

Sermon for the Eighth Sunday After Pentecost: Jeremiah 23:1-6

The Rev. Brooks Cato

A little over two weeks ago, I walked into the living room over at the rectory and hollered when I saw two tiny little buds on one of my plants. Now, some of y'all may remember that Becca and I are fiends for houseplants, so much so that we've affectionately renamed that particular space as "the jungle room." We're pretty used to plants blooming, and I have to admit to getting excited when we see the particularly slow-growing ones put out a fresh new leaf. So for a bud to get a yelp outta me is a little unusual. Sure, I'll get mildly excited over a new blossom, and I'll feel a small sense of pride well up for my little plants working so hard to make the world a little more beautiful. But this one is different. See, this is no little flower and it's no common bud. I've had this plant for over a decade, and it's weathered one dog's wagging tail and another's snacking mouth, it's been through four moves across three states, and it finally, *finally* decided it was time to bloom. This would be the first bloom on my own plant, but I'd caught a glimpse on my mother's plant years before. It's from that one that mine grew, once a small cutting stuck in soil and now the Queen of the Night perched in my living / jungle room.

The Queen of the Night, or *epiphyllum oxypetalum* if you're nasty, is one of those kinds of cacti that doesn't really look like a cactus. No thorns, no big barrel arms reaching to the sky, no deep water stores to last through long desert droughts. It just has these long, flat leaves draping gracefully over the edges of its pot. Once in a while, it sends out long, thin shoots four, five, even six feet long reaching to stake claim to yet another corner of the jungle room. It's not a finicky plant to grow and tend, but it's quite the diva when it comes to blooming. Conditions have to be just right for just long enough, and when it's ready it'll bloom. A massive, pure white blossom fragrant as the heavens themselves, bigger than my hand spread wide, brilliantly reaching into the dark for just one night. And then she's gone. So, when I waltzed into the living room and saw a pair of tiny buds beginning to explore the space between one leaf's edge and the front window of the house, I hollered to Becca to come and see and started texting my family right away, the first of many progress reports.

It took 14 days, or rather, 14 nights for this whole process to complete. Every night I'd check before bed, every morning I'd check again. If I woke up in the middle of the night, I'd make my way downstairs just in case tonight was the night, and it kept on not being the night. Funny thing is, in all those nights when something was happening but the bloom hadn't yet appeared, I never got discouraged. I just got more and more excited, more and more hopeful. I know it's a little odd to get so excited about a plant, but y'all. I have to admit, when Becca and I went away last weekend, we strongly considered taking the plant with us. After all, we'd be gone for two whole nights, and what if -- after more than a decade of tending -- what if it decided to bloom while we were gone?!? But we decided to leave it be, more worried about stunting the thing and disturbing the delicate process than missing the show. While we were gone, one of the twin buds fell away, as though the other took all its strength for itself. We mourned, really mourned the loss of that little thing, incomplete and hope-filled and discarded on the windowsill. But the remaining bud continued to grow, curving toward the window and away and back again. It had taken on a life beyond normal plant growth and seemed to be really alive, ready to leap out of its pot and explore the world. You better believe Audrey Two from Little Shop of Horrors popped into my imagination. I had dreams of "Feed Me, Seymour" and worried what it would come to if the Queen of the Night demanded more than just water and sunlight. But water was all it needed. Water and time and attention. And in return, it filled the house with a sort of electric hope. Is tonight the night? Not yet. What about tonight? Not yet. It would always be tonight, until it wasn't. And then when daybreak came, tonight would be the night yet again. Until it wasn't.

And then one day, Thursday, it was. When I woke up Thursday morning, the bulb was heavier, curved and resting gently on the windowsill, too heavy to hold up its pointed head. By midafternoon, it was fat and

swollen. Tonight really would be the night! And my God, it was! Around sundown the once-protective outer petals peeled away and the delicate feather-like interior petals opened and spread and reached toward the moonlight, and the delicate interior stamen and pistils and other plant-part thingies I knew the names of in eighth-grade biology stretched out into the night. Once that diva of a blossom decided it was time, it was time. It probably took an hour or two to open fully, and then the pure beauty rested its head on the windowsill for the rest of the night waiting for pollinators that would never come. As the blue light of dawn crept in from the east and wrapped around through the western window, the feathery petals closed again, hiding the delicate interior from the strength of the sun. And that was it. The performance in full completed in one glorious night.

I slept on the couch Thursday, and I kept waking up to take another look and steal another nose-full of her precious fragrance. The entire rectory filled with a perfume I'm sure even heaven longs to smell. But by Friday, while you'd still catch a whiff walking into a different room, the blossom itself lay deflated by the window, like a party balloon a week after all the guests have gone home.

I waited over ten years for that night. I watered and fertilized and shifted that plant into just the right light. I waited and waited. I told friends what potential that pot held. I gave cuttings to a few takers and promised glory that would one day come. I scolded my grazing pupper and stuck damaged leaves back in the dirt to grow again. But more than anything, I waited. And you know what? It was worth it, every one of those roughly 4,000 nights that it didn't bloom just to get to the one night that it did. In one of her many wonderful roles, Julie Andrews says, "A queen is never late. Everyone else is simply early." I was early to the show, and when the queen arrived, it was a joy to be in her presence.

Ok, flowers are great and all, and this one really is great, but I suspect some of you are beginning to wonder what any of this has to do with church or the readings we heard today. Fair enough. I think there's something to beauty in our lives that's more than just appreciating something that's pleasing to the senses. The Oxford Movement, back in the 1830s Church of England, pleaded with the church to reinstate those beautiful aspects the Puritans had removed. Things like colorful hangings to match the seasons of the year, clergy vestments, candles on the altar, even flowers embellishing the space - all these we live into in the legacy of the Oxford Movement. But it wasn't just about beauty for beauty's sake. They argued that beauty itself points to God, and your experience of beauty draws you closer and closer to a life lived in faith. But they also identified an inequity in their day: if you wanted to experience beauty, you pretty much had to be wealthy or otherwise have access to the spaces wealthy people occupied. Your average coal miner couldn't just waltz into a schmancy museum, and the Oxford Movement argued that that wasn't just social inequity, it was spiritual inequity. So, when they built their churches, they designed gorgeous and elaborate worship spaces, gothic-revival buildings with ornate details and stunning stained glass, and they dropped them down right in the middle of the slums. Everything in life for the poor was gray, from the clothing to the air itself, and suddenly color and architecture and fragrance were yours as much as anyone else's. And with that glorious festival of the senses, everything pointed to God. Equity and beauty and access to God suddenly on a playing field leveled by the church.

But while all that is good and true, that night-blooming beauty on my windowsill goes deeper still. We are not a people that is terribly good at waiting. Some of you are more patient than others, most of you are more patient than me. But on the whole, waiting is not -- nor has it ever been -- a forte of humanity. We don't wait well. But nearly all of the Prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures and the bulk of The New Testament, too, ask us to do just that. Wait, and wait well. The old prophets, the Jeremiahs of the world, show us just how ugly this world has become and point forward. "The days are surely coming when a righteous branch will rise up." And there will be justice on the land. And safety. And beauty. All things will be made right when the Messiah comes. And so we wait. And we wait. And we wait. And when Jesus comes, we've been waiting so long, we aren't even completely sure what we're waiting for anymore, but we know it's coming and we know it will be great. But in

spite of all the spiritual tending we've done, we still aren't quite sure we can recognize him when he comes. But he surely does. And he is glorious. And his time on earth is heart-achingly brief. And he tells us to wait, again. Live into this beauty you have seen, share the beauty of God, proclaim the life-changing glory of just one fleeting encounter, and he'll come back. One day, one night, we know not when. Like a bridegroom or a strongman or a thief in the night, we know not when. But one night, one night in thousands, we'll see all that beauty and glory and love and joy again. One day. One night.

I absolutely saw something of the glory of God in that flower. The Queen of the Night is wonderfully and fearfully made. But more than anything, more even than its stunning blossom, the gift of that flower is in the waiting. There was nothing I could do to make the process go faster. I just set the conditions of possibility for it to do its thing, and when it was time, it was time. I don't think that seeing that flower bloom made me a better believer. I don't think it made me believe in God more than I already did. But I do think over the years, it's made me better at waiting and hoping for a thing not-yet-seen.

Every week we say the same beautiful and hopeful line: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. This much is true. But when? Why not now? Why not tonight? If that glorious jungle room flower has taught me anything, maybe it's this: That today is the day. Tonight is the night. Until it's not. And then when morning comes, it's tonight all over again. We're filled with that electric hope. Is tonight the night that Christ will come again? Not yet. What about tonight? Not yet. It can always be tonight, until it isn't. And then when daybreak comes, tonight can be the night yet again. Until it isn't. Until one day, one night, it is.