

## 1 Sermon, December 4, 2011

Texts: Song of Songs 2:1-2, Matthew 6:25-34, Isaiah 35:1-10

Title: "Waiting for Jesus: the Rose"

1. Why the rose?
  - a. Isaiah 35:1
  - b. Song of Songs 2:1-2
  - c. Matthew 6:28
2. The rose is what springs up when Christ is planted in us.
3. Perfection in love.

### 1. Why the rose?

Our advent hymn for the season, "People, Look East," speaks of "Love, the Rose." At the end of worship, we'll sing "Lo, how a rose e'er blooming." Why would a rose be a way to refer to the coming of Christ?

In the medieval Church, it was a mystical kind of thing, to speak of Christ as a rose always in blossom, having come from God through a fragile human lineage, as the prophets foretold. Christ, is beautiful, sweet and present to us as a light that dispels the darkness.

The mystical symbolism of the rose representing Christ is lost on us now, but if we turn to scripture, we can trace a sense of meaning.

The King James version of Isaiah 35 reads:

The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose. (Isaiah 35:1, KJV).

In the 13th century, Christians looked at this passage and saw in it a prophecy for the coming of Christ. Christ was the rose.

The second reference to a rose is found in the Song of Solomon, or Song of Songs, chapter 2, verses 1 & 2.

I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys. As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters.

I won't get into identifying the kind of plants botanically, because it's ambiguous. But spiritually, the flowers in this passage have been seen to refer to Christ, Christ who loves of humanity, and of the church, which is the Bride of Christ.

Matthew Henry, writing in 1710, says:

See here, what Christ is pleased to compare himself to... He that is the Son of the Highest, the bright and morning star, calls and owns himself the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys, to express his presence with his people in this world, the easiness of their access to him, and the beauty and sweetness which they find in him....

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And it may be the third passage, where Jesus asks us to “Consider the lilies,” which led Julia Ward Howe to write: [sing]

In the beauty of the lilies, Christ was born across the sea,  
With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me.

The beauty of Christ transforms us.

### 2. The rose is what springs up when Christ is planted in us.

All this is metaphor. You learned in high school English class that a simile was when you said orange juice is *like* sunshine. A metaphor is when you say orange juice *is* liquid sunshine. You don't really mean that sunshine can be liquefied. But you use the metaphor to make orange juice more attractive or meaningful.

And it's true that when we speak of God, all we have is metaphor. We can't describe God accurately. We don't have the language for it. So we use metaphor to say that Christ is way — truth — life — light — love — door and more.

Today's metaphor can be carried further: we are like good, rich dirt, and when Christ is planted in us, we achieve something more, something closer to perfection – something blossoms in us like a rose.

### 3. Perfection in love.

And here we come closer to the mystery that you and I know in our lives.

Christ's presence in us is an unfolding of something that was there all along, something that was planted in us, something little short of miraculous.

We may be selfish or hard-hearted, but still the presence of Christ in us motivates us to generosity – you see it all around you in all the charitable opportunities that people take advantage of this time of year.

We may be self-centered and impatient, but with Christ, acceptance and patience spring up in us from God knows where. (I mean that literally.)

We may be set in our own ways and angry, but Christ's love has a way of making forgiveness blossom in our hearts.

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Let's take a couple of examples of the love of Christ planted in us and bearing fruit:

There's a true story of a man in the post office just before Christmas when another man in line was very impatient at the long lines. He was griping, saying with all the lines, he was glad he didn't have to mail out birthday presents, too. He said, "Thank God I don't know anybody who was born at Christmas."

The first man thought, "Thank God I do."

Just recently I had it happen to me. When we were in India a few weeks ago, we paid a tour guide to take us to the Taj Mahal. Afterward, he took us around to some businesses that sold jewels or stone inlay like the ones used in the walls of the Taj, and carpets like the ones that would have been on the floor of the Taj.

At first, I was resentful, sure that our tour guide got a kickback when he brought tourists to these shops. I said to myself, "I didn't come to India to buy rugs or jewels or tabletops."

But then I remembered my faith, and thought that I also didn't come to India to get angry at a tour guide. I decided to enjoy the experience. There were other things I would prefer to do, but it was not a bad thing to see how rugs were tied, and enjoy the beauty of them.

It was a little God-moment, when I decided to practice my faith and have patience.

What we call the fruit of the Spirit are just that, the fruit of the love of Christ planted in us, growing to resemble something beautiful, like a rose.

I want to share with you an unlikely before-Christmas story that happened in Canton, Ohio, in 1933.

An ad appeared in a small local newspaper, offering to help a number of families in a modest way before Christmas, no strings attached. A Mr. "B. Virdot" sent out checks of \$5 each to 150 families in Canton.

The act of kindness inspired the Canton community. It told them that, in the height of the Depression, someone in their community cared. But it was a mystery, because there was no "B. Virdot." It remained a mystery for many years, but people speculated in the newspaper that it was probably a wealthy person in the community, and surely someone of great Christian spirit to do this just before Christmas.

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The mystery was solved in 2008, when Ted Gup, who happens to be a reporter, received an old suitcase from his mother with papers from her father.

It turns out that the giver, Sam Stone, was an orthodox Jew who had been born in deep poverty in the Ukraine, a place where in the early 1900s Jews were persecuted and sometimes burned out of their homes or killed by "Christians."

Sam Stone would not have been the first person suspected of doing this generous deed. He faced bankruptcy twice. He spoke with an accent, having spoken only Yiddish as a child.

Sam Stone was not even a US citizen. He had immigrated illegally, but loved his adopted country and loved his community and wanted to help people in need.

It was this man who took the trouble to insure that the gifts were anonymous, so people did not feel they owed him personally. It was this man who gave away \$750 – the equivalent of about \$13,000 in today's money.

It was this Jewish man who wanted to help Christians at Christmas.

Isn't that beautiful, like a rose?

Just like a rose unfolds as it blooms, so the grace of God unfolds in our lives if we open our hearts and minds to the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

3. Roses grow upon briars, which is to signify that all temporal sweets are mixed with bitter. But what seems more especially to be meant by it is that pure happiness, the crown of glory, is to be come at in no other way than by bearing Christ's cross, by a life of mortification, self-denial, and labor, and bearing all things for Christ. The rose, that is chief of all flowers, is the last thing that comes out. The briary, prickly bush grows before that; the end and crown of all is the beautiful and fragrant rose.

Jonathan Edwards - from Images or Shadows Divine Things

(Source: McMichael, George, et al., eds. Anthology of American Literature. 6th ed. Vol. 1. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice, 1997.)

<http://www.siskiyous.edu/class/engl1c/reynoldss/edwards.html>

<http://www.selahpub.com/Choral/ChoralTitles/405-259-FlowerofLove.html>

Of all the flow'rs that grow on earth, each one must fade and die.

But now a fadeless rose appears: it comes from God on high.

Its fragrance fills the weary earth. All hearts rejoice at Jesus' birth.

Glory spreads on our way, God's own flower blooms today:

Christ the rose of love is born.

Text: Anonymous.