

GROWING ROSES IN BARREN HEARTS
PHILIPPIANS 1:3-11
DECEMBER 8, 1985

"BEHOLD A MIGHTY PROPHET" is our Advent theme this year, based on the anthem which the choir is singing weekly. The stanza of the anthem for today is:

O Lord, prepare within a barren heart a peaceful
place, whereby thy grace therein may ever grow
that blissful flower, God's fairest rose.

The mighty prophet cannot only topple tyrants, overcome evil and eventually institute the reign of God; but the mighty prophet can grow roses even in such unlikely spots as barren hearts.

Advent, like the season of Lent, is a barren time. In our culture we seem to be threatened by barren times for we fill Advent with hectic activities; but the season itself is a time of waiting. As crop land lies dormant between planting times, so Advent is a dormant time, waiting for the coming of Christ. We wait for the celebration of his first advent when he was born as a human child on Christmas. We also wait for the second advent, for the ultimate victory of God over sin, evil and death.

From time to time, every person, every church experiences barren seasons. Perhaps some people experience depression because they do not realize that they will from time to time experience barrenness. The barren spells surprise them. Somehow they expect life always to be bright. They expect themselves to be positive, uplifted, ready to meet the challenges. The theory of biorhythm tells us to expect times when we are low intellectually and low emotionally. When you are prepared, then those barren times are not as devastating.

There will be times when you feel down, depressed, lonely. There will be times when you feel discouraged, blue, letdown. There will be times when you feel stressed, overwhelmed, incapable of handling your life. There will be times when you will feel unproductive, worthless. You can't feel "up" all the time. You will hit dry spells. Your heart will feel barren. You will have an Advent experience where you find yourself waiting and hoping for brighter days.

Margaret Cisco tells about her grandfather who emigrated from Czechoslovakia. Every Christmas he would tell the family about his cherry tree. When he was a young boy, a huge, old cherry tree ceased blooming. One year after Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, his father took him to the tree. Together, they shook the tree, and called, "Wake up! Jesus is born!" The following season, grandpa said, they had cherries. In 1979, now in the United States, grandpa had a cherry tree that had ceased to bloom and announced that on Christmas Eve he intended to repeat his father's actions. His grandchildren were openly skeptical of his superstition. They tried to tell him that the cherry tree was old, but grandpa refused to listen. After Midnight Mass, he rushed home anxiously to shake his tree and cry, "Wake up! Jesus is born!" The grandchildren laughed as they sat in the car and waited for grandpa. Gradually the incident was forgotten until the tree came alive in the spring, blossomed, and gave piles of cherries which grandma made into miracle cherry pies!

This Advent, or whenever you feel barren, shake yourself and cry, "Wake up! Jesus is born!" Wake up and let God give you a crop beyond your wildest imagination. In God's good time, you will find yourself productive, fruitful, and successful in doing what God calls you to do. The mighty prophet can even grow roses in barren soil.

The Manteca Church where I served as minister for seven years is fortunate to have a rose garden. Not only do roses line the sidewalk from the street to the front door, but there is also a rose garden along the side of the education building. For some time the rose garden did not do well. The blossoms were small. Some of the roses did not bud. Some of the buds did not blossom. Rosarians tell us that one of the mysteries in raising roses is the riddle of why some buds never get beyond the budding stage. A promising bud appears on the stem but never opens. One of the mysteries of human life is why some lives never unfold beyond the budding stage.

The roses did not do well in the Manteca garden as long as they were tended haphazardly by the custodian or whoever happened by. Then the retired minister who was part of our congregation volunteered to be the rose gardener. At least three times a week, Frank came and tenderly cared for the roses. He watered them, fertilized them, sprayed them for aphids, and pruned them. I don't know if he talked to them, but you could tell that he loved them. Then the rose garden came to life. Suddenly we had gorgeous, large rose blossoms of red, pink, white and all shades in between. When a baby was born, a rose from the church garden was placed on the altar for the Sunday service and then given to the new baby and family.

It takes a gardener who will commit his/her energy, devotion, knowledge and time to get beautiful roses. How fortunate we are for we have a gardener--the mighty prophet, Jesus--who takes a barren life, a barren heart, prepares the soil, creates a peaceful place, nurtures, prunes, waters, loves the heart. Then the grace of God grows that blissful flower, God's fairest rose. The text for today is from Philippians, the first chapter, verse six: "And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." God will not abandon you. God will not let you down. God who is working in your life, God who began a good work in you, will bring it to completion; perhaps not according to your plans, for neither you nor God is in control, but God does have power and, when you cooperate, God will bring you to completion.

In Manteca the annual Garden Club Flower Show is held in the church's Fellowship Hall, and one year while I was there, someone gathered up discarded flowers from the individual exhibits, arranged them in an attractive bouquet, and won FIRST PLACE! "The last shall be first!" God works in the same manner. Jesus, the mighty prophet rose gardener, can gather up the leftovers, the discards, and make beautiful bouquets. God can take people who feel barren, who feel like misfits, unnoticed by others, people with low self-images, and make prize-winning bouquets.

Sparky was a loser. School was all but impossible for him. He failed every subject in the eighth grade. Every subject! He flunked physics in high school. In fact, he distinguished himself as the worst physics student in the school's history. He also flunked Latin, and algebra, and English. He didn't do much better in sports. Although he managed to make the school's golf team,

he promptly lost the only important match of the year. Then there was a consolation match, and Sparky lost that also. Throughout his youth, Sparky was awkward socially. He was not disliked by his classmates; he was just not noticed. He was astonished if a classmate ever said "hello." In high school Sparky did not date. He was too afraid of being turned down.

Sparky's one talent was art. Of course, no one else appreciated his work. In his senior year, he submitted some cartoons to the editors of his class yearbook. His cartoons were rejected. But, Sparky persevered and decided to be a professional artist. He even wrote a letter to Walt Disney Studios. They sent him an application. Sparky spent a great deal of time preparing cartoons to send to Disney. He mailed his drawings and waited, and waited. One day the reply came--he did not get the job.

Do you know what Sparky the loser did? He wrote his autobiography in cartoons. He described his childhood self---the littleboy loser, the underachiever---in a cartoon character the whole world now knows. For the boy who failed the entire eighth grade, the young artist whose work was rejected not only by Walt Disney Studios but by his own high school yearbook, that young man was Charles Schulz, creator of "Peanuts," and the unforgettable character, Charlie Brown. Charles Schulz had and has a deep faith in God, for his comic strip preaches the gospel of Jesus Christ: how God makes winners out of losers, how God grows roses in barren hearts, how God creates prize-winning bouquets out of discards.

We had a vivid lesson Friday night in how to make winning situations out of losers. We will remember December 6 as the night the lights went out! In all my vast years of experience (!), this was a first. In the middle of the Hodie concert, the transformer on High Street blew out, leaving us without lights for 35 minutes. The first announcement told us we might be without power for over an hour. Our Director of Music was an example of resiliency. He handled the situation with grace and creativity. Let me tell you about Leroy. After the initial shock wore off, and we all began to realize that the power was not coming back on in the immediate future, Glenn said to me, "Let's sing Christmas carols." I replied, "That's a good idea. I'll ask Leroy." But, I couldn't find Leroy. He had disappeared, and do you know where he had gone?

This was the big concert of the fall season. Leroy had worked months arranging this concert. He was conducting a 47-piece orchestra, a 77-voice choir, over 40 in the children's choir and three renowned soloists. Douglas Lawrence was singing when the lights went out. With all that responsibility, can you imagine what was Leroy's concern? He had gone to check on the children in the child care room, for he was concerned that they might be frightened in the dark! Did you think of the children? I didn't think of the children. Two parents were ahead of Leroy, but most of the parents had not yet realized that the child care room would also be in darkness. But Leroy did. I consider that to be amazing, and exemplary of the caliber of commitment we find in this church. He found the children crying, so he said, "I'll get your mothers to come." One little tyke spoke up, "That's a good idea."

That was a good idea. Many folks had good ideas. I was amazed how quickly and calmly order was established. No one directed, but magically, candles appeared. The luminaries for Christmas Eve were brought and lit.

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Candelabra appeared. One person who lived nearby went home and brought back a Coleman lantern. Another went home to get a generator to power the orchestra lights. We sang carols in the dark with the orchestra playing by ear. It was a grand time. People talked to each other. Bonding occurred. People laughed, and most stayed to the very end. What a privilege to be part of such a church! This is a church where the people make winning situations out of losers. We have had dry spells, but our people are resilient. This is a church which first thinks of children. This is a good place to be. Thank you for allowing me to be a minister here.

The night the lights went out taught us at least three lessons on how to handle crises and barren, dry spells. What do you do when the lights go out in your life? First, relax. When things don't go your way, when others laugh and reject your drawings, when you hit a barren spell, relax. Don't panic. Don't get angry, upset and anxious. Relax and welcome a new opportunity.

Secondly, trust God; put the matter and yourself in God's hands. Believe the promise: "God who began a good work in you will bring it to completion."

Thirdly, assess the situation and do something positive. Take a positive action. When the lights go out, light a candle. When Disney Studios reject you, draw your own comic strip. When the roses don't blossom, talk to them lovingly. When you feel lethargic, complacent, tired, or anxious, cry "Wake up! Jesus is born!"