

1

My flowerpots are empty. The garden hose rolled up and put away. Lawn furniture stashed in the garage. The first snowfall signaled me that it's time.

As I look out my window at my garden, I realize it's also time to tear down the green bean vines, dig up the sweet potatoes, pull up the tomato plants, and add compost to the ground to prepare for winter. Although I always look forward to planting a garden in the spring, I also enjoy in the fall preparing the ground for a rest. There's something comforting about the cycle in my garden of growing and resting.

I've planted numerous gardens throughout my years—from my home in Illinois to my garden in Elkhart, with several in between. Some gardens have had vegetables, others just flowers, but in every place I have lived, I planted something. Whether it was tomatoes or roses, hostas or beans, annuals or perennials, planting in the dirt serves as a way I settle into a new community, even though I often knew it might not be a permanent location. Gardening has become a spiritual practice, a way of connecting to God's presence in my life, a way of feeling grounded.

Maybe that's why the prophet Jeremiah suggested to the exiles in Babylon to plant gardens, for they would be there for a while. About 600 years before Jesus was born, those living in Jerusalem found their lives turned upside-down. Troops surrounded their city and eventually captured it, and the citizens were forcibly removed from their homes and dragged to another land. Many of the writings in our Bible struggle with this event, wondering how such calamity could happen. It's in this chaos that Jeremiah wrote a letter from Jerusalem to those in captivity in Babylon.

I imagine many exiles were asking the question, "Now what? What should we do while we're in this strange place? How long will this last? When can we go home?"

At the time, they didn't know their exile would last 70 years, with older members of the community never returning home again. To offer comfort, Jeremiah wrote a letter suggesting practical things to do.

First, build a house. Each time I moved, I explored housing options with a realtor, and in more recent years, Zillow offered me a chance to explore the

2

housing market from my computer. Those exiles moving thousands of years ago didn't have the luxury of an app or realtor, but Jeremiah suggested they find a house, settle down, and plan to stay a while.

Second step. Plant a garden. It's as though Jeremiah said, "You're going to need food to eat, and since you will be there for quite some time, grow some vegetables." Planting a garden, however, is more than just about food. It's about connecting to the ground, putting down roots. For some, digging in the dirt and harvesting food serves as a spiritual practice, as a way of connecting to God's presence in the world. For each plant harvested, one can utter the words, "Thanks for this food that gives me life." The words can serve as a prayer of thanksgiving. Even in times of chaos, the act of planting and harvesting serves as a tangible reminder that God continues to offer growth and nourishment.

Third, Jeremiah suggested that the exiles have families—spouses, children. It's often these family connections that help hold us together in times of

trouble. When faced with turmoil, stay close to those you love.

And finally, Jeremiah suggested that they seek the welfare of the community and pray for them. The Hebrew word translated as "welfare" is *shalom*, which has a much broader meaning. It implies wholeness, peace, healing, freedom.

I imagine those who received the letter from Jeremiah muttering among themselves, "What? Freedom in captivity? Are you crazy, Jeremiah? Peace in the midst of war? What kind of healing do you expect us to find in this strange land? Why should I pray for *them*?"

Gardens. A place to find peace and contemplation while digging in the dirt. A place of food, offering a sense of freedom from hunger. A place to gather food to share with the broader community, offering care for our neighbors—even our enemies. Who knew that planting a garden could provide so much hope?

Jeremiah's suggestion to offer prayers for their captors echoed centuries later when Jesus suggested that his followers pray for their enemies—not a

vindictive plea for God to destroy them—but prayers of love, prayers of shalom.

Those gardens in Babylon became sacred ground, but as they buried their loved ones who died there, the graves in this foreign land became sacred as well. It may seem odd to view ground as sacred, as a place of God’s presence, which is something Disciples preacher Fred Craddock learned as a young boy.

I recall as a youngster having to go get the little red mule we used to plow. We had a little... garden—tomatoes and cabbage and peas—and we plowed that...garden farm with a red mule... Our fences were poor, and the red mule would get out. I’d come home from school: “Go get the red mule.”

Finding the red mule almost invariably involved going up over a hill and across the back woods where there was the family cemetery... It was an old cemetery, with wind whistling in the pines, the carpet beneath making it so silent it was frightening. I would make noises and scuff my feet and whistle and do anything to break up the

silence of the place. I hated that mule taking me through that frightening cemetery in the late hours of the day, sometimes almost dark, always behind that graveyard.

When I went for the mule, I said, “Do I have to go through the graveyard?” [Mom] said, “There’s no other way. Now when you go through the graveyard, make sure you don’t step on graves. Graves are sacred ground, and don’t step on the graves” ... The ground was level, the little markers leaning over, and the carpet of needles. Where was the grave? I remember how ridiculous I must’ve looked tiptoeing and taking long steps and then short steps trying to avoid what I did not know—but maybe this is sacred. I went home frustrated with that mule and I said, “Mama, I can’t tell what part is sacred.” And she said, “Well, I know, it looks the same. But if you’ll just treat it all as sacred, you’ll never miss.”¹

Gardens. Graves. Life. All are sacred ground. Even when in times of chaos, may you plant hope and harvest seeds of joy to share with those around you.

¹ Fred B. Craddock; Mike Graves; Richard F. Ward. *Craddock Stories* (Kindle Locations 1318--1328). Kindle Edition.