifeless, hopeless was now a thing of beauty. A family reunion. A party. A valley full of sacred people, laughing and hugging and sharing their stories.

“This is the house of Israel,” God tells Ezekiel. “You have been beaten down. Struck down. Chomped away at, until it feels like there is nothing left. You have lost everything that you think makes you, *you*. But I am telling you, that your story is not yet finished. Your roots go deep. And there is still life in you, even if it doesn't look like it right now. So don't go digging up the bush and throwing it away just yet. Because I am going to do a new thing.”

Our reading from Job today says the same thing in a slightly different way. If you will remember, Job was a man who did everything right in life, and even still, he lost everything. His family, his savings, his health...all of it. Gone. Most of the book of Job is one big lament – Job grieving over everything that he has lost. In our reading today, Job remarks that life feels like a flower that is beautiful and full of life one moment, and then in the next moment, withers up and dies in an instant.

And yet, Job also points to a tree and remembers that a tree is not like a flower. A flower might die in an instant, but a tree...it can be completely cut down to nothing more than a stump, but still be alive. The roots will continue to grow, and over time, sprouts will begin to shoot forth and new life will emerge.

I think maybe Job would have looked at those bunny-eaten blueberry bushes and known, right off the bat, that all was not yet lost.

One of my all-time favorite places to hike is back in New Mexico, on a mountain west of Albuquerque called Mount Taylor, that takes you up the side of an old, dormant volcano, through a forest of aspen trees. My favorite part of that hike is about halfway up there is an aspen tree that stands next to the trail, right on the edge of the forest.

This tree is unusual, because it climbs straight up, and then maybe about 10 feet or so off the ground, the trunk takes a sharp, 90-degree bend, grows sideways for about 3 feet or so, and then bends again and starts growing upward. If you get close enough to the tree to examine it, you will see that on the backside of the tree, the original trunk is almost entirely hollowed out and charred.

Here's what happened: the tree was growing normally, until one day, it got struck by lightning. Now, while a lightning strike might kill most trees, not this one. It did, however, change the tree. The tree put all of its energy into a single branch, turning that branch into an extension of the trunk. And then, after some time, it started growing upward again, toward the sun.

The thing about gardening, and the thing about life, is that it will always be met with the unpredictable. We can give our gardens all of the best care and love, but we also must recognize that even the best gardeners out there don't have total control over the outcome. Gardeners can't control the weather. Gardeners can surround their blueberry bushes with fences and netting to protect them from hungry critters, but sometimes even that isn't enough.

That aspen tree growing on the side of the mountain could not have known exactly where lightning was going to strike.

It was not Job's fault that out of the blue one day his crops died, and his animals died, and his sons died, and he got painfully sick. He did not deserve that, he could not have predicted that that would happen, and there is nothing that he could have done to have prevented it.

And while the people of Judah – especially the kings and leaders – were largely to blame for God's willingness to allow the Babylonians to come in and invade; and while many prophets had warned them that if they didn't shape up quickly, there was going to be destruction; your average family living in rural Judah had absolutely no say over what their own king did or did not decide to do, and they had absolutely zero control over power-hungry emperors who were looking to invade and dominate every country in the Ancient Near East.

That's the bad news. The incredibly painful, frustrating, maddening reality of life. That there is so much over which we have absolutely zero control.

But there is a flip side to that reality, too. And that is that we have a God who sees beyond our present reality. Who looks beyond this present moment. Where we may look out at the garden at where our blueberry bushes used to be, God sees those roots still growing down into the soil, and sees the shoots and sprouts that will one day start growing upward again. Where we stand with Ezekiel and see nothing but a valley of dry bones, God sees people ready to rise. Where we sit with Job in the pain, really feeling him while he talks about life being a flower that withers up and dies, God looks at him instead as a tree that will one day grow again. And while we look at an aspen tree that has been struck by lightning and say “there’s no hope,” God helps that tree figure out how it is going to survive.

When we look around at our church, our community, our country, our world, things right now don’t look anything like they did two years ago, or five years ago, or ten years ago, or fifty years ago. No person could have fully predicted what life would look like as we sit here today. And if the news and social media had their way, they would have us believing that life is harder now than it has ever been. I don’t fully believe that. I think life has always been hard. It was hard for Job; it was hard for Judah; and yes, it is hard for us. The nature of the “hard” has changed, but this universal reality of life has not.

But you know what else has not changed? The presence of God with us through it all. We have a God who sees beyond wars and pandemics and high gas prices. A God who looks at all of the branches that have been nibbled off of our blueberry bushes in the last few years, and who says “you know what? This bush is still alive. Just give it care, and give it time. And don’t expect it to come back all at once.”

Or like the aspen tree growing on the side of the mountain, don’t expect it to look like it used to. We might end up looking radically different in the end. But you know what? That’s okay. Because I, your God, am about to do a new thing.

So my friends, may we take a deep breath. May we take the time, along with Job, to grieve those things that we have lost. But then, may we pick ourselves up, and stand beside God as we gaze over the vast valley, and watch together as God once again breathes life into all of our dry and dusty spaces.