

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, July 09, 2017
Marg McGugan
Job 50:15-24; Psalm 23
“God’s Garden”

Gardens are full of sweet smelling flowers; shady maple trees; pathways and grassy expanses; places for relaxation and reflection on the trepidations of our lives. Laughing children and soft spoken conversations. Gardens have not changed much over the centuries. In fact, the Hebrew garden or Gannah literally meant ‘a covered or hidden place’ usually enclosed by a wall with winding paths through shade or fruit trees and water features while lingering smells of herbs and flowers permeated the air. The walled garden was built to keep wild animals out and to provide a place for prayer. The Old and New Testament writers mention prominent gardens in the Bible---the Garden of Eden, David’s Divine Garden, The Garden of Gethsemane, and the Garden of Calvary.

As some of you know, I have a water garden with gold fish, water lilies and a hardy lotus plant and it is here I find quiet time for God.

The other day, as I sat by my pond, I was struck by curiosity—a curiosity that led me to find a water garden hidden in scripture.

Vernon Howard, an American spiritual teacher, author, and philosopher wrote: “Always walk through life as if you have something new to learn and you will.”

My question was, ‘Is the Lotus plant mentioned in the Bible?’

As a matter of fact, it is mentioned briefly in the New Revised Standard Version as read this morning.... ‘Under the lotus plants it lies, in the covert of the reeds and in the marsh’.

Upon opening the google site to retrieve the answer, I directed my full attention on the word ‘lotus’ ignoring what book it was found in.

My admiration for this aquatic perennial grew two fold once I learned that some ancient poet had written ‘lotus’ in scripture. Maybe not as elaborate as I was hoping for; but, it was written.

But something twigged in my brain as I slowly began to realize that this ‘word’ was contained in a sentence in the Book of Job and verse 21 was a small artifact in a lively discussion between God and Job.

Job is a godly man--- blameless and devout, who is submitted to relentless suffering by Satan, an adversary to God. Satan’s job is to instill evil in the hearts of Christians and he tests Job beyond his limits. Under God’s authority, Satan can do anything to Job except kill him (Job 1:6-2:10).

‘Does Job not fear God?’ Satan asks, suspecting Job is motivated by self-interest to acquire favour from God. Would Job not curse God to his face?

And so begins the blustery prose of Job’s struggle as he tries to understand his relentless suffering. Three of Job’s friends visit him to extend comfort and discernment only to add fuel to the fire as Job tries to express his innocence and yet, maintain his faith in God.

God tries to squelch the sparks that fly upward; but, Job’s spirit gathers the fury of a tempest as he hurls his protests and arguments of human suffering at God thinking that God does not understand the degree of suffering he has experienced. Job even goes as far as cursing the day he was born. By now Job saw God as a savage lion who is responsible for his utter misery and he wishes God would let him alone long enough for him to find comfort. If he could only escape God, his spiritual agony would end.

Job, is about to witness God in another venue.

In an organic garden at the edge of the Jordan River, concealed by willow trees and pencil thin reeds and sacred lotus, God's voice ripples across the wadi---a temporary water hole filled by flood waters from the rainy season. The sun-baked valley is awakened from sleep and satisfied of its thirst. *'The hungry eat their harvest, and they take it even out of the thorns; and the thirsty pant after their wealth' (Job 5:5)*. One only sees the lush greenery filtering the sunlight as it hides the massive Behemoth from sight.

In its peacefulness, the Behemoth immerses itself in the waters to be cleansed of the dust and healed of its drudgery. It has no knowledge of reason; but it has learned how to survive in its harsh environment.

We are told that the Behemoth, a four-legged beast, is made on the same day as humankind. And growing nearby this massive beast is the vibrant lotus plant as it bursts into life renewing its propagation for another season. Most eastern cultures and religions identify some sort of symbolism with the lotus plant which represents creative power, purity, faithfulness, divine birth, and vitality.

By all accounts, Job has temporally forgotten who created who. He has temporally forgotten that God is the Maker of heaven and earth. He has temporally forgotten that God preserves, supports and governs all creation. God is in control of the most powerful beast and the most sacred flower. During the creation story, Job was just a twinkle in the Creator's eye.

Job is silent. 'See I am of little account; what shall I answer you, the Almighty?' (Job 40:4)

We are anticipating God's reaction. We await God's judgement. 'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?' In the whirlwind, we are being challenged to answer God as to why we condemn God to justify our means.

God speak privately to Job, away from his wife and his friends, respecting Job's honour; but, instilling into Job the wisdom of the Almighty. God does not answer Job's question about human suffering; instead, God speaks worshipfully of his creation--sounding like a mother smitten with her children, however strange or ugly they may seem to others--while questioning where Job was when God laid the foundation of the earth.

In this garden, we find ourselves on God's turf, at God's wadi, in a place we least expect and similar to Job, we are lost for words. We see but, we don't understand the ways of God. Why do humans ask so many questions? Why can we not trust in God just like the beasts and lotus? We think we should receive favours because we feel we are better than the four-legged beasts. Yet the beasts and the plants are interdependent to each other and both suffer drought and famine and death

Where do we find words to sustain our suffering?

There is another garden, David's divine garden, groomed with lush green pastures and still waters. A place of grassy knolls to lie down in and be still. A place to contemplate who God is and to humble ourselves before Him. There are pathways and grassy expanses to walk with Jesus who awaits patiently for our arrival, blessing us with comfort and the promise of serenity. And if we come with insurmountable pain, walking sticks are provided to lean on when we are tired and weary. The 23rd Psalm attributed to David, leads us to the house of protection. There will be dry seasons and rainy seasons to change the course of our dreams; but, a cup filled with goodness and mercy will sustain us through it. And even when we do encounter Satan, God's presence will abide with us and wash away our fears. God will lead us onto paths of provision and restoration and righteousness. God will lead us from death--the death that Jesus destroyed upon the cross--into the Holy Place of eternal life.

Gracious God we are speechless before you in your gardens of lush beauty and visible holiness.

Amen.