

Easter 6C – Rogation Sunday

Peace, Seattle

May 5, 2013

Genesis 1:11-13; 29-31; Eph. 3:14-21; Luke 8:4-8

## **HIS SEED WITHIN US**

**Well the weather is certainly cooperating with our venture today!**

**Or should we flip that around and say that today we are aligning ourselves with what the natural world is all about this time of the year: plants awakening, all the little live things coaxed by the sun, pushing up from the soil, unfurling, growing, blooming.**

We didn't design this process—this drama—in which life awakes each spring, but we participate in it, we are sustained by it, and for the past 10,000 years or so, we have done our best to harness it.

**“In the spring, at the end of the day you should smell like dirt,” says Margaret Atwood.**

Well, I'm not sure we'll all leave here smelling like dirt, but this morning we are all about deepening our awareness of how all these good gifts around us—with the gracious conditions that make it so—come from our Creator's almighty and altender hand.

**And so, on this Earth Celebration—Rogation Sunday our voices, with the Psalmist, sing:  
LORD, SEND OUT YOUR SPIRIT, AND RENEW THE FACE OF THE EARTH!**

**Some of you are familiar with the term “Rogation Sunday.” Chances are, if you're one of those persons, you've been connected at some point to a rural congregation.**

**The origins of the tradition go way back to the year 470 in Vienne, France, where a series of natural disasters caused crops to fail and many to suffer. Archbishop Mamertus proclaimed a fast and ordered that special prayers be said as the people processed around their fields, asking God's protection and blessing on the crops that were just beginning to sprout.<sup>1</sup>**

To this day, on Rogation Sunday, in rural parishes in the United States, Europe, and the United Kingdom, God's blessing is sought for seeds that are sown, that they may produce an abundant harvest.<sup>2</sup>

Now, we are not surrounded on this hill in West Seattle, by acre upon acre of fields ready for planting. Nonetheless, we are called to acknowledge God's benevolent hand in the processes that move from seed to harvest to table.

**When you search the Scriptures with an eye toward images of seeds, soil and growth, you end up with many texts to choose from for a day like today.**

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<sup>1</sup> The antecedents of this tradition reach back further still to Roman times, and likely beyond. Prayers for the success of crops is likely as old as agriculture itself.

<sup>2</sup> The Rogation Days originated in Vienne, France in 470 after a series of natural disasters had caused much suffering among the people. Archbishop Mamertus proclaimed a fast and ordered that special litanies and prayers be said as the population processed around their fields, asking God's protection and blessing on the crops that were just beginning to sprout. The Latin word rogare means "to ask", thus these were "rogation" processions. In an agricultural society, closely connected with the soil and highly vulnerable to the uncertainties of nature, this was an idea that took root quickly, and the custom spread around Europe and over to Britain. See these links for more background: <http://fullhomelydivinity.org/articles/rogation%20and%20ascension.htm>.

In former times, when maps were rare, another tradition grew up around Rogation Days. The parish priest or land owners would walk the boundaries of the parish or field with a crowd of boys en tow who, armed with green boughs, would beat the parish boundary markers as they walked. In England this is known as “Beating the Bounds.” In America, a son of the family was “bumped” against the landmarks, the boundary stone, or against a boundary tree. If a pond or stream marked the boundary, he was ducked into it. The purpose of the “bumping” was to help the boy remember the boundaries of the land he would someday fall heir to. The tradition also affirmed the farmer as the guardian of the landmarks. As one family walked their landmarks, their neighbors across the line walked the same boundary line and bumped their boy against the same landmarks from the other side. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beating\\_the\\_bounds](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beating_the_bounds) and <http://chalcedon.edu/research/articles/rogation-sunday/#author-rev-r-j-rushdoony> for more background and interpretation.

**Texts like Genesis 1**, which speak of the fruitful Earth erupting with plants and trees of every imaginable kind—central elements to God’s plan of sustaining life on this green-blue planet...

**Texts like Psalm 104**, which celebrates a Creator who not only calls all things into life, but sustains that life every moment through the animating breath of the Spirit.

**St. Paul** speaks with a deep longing of the kind of faith that roots and grounds us in Christ’s love; and **Jesus in the gospels** uses parables from farm and field to unfold the mysteries of God’s reign to his listeners in terms they can understand.

**And the list goes on...**

The prophet Isaiah, searching for language expansive enough to communicate the power and depth of God’s word of promise to an exiled people, turns with wonder to the natural world:

<sup>10</sup>For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, <sup>11</sup>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. (Isaiah 55:10-11)

**Tertullian**, the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Church Father who added the word “TRINITY” to Christian vocabulary, contributed his own earthy analogy in which the Trinity was like a plant, with the Father as a deep root, the Son as the shoot that breaks forth into the world, the Spirit as that which spreads beauty and fragrance, “Fructifying the world with flower and fruit.”<sup>3</sup>

**There are modern writers, too**, who have found language for declaring the wonder and mystery of burgeoning spring; the vast potential concentrated in seed—sown soil; the deep and mysterious connectors that bind us two-legged creatures to the plant life that sustains all things living.

**In her book, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek**, Annie Dillard takes us deep into wonder as she stares through a microscope into the heart of a single cell of an elodea algae plant: (Listen carefully now...)

“If you analyze a molecule of chlorophyll, [the element that gives the green world of plants its color and carries out the business of photosynthesis],” Dillard writes, “what you get is 136 atoms of hydrogen, carbon, oxygen and nitrogen arranged in an exact and complex relationship around a central ring. At the ring’s center is a single atom of magnesium. Now: If you remove the atom of magnesium and in its exact place put an atom of iron, you get a molecule of hemoglobin. The iron atom combines with all the other atoms to make red blood.”<sup>4</sup>

**Mary Oliver**, in her poem MORE HONEY LOCUST, speaks of holy seeds, generosity, and thanksgiving:<sup>5</sup>

Any day now the branches of the honey locust will be filled with white fountains;  
In my hands I will see the holy seeds and a sweetness will rise up from those petal-bundles  
so heavy I must close my eyes to take it in, to bear such generosity.  
I hope that you too know the honey locust, the fragrance of those fountains;  
and I hope that you too will pause to admire the slender trunk, the leaves,  
the holy seeds, the ground they grow from year after year with striving and patience;  
and I hope that you too will say a word of thanks for such creation out of the wholesome earth,  
which would be, and dearly is it needed, a prayer for all of us.

<sup>3</sup> Norris, op cit. p. 291.

<sup>4</sup> Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), pp. 126-127.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Oliver, *Evidence*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009) p. 17

## **A WORD OF THANKS...A PRAYER FOR ALL OF US...DEARLY NEEDED.**

**That is what this day is about.**

**For it is the Lord's Day. The eighth day of creation. The day when our risen Lord, met by Mary outside his empty tomb, was mistaken for none other than – yes! – a Gardener.**

And on each Lord's Day we take into our selves—into our bodies, our cells—the grain once sown as seed, which, rooted into the good earth, and nourished by warming sun and falling rain, was harvested, milled into flour, kneaded into bread, shaped into loaves and brought to this Table.

**We call this bread HIS BODY, he who said:**

UNLESS A SEED FALLS INTO THE EARTH AND DIES IT REMAINS JUST A SINGLE GRAIN;  
BUT IF IT DIES, IT BEARS MUCH FRUIT.<sup>6</sup>

So it is, Sisters and Brothers, that when we eat this bread, this grain, he is sown in us—so that we might become a harvest of life for the sake of the world.

Here in the city there are no great fields; no vast farms; but we do have gardens and pea patches; little places where we can sink our hands into the soil and coax from it living emblems of God's caring and Earth's goodness, whether vegetable, fruit, bush or flower.

Delores Dufner, in her potent and pithy hymn says it so well:<sup>7</sup>

The word of God is source and seed, it comes to die and spout and grow.

So make your dark earth welcome warm; root deep the grain God bent to sow!

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> John 12:24

<sup>7</sup> Delores Dufner, OSB, © 1983, 1993 Sisters of St. benedict, St. Joseph, MN, admin. Augsburg Fortress. Hymn #506 in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*.