

1 Christmas– Year C – December 27, 2009
Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Psalm 147; Galatians 3:23-25, 4:4-7; John 1:1-18
Susan E. Wilmot

One word. Dandelions! Now dandelions may not be foremost in our minds at this time of year, especially with the gleaming white snow blanketing most of our yards, or at other times. However, dandelions are one of God's most superbly advanced survivors of the plant world. The cynic inside me has always had something of love-hate relationship with this tenacious and ubiquitous plant weed. I have spent hours on my hands and knees moving steadily across a patch of lawn wielding a nifty dandelion extractor and feeling that deep satisfaction of bringing order out of weedy chaos. Then I've woken up the following day with a blistered hand, only to see the almost miraculous resurrection of the dandelion population.

On the other hand, I still remember how magical it is to blow time away with a dandelion clock and watch as the seeds float on a playful summer breeze in a gauzy cloud looking a bit like a myriad of tiny Tinkerbell's. The prophet Isaiah describes how the Israelites have been through all kinds of torturous wars, judgments, and exile. In today's lesson from Isaiah, a people, long lost in its preoccupations with the false gods of greed and self-indulgence again finds their authentic life in praise and worship of God. It is as if the seeds of God's love and faithfulness were buried under a dark and cold winter of icy idolatry and snowy sin. Now spring has come and God's covenant promise of faithfulness and blessing is melting their hearts and yielding the fruit of righteousness. Exile is a very cold and lonely place, but sometimes a precursor to kindling a need for restoration to community, as well as being necessary for seeds to germinate and grow. Often when our spiritual lives seem most sterile or bleak, that is when God is working most productively in the secret depths of our souls, knitting together and healing the pieces that will transform us into a new being in Christ.

The Israelites are celebrating God's graciousness in their return from exile, "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God." Our Christmas songs are also hymns of celebration for the paradoxical nature of our own release. As we have believed in His Name, and received our Lord, Jesus Christ, He has taken possession of our hearts, grasped us, and yet released us from our own exile in sin and death. Until the seed germinates and the tender shoots begin to move towards the light, they are essentially blind to the dirt in which they dwell, and the heavy darkness of the layers in which they are buried. However deep the darkness that surrounds us, the miracle of life is still present and available to all who accept God's gift of faith. There is a huge difference between surviving and really living. How many of us would ever have even seen the difference outside of the Light and Life of Christ?

We have to admire the amazing design of the dandelion and how incredibly well adapted it is to growing in a tremendous range of climates. We have lived in three different countries where the temperature variations have been everything from somewhere around forty below in the winter to triple digits in the summer. And the dandelion has been with us through it all. Quite properly, in our freedom in Christ, Christians have a hard time relating to words like exile. As members of Christ's Body, we are already reconciled to God in Christ, and enjoy the gift of God's presence planted firmly within us. Whatever our life circumstances, we have come to trust and rely on the fact that there is nowhere we can go where God is not already waiting patiently for our arrival. Because of our interrelatedness – a connection that goes so much deeper than flesh and blood – we will always find a new community of faith waiting to welcome us, wherever we find ourselves. Whatever our temporal situation, when we maintain strong roots of faith in Christ, God will find a way to feed us and help us grow.

The mobility of the dandelion seeds is another miracle of this plant's awesome growth potential. The glory of the Lord has been literally tenting with God's people since the time of Moses,

and in the Word made flesh the Gospel writer sees the glory of God pitching a tent among us in the person of Jesus. In the Hebrew language words are composed of consonants. What we translate as Yahweh, a name for God, is actually written as Y-H-W-H. Similarly, the consonants of the word for tent are s-k-n, linked to the Hebrew verb written s-k-n, meaning to dwell, from which comes the word Shekinah, a word used by Rabbis to describe the glory of God. It is the same glorious cloud of God's presence that filled the tent during the exodus, and later the temple. In Jesus, the glory of God is revealed in the flesh. As the people of the exodus did, we too associate tenting with camping, a mobile and temporary home-away-from-home. At one time, the temple in Jerusalem was thought to be God's dwelling place amongst the people of Israel. It was the central place of sacrifice and worship to God. Jesus prophesied the destruction of the second temple, and spoke of a new temple in His body. You and I are living stones of that new temple in the Body of Christ dispersed throughout the world wherever Christians grow in witness as our lives testify to God's desire that all should know Him in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

I don't think I have ever seen a single dandelion, and if so, it did not remain that way for long. For by root or by seed, the dandelion is prodigious in its ability to reproduce and live in a kind of dandelion community. As the story goes, there was a man whose attendance at worship services became increasingly sporadic, and finally stopped. His Sunday mornings started to fill up with other stuff, the way our lives can get cluttered with busyness, and crowd out the most important things like daily prayer, Bible study and worship. A few members of the congregation noticed his absence and his pastor called to see if it was okay for him to stop by for a visit. The man invited the pastor in and offered him a seat by the fire. Noticing a pair of fire tongues the pastor reached in, pulled out a single piece of coal, and without comment placed it on the hearth. The man didn't say anything either, at least at first. He and the pastor exchanged pleasantries and the pastor asked how the man was and what was going on with him. The usual gentle inquiries that lead to the deeper questions, and perhaps some explanation as to why the man had stopped gathering with the rest of the community for worship. After sharing how busy his life had become and how he felt that it was just fine to have a private and personal faith, offering a prayer now and then, and enjoying God in creation, the man glanced at the hearth. It was then that he saw the single ember that had once been glowing brilliant red with passionate flames dancing within it, and fed by the fire all around it, had dulled to an ashy grey blackness alone on the hearth. "Oh," he exclaimed with a dawning realization. "I get it. I really need the church, as much as you need me," he said quietly to the pastor, knowing that most of what he had been saying was just guff, even as the pastor had listened patiently and nodded compassionately. The man smiled. The pastor had not had to say much at all, he had made his point with a single piece of coal, pulled out of the fire and left alone on the hearth. There is no such thing as Christianity without community. We are all part of Christ's Body and we need one another in order to grow into our new name of beloved "children of God".

For the health conscious amongst us, I read somewhere that parts of the dandelion are more nutritious than broccoli or spinach. They also have great internal health benefits including stimulating the liver, and cleansing the blood of toxins. Becoming a healthy community of faith involves the hard work of growing together, and becoming vulnerable enough to share our spiritual gifts for the good of the community. It can be risky and painful to trust, especially if we have been burned by past experiences. Not everyone grows at the same pace, and so each of us must be responsible for being slow to speak and quick to forgive. Our salvation in Christ Jesus is also our healing, effected through the process of our sanctification, or transformation by God's grace. We too will each become a crown of beauty if we yield to the Gardener's hand. Always remember, there are no weeds in God's garden.

Amen.