

# **HYPETHRAL: LIFE IN A CATHEDRAL WITHOUT WALLS**

**A Sermon Series † August 2021**

**Mark and Lynn Barger Elliott**



**HOUSE OF HOPE**  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“The heavens declare the  
glory of God;  
the skies proclaim the work of  
the Lord’s hands.  
Day after day they pour forth  
speech;  
night after night they reveal  
knowledge.”  
- Psalm 19:1-2



Scripture:  
Job 12:7-10  
Romans 8:19-22

Rev. Dr. Mark Barger Elliott

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“I don’t think it is enough appreciated how much an outdoor book the Bible is,” observes Wendell Berry in his essay, *Christianity and the Survival of Creation*.<sup>i</sup>

“It is a ‘hypethral book,’” notes Berry, “as Thoreau talked about – a book open to the sky.”

When I read Berry’s words a few weeks ago, I had one of those moments when you stop, look up, scratch your head, and say to yourself, *I’ve never thought of it quite like that before*; that the Bible is an “outdoor” book, meaning it points its readers beyond itself, and by so doing, it guides us beyond ourselves.

Which makes sense when we remember where the stories and teachings of the Bible occur: in a garden, desert, field, lakes.

And why does the Bible do that? Why is it an “outdoor book”?

Berry suggests one reason is “outdoors we’re confronted everywhere with wonders; we see the miraculous is not extraordinary, but the

common mode of existence.”

This morning we begin a new series called, *Hypethral: Life in a Cathedral Without Walls*. In the coming weeks we’ll reflect on what it means, as Thoreau describes and as Berry encourages, to discover God’s presence outside these walls.

A good place to begin our series is to ask, well, what does that word even mean – *hypethral*?

I had to look it up. I’d never actually seen the word in print before.

I discovered that “hypethral” describes temples constructed without roofs, some even with holes in the walls. You will find an example on our bulletin cover.

Have you ever stood in such a sacred space, I wonder?

A cathedral without walls? A room that looked up to the heavens?

This brings us to our first passage from the book of Job where we read how Job is grappling with implications of what it means to live in just such a cathedral.

You might remember the gist of this book, found in the Hebrew Scriptures, is that calamity and hardship appears in Job’s life after a wager is made in heaven that Job’s faith would crumble if his many blessings were taken away.

And as one scholar describes, as Job argues with his friends and with God, the point of the book is for Job to “learn while the world may not be to his liking, the world will hold at its center because it is God’s world. The world, in other words, does not rest in Job’s virtue.”<sup>ii</sup>

In the twelfth chapter we drop into a conversation Job is having with a friend as he attempts to figure out why his life has taken such a sharp turn into misery, while those who cheat, lie, and mock God seemingly do well without repercussions.

What they discuss – Job and his friends - is whether answers to these

kinds of very difficult questions can be discerned when we perceive our life as inhabiting a supposed cathedral without walls.

“But ask the animals and they will teach you; says Job.

the birds of the air, and they will tell you;

ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;

and the fish of the sea will declare to you.

Who among all these does not know

that the hand of the Lord has done this?”

Job is saying to his friends - who were just making this same point - of course that's true. Tell me something I haven't heard before, that creation reveals God's ways and purposes! Because if that's in fact the case, Job argues, how can that explain why I am suffering? What good is it to pay attention to creation when my life and the world around me, appear so full of hardship, out of control and without purpose?

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Paul, in our second passage picks up Job's argument and affirms, on the one hand, yes, creation is continually grappling, as Paul puts it, with futility and decay. But he goes on to offer his readers a remarkable metaphor. He suggests what we see around us is similar to a divine birth, with the necessary and unfortunately painful, birth pangs.

Creation, argues Paul, is therefore ultimately heading *somewhere*.

In other words, Paul - no stranger to suffering himself - as he gazed into the world perceived distress, yes, but also hope. Paul saw and believed God was working in and through a process of divine re-creation, one that would ultimately result in earth and heaven becoming one.

Which sounds good, doesn't it?

But as we gaze into our world today - with all the hardships of this past year and a half, and now the distress of this summer - it can make you wonder, is Job right about creation, or is Paul?

Should we be hopeful, or not?

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“I recently visited Yosemite National Park after decades away,” wrote Susannah Meadows in a recent op-ed piece in *The New York Times*.<sup>iii</sup>

In 1993, I spent a summer there as a park ranger intern, and came to know and love the park deeply. On this trip, I saw its transformation at the hands of climate change. It was devastating.

Coming into the park from the south, up California 41, I looked out onto mountains that appeared studded with giant charred toothpicks. The 2018 Ferguson fire had decimated this once magnificent forest. Other trees were dying off, victims of bug infestations abetted by warming temperatures and milder winters. The waterfalls were pathetic wisps in the wind, shadows of the lush, white horse-tails that spilled down the summer I lived there.... What I saw in Yosemite feels like a wake-up call that’s come too late.

Of course, what Meadows describes is not only occurring in California, but here in Minnesota as we’re grappling with similar environmental distress, from heat waves to drought. And now our air quality is hazardous, the result of forest fires to the west and in Canada.

So, who is right, Job or Paul?

Is there still hope for our world, or not? Is God still engaged, as Paul discerned two thousand years ago, in a divine and perpetual process of re-creation, or not so much?

†

“may my faith always be  
at the end of the day  
like a hummingbird... returning  
to its favorite flower.”

Sanober Khan, a Mumbai based poet, wrote those lovely words in a collection of poems titled *Turquoise Silence*.

Lynn and I have always been fascinated with hummingbirds.

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As you might know, they're the only bird that can fly backwards.

If you've ever been near one, you've heard that enchanting sound, that hum, created by wings that beat up to 80 times a second.

A few weeks ago, Lynn and I were in San Francisco visiting our daughter who is navigating what we call "adulthood," starting her first job, signing up for renter's insurance, a credit card, and putting down a security deposit on an apartment.

During our visit, late one afternoon, I happened to be sitting on a porch in a wooded area when I heard that distinct hum. I took a quiet, deep breath to compose myself and then out of the corner of my right eye I saw feathers and that distinct beak.

The hummingbird then flew a few feet closer, stopped on a dime, and hovered about four feet from my shoulder.

Then it flew towards me *again* hitting the brakes a few inches from my ear. I turned my chin ever so slowly and suddenly we were eyeball to eyeball, a hummingbird and me. And then off it darted.

Is God still engaged, as Paul discerned two thousand years ago, in a process of divine re-creation, birthing a new world? Well, after that moment on the porch, I'd have to side with Paul over Job. Because face to face with a hummingbird, it felt like I had entered a hypethral, a cathedral without walls.

Have you ever had that kind of experience?

Have you ever found yourself in a similar type of hypethral?

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David Henry Thoreau was born in 1817.

When he turned twenty, the world was in distress.

Today it's called the Panic of 1837, the year when financial markets collapsed which then led to seven-year recession. As author Andrew

Menard relates in his wonderful book *Learning from Thoreau*, that year David Henry Thoreau also graduated from Harvard. Eager to nudge her son out of the nest, Thoreau's mother told him "to pack a bag and skedaddle."

Wanting to assist his friend in leaving home and navigating a suddenly tumultuous world, it was Ralph Waldo Emerson who encouraged Thoreau to begin a journal and to become a writer. That journal would eventually become, *Walden*.

Now journaling wasn't that much of a stretch for Thoreau who, ever since childhood, had always exhibited a proclivity to observe life. He had once told his mother, for example, he was studying the stars above to see if he could find God behind them. And it was in the midst of this tumultuous year, and while journaling and paying attention to nature, that Thoreau came to discover a cathedral without walls.

In his writings, he'd later point readers to what he described as a "latitude beyond." He observed how, "All nature is in an expectant attitude... I hear, beyond the range of sound, I see beyond the verge of sight, new earths – new skies - new seas... I begin to be transcendental."

That year – 1837 - in the midst of an economic panic, uncertain what would happen next in his life, David Henry Thoreau also choose to become *Henry David Thoreau*. He gave himself *a new name* to mark a new way of understanding the world, perceiving that his life and creation were unified, integrated, making up one, transcendent whole.

And what difference did Thoreau's life make, discovering and describing this hypethral, outside of a book that still sells today, and drawing 500,000 people every year to Walden Pond?

Did his belief that life is embedded in cathedral without walls lead to anything?

Did his efforts, his observations, assist in some way with the divine, perpetual re-creation Paul perceived in our world?

"When Thoreau died in 1862," relates Andrew Menard, "he had no way

of knowing [this, but his observations] had hit home. Three years later, “the U.S. Congress voted to cede the Yosemite region to... California – making it the first public land preserved solely for public use. Just seven years after that, Yellowstone became the first in a long line of national parks.”

Here at the House of Hope, although we so enjoy worshipping in this sanctuary, over the years we have also come to recognize it is in many ways a hypethral, a cathedral without walls, one that guides us, to a “latitude beyond” as Thoreau put it. This is a place where we can assist in God’s re-creation of our world. From launching our community garden in 2011 to our becoming an Earth Care Congregation, this congregation has heard the wakeup call Susannah Meadows describes.

So, don’t give up on hope, wrote Paul to the church in Rome two thousand years ago, even though the world he saw around him was in distress.

Don’t give up hope because the Creator is always re-creating our world.

Now, we might notice the difference that we strive to make in our own lifetime, or as in Thoreau’s case, it might not be realized for generations to come. But don’t despair, don’t give up, because if we look up, if we look around, into a “latitude beyond,” there is just no telling what we might see.

“...Like a terebinth or an oak  
whose stump remains  
when it is felled.  
The holy seed is its stump.”

–Isaiah 6:13

Scripture:

Isaiah 58:11-12

Psalms 34:18

Romans 5:3-5

Rev. Lynn Barger Elliott



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It was a warm morning in Tennessee when the very first Atlee Burpee Seed Catalogue was delivered to my great-grandmother's mailbox. Inspired by the catalog, it was also the day, she knew she would name her son, Atlee.

Encouraged by the United States government, but even more likely motivated by their own hunger, my great-grandmother's family started a Victory Garden during World War I.

They had seen posters and newspaper ads promoting the "War Garden Movement," inviting those on the home front to "sow the seeds of victory" by planting their own fruits and vegetables. Not only would it supplement their rationed food quotas, but they were told...gardening would boost morale throughout neighborhoods.

Soon raising strawberries and tomatoes, beans and herbs, became a way of life for my great-grandmother and her young son Atlee. Then it became a necessity during the Great Depression and World War II. By the time my grandfather, Atlee Barger, became an adult and a father of five, he gardened so there could be food on the table.

Life, in other words was hard.

Wars, the Depression, sharecropping in the Dustbowl, and working on the assembly lines in Flint, Michigan, they all attempted to break my grandfather. And yet, what kept him going, was always a garden. There, in that place, he found hope and the promise of new life, *just on the edge of what he could not yet see.*

Last week we began a new series called *Hypethral: Life in a Cathedral without Walls.*

When Mark and I discovered the word “hyperthal” in the writings of Wendell Berry, I’ll admit, I had to consult the Dictionary app on my phone!

Hypethral is an architectural term that refers to a place of worship with openings in the roof or walls that guide our attention outward toward a “latitude beyond,” as Henry David Thoreau once put it.

Berry observes how in many ways, the Bible is a hypethral book. Which makes sense, doesn’t it, when we think about it. The teachings, the stories of the Bible, so often push us outdoors as they refer to a garden, a desert, a tree or the sea.

Which brings us to our first passage from the Hebrew Scriptures. It’s helpful to know the context in which the prophet Isaiah is addressing his nation. They are in exile and the political and economic upheaval around God’s people has pushed them to despair.

Uprooted and living far from their homeland, their routines and rituals are unfamiliar. They long for the life they once knew.

And what is Isaiah’s message to the people of Israel?

He reminds them that they live in a hypethral, a cathedral without walls.

He points their attention to the restoration of nature as evidence of God’s presence, God’s comfort, and God’s desire to mend their broken lives. He said,

“The Lord will comfort all her waste places,

And will make her wilderness like Eden,  
her desert like the garden of the Lord...  
The Lord will guide you continually,  
and satisfy your needs in parched places  
and make your bones strong;  
and you shall be like a watered garden  
Like an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled,  
The holy seed is its stump."

†

Last week, we reflected on the words of Paul, encouraging the church in Rome not to give up hope. Yes, Paul acknowledges, creation is groaning, but then he likens it to a divine birthing process... meaning, creation is ultimately heading somewhere.

In other words, as we study the world around us, particularly creation, we'll see distress. But there is also, if we pay close attention, hope, as God works in and through a process of divine re-creation, a process, Paul tells us, that will ultimately result in earth and heaven becoming one. But we're not there yet, are we - the culmination of time? And so, until that day, how do we nurture the hope inside us that Paul describes?

This brings us to our second passage from the book of Romans.

While studying this text, I was struck by the way Paul, while speaking of hope, attaches it to the Greek verb "*katergazetai*," which means "to produce."

In other words, how do we nurture hope inside of us? Well, it must be grown and cultivated, as one might tend a garden. Paul writes,

We know that suffering *katergazetai*, produces endurance,  
and endurance *katergazetai*, produces character,  
and character *katergazetai*, produces hope.

And why does Paul draw from that word? Why does he point his readers in that direction, as if hope is raised like a vegetable in a garden?

In a way, we could say Paul is preaching from his own life. The insight hope is produced, as opposed to discovered or built, emerges from the pen of someone who had experienced suffering. When we reflect on Paul's life, we encounter someone who knew, for example, what it was like to not arrive at his preferred destination, as he had been shipwrecked on at least four occasions.

Paul knew what it was like to enter a new town or a room and not be welcomed. At times, Paul was that person no one wanted to be around. And he knew what it was like to be lonely, as he suffered and endured prison, arrested for speaking his mind and sharing his faith.

And yet in every situation, Paul learned firsthand, if he paid close attention, he would come to see how God was at work, producing a way forward, a new path. *Hope was right there at the very edge of what was seen, what was emerging.*

†

When Mark and I were on a study leave last month preparing for this sermon series, we came across a wonderful book by Sue Stuart-Smith, called *The Well-Gardened Mind*. It made us think of Paul's claim that hope is produced and grown, as if in a garden.

It also brought to our attention the remarkable story of the Alnarp Gardens. Have you heard of them?

Much like the Saint Paul campus of the University of Minnesota, there are gardens at the University of Agricultural Sciences in Alnarp, Sweden. One in particular rests on the far edge of campus, five acres enclosed within a russet-red picket fence.

This garden is also home to an intensive 12-week program aimed at restoring and cultivating mental and physical health. As Stuart-Smith describes it, most of the participants are lawyers, physicians, teachers, and nurses. "Typically, they are high-achieving, conscientious people," who have had something snap in their lives, something break, due to the pressure, tension and expectations of their daily lives.<sup>iv</sup>

And, why do they come to the Alnarp Gardens?

To be reminded that life, creation, is always at work, producing a way forward, a new path. Hope, in other words, shimmers at the very edge of what is seen, what is emerging... in a garden: in a hypethral, a cathedral without walls.

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This past year has been extraordinary difficult, hasn't it? And I have now and again thought of my grandfather Atlee Barger, as he found hope, new life in his garden in the face of the Great Depression, World War II, and on an assembly line in Flint, Michigan. And it was perhaps through his eyes, with his memory in my mind, that one day this past May, while Mark and I were grappling with the challenges of celebrating family milestones during Covid, we happened to walk by a stump in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

You'll find a photograph of it on your bulletin cover.

We could see how a storm had recently come through and caused significant damage. This tree, like many others, was taken down and left as a stump.

But here's the thing, if you look closely, you will see new life, sprouting up around the edges. Can you see the tender leaves and stems, growing out and through the broken places, audaciously pointing to a hopeful future.

We know that suffering *katergazetai*, produces endurance,  
and endurance *katergazetai*, produces character,  
and character *katergazetai*, produces hope.

This is what participants who spend time in the Alnarp Gardens discover.

It's quite remarkable, actually.

The participants, most of whom who arrive in the program with little interest or experience in gardening, are invited "to choose a peaceful place where they can spend time alone. Some carry mattresses out to

the wilder, (more natural) parts of the garden.” Others find refuge in a hammock in one of the garden rooms. Still others find comfort on a bench gazing into the orderly rows of staked tomatoes and lines strung for green beans. And there, they rest.<sup>v</sup>

After a week or two, they begin to look beyond, outward into this hypethral, and they start to explore the rest of the garden.

*It is then, that hope begins to grow.*

Sometimes it start as one begins to care for a seedling, and soon realizes how little she has been caring for herself.

It might happen while pulling up weeds and sensing a parallel motion of letting go of toxic feelings.

Or perhaps it occurs in the compost heap, while folding in yesterday’s food scraps, and the realization takes hold that something which no longer has life, is no longer useful, can fertilize and bring growth in the next stage of life.<sup>vi</sup>

Upon completing the 12 weeks of garden therapy, research reveals over 60% of the participants return to work and good health. Three months later, 100% of the participants reported making lifestyle changes that include connecting with gardens. Some take walks and appreciate gardens in their neighborhoods. Others planted gardens at home, while still others spend time in a community garden.

All approached each day with the understanding that tending plants can teach us how to live.<sup>vii</sup>

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When I was pregnant with my son, Mark and I had a few choices to make, including what middle name to give him. We choose, Atlee. And why that name?

Because at some level, we knew in his life, in any life, there would be suffering, upheaval and disappointment.

But we also knew there would always be more to the story.  
That there are always new sprouts emerging at the edge of our  
brokenness, our loneliness, our weakness, our suffering... growing,  
*katergazetai*, producing hope.

And it was our hope, our prayer, our son would always find God at work  
in his own life, as he looked outward to the latitude beyond, from the  
hyperthral, the cathedral without walls.

And that is our hope, our prayer, for each of us, as well.

“There is a vitality, a life force, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique...”

—Martha Graham  
Dance Choreographer

Scripture:

Genesis 1:11-12

I Corinthians 3:6-9



Rev. Lynn Barger Elliott

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I wonder if you were able to watch the Olympics over these past few weeks.

Our family celebrated those extraordinary moments - like Saint Paul's own Suni Lee winning a gold medal with her seated spin on the beam and her three flawless tumbling passes.

We witnessed the shock and joy of amateur Anna Kiesenhofer- pedaling across the finish line 75 seconds ahead of highly favored racers behind her. And we cheered on Caeleb Dressel as lap by lap, he swam his way to five gold medals.

There's something else we noticed, perhaps you did, too.

From time to time, as finish lines were crossed and team victories were celebrated, athletes would point upwards, attempting to redirect our attention and to give the applause and credit to God.

It's interesting, isn't it, that for so many of us and with particular athletes, our sense of God is found upwards.

To the question, “Where is God?,” many of us seemingly would answer, “Up there.”

A few weeks ago, we began a new sermon series called *Hypethral: Life in a Cathedral without Walls*. Mark and I discovered the word “hyperthal” in the writings of naturalist Wendall Berry and Henry David Thoreau.

The word refers to an ancient place of worship, imagine say a Greek Temple, with openings in the roof and walls that guide our attention outward, or as Thoreau put it, toward a “latitude beyond.” In other words, when answering the question of “Where is God?,” Berry and Thoreau would point upwards and outwards.

Two weeks ago, we reflected on the words of Paul, who observed creation is groaning, yes, but not without hope. Paul believed that God is always birthing something new into our world, meaning despite the devastating wildfires and heat domes, it’s not too late – with God’s help – to re-create our world.

Last week, we narrowed our scope of reflection from all of creation, to the edge of a garden. We considered the words of Paul as he reminds us that out of the broken places in our lives hope grows, often on the edge, on the cusp, of what we can and cannot see. I shared a photograph of a stump Mark and I had come across. It had been a tree knocked down by a storm, and then cut down by a blade. But on the rim, on the edge, new life was emerging.

This morning, instead of pointing us upward or to the “latitude beyond,” our cathedral without walls turns our attention downwards, *to what lies beneath*.

†

Over the years Mark and I have returned time and again to the book of Genesis as it never fails to offer the gift of a new insight, a new door or path into the understanding of where to find God.

This morning, we hear these words about creation: “The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every

kind, bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good.”

As I reflected on that passage this week, I wondered what it means for something to be “brought forth.”

I discovered the Hebrew word for “brought forth,” *watowse*, is only used 2 other times in scripture.

First, we find it in the story of Ruth, a widow who had lost everything - her family, home, community, financial stability. She was given the opportunity to glean food from a distant relative’s field. The harvest Ruth “brought forth,” *watowse*, was the difference between death and life.

The second time is in Jeremiah. The prophet uses the word to describe the future God created for a people in captivity. The text reads, God “brought forth,” *watowse*, “the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.”

In Genesis, that same principle, one that leads us from death - from captivity - to life, is, shall we say, *happening in the dirt*. In other words, it is divine action that brings forth sustenance from the earth.

Which leads us to this fascinating insight, that another hypethral the Bible describes isn’t necessarily above us or beside us. *It is beneath us*.

†

It all started in 1879 when William James Beal, professor of botany at Michigan State University asked, “How long can a seed live?” If a seed lies dormant underground, how long can it sit and still be able to grow?

What do you think? Is it years? Decades? Centuries?

Professor Beal devised an experiment, not so he would ever be able to answer his question, but so generations ahead of him could. <sup>viii</sup>

And so he plucked thousands of seeds from plants in and around East Lansing, Michigan, stashed them - as professors do - into 20 airtight bottles, and buried them in secret spots around the campus. He then drafted a map, not unlike a pirates’ treasure map, which would lead

future researchers to their location.

Next, he did something wonderfully clever. He charged a younger colleague to dig up one bottle 20 years later and to plant the seeds. If the experiment was successful, meaning some of the seeds sprouted, that colleague was to appoint another younger colleague to repeat the experiment 20 years later.

Since its concoction, Professor Beal's experiment has been repeated 7 times.

Every 20 years a bottle is dug up, its seeds are planted, and unbelievably, some of those seeds sprout.

Just this past spring, the experiment was conducted again. I came across an article on the experiment and a photograph of the appointed researchers, which is on the cover of your bulletin.

As New York Times journalist Cara Giaimo writes, "It was a cold winter morning, several hours before sunrise when the latest custodians of Beal's seed experiment arrived at the agreed upon spot on the Michigan State University campus. Armed with gloves and headlamps, they looked as if they were meeting to go spelunking, not to dig up botanical treasures."

One balanced a shovel over his shoulder, as he pulled out an old map. They crowded around it, seeking clues to guide them to the buried treasure: a bottle filled with sand and a bunch of really old seeds.

After a few missteps, they eventually uncovered a bottle buried 142 years ago. In the dark of night, they whisked the bottle back to the lab, where each of the seeds was planted.

And what happened? Did you think those seeds could sprout -- one more time?

†

I wonder if you have heard of Hildegard of Bingen?

Perhaps one of the most impressive people of the 12th century, she founded monasteries and corresponded with Popes. She was a well-known composer and playwright. As a writer, she made astute observations regarding botanical and medical issues that shaped the scientific research of the time.

As Thoreau coined the phrase “hypethral” to communicate what he believed about nature and worship, Hildegard also found it necessary to create a word to convey her thoughts. And so she combined the Latin word for green, *viridi*, with the Latin word for truth, *veritas*, and called it “*viriditas*.”

And why did she do that?

Well, after studying the natural world and reflecting on the theological world, she felt it necessary to create a word that would combine the two and that would describe God as the source of all life, the font of all energy, upon which all other life forms depend. <sup>ix</sup>

For Hildegard, the divine power of “*viriditas*,” was on the one hand literal – it could be seen in the sweet potato vine and the towering oak trees. But “*viriditas*” was also profoundly symbolic - it created and described a connection between the human spirit and this life force, which she attributed to God’s way of working with nature and with humans.

So what lies beneath us?

*Viriditas*: the divine bringing forth of nature, as Genesis describes, as well as - the bringing forth – of the vibrancy of the human spirit.

†

We capture that sentiment in our second passage for this morning.

Yes, Paul wrote about the groaning of creation that will, as he believed, lead to re-creation, to a new earth. So, “don’t give up hope,” he pleaded.

But Paul also wrote to the church in Corinth these famous words, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So, neither the one who plants, nor the one who waters is anything. It is only God who

gives the growth. For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field."

Since the pandemic emerged in 2020, we all know how extraordinarily difficult and trying these past several months have been.

We have lost friends and loved ones. We have watched plans and dreams denied and postponed. The killing of George Floyd set our community and the world on edge. And it all seemed hopeful just a few months - even weeks - ago. There was a verdict, new effective vaccines were developed. But now, anxiety is creeping back; fear and frustration and bursting forth into world.

But as we consider our two lessons this morning, I want to invite you to embrace the hope Paul proclaims and Hildegard names: *God is always bringing forth, watoose, new life.*

In other words, there is so much more to life than the anxieties, fears, and frustrations we sense emerging around us. For scripture declares there is a force, a spirit, a divine *viriditas* beneath us, leading us - as it did for Ruth, and the Israelites, and for the church in Corinth - to life, into new life.

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So, what happened last spring, after they dug up Professor Beal's seeds 142 years later in Lansing, Michigan? Did they sprout?

Well, day after day, Dr. Lowry, professor of botany at Michigan State University, would enter the basement room in his lab, peek into the growth chamber and would see... only dirt.

Was this the end of the line, he wondered?

Had the experiment concluded with him?

Was there no more life in Professor Beal's seeds?

On April 23rd, Dr. Lowry checked on his seeds, as he had done many times over the past few weeks. And there it was: a tiny sprout, two

leaves reaching upward. "It was... an amazing moment", he said.

If we think about it, truly we live in a hypethral, a cathedral without walls, don't we?

A world where that which has been buried for 142 years can still bring forth life.

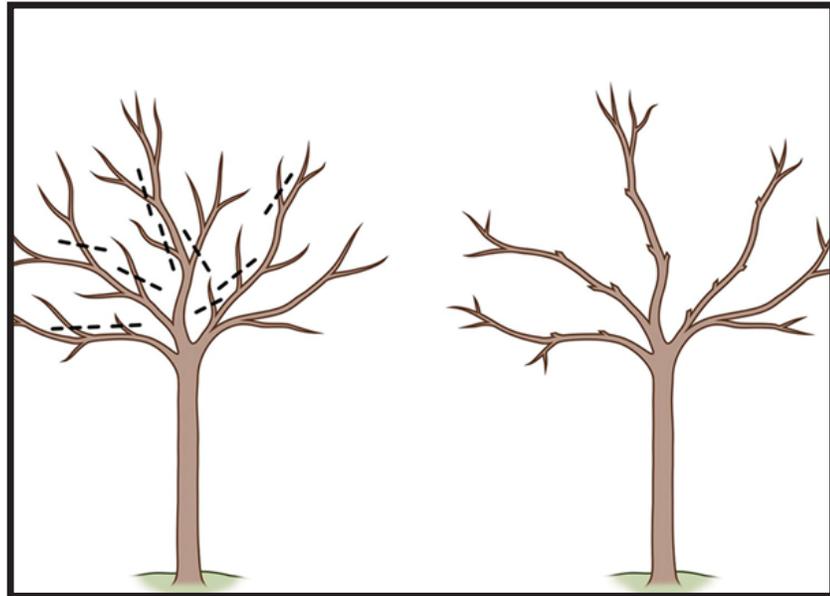
It can still, as Genesis describes, *watowse*, or as Hildegard names it, experience *viriditas*.

So let us never give up hope, as Paul teaches.

Come, let us dig and plant in the gardens of our lives, one more time.

Let us dig and plant in our world, one more time for something will emerge, something divine, something new, something... amazing.

“Laurel had watched him prune. Holding the shears in both hands, he performed a sort of weighty sarabande, with a lop for this side, then a lop for the other side, as though he were bowing to his partner.”



- Eudora Welty, *The Optimist's Daughter*

Scripture:

Isaiah 18:4-5

John 15:2-5

Rev. Dr. Mark Barger Elliott

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Cassady Rosenblum was a producer of the NPR program “Here & Now” in Boston, but then quit that job to move back to live with her parents in West Virginia.

And why do that?

Why leave that kind of high-regarded and even coveted, position to return... home.

Was her decision health related? Economic? Spiritual?

What prompted her to close her NPR laptop, turn in her lanyard, and choose instead to sit on her family’s front porch and stare at red oaks and popular trees as the sun rose and set?

This morning we continue our series *Hypethral: On Life in a Cathedral Without Walls*. Back in July, Lynn and I came across the word “hypethral” in the work of naturalist Wendell Berry and Henry David Thoreau. It’s a word that alludes to how ancient temples often did not have ceilings or walls, but were open to the sky, to nature, to wonder. The sacred, in other words, can be experienced here in a place such as this sanctuary, but it can also be discovered in places Thoreau once called “a latitude beyond.”

This morning we turn to the hypethral of the vineyard and Jesus’ words found in the Gospel of John.

Now, those who have had the time, or inclination, to read the gospels - the four books that describe the life of Jesus - know they’re not necessarily uniform in approach or content. As any author brings their own interests and proclivities to a work, so do the authors of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Marilyn Mellowes, a PBS producer known for the series *From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians*, observes, “If Matthew’s Jesus resembles Moses and Luke’s Jesus resembles a Greek philosopher,” John’s Jesus is, as one scholar notes, “a stranger from heaven.”<sup>x</sup> And in John’s gospel, we are invited to glean Jesus’ true identity.

But while in the other three gospels Jesus discloses information through parables, in John’s Gospel he also offers seven descriptions in what are called, “I am” sayings. Jesus says, “I am the bread of life.” “I am the light of the world.” “I am the door.” “I am the resurrection and the life.” “I am the good shepherd.” “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” And the final one, “I am the true vine.”

†

I wonder, have you ever been in a vineyard?

Lynn and I have a favorite one in Sonoma - small, family run, and not really on the tourist path. We’ve been fortunate to be able to visit every few years or so, and in different seasons.

We’ve visited before the harvest, when the dirt is dry and dusty and

grapes are red and hang heavy from the vine. But also, in winter, when the colors of the vineyard have faded to grays and browns and the trunks of the vines are jagged and pruned.

And it is to that kind of place Jesus directs our attention, as he proclaims, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. God removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit."

Now, the vineyard isn't a new image. In the Hebrew Scriptures, vineyards are everywhere. Noah plants one. Leviticus describes how to care for a vineyard. And the prophet Isaiah declares, "For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel." And in the other Gospels, Jesus points to vineyard owners and its workers in parables, as a means to make a spiritual point.

But what is fascinating in our passage today is that Jesus makes explicit how God is the gardener of our world, and in particular the gardener of our spiritual life. The metaphor, in other words, jumps from being descriptive, to being prescriptive. And note in our passage the fascinating detail the gardener prunes branches that aren't bearing fruit in Jesus' own life.

*Everyone, in other words, is in the vineyard, even God's son.*

I wonder, this morning, is there some aspect of your life that isn't really bearing fruit, which might require a bit of pruning?

Perhaps the harvest has come and gone in your life, and a little trimming needs to be done in your soul, mind, and heart?

Perhaps a little pruning needs to occur in how you approach your work, a significant relationship, your wealth, or lack of wealth?

Perhaps your relationship with God requires some tending.

If this at all resonates at some level, we might ask, "Well, how do we do that? How do we prune... ourselves?"

Margaret Roach writes a column on gardening in *The New York Times*. As she puts it, "I am a corporate-publishing dropout, having left the city and 'success' in late 2007 for a life lived much more quietly and close to nature." In one of her articles, she has a conversation with Jeff Jabco, Director of Horticulture at the Scott Arboretum at Swarthmore College, which has over 300 acres and over 4,000 different kinds of plants.<sup>ix</sup> And in the interview, Roach and Jabco discuss... pruning.

Now, in our family, Lynn is the gardener. She watches over our plants, cares for them, nurtures them; while honestly, all I'm good for is... *guiding a push lawn mower*. So, the insights Roach and Jabco offer their readers, I don't understand exactly what they are talking about, but I find the details fascinating.

Jabco says, for example, regarding lilacs and hydrangea, "always [prune] vertical water sprouts... from the trunks and branches of any plant, as well as suckers at the base of grafted plants."

And this, "typically with spring bloomers, you prune after bloom, unless it's a fruit tree, in which case you would prune before bloom.... Fruit pruning doesn't follow the rules for ornamentals."

But then, summarizing his insights, Jacobo offers an intriguing phrase. He shares that what he does can be categorized as, "health pruning." *In other words, the health of the plant is the ultimate goal, the aim, of the gardener, and thus, of pruning.*

As Jacobo puts it, the gardener is always "thinking about blooms for next year." And this work, this pruning, has to be done very carefully, because, as he observes, "just shearing back ruins the form of what the plant naturally is."

Which raises a wonderful question, so how do we prune... ourselves?

And perhaps the first thing to recognize is the goal is our health. The purpose of pruning is to restore that which is living inside us to its true essence, its true nature.

†

So why did Cassady Rosenblum quit her job at NPR in Boston and head home to her parent's porch in West Virginia?

In a recent article about her trek, she points to a factory worker in China named Luo Huazhong as her inspiration. For one day, he decided, instead of going off to work to draw the curtains and crawl back under the sheets. A post he wrote describing his decision went viral and has become known as the "lying flat movement," or in Mandarin, *tangping*.

xii

It might help to know that where Mr. Huazhong works in China. The schedule is 9am to 9pm, 7 days a week. He was, as we call it in the west, burned out. Or in the vernacular of the vineyard, he needed to engage in some pruning; to pull back his life in order to re-discover his true essence, his true nature.

*Tangping*, this emerging lying flat movement, resonated with Cassady Rosenblum. As she writes, and so, "what is the porch if not a place to chat with neighbors, to marvel at the hummingbird at the feeder, to listen to the wind in the chimes?" It is, as she describes, "an... altar for the future."

In other words, yes, Cassady Rosenblum dramatically pruned branches in her life that had produced up to that point, and to the best of her ability, NPR shows; but now, on that front porch in West Virginia, her altar, her hypethral, a cathedral without walls, *she discovered something growing. There was another future yet to come.*

"I am the true vine," says Jesus. "My Father is the gardener. God removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit."

I wonder, this morning, is there some aspect of your life that isn't really bearing fruit, which might require a little bit of pruning?

If so, what might it be?

†

Lynn and I are both enormous Eudora Welty fans. Her home in Jackson,

Mississippi is now a National Historic Landmark. Have you read any of her wonderful short stories or novels?

Her novel *The Optimist's Daughter*, for example, won the Pulitzer Prize and you'll find a quote from that book on your bulletin cover this morning,

Welty writes, "Laurel had watched him prune. Holding the shears in both hands, he performed a sort of weighty sarabande, with a lop for this side, then a lop for the other side, as though he were bowing to his partner."

I had to look up the word, *sarabande*.

Do you know what it means?

It's a word that describes a "slow stately Spanish dance."

Isn't that lovely?

In other words, yes, to prune means to remove branches of our lives that have served their purpose, like the image of the two trees - before and after pruning - on your bulletin cover.

But the helpful point Welty makes is this process of pruning isn't something to be feared, or avoided; it isn't, shall we say, an amputation, but rather an invitation to dance slowly in God's vineyard, a hypethral; to dance with a partner who knows you and me as intimately as God knows God's own son.

You see, the good news Jesus shares with us in this final "I am" statement is he affirms despite everything tragic occurring in our world today and in our own lives - the sorrow, the disappointments, the setbacks - we are all in the vineyard. And there is always, thanks be to God, more to grow and more to emerge from our branches.

“Let us, together, sow seeds for a better harvest—a harvest for hope.”

- Jane Goodall,  
Anthropologist



Scripture:

Deuteronomy 16:13-15

Galatians 6:7-9

Rev. Dr. Mark Barger Elliott

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Daniel Pink, who worked for National Geographic, is a best-selling author. This week I read, *When: The Scientific Secrets of Perfect Timing*, where he makes this observation, “Our lives present a never-ending stream of ‘when’ decisions.”

For example, when is it time to put your house on the market? Cancel a vacation? Change careers? Deliver bad news? Double down on an idea or set it aside?

I wonder this morning, do you have a “when” decision you’ve been wrestling with, are unsure of, taking time to think through?

For 218 pages Pink relates to his readers two years of research he undertook to understand what he calls “the science of timing.” And he offers his readers this conclusion, “I used to believe timing was everything. Now I believe that everything is timing.”

This morning we conclude our series *Hypethral: On Life in a Cathedral Without Walls*. “Hyperthral” is word Lynn and I discovered this summer in the work of Wendell Berry and Henry David Thoreau. The idea is that yes, we can experience God in this sanctuary, but we can also experience the divine in and from a cathedral without walls, in a “latitude beyond,”

as Thoreau once winsomely called it.

In our series we've reflected on the hypethral of the world God created and noted how God is engaged in a perpetual process of re-creation. So, as Paul put it, don't give up hope for our world.

We've considered the hypethral of seeds, the edge of a garden, and last Sunday considered pruning as a sarabande - to draw from Eduora Welty's idea. It's a dance where we partner with God in a divine vineyard to grow faith, hope and love in our lives. As Jesus said, "I am the true vine, and God is the vinegrower. God removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit."

This morning we turn to the hypethral of the harvest.

A little over a week ago our congregation gathered to celebrate the tenth anniversary of our community garden. Truly, the harvest has come in this summer at the House of Hope as our gardeners gathered Roma tomatoes, green beans, romaine lettuce, cantaloupe, and strawberries!

As of a few days ago, over 906 pounds of food has been harvested and shared with local food pantries!

Last week, as we reflected on how the Bible points us to the reality and the metaphor of the vineyard and pruning, the same, we can say, is true regarding the reality and metaphor of the harvest.

For example, as our call to worship proclaims - drawing from the prophet of Isaiah - the joy that arises at the sight of a bountiful harvest - Roma tomatoes and green beans - is similar to the joy we can feel when we are in God's presence; when darkness lifts in our lives and we walk in the light of grace, of new beginnings.

Scripture also demarcates three festivals where God's people are to gather and celebrate the harvest: the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Booths. In our first passage we find the latter described and guidelines shared in how it shall be observed. We read, "when you have gathered in the produce from your threshing

floor and... wine press... Seven days you shall keep the festival... at the place that the Lord will choose; for... God will bless you in all your produce and in all your undertakings, and you shall surely celebrate."

And in her book *Like a Garden: A Biblical Spirituality of Growth*, Sara Covin Juengst helpfully explains for God's people the harvest was more or less unfolding *all the time*. As she writes, "In biblical times, harvests took place almost year-round. Flax was harvested from March to April. The barley harvest came in April or early May, followed by the wheat harvest in May or June. In August and September, the summer fruits, figs, grapes... were gathered, and the olives from September to November."<sup>xiii</sup>

Harvest time, in other words, had a daily, monthly, yearly rhythm; it is a sacred tempo that enabled God's people to sync their lives, their efforts, with the hypethral of God's creation.

Which sounds lovely doesn't it?

But there is another side to the reality and metaphor of harvest, one prophets often pointed to. And that is, when God's people chose to ignore or neglect this rhythm - this sacred tempo - the harvest would in the end fail and rot, which was disastrous for an agrarian community. But this kind of failure was also, taught the prophets, a spiritual failure. We catch a glimpse of that warning in our second passage as Paul writes, "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow... so let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up."

†

I wonder this morning, do you have a "when" decision you've been wrestling with, are unsure of, taking time to think through?

A decision to put your house on the market? Cancel a vacation? Change careers? Deliver bad news? Double down on an idea or set it aside?

This morning I'd like to suggest that those kinds of questions and decisions are related to the *hypethral of the harvest*.

That yes, as we considered last week, there are seasons of our lives when we need to embark on a process of pruning, cutting back certain branches so something new can grow in that place. But there are also moments, as scripture describes, when it is time to harvest, time to act, time to make a decision, and to sync our lives with God's rhythm, God's timing.

†

David Whyte is a poet-philosopher and Associate Fellow at the Oxford Business School. He writes lovely books and is invited to speak to audiences that range from Fortune 500 companies to theological conferences.

But, as he shares, he hasn't always been a poet. And the decision to become one - a moment that changed his life forever - emerged after he came to understand the rhythm and timing of the harvest.

In his book *Crossing the Unknown Sea*, Whyte shares how his life had come to a crossroads regarding the path he would take so he visited his friend Brother David, an Austrian monk whose life was shaped by silence and prayer. He was someone Whyte calls "the nearest thing I had to a truly wise person in my life."<sup>xiv</sup>

He met with Brother David and as Whyte shares, "I found myself almost blurting, 'Brother David... tell me about exhaustion.'"

"He looked at me," notes Whyte, "as if trying to sum up the entirety of the situation... [and wanting]... to say a life-changing thing to me. He said, in the form both of a question and an assertion: 'You know the antidote to exhaustion is not necessarily rest?'"

Whyte writes, "The antidote to exhaustion is not necessarily rest?" I repeated woodenly, as if I might exhaust myself completely before I reached the end of the sentence. 'What is it, then?'" Brother David looked at me as if I should fill in the blanks. But I was a blank to be filled at that moment... So he carried on: "You are... tired... because a good half of what you do [where you work] has nothing to do with your true powers, or the place you have reached in your life. You are only half here, and half here will kill you after a while. You need something to

which you can give your full powers. You know what that is; I don't have to tell you." "He didn't have to tell me [because Brother David] knew I wanted my work to be my poetry.

"It's all right," he went onto to say, "to support yourself with something secondary until your work has ripened, but once it has ripened... it has to be gathered in. You have ripened... and... are waiting to be brought in. Your exhaustion is a form of inner fermentation. You are beginning, ever so slowly", he hesitated, "to rot on the vine."

†

On your bulletin cover is a photograph of tomatoes that were, shall we say, not harvested in time.

Something has gone wrong.

They, like David Whyte, are rotting on the vine.

If "everything is timing," to draw from Daniel Pink, clearly here, the timing was off; the "when" moment has passed.

Over the past few months as we've all found our lives upended by the pandemic. I have been struck by stories of people like David Whyte.

A few weeks ago, for example, Adam Grant, a professor of psychology at Wharton Business School wrote an op-ed that went viral where he categorized an inner fermentation, a rotting on the vine, as languishing.

As he writes, "at first, I [noticed how] friends mentioned they were having trouble concentrating... A family member was staying up late to watch 'National Treasure' again even though she knows the movie by heart. Instead of bouncing out of bed at 6 a.m., I was lying there until 7, playing *Words with Friends*. It wasn't burnout — [my friends and I] still had energy. It wasn't depression - we didn't feel hopeless. We just felt somewhat joyless and aimless. It turns out there's a name for that: languishing.. [it] means a sense of stagnation and emptiness... as if you're muddling through your days, looking at your life through a foggy windshield. And it might be the dominant emotion of 2021." <sup>xv</sup>

Do you know anyone who feels that way? Do you feel that way?

*The Wall Street Journal* reported recently “more U.S. workers are quitting their jobs than at any time in at least two decades.” “A recent Microsoft survey found more than 40 percent of workers globally were considering leaving their jobs this year.”<sup>xvi</sup>

“People are seeing the world differently,” says Steve Cadigan, who at one time led human resources at LinkedIn. “It’s going to take time for people to think through, ‘How do I unattach where I’m at and reattach to something new?’”

†

“You reap whatever you sow... so let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.”

“God will bless you in all your produce and in all your undertakings, and you shall surely celebrate.”

From a feeling of perhaps languishing to an awareness it might be time to “unattach” and to harvest something new God is growing in your life, if such observations resonate at all with your own life, the good news scripture declares this morning is don’t despair, but instead recognize you’re living in the hypethral of the harvest.

For David Whyte discovering that hypethral meant standing up from that talk with Brother David and deciding to go and to do one thing every day towards becoming a full-time poet. As the phrase goes – lo and behold - three months later he received a call. A conference speaker had canceled and Whyte was invited to stand before a large crowd to share his poetry, his harvest.

And may it be so, for us and for those we know.

For the God we know in scripture longs for each of us to flourish, not to languish.

But there is a tempo, a sacred rhythm to which we need to pay close attention. And when we do, scripture declares, joy is its produce.

## Disclaimer:

These sermons were prepared as a spoken event.  
Please excuse any grammatical errors,  
repetition, missing references or citations.

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## Footnotes:

- i. [http://www.ecofaithrecovery.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/BerryWendell\\_ChristianitySurvivalCreation.pdf](http://www.ecofaithrecovery.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/BerryWendell_ChristianitySurvivalCreation.pdf)
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- vi. Stuart-Smith, p. 248.
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