

“The Nativity Garden”

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A Reflection for the Fourth Sunday of Advent

Hosea 14:1-9

December 23, 2018

You can read the Scripture by clicking [here](#).

With Christmas knocking at the screen door, it's near time for salads and cold cuts. No ugly Christmas sweaters; it's way too hot! After gifts are opened, let's have a water fight in back yard, or play in the waves. See, this is how my Australian relatives will be celebrating. It's Christmas in the summer.

I'd like to experience that someday . . . in Australia! A warmer Christmas here is scary-bad news. I imagine slapping on sunscreen instead of slipping into snowpants would feel un-Christmassy. For us in northern climes Christmas does not spring up in the summer. It falls in the winter. Even when there is no snow, our Christmas eves are long and their dark is deep.

Christmas stands on the doorstep of the bleak midwinter. Whatever greenery we have, even when it's real, is something we've cut or chopped. Life is dormant, settled down to a long winter's nap, waiting.

We don't grow gardens at Christmas.

But God does.

II

Hosea doesn't feel Christmassy either.

This month we've been dipping into the writings of this prophet. Hosea is about heartbreak and betrayal. Hosea has told us his life: his destructive marriage to Gomer; his shame and embarrassment as time and again she'd gone off with other men; their children, but with him not knowing if they were his really; his repeated waiting for her, his reaching to her, his seeking reconciliation with her; his offering of rekindled love. It's powerful!

We don't know how things turned out for them, but it sure doesn't feel like a Christmas story.

Hosea was a prophet of God, so his story wasn't just about one couple's troubles. His words and, more powerfully, his actions show us God's heart. Hosea lived in a time when God's People were pressured and insecure and fragile. They reacted by looking for security, prosperity, meaning and identity anywhere they could find them, except God, instead of God. They had not left God, not entirely. But they supplemented God, imagining

God wasn't good enough. They broke their covenant relationship with God. Hosea cried out God's experience of betrayal. He warned where this was headed.

Unlike Hosea and Gomer, we know how it turned out. They did not listen. They were destroyed. Only a small bit survived.¹ It doesn't feel like a Christmas story.

It's our story too. Our story is also about turning away from God. It's a dead-of-winter story. But can it be our Christmas story?

Yes, because Christmas is when God grows a garden . . . and not just in Australia.

III

That's what struck me in that reading of how Hosea ends.

Hosea has called them to return from their turning-away.² They need to get straight who they can count on. They cannot depend on Assyria. (Assyria was the superpower next door.) They cannot depend on military strength. (That's what the business of "not riding horses" was about; horses were for war). They cannot depend on the "gods" they've been turning to. (Why put your trust in things made by our frail human imaginations?)

We can count on God. God will take away and heal our turning-away. God will love us freely. God is angry when we turn away, because God angers at whatever threatens God's beloved. Still, we can count on God to turn to us, again and again.³

Then Hosea gives us this description that struck me. It's of God reviving God's People. It is lush, alive, and growing.⁴

God says:

I will be like the morning dew to Israel.

In our dry desert, God is the surprising presence of moisture in the morning. The dew soaks into the barren ground — that's God's People, that's us.

Listen to what happens.

¹ Hosea lived in a time when God's People had divided into two countries. The kingdom of David and Solomon split into a northern country, which retained the name "Israel"; it was also called "Ephraim." It was the largest and more powerful of the two. Hosea lived in this Israel and his message was directed at its leaders and people. In 722 BC, the Assyrian empire conquered it. Those who it did not destroy, it dispersed. (These are the fabled "ten lost tribes.") The southern kingdom, called Judah and centred in Jerusalem, continued until it was conquered by the Babylonians in invasions in 597 and 586.

² Verses 1-3.

³ Verse 4.

⁴ Verses 5-7, adapted from *The Message*.

*They burst into bloom like a crocus in the spring.
They put down deep oak tree roots,
They become a forest of oaks!
They become splendid—like a giant sequoia.
They become fragrant, like a grove of cedars!
Those who live nearby will be blessed by them,
be blessed and prosper like golden grain.
Everyone will be talking about them,
spreading their fame as the vintage children of God.*

This is more than a garden. It's a whole landscape of growing, bursting, spreading, fragrant, vibrant and abundant life.

What a picture of when God saves us.

Do you picture Christmas?

IV

Jesus might have been born in the rain and damp snow of a Bethlehem winter. Or maybe it was fall. Or, springtime. We don't know. I don't think it matters much. Still, to me Jesus' arrival feels "Springy."⁵

C. S. Lewis' children's novel, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe tells of a mythical land called Narnia. It was burdened by a century-long curse, imposed by the evil White Witch, who had "*made it always winter and never Christmas.*"⁶

Then, things mysteriously begin to change. Listen to the experience of one of the children who are at the centre of the story, Edmund.

. . . there was a moment's silence. And in that silence Edmund could at last listen to the other noise properly. A strange, sweet, rustling, chattering noise — and yet not so strange, for he knew he'd heard it before — if only he could remember where! Then all at once he did remember. It was the noise of running water. All round them, though out of sight, there were streams chattering, murmuring, bubbling, splashing and even (in the distance) roaring. And his heart gave a great leap (though he hardly knew why) when he realized that the frost was over. And much nearer there was a drip-drip-drip from the branches of all the trees. And then, as he looked at one tree he saw a great load of snow slide off it and for the first time

⁵ The evidence in Matthew and Luke's accounts is sparse, to say the least, which gives plenty of room for speculation and theories. I found a good summary of the considerations here:

<https://www.jesusfilm.org/blog-and-stories/when-jesus-really-born.html>

⁶ C. S. Lewis, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1959), 98.

*since he had entered Narnia he saw the dark green of a fir tree.*⁷

Spring had come. In the magic world of Narnia, with spring Christmas had finally come too!⁸ Aslan the Lion, who in the story represents Christ, had arrived and was “on the move.”

V

Hosea’s book finishes with a challenge to his people. *Be wise! Return to God, and be restored to life.* They don’t.

We are left hanging, in dire desperation. Not just God’s People, but all people. We keep on with being pressured, and insecure, and fragile. We keep turning to the latest power that entices us, or the latest solution we’ve conjured with our own hands, and bow down to them. Life continues to wither. The garden continues to die. God’s creation groans and waits through the long unending winter.

But then it’s like God got tired of waiting for us. It’s not like people suddenly got their act together. They didn’t and we still haven’t. We continue to turn from God.

Still, God began the revival, the renewal, the re-seeding, the re-gardening.

Why? Hosea put it this way: *God loves freely.*

In Narnia, Edmund heard the drop-drip-drip of melting frost. In Bethlehem . . . the Dew fell . . . and rested . . . and the Baby . . . was born.

So now,

*We begin bursting into bloom like a crocus in the spring.
We can put down deep oak tree roots,
We become a forest of oaks!
We become splendid—like a giant sequoia.
We become fragrant, like a grove of cedars!*

Christmas is here. Springtime has come. God’s gardening, begun.

Amen.

⁷ Ibid, 108.

⁸ In the story, Father Christmas arrives at the dawn of spring!