

The Reverend Kirk T. Berlenbach
Advent III, Year B
December 11, 2011

How many of you like to garden? Of course gardening season is now long over- the earth is barren and the ground is growing cold and hard. But before long, the spring seed catalogs will start arriving and before we know it, it will be time to consider tending to our own little plots. I begin to prepare my beds for planting at the end of March so that I can plant early peas. It is a whole lot of work- usually more than I can do in a day- and once it is done- what is there to show for all the labor? Not much. For once the beds are cleared and the soil tilled there isn't much to look at- just a lot of bare earth. There is no sprout or leaf. There is nothing to demonstrate the promise of flower or vegetable that is to come. But it is into this very soil that we plant our seeds and in doing so, each gardener takes a leap of faith.

Today's Psalm relies heavily on similar images of seeds and planting. But at its heart it is a song that evokes the images of the Babylonian exile. This is a song sung by a defeated people, a people in exile who have lost everything. But surprisingly, the song that arises out of this vision is no dirge or lamentation. On the contrary, it is filled repeated references to laughter and joy. This song of a defeated, downcast people, who, at present, know only the sowing of tears, nevertheless boldly proclaims an unbelievable hope- that one day those tears will be replaced with laughter and will yield a harvest of joy. How can this be? How can exiles- who have lost their nation, their homes and seemingly have even been abandoned by G-D sing such a song? In order to better understand this incredible transformation, let's return to the image of the seed and field.

That is not as easy as it might seem because none of us are farmers. At best we grow a few vegetables as a hobby but none of us depend on seeds and earth in order to feed our families. Our lack of familiarity obscures some of the depth of meaning that would have been rather obvious to the audience of the time. Let's look at some of these subtleties. First, the psalmist makes a point of describing the seed. In Hebrew the word is not simply seed, it is "precious seed." That tells us something. Remember, survival depended upon their crop. Unlike our modern society the ordinary families of three thousand years ago never had food in abundance. There were no grocery stores and in the winter no one had it in plentiful supply. That made each seed a valuable commodity. After the harvest most of the grain went for food but each year a certain amount had to be set-aside so that there was something to plant next season. Life for the following year depended on that seed and so great care was taken to make sure it was properly stored and cared for. When we understand just how important seed was, it is easy to see why the psalmist calls it precious and why it was a powerful symbol for the people of that time.

But in order for the seed to reach it's potential it must be planted. And while that might seem rather obvious, we must not gloss over it. The seed was so valuable that parting with it was a real loss. For poor farmers those seeds were not only seeds, they were also food- and when food was scarce, every little bit was significant. And as the winter drew on and as the food stores dwindled, they had to make the hard choice to toast the seed and eat it or to take the risk of planting it. So in reality sowing the seed was both a sacrifice and an act of faith.

Obviously our lives are very different than the Israelites who first sang this psalm. But even though none of us here are farmers or exiles, there is still something in this psalm that resonates within us even if we don't fully understand it. The seed is a symbol of life and hope but in order to reach it's full potential, we must be willing to give it over in faith. We face the same challenge as the Israelites of old. We don't always have enough of the things we need to survive. Some of us have had to deal with of not having enough money or even enough food. Many more have run short of love, strength and serenity. And so we know the anxiety and even the despair that comes when we look over the fields of our lives and see nothing but barren earth. And when our resources dwindle- when we are running out of money, out of health, out of patience, out of love, out of time, we come to understand just how precious that little handful of seed truly is. It is all we have left so how can we possibly risk it on the chance that it might actually yield more of what we need? For in the short term, giving up the little bit of energy or resources we have only stretches us thinner- it only increases our stress. That is why the seeds of hope are sown with tears. For it is one thing to give of ourselves in times of abundance, but when a handful is all that we have left, it requires a real act of faith in order to give it up. In our times of crisis we must make a choice. Do we hold onto the little we have or do we entrust it to G-D?

As anyone who ventured outside this weekend knows, winter is truly here. The plants have withered and the ground is cold. Brown and gray have replaced the green. And yet, even though spring is months away, we still know that it will return. For some of us, life feels just as bitter and as desolate. Prosperity, happiness and comfort are all but gone. Our hearts have become as cold as the landscape. And even G-D may feel as distant as the warmth and green of the summer garden.

Yet this bleak picture is not without hope. The seeds of our tears can be transformed into a harvest of joy. In the barrenness of our grief and loss, in the times when G-D seems absent, there is still hope. The Psalm reminds us that with G-D all things are possible. For even when it seems that we are abandoned and that the only thing around us is desolation, the seeds of life, although hidden, are there nonetheless, just waiting for the opportunity to transform our lives. New possibilities, new relationships, and even new life itself can grow from our tears and heartbreak so long as we continue to believe. In a spiritual sense we are all farmers. We all have sown the seeds of tears. But as people of faith we know that those tears also hold the promise that G-D will take them, transform them and ultimately multiply them into a harvest. For as surely as spring returns and just as the buried seed sprouts G-D will deliver us from our winter and turn our tears to laughter once again. It is not always possible to understand how this miracle occurs. Then again, no one truly knows how the germ of life causes a seed grows into a plant. But as all gardeners know, when we entrust those seeds to the earth, they will sprout and grow, regardless of our understanding. What matters is that the seed contains the kernel of life. It may be all that is left of the glory and the beauty of the harvest that once was and so it is very precious... but only by planting it- only by entrusting it to G-D, do we give life the chance to spring up anew and rise again out of the barrenness of the empty field of loss and fear. In this is our hope- the same hope that sustained the exiled Israelites- the same hope that can sustain us through the barren winters of life- a hope that bears its first fruits in the coming birth of the Christ Child. AMEN