



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, February 13, 2022
The Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany (Septuagesima)

Festal Evensong
4pm

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Alison Turner, *Associate for Children & Family Ministry*
on
Hosea 10:1-8, 12
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Hosea 10:12
Sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap in mercy; break up your fallow ground: for it is time to seek the Lord, till he come and rain righteousness upon you.

I wonder what sort of gardener are you? whether you simply have a plant in your kitchen, a back yard, or vast fields in Connecticut.

I used to think of myself as being a gardener. As a child I had a secret garden; it was a great place to play and cultivate my imagination. It had a multipurpose potting shed from where I would grow all manner of things, run a shop and tea room, and on occasion issue tickets for detailed tours of the estate (a fairly small back yard) as if it were a scene from Downton Abbey. I had my own plot about the size of the base of this pulpit, and with my then Cairn terrier beside me I enjoyed digging deep into the soil, discovering an underworld of insects' activity, planting all manner of seeds and fruit kernels and making rainbows, as sunrays and water combined as the soil was watered by the garden hose. In contrast to this attentive hobby of my childhood I later became fair-weather gardener replanting containers with seasonal ready-made spring blooms and 'tada' I had a fast-track effortless garden in two hours. How easy was that?

How far was that experience from the image of the long, hard, work of the land we hear of so often in scripture and that I saw in the plentiful fields near my home in the arable farms of the Essex countryside. Plentiful fields reflecting harvest songs of ploughing fields and scattering seed, fed and watered by God's Almighty hand, were familiar as indeed were other seasonal scenes of crop rotation which included sites of vast expanses of land, of fields that looked dull empty and uninteresting. Fields at times battered by the elements, encrusted with debris too hard or stubborn for any hand-held garden fork to cut through. And yet, as I learned early on, not to be fooled by their lack of life for they were not forgotten but planned, intentional fallow fields, resting fields, that allowed time for the land to recover, to recuperate, and for the mingling of tired old soil and broken roots to be turned into mulch and made something new, as they took turns for their season to be replenished, reborn.

Scripture and hymnody offer us numerous references about gardening and farming, many saturated with metaphors for joy, redemption, of life, death, and new life, and God's kingdom. We hear, as we did this morning, of trees seeking water by the river, of trees clapping hands, or swords been turned into plough shares and spears into pruning hooks, and of course the multiple land-based parables of Jesus. I am sure you too will recall the poetic words of Ecclesiastes that there is indeed a time for everything under the sun- for

planting and sowing, reaping and dying, there is not one without the other. We recalled God's provision on the land in the seven years or seasons of plenty, and famine, within Pharaoh's dream in Evensong last week. Seven being such a significant number that also appears in the books of Exodus 23:11 and Nehemiah 10:3, with their two of only six mentions of fallow ground located in scripture: *We will let the fields lie fallow every seventh year.*

Here today in Hosea we have a third, vivid image of fallow ground as something needing not simply physical attention, but something which serves a metaphor for the work of God in the hearts of Israel. Israel, a rebellious nation who had closed their hearts, and their lives to God's tenderness and merciful possibilities for their very own souls and the life of the nation.

"Sow to yourselves in righteousness and reap according to mercy," Hosea warned. "Break up your fallow ground: for it is time to seek the Lord."

This verse is part of God's all-embracing call to repentance and a plea to his beloved yet hard hearted people to come back to him with all their heart and not let fear keep us apart. For in God's eyes, he desires that nothing may come between them.

Here we see in this often-quoted verse, Hosea 10:12, this call to righteousness, this loving call to bold, complete, tender forgiveness is in some ways simple to accept but seeing it through, as in any relationship takes a concerted effort even in those seasons of emptiness. Hosea calls upon gardening or farming terms to describe how seeking, and serving God requires deep rooted determination not fair weather, faithfulness. For when a farmer sows seed, they do so with a view to harvest. When a farmer is reaping, they do so faithfully for what has been sown. God is calling for the same kind of deep hearted efforts to be made in following him and not simply by giving an outward show of remorse but dedicate themselves to a deep inner, sustained, gesture of commitment. They were to sow with a view to righteousness and reap in mercy and loving-kindness, a word itself which is rooted in loyalty and trust.

But the call to break up the fallow ground and turn over the un-ploughed earth is an equally urgent call to the body of Christ, as it was at the time of Hosea, for reconciliation not only with God but one another, and indeed at times our very selves. I wonder what holds us back in seeking mercy and grace with all our heart and acknowledging our very fears before God?

Maybe at times we are fearful of what might be discovered if we dig deep in our 'yes' to what God desires our lives?

Maybe at times even without realizing our lives are so defined by the hurts buried deep within us we ignore them, and dare not let them go. Or those things which course us to habitually cultivate barriers, that make us hard hearted to the pain of the world and even ourselves. Perhaps we are fearful of what might happen if we spend time digging deep into the wounded soil of our lives and bring those memories into the light of day. Perhaps there are fears, or there is shame, condemnation, abandonment, maybe a stubborn grudge, or a need for reconciliation that has been buried, left fallow and forgotten that inadvertently frame our inner lives, thus rendering parts of our outer lives dormant, lifeless all too long. However, there is hope in scripture which reminds us that in utter contrast, to God, we are each and every one of us, and each and every part of us not forgotten, but tenderly loved.

Back in my secret garden of childhood I would at times take the huge old garden sieve fascinated by what would remain when the good soil would sift through (which I sold in my shop). What would remain? Sometimes

stubborn bits of rock, jagged stones, broken roots, shining coins and shimmering honed glass.

Sometimes I've found if we give time to sift through our own lives, we sometimes find not only good soil but start to recognize the obstacles, our fears and sometimes sins, for what they really are, and the treasures too which are buried within. That sometimes takes time, lots of dedicated time to break through the long

lasting fallow-ness of our lives before the sowing, ploughing, watering, and even reaping is ready to start again.

As we approach the holy season of Lent, in a couple of weeks' time, will we simply be drawn into the sobering nostalgic habits of yesteryear, like a fair weather gardener choosing the easy container garden option, or will we choose the deep, real, even hard uncomfortable work, in maybe just one area which is seemingly dormant or fallow, fearful or simply hard?

Dare we take this time to seek mercy and dig deeper below the surface to find what is unchecked, unturned and seemingly forgotten, fallow and ask God in the face of another, to journey with us into a season of growth and to reap in grace, aplenty?

For as Hosea reminds us, "It is time to seek the Lord."

In a moment of quiet, I end today with this poem, *Fallow Ground* by Jenyo Eniola

Land left uncultivated
For seasonless season
Pasture left unplowed

Left lone; dormant field
In ponderous dilapidation
There grass grows
In fistful profusion

Asleep solid soil
Clad in fruitless tares
Pachydomatous plain
Array in thorny grass

O fallow ground!
In desolation; for how long
Will you live and reign
As prodigal wasteland?

Break up your fallowness
O ground hark now!
Abandon not The Ìlèdú
In huge and hefty Devastation

Unclog firmly today
Sterile, barren grains
And Plough and plant
Luxuriant crops

For you to reap aplenty
In cordial clemency