

Finding God in the garden

This is Ruth Lively. My husband, John, and I have been members of St. John's since 1994. I like making things, doing things with my hands. I especially love to garden and to cook. These activities not only give me great joy, but offer opportunity to experience God's love, abundance, and grace.

The garden, in particular, is where I find God. It's where I talk to God, where God speaks to me, and it is where I sing. The garden isn't the only place these things happen, but it is where they come most easily.

I offer you four vignettes, random thoughts on ways God speaks to me in my garden.

First, The violet

Outside my back door, there is a violet plant growing out of a minute crevice between a paving stone and the brick wall, literally between a rock and a hard place. The plant is small, and looks fragile, but it flourishes, and has many blossoms right now. Like the violet, I too can grow and flower, even in adversity.

Second, Cilantro

Years ago, I planted cilantro in one of my garden beds. This herb does not like summer heat, and I planned various ways to trick it into sticking around until the tomatoes came ripe. But as the days grew long and summer set in, the cilantro flowered and set seed. I had failed to manipulate its schedule. I harvested some seed to use in the kitchen, and then pulled the plants and composted them. Then a wonderful thing happened. The next year, wherever I spread the compost, cilantro sprouted. Thousands of seedlings. I have never had to plant it again. When I see cilantro in my garden – and I see it everywhere – I am reminded of God's extravagant abundance. But it is an abundance that comes on God's timetable, not mine.

Third, The cross

An old iron cross lives in my garden. It's the kind of cross you see in old burial grounds out in the sticks, tiny cemetery plots in remote places. I found the cross for sale at a garden center in Austin, Texas, rescued it, and brought it home. It's a rustic thing, slightly ornate in a humble sort of way. In summer it hangs on the fence in my vegetable garden, where purple morning glories twine around it. In winter it leans against the house and its silhouette shows stark and clear against the bare wall. I don't have much ornament in my garden, but I have this cross. The cross of Christ -- thereon hangs my hope.

And finally, Pruning

Pruning my fruit trees is a task for winter, when the trees are dormant and won't bleed sap, their precious life fluid. First, I cut out the dead, the diseased, and the damaged wood. Now I am left with healthy branches, but I still have work to do. I must remove those that grow in the wrong direction (that is, inward rather than outward), or that cross over others, or that crowd others. The goal is a tree that has only healthy wood, and a strong branching structure that is

open enough for light and air to penetrate to the center even when the tree is full of leaves. Sometimes we need to be pruned, in order to be healthy, more fruitful, so that light can penetrate to our center. Pruning is painful, but if it's done correctly, cleanly, the wounds can heal, and the tree – or the body -- is the better for it.

Gardening restores my soul like nothing else. The beauty I find there feeds me. If I am frustrated or angry, burdened or overwhelmed, I can generally find healing working in my garden. Weeding is particularly therapeutic. A quarter of an hour rooting out dandelions or chickweed does wonders for my perspective. Mostly, though, gardening allows me to participate in God's creation. And that fills me with hope, and a great sense of peace. It is nourishing beyond telling. The final lines of Psalm 23 sum up how it makes me feel:

**Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.**

I can think of no better prayer than to use the words of the great Thanksgiving Day hymn, number 291, from the blue hymnal. Let us pray.

We plow the fields and scatter the good seed on the land,
But it is fed and watered by God's almighty hand;
He sends the snow in winter, the warmth to swell the grain,
The breezes and the sunshine, and soft refreshing rain.

All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above;
Then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord for all his love.

Amen.