In the Garden

By Christopher Ross

It says something about the pleasure of putzing around in gardens at the close of the day that that’s what God was doing in the last moments of humanity’s innocence. As Adam and Eve are hiding before their fateful confrontation, they hear “the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day.”

That lovely line from Genesis often comes to mind on summer evenings in our own backyard garden. When the sun is low in the trees, flower petals and leafy branches glowing in the golden light, the air cool and cleansed of humidity, bees and birds flitting around in a final burst of activity before nightfall, I can imagine God padding barefoot across the grass.

My wife and I bought a house in Glenside at the end of last year which came with a garden well-tended by the previous owners of 30 years and by the owners before them. As we moved in at the end of February, we had no idea what a refuge that fraction of an acre would become when the world shut down for the pandemic. Nor did I realize that the process of entering the teeming ecosystem that this green patch held would deepen my own spiritual life.

A garden is a place where miracles happen. Those weird, spindly, green stalks with knobby pods at the end, half resembling alien flora? Poppies, whose vivid orange extravagance, like something out of the Palace of Versailles, reduced us to awed finding that the carrot seeds we had planted in a raised bed had turned in a matter of days into tiny green shoots (and a day after that, breakfast for one of the chipmunks). Nor has shock ever turned more quickly into admiration when leaves sticking out from under the hood of our car led us to a squirrel nest constructed in the engine.

Four very confused baby squirrels poked their heads up through the leaves to see their roof gone. When we had retreated for an hour, the mother returned, deftly picking each son and daughter up by the neck and whisking them to the top of a massive silver maple. In the ensuing weeks, we watched this family learn the ropes of the branches that spanned the yard.

In each of these cases, a sense of wonder gave way to concern and care; beauty awakens our duty to something higher. St. Augustine lyrically described this phenomenon in an Easter sermon, how nature’s sublimity points us to God: “Question the beauty of the earth, question the beauty of the sea, question the beauty of the air... question the sun making the day glorious with its bright beams, question the moon tempering the darkness of the following night with its shining rays, question the animals that move in the waters, that amble about on dry land, that fly in the air... they all answer you: ‘Here we are, look: we are beautiful.’ Their beauty is their confession.”

This is not the only theology I picked up in our backyard: a garden also has lessons to teach the soul about order and disorder. With apologies to weeds, there are few better metaphors for sin. Try to leave it alone, ignore it, and it multiplies. Neglect it long enough, and it overshadows everything...
desirable, stealing the resources necessary for healthy life, sinking its roots ever deeper and more stubbornly. When the invasive Star of Bethlehem plant exploded across the lawn and flower beds in May, I worked myself into a sweaty frenzy stuffing trash bags with the endless stalks, stems, flowers, and bulbs. Catching my breath, a thought stopped me in my tracks: what if I invested the same energy and ruthlessness in tearing out the overgrown bad habits of my own life?

As much as they are about life, gardens are also about death. It was a month or two into creating a compost pile when I realized it was as effective a memento mori as a skull on a shelf. Looking into the pile of decomposing plants, kitchen scraps, and eggshells, I was looking into my own fate, the fate of all living things. But there was something comforting about nature’s version of Ash Wednesday. Gardeners call compost “black gold”—last year’s ferns become tomorrow’s petunias. Even in death, we find the richness of future life.

One day while mowing the grass, I noticed under the shade of a large hosta leaf a small, dead vole. There was something solemn and elegant about the angle of his final repose. With paws folded on his whitish chest, a tiny snout lifted skyward showing the gleam of teeth, he brought to mind an image of a slain Arthurian knight, or Romeo in his last throes.

I knew I could pick him up, wrap him in a plastic bag, and throw him out in the trash. But even for an animal that was as much of a nuisance as this one, whose burrowed holes dotted our bed of irises and alliums, this seemed an ignoble funeral. I wished that four of his little compatriots would venture out, gently lay him on a hosta leaf bough, and carry him off. For the time being I left him there and got on with mowing. The following morning, I checked under the leaf: he had vanished—not a strand of fur left behind. It was an owl or a fox who had carried out the last rites I’m sure, but even that seemed a far better conclusion than my intervention. It was the garden’s way of assuring me that its own rituals were intact, and perhaps that even a creature as insignificant as this one did not escape God’s love. “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?” says Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel. “Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.”

Throughout these months, a more personal event was framing our horticultural adventures and providing a ray of joy at a dark time in the country. My wife’s pregnancy—now in its 21st week—was evolving along with the seasons. Watching robins build nests and once-bare shrubs robe themselves in green, it was impossible to miss the parallels between human and natural growth, and not feel a stirring of hope. Both indoors and out, a deep, life-nourishing script offered premonitions of blooms to come.

Images: author’s photos of his garden.

And Speaking of Flowers. . .

Many thanks to Pat Hynes for the gift of floral arrangements to grace OSJ during this weekend’s livestreamed and public Masses.
Please remember our sick and homebound brothers and sisters, our ministry at Pennsylvania Hospital and all those who have asked for our prayers.

George Bernato, Debbie Brooks, Ann Crowther, Jane Crowther, Mary Kay Crowther, Barbara Epting, Allan May, Jerry McAndrews SJ, Owen Petzelka, Philip Press, Matthew Smith, Sara Smith, Sharon Winge and Pat Yusko.

If you wish to have someone included on the parish prayer list, please call BJ Brown at 215-923-1733 or email bjbrown@oldstjoseph.org.

Announcements

Addressing Racism

Catholic leaders from across the country offer messages about overcoming racism and injustice. The home page of our parish website (oldstjoseph.org) has two useful links. The first is to the US Conference of Catholic Bishops’ recommendations for Practical Steps to Eradicate Racism. The second is to #BlackCatholics Syllabus, which was compiled by Dr. Tia Noelle Pratt, a sociologist of religion and a diversity and inclusion specialist.

A Helping Hand for Our Neighbors

The Sisters of Saint Joseph Welcome Center, located in the Kensington section of Philadelphia, is collecting gift cards to distribute to immigrant families in need. These cards are used to help our friends and neighbors to meet their basic daily needs during these challenging times. The Welcome Center requests cards from ShopRite, RiteAid and Target. If you are able to contribute, please send cards to: SSJ Welcome Center, 728 E. Allegheny Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19134.

Honor Roll

Merion Mercy Academy is proud to announce that two students from Old St. Joseph’s were listed on their second semester Honor Roll for the 2019-2020 academic year. Congratulations to Grace Dever and Sydney Parson and their families!

Barbelin Fund Gifts

Old St. Joseph’s Barbelin Fund was established by a bequest, and it supports the parish’s ministry with poor and vulnerable populations—including Faith, Food & Friends—and its commitment to the work of justice. This month, Barbelin Funds were used to renew three annual memberships. The first is Bread for the World, “a collective Christian voice to end hunger” (bread.org). The second is the Ignatian Solidarity Network, “advocates for social justice animated by the spirituality of St. Ignatius of Loyola” (ignatiansolidarity.net). The third is Network, advocates for Catholic social justice (networkadvocates.org).

Annual donations were also made to four organizations that OSJ works closely with on a regular basis. The Bethesda Project’s Church Shelter Program has helped many guests at Faith, Food & Friends find emergency and long-term shelter. Long-time friends at the Gesu School also benefit from OSJ’s Advent giving tree. The Ignatian Volunteer Corps has connected OSJ with leadership for Faith, Food & Friends and our hospital ministry. The Archdiocesan Nutritional Development Services provides milk to Faith, Food & Friends, along with helping to feed many thousands of Philadelphians.

Thank you to the Barbelin Fund donors who make it possible to support these life-changing ministries!
INFORMATION

Pastor
Fr. Walter Modrys SJ (pastor@oldstjoseph.org)

Parochial Vicar
Fr. Francis Hannafey SJ (fhannafey@oldstjoseph.org)

In Residence
Br. Robert Carson SJ
Fr. Ed O’Donnell SJ (eodonnell@oldstjoseph.org)

Pastoral Associate
BJ Brown (bjbrown@oldstjoseph.org)

Business Manager
Eric German (germane@oldstjoseph.org)

Director of Music
Mark Bani (music@oldstjoseph.org)

Parish Offices
(ooffice@oldstjoseph.org)

Religious Education (PREP) Coordinator
Christine Szczepanowski (prep@oldstjoseph.org)

Faith, Food & Friends Director
Deborah Hluchan (faithandfriends@oldstjoseph.org)

Director of Hospital Ministry
Tom Volkert (hospitalEM@oldstjoseph.org)

Rectory Office Hours
Monday through Friday: 9:30 AM to 4:30 PM

Mass Times

Medical Emergency
In a medical emergency when the need for a priest is urgent, please call the rectory.

Hearing Enhancements
Old St. Joseph’s is equipped with an audio hearing loop. Switch on the T-coil function of your device to use the loop. Booklets with the Sunday readings are available in the rear of the church.

Registration
Registration forms are available in the rectory office during normal office hours, on the bookcases in the back of the church and online at www.oldstjoseph.org. They can be returned to the parish office by mail or in person.

Sacrament of Reconciliation
Priests are available for the Sacrament of Reconciliation Monday through Saturday by appointment; please call the parish offices.

Sacrament of Baptism
To arrange a baptism, please contact Fr. Hannafey (fhannafey@oldstjoseph.org) at least two months before the desired date.

Eucharist for the Homebound
To arrange to receive Communion at home, please contact the parish offices.

The Sacrament of Anointing
Homebound or hospitalized persons wanting to receive the Sacrament of Anointing should call the parish office.

Sacrament of Matrimony
If you want to be married at Old St. Joseph’s, please visit our website, oldstjoseph.org and read the material under the heading Weddings. Please call the parish office at 215-923-1766 at least nine months before your desired wedding date.

Rite of Christian Initiation
If you are an adult wishing to be baptized, or to receive First Eucharist and Confirmation, or are a baptized non-Catholic seeking full communion with Catholic Church, please call the parish office or email rcia@oldstjoseph.org.

Mass of Christian Burial
To schedule a funeral or memorial Mass, ask your funeral director to call the parish office.

Parish Pastoral Council
(osjpc@oldstjoseph.org)

Parish Finance Council
Paul Shay, chair

Historic Preservation Corporation Board
Fr. Walter Modrys SJ, president

Adult Education
Rita O’Brien and Jeannmarie Zippo (adulted@oldstjoseph.org)

Eldership
Pat Nelson (eldership@oldstjoseph.org)

Parish Life
Joe Casey (parishlife@oldstjoseph.org)

Ignatian Spirituality and Formation
Len Mancini (osjspirituality@oldstjoseph.org)

Women, Faith and Fellowship
Rana McNamara (wff@oldstjoseph.org)

Young Adult Community
(osjyac@gmail.com)

Altar Servers
Maria Ramirez (altarserver@oldstjoseph.org)

Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion
Bill Stewart (EM@oldstjoseph.org)

Hospital Ministry
Luanne Balestrucci (hospitalEM@oldstjoseph.org)

Homebound Ministry
Neal Hébert (homeEM@oldstjoseph.org)

Lectors
Lou Anne Bulik (lectors@oldstjoseph.org)

Ushers
Nickola Szigorich (ushers@oldstjoseph.org)

Children’s Liturgy of the Word
Peggy Connolly (clow@oldstjoseph.org)
God Bless America

Please Continue To Pray For

World Peace

Ronald Rex Piselli Funeral Chapels Inc.

“We are a member of this great Parish, Proudly serving the Parishioners and Clergy for over 30 years”

215-271-0950
Offices - 1213 S. Broad Street • Phila., PA 19147
Email: ronrex@comcast.net

CatholicMatch Pennsylvania

Pray for our Men and Women in Uniform

IRREPRESSIBLE
K.J. Alexander

To her, she’s just another foster kid.
To them, she’s the queen who will save them all.

AVAILABLE NOW!

Scan Here or Visit https://amzn.to/322DlqT

STAY STRONG

Patronize your local businesses

Veterans Crisis Line
1-800-273-8255 PRESS 1

Military Crisis Line

Ready.gov
Don’t be afraid... Be Ready

Shop and save locally!

Just scan this code with your mobile phone:

or visit: www.TheCommunityCoupon.com

FOR ADVERTISING INFORMATION CALL: 800-883-4343 • Bon Venture Services, LLC • 34 Ironia Road • Flanders, NJ 07836