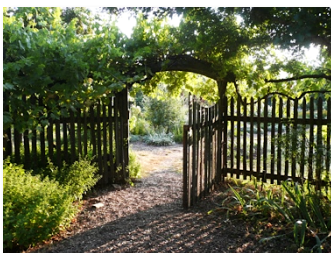


## **“The Life of a Watered Garden”**

Rev. David Gregory

January 3, 2021

Christmas 2



### **Readings**

*Jeremiah 31:12-13 from the New Revised Standard Version*

(The remnant of Israel) shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion,  
and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord,  
over the grain, the wine, and the oil,  
and over the young of the flock and the herd;  
their life shall become like a watered garden,  
and they shall never languish again.  
Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance,  
and the young men and the old shall be merry.  
I will turn their mourning into joy,  
I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.

A Reading from *Consolations*:

*The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*

David Whyte

To feel a full and untrammelled joy is to have become fully generous; to allow ourselves to be joyful is to have walked through the doorway of fear, the dropping away of the anxious worried self felt like a thankful death itself, a disappearance, a giving away, overheard in the laughter of friendship, the vulnerability of happiness felt suddenly as a strength, a solace and a source, the claiming of our place in the living conversation, the sheer privilege of being in the presence of a mountain, a sky or a well-loved familiar face – I was here and you were here and together we made a world.

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Hello and welcome to this brand new day in a brand new year, and my wish for you is that it will be a safe, healthy, and prosperous one, both for ourselves and for the planet that we inhabit. With a new season comes an energetic shift, one that is particularly welcomed at this time, after the challenging year we've just experienced. No one I know has spoken kindly of the year 2020, nor have they expressed any of the fondness or nostalgia that a yearly review will often bring. The truth is, we could not wait for it to be over, even though the very circumstances that made it difficult remain far from

over. In many ways the movement from December 31<sup>st</sup> to January 1<sup>st</sup> is like any other page on the calendar. But what makes it feel different, I suppose, is the sensation of movement. It's like when you're on a commuter train that begins to inch slowly forward after having been stalled interminably on the tracks. You can feel the release of the brake, even without acceleration. It means that at least there's *something* happening. Of course, we'd love to appear immediately at our destination, but we're grateful for those incremental steps that move us even a little bit in the right direction. Even that much is life-giving. It fuels our confidence. It helps us remember that life is a succession of little steps, and that deep and lasting solutions can never be hurried.

A couple of years ago, many of us enjoyed an award-winning documentary entitled "Biggest Little Farm," which chronicles the eight-year quest of a couple in Los Angeles who left the city with their dog to take up residence on 200 drought-stricken acres in Ventura County. They made it their project to restore the land and its eco-system by introducing combinations of plants and water, farm animals and wildlife, that would hopefully attract the elements of an earlier world that seemed lost forever.

The film is a study of what can be accomplished through the agency of sustained daily effort, and loving care for the earth. There is a lot to learn through their many setbacks, and there are large sections of the story where it appears that almost nothing is happening, but little by little, inch by inch, they move forward, and through eight years of committed sacrifice and hard work, they finally reach a tipping point where it all begins to come together.

This is where we are as a culture right now. We're putting one foot in front of the other—it's all we know how to do. It's all that we can see. And each step brings us closer to the tipping point toward all the healing and restoration that we are longing for. So, when we say "Happy New Year" this time around, what we really mean to say is that there is a sensation of movement, and it signals better days to come. There is great joy in knowing that. There is great peace in the feeling of it. There is great love in carrying out our good work toward the goal. It's going to be a great new year!

During Advent and Christmas, we have paid close attention to the Hebrew prophets, for they express the depths of joy and sorrow that are the context for the life of this person we call Jesus of Nazareth. His is a Jewish story to the core, one that captures the hopes and dreams of the Hebrews and their promised land. He appears on the scene as the dissident, the insurgent who tries once again to break the never-ending cycles of bondage, of exile, and hopelessness. Just a few centuries before, Jeremiah, known as the "weeping prophet," broke through his own hopelessness to envision life as a "watered garden." This ancient version of "Biggest Little Farm" inspired the hopes and dreams of the generation that Jesus would be born into.

Maybe deep down the contemporaries of Jesus were looking for an "easy-button" kind of Messiah, one who would swoop in, right every wrong, and leave them in a place of perfect peace and joy. But Jesus was never that kind of Messiah. Instead he was a relentless teacher of loving sacrifice, the kind that can take a barren wasteland and eventually turn it into a watered garden. We can easily forget how essential it is to live in that wasteland, to stay in it, to inhabit it, to grieve all that it has lost, and to lovingly coax it back to life—while fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains, repeat the sounding joy. And if we have lost sight of this joy, we have David Whyte to remind us how to find it in *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment, and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*. If we're trying to find joy in

the “not-yet,” if our patience is wearing thin, if our happiness seems dependent upon everything lining up into a perfect order, we are reminded that to be joyful is “to have walked through the doorway of fear,” to experience the “thankful death” of the “anxious worried self.”

In other words, the things that we’re experiencing in our world are pretty terrible. It’s ok to say so. And we’re looking for our messiah in the form of a vaccine that will come along and return us magically to the world we thought we lived in. But even this messiah is not an easy button or a magic pill that makes it all go away. As grateful as we are for it, the real miracle will happen in the sustained, prolonged, consistent, sacrificial daily efforts where we care for our neighbors as we care for ourselves.

If we have learned anything at all from the last year, it is that we are vulnerable creatures, and that our happiness is not to be found in the simple absence of fear. It is not to be found in being right, or in winning a victory over those with whom we disagree. It is not to be found in our own certainty, or in the discovery of the one missing puzzle piece that will allow the picture once and for all to make sense. The coming of the Christ Child in each of us does not signify a moment of happily ever after.

It signals instead the arrival of a new path, one that is accessible, congruent with who we are, and cognizant of our vulnerabilities. It enables us to come together sacrificially, lovingly, and carefully, to water this new garden we call life. It enables us to meet half-way in this place that we call love, to find comfort in the familiar face, and to create a world together that will be better than the one we inherited.

I leave you with the words of poet Kim Stafford in a piece entitled “Meeting Halfway,” which can be found in a collection called *We Begin a Better Nation*.

*Behold this empty space  
between your certainty and mine,  
this arena of sunlight free  
of claim and counter claim,  
this bright meadow where no one  
has shouted, bullied or begged,  
where butterflies are sovereign,  
where birdsong is our legislation,  
where you and I could walk  
out into the open, look around,  
and speak—first of the children,  
then of our dreams, and only then  
of the work we will do together.*

