

# Rogation Sunday

## Scriptures

Joel 2:21–27

Psalm 107:1–9

Revelation 21:1–4, 22–22:5

John 14:21–29

## Opening

I'd like you to raise your hand if this is your *first* time to attend a Rogation Days worship service, whether a Sunday or weekday service. Now I'd like you to raise your hand if you *ever* at any point of your life attended a Rogation Days worship service, whether a Sunday or weekday service. I figured we were all newbies here. I must say it is the first time I remember collecting dew and grass clippings on my cassock.

Had I been an Anglican priest in a rural parish four hundred years ago, the bishop might well have removed me from my post for neglecting my pastoral duties of a Rogation procession. So George Herbert seems to say, the patron saint of rural parish priests. Herbert writes, 'The Country Parson is a Lover of old Customs, if they be good, and harmless; and the rather, because Country people are much addicted to them, so that to favor them therein is to win their hearts, and to oppose them therein is to deject them. Particularly he loves Procession.'<sup>1</sup>

Yes, I know, you thought becoming an Anglican basically meant embracing the Book of Common Prayer, weekly communion, the Daily Office, and copious quotations from C.S. Lewis and N.T. Wright. But being Anglican means walking in a field and splashing holy water on dirt as well. We have a great theology of dirt, you see. Or we did at one time. We believe you ought to douse holy

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<sup>1</sup> George Herbert, *The Country Parson, The Temple*, eds. John N. Wall Jr. and Richard J. Payne, *The Classics of Western Spirituality*. (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981), 109.

water firstly on people, and especially on Easter Day, and later in the season on seeds, flowers, herbs, crops, and fields. When people become Anglican, they're always worried about doing things 'the right way' (a fear we should heal, of course). But I say none of us are good Anglicans until you've entered a nave with a bit of earth and grass clippings on the floor, tracked in by the faithful. The psalmist said 'all flesh is like grass,' so it's good that the people of God walk along grass in worship and procession a few times a year.

## Section 1

Oh sure, to the outward eye, it looks fairly silly to see people walking in a line on a nice Sunday morning, getting their nice shoes all dirty and wet. What the outward eye doesn't recognize is that the whole walk says that this place matters and matters for all eternity. This isn't just a patch of grass, a plot of ground, meant to be burned up when Jesus comes back. The ground was cursed when Adam sinned in the garden, but creation cries out for redemption. Just as Christ freed us from our sins by his death and resurrection, so his good creation will be set free from its own thorns and thistles to become what he intended her to be. That every single tree, flower, mountain, hilltop, grassland, river and sea would glorify the Lord. So we call out to the Lord in 2019 that creation would become what he intended her to be: a place of peace, glory, and abundance.

## Putting Down Roots

These Rogation Days says that this place matters, this parish matters. We are the people of God, the sheep of his pasture. But he didn't give us every pasture, he planted us in Knoxville. We are not the people of his pasture rooted in Chattanooga. We are not the people of his pasture rooted in Tuscaloosa, AL, and thanks be to God because the roar of 'Roll Tide' on Saturday is no way to prepare for worship on Sunday.

None of us are guaranteed that Knoxville will be your parish for another 20 years. We are never assured tomorrow. But this I know: this is our parish now.

No matter how far and wide technology might take us on our devices, you cannot be *everywhere*. You don't live just *anywhere* either. And if you have been baptized in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, you prepare for God's new creation of heaven and earth *somewhere* too. This somewhere is the place of your sojourn to the New Jerusalem. Yes, you may have lived in and loved

other places besides Knoxville; yes, the Lord may call you to other pastures in his Kingdom in days ahead. But right now, in the year of our Lord 2019, we belong to the parish of Knoxville and specifically west Knoxville. And the more people that put down roots in this parish, the richer that parish becomes in Kingdom works of love and justice and peace.

I must quote from Wendell Berry on Rogation Sunday. To leave him uncited is unthinkable today. Berry says, “No matter how much one may love the world as a whole, one can live fully in it only by living responsibly in some small part of it.”<sup>2</sup>

We pray ‘thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is heaven’ throughout the year, but on Rogation Sunday we especially ask for God’s new mercies, new blessings on *this* patch of earth, *this* city founded along the Tennessee River.

## Rogare

That’s what the word ‘rogation’ means. Rogation is derived from the Latin verb ‘rogare’ which means ‘to ask.’ We ask the Lord to bless the fields, the crops, and the hands of farmers who produce our food. Rogation Days are days to heal our blindness and our sense of entitlement. We cannot be blind to those who labor each day to provide the food we eat. We pray with farmers who look to the skies seeking a season of favorable rain. We pray for those whose work provides for the common good. We cannot pray with entitlement for daily bread; we depend upon God’s grace over his creation to produce the food we need. And not just the food we need, but the food our neighbors need, the food that the poor need. Today teaches us that we depend upon God’s favor over his land. We ask him for goodness over this land.

We’re very familiar with thanking God for abundant provisions at the time of harvest, Thanksgiving Day in America. But Rogation Sunday calls us to pray and worship in seed time. That’s what I love about dousing some seeds and plants with holy water. We get to live the parables Jesus described. Jesus had great affection for parables about tiny seeds. He told mini-stories about mustard seeds, seeds going into the earth, to train us to see the Kingdom of God. Well, this year those parables don’t have to be metaphors. This is the day when our liturgy asks you to dig in the dirt. And to dig in the dirt wherever you live in this parish of Knoxville.

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<sup>2</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*

Sure, you've probably planted seeds and cultivated gardens before, but seeing the show of hands earlier, we've never gardened with a divine commission, with your church family, for the sake of this parish. So ask him for abundance over the fruits and vegetables you plant.

And if your vegetables and herbs become abundant in July and August, as they often do in East Tennessee, share them with neighbors new and old. Unshared produce can only spoil. Living the Great Commandment doesn't have to be grandiose. It's walking across the street with homegrown tomatoes, cucumbers, and zucchini. Or if you have British neighbors, tomatoes, cucumbers, and courgettes.

The theologian Vigen Guroian wrote a book on gardening and the liturgical year, entitled *Inheriting Paradise*, in which he makes these remarks on gardening.

I think if we all gardened more, all of the birds that fly in the air above and light in my garden below would be better off...When I plant in spring I also hope to taste of God in fruit of summer sun and sight of feathered friends.

Gardening, he continues, symbolizes our race's primordial acceptance of a responsibility and role in rectifying the harm done to the creation through sin.<sup>3</sup>

## Preparing for Ascension

I find it both wonderful and wise that the Church summons to worship on Rogation Days in the same week we celebrate the Ascension of Jesus into heaven. We're asking heaven to come to earth even as earth—in the risen body of Jesus—ascends to heaven. We receive our commission to participate with God in preparing *this place* for the return of his Son. We aren't tasked with preparing the world for God's return. Knoxville is the place, the ground, the dirt, where we prepare for the New Jerusalem.

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<sup>3</sup> Vigen Guroian, *Inheriting Paradise: Meditations on Gardening*

## A Cut Flower Garden and the New Jerusalem

My mom joined Emily and our kids for dinner last weekend and we were talking about the lawn and garden spaces at her home, my childhood home. I share this conversation and story with her permission, of course.

Most of you know that my father died a little over a month ago. When my Dad was transferred from Ft Sanders to Vanderbilt, Mom took a tray of seedlings to Nashville she began cultivating in early March. Earlier this year, before Dad's illness worsened, Mom thought, 'I'd like to have a cut flower garden this year.' So in went the seedlings. And shortly thereafter Dad's health worsened. In certain moments of March and April when Dad was in and out of the hospital, Mom wondered if it just wasn't a good idea to keep those seedlings going.

By the time we reached Holy Saturday and we all headed to Nashville, the seedlings had to come too, they were too far along. My father passed two days after Easter, his body returned to the earth the first day of May.

But also in the earth were the seeds of flowers, not meant to remain there forever, but a cut flower garden. Flowers grown to be cut and placed inside the home, to bring color and life and beauty. Flowers meant to be cut and shared with neighbors and friends and family. And so there they grow in this parish of Knoxville. Neighbors might see them but never know the significance and the story. But to us they have a sacramental quality. They are signs that beauty still rises from this scarred and broken ground, that the body of creation and the bodies of the baptized are crying out for the New Jerusalem to come down. Yes, thy Kingdom come, thy will be done. Thy beauty come to this place, this parish of Knoxville, we call home until you come home to us, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.