

# Peter Bankson: The Land Our God is Giving Us

Seekers Church: A Christian Community

*In the Tradition of the Church of the Saviour*

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## The Land Our God is Giving Us

### Scripture

*Once you have entered the land that Adonai, your God, is giving to you as your inheritance, and you have taken possession of it and settled in it, take some of the first fruits of all that you produce from the soil of the land that Adonai, your God, is giving to you, and put them in a basket. Take them to the place that Adonai, your God, will choose as a dwelling place for God's Name, and say to the priest in office at that time, "This day I declare to Adonai, our God, that I have come to the land Our God swore to our ancestors to give us." The priest will then receive the basket from you and will set it on the altar of Our God.*

*Then you will declare before our God, "My ancestor was a wandering Aramean who went down to Egypt with a small household and lived there as an alien. There they became a nation great, strong and numerous. When the Egyptians mistreated and oppressed us, imposing hard labor upon us, we cried to Adonai, the God of our ancestors, who heard our cry and saw our affliction, our toil and our oppression. Our God brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and outstretched arm, with terrifying power, with signs and wonders; our God gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.*

*Therefore I have brought now the first fruits of the products of the soil that you, O God, have given me." Then you must set them before your God, and bow down before the Most High. Then you all, along with the Levites, and the foreigners that live among you, will feast on all the good things that Adonai, your God has given to you and your household.*

(Deuteronomy 26:1-11, The Inclusive Hebrew Scriptures)

## **Introduction**

When we decided to worship here this morning, Celebration Circle wanted a date that would not complicate things for those who had already signed up to preach. At that time, about a month ago, no one had asked to preach this morning. Therefore, we set the date, and started planning. I agreed to offer the Word today because I wanted to reflect on our journey to this place as one small part of the Body of the Risen Christ.

Later, when I read the Hebrew Scripture lesson for today, I was amazed. This week, I need no other evidence that God has a sublime sense of humor! Whatever other ideas I might have had for this reflection were replaced instantly with the clear need to honor a tradition that goes back to the beginning of the history of God's people – to offer to God the first fruits from our new land.

As I reflected on this Scripture, I realized that it has been just a bit more than a year since God gave us the discernment and the resources to buy this place. In that year, there has been a lot of growth.

The blueprints for renovation have grown thicker and thicker.

Our knowledge of how to get here from all over town, at all hours of the day has grown more sophisticated.

Our connections to the community here have grown, too, as Jeanne and the Community Links Team have met with pastors and business owners, community activists and neighbors.

What has come to fruit so far? Since we have not moved yet, most of our hopes and dreams and plans are still plans... dreams... and hopes.

## The Rose

A week or so ago I came here on a rainy afternoon, looking for "first fruits of the soil," to help me think about our first day of worship in this place. I wandered around outside, trying to see with fresh eyes. The first thing that caught my attention was the rose bush outside the back porch. Remember how scraggly it looked when we first started coming here last winter?

Nevertheless, it sprouted fresh leaves when spring came, and Paul Crumrine, Pat and Trish gave it a little stewardship in the form of some fertilizer and a gentle pruning, and it prospered. Were you as amazed as I was when it started to bloom and there were **two** different kinds of blossoms on that one bush? That rose has been a sign of the life of this place, hanging on, waiting for us to arrive.

Rose bushes remind me of a ritual Marjory began when we made the first of the 20+ moves we have made since we married almost 40 years ago. When spring came in Fairbanks, Alaska, she planted a rose. It reminded her of home, and it made the new place seem a little more like home for us. Moreover, when we left Fairbanks for Georgia, she planted a rose there, too. We never saw most of those roses bloom for more than a year or two. We left them behind when we moved again, to offer a welcome for whoever would come when we were gone. Last year, when our rose here began to sprout, I had the sense that someone before us had left that bush as a welcome for us.

When I really looked at our rose bush, I saw that, in fact, it had **fruit** on it – small, red and black "apples." Here they are ... rose hips from our bush. Did you know that rose hips are one of the most concentrated sources of Vitamin C? If you go to the Takoma Park Co-op, you can get "all natural" Vitamin C tablets made from rose hips. If you take them at the first sign of a cold, they will help your body keep the cold virus from taking root. Therefore, our first fruit is a natural health food, left for us by someone who was here before, someone we will never know.

I hold up these rose hips as the first fruit of health for Seekers Church. They are a sign that as we claim this place which Adonai, our God, has given us for an inheritance, we are called to nurture the inner spiritual health, and the outer vocational health and the shared community health that God is calling us to, as part of the Body of the Risen Christ. Rose hips.

## **The Grass**

There I was, out in the rain with a pocket full of rose hips... looking for other first fruits of this land. I went around the corner of the back porch, and saw a tall clump of dry grass. It reminded me that we had not mowed the lawn ONCE all last year! There, beside the stairs to the second floor porch, was a thick, healthy, bunch of grass that had gone to seed. Seed! First Fruits!

I harvested most of that bunch of grass. Here it is. Notice how healthy it looks. Moreover, notice how each stalk is about the same height. However, is there any fruit? I had to look carefully, but there is – tiny seeds, each equipped with a bit of the finest fluff to help carry it on the wind.

Standing in the rain, holding this bunch of grass, I was reminded of a wonderful day on silent retreat five years ago, when I slowed down enough to let the meadow at Dayspring be my

teacher. Here are a couple of the lessons I learned from the grass:

- If you do not mow it, each grass grows to its own, natural height.
- In the meadow, some grass goes to seed early, and some grass goes to seed late, but all grass goes to seed before winter comes, except the grass in the lawn; that never has a chance to go to seed.

Given a chance, the grass knows what to do. Thinking about the un-mowed grass led me to thinking about children ... and the environment. After a decade at [Communities In Schools](#), I have learned that if we mow our kids too close, they never go to seed. Moreover, although that makes them much easier to deal with at the time, it does not feel like Good News. I give thanks that God has given us the patience and the flexibility to let our kids grow all the way up, and to help others do the same.

The grass also reminded me that there is not much green space here, and there will be even less when we make this building accessible for people in wheelchairs. That feels heavy, but it also feels right. We do care about the environment in Seekers Church, but we will have to go somewhere else to make a difference. The environment that is threatened is **not** in our back yard. I believe God's call to stewardship of all of Creation is a call to go out, to do what we can to be stewards – or prophets – to nurture the health of Creation in places where we are not in control.

Given a chance, the grass knows what to do, and I think we do, too. Grass seed – our second "first fruit."

## The Walnuts

I had a handful of rose hips, and a bunch of wet grass. It looked like that was about it for first fruits. I dug out my

keys and headed for the car.

As I was opening the car door, I looked at my feet, and noticed these squishy black balls, each one with a hard nut inside. Walnuts! There is a big walnut tree in the back yard of India House, next door. (India House is a hostel, where travelers from all over the world can stay when they come to Washington DC.)

Therefore, these walnuts are a gift from our international neighbor. Of course, we all know that walnuts are real food. These are the shade-tree kind, so there is not much inside those hard shells, but enough to entice a squirrel, or grow another walnut tree! If you cut the hard nut inside open, you find this complicated pattern. It reminds me of a labyrinth ... or this building. There are many different sections inside, but every part is connected somehow. It is not always easy to get from one place to another, but you can. Sort of like the path toward deeper commitment to Christ: one path, but once you step onto it, many different practices or disciplines to help you move forward. Moreover, over time you discover that they are all connected deep inside.

The other thing that I think is neat about walnuts is the dye that comes out of the soft stuff outside the shells. This black stuff is full of one of the strongest dyes you can find growing in the wild. I took the outside from half a dozen of these walnuts, boiled it in water to release the dye and dipped this rayon stole in it. Look at the rich color. Now I want to try it on wool and cotton, and see what happens when I use a paintbrush instead of just dipping the fabric in the walnut soup! These walnuts from the parking lot, first fruits from our international neighbors, have started me thinking in a completely new direction!

Therefore, I added walnuts to my basket of first fruits. For me, these walnuts are signs that this new place will nurture the creative spirit in us in ways we have yet to imagine. In

addition, they remind me to give thanks for the gifts from God that are delivered by human hands.

Walnuts, grass seed and rose hips.

## Coming Into the Land

Therefore, I come this morning, as we gather for the first time for worship in this new home, with an offering of three "first fruits:"

- Rose hips, as a sign that this new place will nourish our spiritual health, the inner journey of spiritual growth, the outer journey of vocation and mission, and the community journey of making a place where we know the presence of the Risen Christ.
  - Worship, learning, mission groups
  - Dreams for urban retreat, Taize chant, prayer vigil, hospitality center
  - Sharing the space with other missions
- Grass gone to seed, as a reminder of our call to nurture children, and protect the environment that sustains all life.
  - Creative space for kids, room for another mission or ministry
  - Mission outreach, advocacy
- Walnuts, as a promise that this new home will nurture artistic creativity
  - Art gallery, dance, community theater, labyrinth

So much to do ... so little time! It is tempting to dream dreams so big that it would take hundreds of Seekers to make them come true. And ... is that such a bad thing? Would we know we have succeeded when we have to shift to two worship services with circle time and coffee hour in between?

## **An Admonition**

Dreaming big is easy for us. One of our challenges is a subtle tendency to turn our dreams into demands on others, with performance objectives and outcome measures and multi-dimensional time-lines with milestones and periodic progress reports. We need those to renovate the building, but not to change the world. For that, I think it is more important that we keep praying, and follow God's call into the unknown. However, it will be tempting to get off that path.

In our Gospel lesson for this week, we are reminded of the temptations Jesus faced at the beginning of his earthly ministry. After 40 days in the wilderness without food, Jesus was tempted to abandon his call, and turn back to the good life. There were three temptations: feeding his bodily hunger by turning stones into bread; reaching for power in the eyes of the dominant culture; and counting on God to save him from his own recklessness. These are our temptations, too, as we begin to make this place into our home.

We might satisfy ourselves with making a nice, safe sanctuary from all the turmoil around us ... and lock ourselves off from the world outside our door. I do not think so, and I pray we will not.

We might set down God's call on us and strive for success as a church, as the world defines that – numbers, and programs, and growth. I do not think so, and I pray we will not.

We might come to think that we have special holy protection, and make commitments we know we cannot honor. I do not think so, and I pray we will not.

## **And a Blessing**

I want to close with a word of hope, from the Psalm for this week. Somehow, this, too, is meant for our ears this morning.

*"You who live in the shelter of the Most High,  
who abide in the shelter of the Almighty, will say to the  
Lord,  
'My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.'  
Because you have made the Lord your refuge, the Most High  
your dwelling place,  
no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent."  
(Psalm 91:2, 9-11)*

We are called to deepen our faith in the God of every thought and thing, who is making this universe even in this moment turning pure energy into the ordinary stuff of life.

We are called to stand firm in the face of temptation, turning away from satisfying our bodies and quenching our anxieties at the expense of our call to be part of the Body of Christ; avoiding the idea that we can prevail only if we are powerful; and acting with care so that we do not count on God to save us from our recklessness.

In addition, we are called, just now, to bring the first fruits of this land, which God has given us as our inheritance, to remind ourselves of our beginnings as a people of faith, and then to celebrate with our new neighbors the reality that God is with us in this life of faith together.

[Offer basket of rose hips, walnuts and grass seed.]

Deborah, I offer you, as the priest on duty today, these first fruits from our new land. "This day I declare to Adonai, our God, that we have come to the land Our God swore to our ancestors to give us."

"My ancestor was a wandering Aramean who went down to Egypt with a small household and lived there as an alien. There they became a nation great, strong and numerous. When the Egyptians mistreated and oppressed us, imposing hard labor upon us, we cried to Adonai, the God of our ancestors, who heard our cry

and saw our affliction, our toil and our oppression. Our God brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and outstretched arm, with terrifying power, with signs and wonders; our God gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Therefore I have brought now the first fruits of the products of the soil that you, O God, have given me."

[Set the basket on the altar table.]

God has led us to this new place. We have offered a basket of the fruits of this land that grew here since we took possession a year ago. Now, let us celebrate the presence of Christ among us, and then open our doors to those who would welcome us to this place as neighbors and friends, and enjoy a feast together.

Amen.