

Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent: Matthew 24:36-44

The Rev. Brooks Cato

As many of you know, Becca and I have been doing a lot of dreaming lately. By my count, we've designed no fewer than 900 houses on sketchpads, online software, and the occasional post-it note. In case it wasn't clear, Becca's the house designin' virtuoso; I'm the post-it note scribbler. Anyway, in our designs, we keep coming back to one aspect we both love: a jungle room. Every house we put together in our brains needs a jungle room where there's more plants living in 'em than anything else. Fancy places call 'em a solarium or a conservatory, but that feels too much like asking for a murder mystery for my tastes.

So, to prepare for our eventual, and admittedly gratuitous jungle room, we've been collecting plants. We have so many houseplants. And this is not a new hobby. We've been collecting them for years. Far as I can remember, I've always had plants to care for, so I don't know how to guess when we started growing our collection. But we've got a bunch. Some of our plants made the move with us from Arkansas to New York, and they've fared in this chilly clime with varying degrees of success. The Norwegian Island Pine is doing great! The mandevilla did not do great. We have a schefflera with a twisting, bonsai trunk. We've got a dragon's blood plant with swords for leaves. We even have a couple of devil's backbones that almost hurt enough when you imagine 'em to give the devil a little sympathy.

We got so excited about our jungle room and all the cool plants we can fill it with that we ramped up our house plant collecting, but we might've gotten ahead of ourselves. Space on countertops and shelves and tables and reasonably flat surfaces is now at a premium, and we've begrudgingly put a moratorium on plant collecting. We don't have a jungle room, yet. So, we're babying the plants we have now and hoping they'll hold on through another few winters of low light and dry rooms. The philodendrons will manage just fine. They're sort of show-offs. They stretch out and unfurl leaves all the time, and if you pay attention, you can even catch a drop of water seeping out the end of a long stalk. But most of our plants just are. They're quiet green things, occasionally brown-tipped, occupying a corner or a shelf and soaking up sun and not really doing much of anything at all. We're not the flowering type, not usually. Mostly we lean toward leaves and growth unusual enough to hold our attention year round.

But we do have one plant that flowers, we've just never seen it happen. Not yet. Truth be told, I don't actually know if it flowers, I've just been promised it does. It's a night-blooming cereus which, if you've never seen one blossom, you're really in for a treat. They bloom spectacularly, only if they're happy, and even then, the blossom only stays for one night. The blossom is white, but it looks like three different white blossoms all stacked on top of each other. And they smell so sweet. I've seen some beautiful plants in my life, but the night-blooming cereus was the first that was literally breath-taking. I didn't know flowers could actually do that. I don't want to overstate the beauty of this flower, but I really think it changed my life -- every flower from that point on has been measured against it.

Now, our plant came from a cutting off my mother's. That woman has the greenest thumb I've ever seen. When her night-blooming cereus finally decides the conditions are right, it blooms not once, not twice, but three or four or more of these beauties all at once. Where one person might get a once-in-a-lifetime glimpse of impossible beauty, she cultivates a fireworks display. I did not inherit that gift, but I did inherit that diva of a plant. It has never bloomed for us, but we also keep moving it, so maybe it just needs a better sense of place. Also, for a couple of years, we had it placed near a doorway, and whenever my dog Cotton welcomed a new face into the room, his wagging tail shredded whatever new growth was brave enough to stick out.

These days, she's tucked in a place where she seems happy enough, but what she really needs to show off is a jungle room. One day, maybe. In the meantime, we try to keep her happy, setting the conditions for a glimmer of the miraculous to enter the world. But it's really not up to us. I mean, there are some things we need to do. We have a discipline for all our plants, watering just so, turning the pot to even out growth, pruning back what needs to be pruned. But I've noticed that, when I tip the can and hear the soil bubble water deeper down to the cactus's roots, I pour with a little more hope. It's not that I expect my hope to make a huge difference for the plant. Who knows? Maybe it will. It's just something in me bubbling up without my say. One day, I hope to see what that little plant can do.

We're doing a lot of that these days, pouring into family, or gifts, or church with a little extra hope. 'Tis the Season. Advent has arrived, and we're growing into this dual-natured time of year ourselves with all that hope pouring onto us and pouring from us all at once. We know the story we're reaching towards. We've seen it before, a beauty bursting into the world in a single night, a flash of grace that leaves before we're ready for the show to be over. And we hope for the other side of that same story, the night the bloom returns, fragrant, breath-taking, and life-changing.

But we're also a little dual-natured. We're in control of some things, and we like that. We tend to our needs and cultivate practices in ourselves. Praying, turning ourselves a little more to the light, even pruning off what needs pruning. And sometimes that's enough for us to grow and to hope. But, we're also being tended to in those places we can't control. God's caring for us, holding us, urging us to turn, and to trim, and to bloom, too. Maybe God breaks through and we flower, or maybe our neighbor does, and the beauty of those moments, even the fleeting ones, erases all other blooms before, or rather, elevates all other blooms before. We see what we're capable of when God works through us, and it is pure, breath-taking, life-changing beauty.

I know our lives are busy. But if there's time in the day to care for something as humdrum as houseplants, there's time to hope, to give thanks, and to pray. And if there's time for daydreaming about extravagant jungle rooms filled with green things, surely there's time for beauty and for joy and, again, for hope. Hope is here now, and with it, one day, we know not when, beauty will be here. And one day, we know not when, Christ will be here, too.