

Laurie Sedgwick:

Good morning, and welcome to morning prayers on this glorious day. Please stand as you are able for our responsive reading from the black Appleton Psalter Book. Today we'll be reading Psalm number 164, found on page 83.

Laurie Sedgwick:

"Oh, Great Spirit, whose voice I hear in the winds and whose breath gives life to all the world, hear me.

Congregation:

I am small and weak; I need your strength and wisdom.

Laurie Sedgwick:

Let me walk in beauty and make my eyes ever behold the red and purple sunset.

Congregation:

Make my hands respect the things you have made and my ears sharp to hear your voice.

Laurie Sedgwick:

Make me wise so that I may understand the things you have taught my people.

Congregation:

Let me learn the lessons you have hidden in each leaf and each rock.

Laurie Sedgwick:

I seek strength, not to be greater than my brothers and sisters, but to fight my greatest enemy—myself.

Congregation:

Make me always ready to come to you with clean hands and straight eyes,

Laurie Sedgwick:

So when life fades, as the fading sunset,

Congregation:

My spirit may come to you without shame.

Choir:

(singing)

Maeve Hammond:

Today's inspired text comes from The Grief Handbook: A guide to getting through the worst days of your life, by Bridget McNulty. She says, "Gardening to me is the ultimate act of hope. You're planting something in the hope that it grows and flourishes, in the hope that you'll be around to see it grow and flourish. One of the hardest things to wrap my head around after my mom had died was the sense that anything could happen at any time, that the rug could be pulled out from under us with no warnings whatsoever.

"I've been thinking a lot about cultivation taking distinct and discrete natural elements, combining them with intention, practice and time and diving in to create something from essentially nothing. I grew up with my grandmother's cultivation. She is an avid and passionate gardener. She doesn't casually belong to a club or a skim of nature magazines. Rather, she finds her happiness and purpose in creating and caring for the gardens surrounding my grandparent's house. She's been known to even take plants out of patrons' carts at nurseries and home improvement stores. That's how dedicated she is to her craft.

"The physical practice of cultivating a garden has inspired allegories of spiritual transformation and caretaking. The 17th century Spanish mystic and Carmelite nun Saint Teresa of Avila wrote of her delight to imagine God walking in the garden of her soul. She referenced the gardens in Genesis, Gethsemane and the Song of Songs as important spiritual and scriptural tools in her interior prayer life, in relationship to the Divine. She even created a four-step process of cultivating her soul's garden.

"In the first step she sends water into a well and pulls it up. Imagine the courage to keep trying, as you struggle to pull a heavy bucket from a well with a rope. Then she cranks a wheel to send the water down to the garden. This is difficult of course, but less overwhelming perhaps. The water after all has a path leading to the third step, irrigation through a river. And the fourth step is the most rewarding. God will rain down on the garden of her soul. All of her courage and physical, mental, and spiritual strength will be worth it.

"The garden therefore is a source of hope for Teresa. And followers of her method, plan, plant, and tend in the hope that their work will flourish and bear fruit. This however also invites an alternative to this reward. What if after all their dedication and admiration of their garden, the followers plant seeds to grow? What if the land is too dry? What if pests or bad weather or disease ruin the crops? The precarious paradox of the garden reminds us that all cultivation, all caretaking, and all love require risk-taking."

I came across today's inspired text by Bridget McNulty as I was preparing materials for a weekly chaplaincy class in Grief Support Group that I facilitate. "I was struck by how intertwined the cultivation of a garden was with the shock and unpredictability of grief. I'm reminded of the grief in the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve's expulsion in Genesis 3, it's the grief of loss and inability to return to a previous state. They will never know again, a prelapsarian existence after the Fall.

"The garden has transformed into, as Saint Teresa may put it, a place of paradise and agony. God even sends a cherubim to guard the Tree of Knowledge, essentially creating a barrier in front of even the memory of the before times. And even in Jesus' time, the Garden of Gethsemane in Matthew 26, it's heavy with the grief of his own death and separation from his community. He repeats, "I am grieved,"

speaking of his disciples, his friends who cannot even stay awake to be with him the night before his arrest. Christ exhibits desperation. He throws himself on the ground and pleads to God, "Let this cup pass from me." He even enters bargaining, a stage of grief, if it is possible, let God spare him. It is a heartbreaking scene of both confusion and certainty for Jesus, especially when he admits God's sovereignty, "Your will not mine."

"With every change and loss, there is grief. The Instagram account at Happywholeway has a helpful graphic on the encompassing definition of grief, which states, "Grief is not just the death of a loved one. Grief is also for friendships that have ended. Grief is losing your community, missing the certainty you once had, questioning your judgment, releasing who you once were, feeling lost and unanchored, and losing traditions you loved." In other words, grief is cultivating your garden only to wake up and find your crops are wilted and destroyed.

"I wonder how we can apply the cultivation of a garden to the cultivation of grief. Indeed, how do we guard in grief? How do we make meaning of grief as the pandemic continues and cases still spike across the country? As we sit in the sanctuary beside The Wall of fallen soldiers and past the end memory plaques, as we exit learning prayers today, as we consider our own falls, loneliness and bargains, as if we ourselves were in Eden or Gethsemane, or if cultivation for us is synonymous with identity like my grandmother, do we prepare in steps like Teresa seeking sublime contemplation? Do we dig our hands into the soil and pull up water from the well? Do we hope cautiously, tentatively knowing and risking that everything could change all at once?

"My hope is that we cultivate what sustains and supports us, even in the midst of grief and change. I hope you, my friends, cultivate memory, spiritual care, friendship, sacred texts, prayer, cooking, planting, harvesting, or composting. I hope the Divine rains down as you tend to the garden of your soul. And friends, I hope it pours. Amen."

As you are able, please stand for our closing prayer. Let us pray. Good and Great Creator, our God, we humbly ask for your guidance and watchfulness. May you hand us the tools of cultivation through all moments of life. May you walk with us in our soul's garden. May you weed and plant and water beside us. May you refresh us in the wilderness. Amen.

Now let us pray in the words that Christ taught us saying, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Divine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Laurie Sedgewick:

Let us sing the hymn, Through all the changing scenes of life, number 283 found in your Crimson Harvard Hymnal.

Congregation:

(singing)

Laurie Sedgewick:

Eternal God and Father, by whose power we are created and by whose love we are redeemed, guide and strengthen us by your spirit that we may give ourselves to your service and live this day in love to one another and to you. Through Jesus Christ your Son, our Lord. Amen.