News
EarthBeat



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I started gardening in the novitiate as a way to pass the time during the pandemic. I lived in Old Mission Santa Barbara, and in Southern California one can garden all year round. I started with beans not really knowing what I was getting myself into. Drying pods dangled from old vines all around the property, and I decided to break them open and plant the purple speckled seeds found inside.

I didn't know much about starting a garden, so I asked a brother with a greener thumb for advice. Brother Franklin, an expert botanist in his retirement, told me, "Don't forget to water the seeds when you first plant them. You have to give them lots of attention in the beginning. After all, you're asking a lot out of them."

"What do you mean?" I replied with a confused smirk. Franklin grinned holding the large seeds in hand and said, "When you plant a seed, you're asking it to give up its life as a seed! That's a big thing to ask."

I never thought of gardening this way. Gardening always seemed serene and low stakes. But as I soon learned, growing plants from seed does not always turn out the way you want. Out of six seeds that I originally planted, only three sprouted, and out of those three plants only one flowered.

> We come to life much like my beans, breaking out of their comfortable shell, encountering unfamiliar terrain, straining to reach the light.
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I became stressed by the responsibility of keeping these plants alive, of honoring the seeds' sacrifice: the dramatic change I forced it to go through. A lot can happen to a seed when it's first planted. It can get washed away by heavy rains. Animals can come along and decide to steal it for a quick snack. Some seeds never become plants at all.

Gardening was not shaping up to be the tranquil pastime I thought it would be. I underestimated the care and perseverance it would take to nurture a tiny garden.

And if seeds need nurturing to grow, what about people? The readings for the fourth week of Advent remind us that the road to Bethlehem was not always a smooth one.

The unwed Mary returns home after visiting with her cousin, and she is pregnant. Not wanting to shame her, Joseph quietly divorces her. I'm sure in the small town of Nazareth people could have been whispering all sorts of gossip about the unwed mother. What must Mary have felt in those moments, being judged and isolated in her own community, by her betrothed? Having to care for this new baby all by herself? I imagine this period of change in Mary's life may have felt heavy and scary.

Joseph must have been upset and frustrated at first by this turn of events. He probably was not expecting his wife to return pregnant before their wedding day. Despite the discomfort and anxiety, God uses this moment to transform Joseph's heart. Through an angel, God reassures Joseph of the presence of the Holy Spirit even in the midst of the turmoil. Joseph's response to care for Mary is immediate.

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In our own times, we face countless crises: wildfires, hurricanes, natural and human-made disasters. It's easy to become overwhelmed by the catastrophes or unexpected challenges that so many of us face. Change, especially when drastic and out of our control, can be like a little death.

But these moments can also be opportunities to transform our hearts. God may be calling us into a new and deeper relationship with our neighbors, the earth, and with Godself that we just don't understand yet. New can be scary. In my own journey, I've struggled to trust God when life is a mess, when the road looks unfamiliar. That is why we need to look out for one another.

None of us come to life with a roadmap. We come to life much like my beans, breaking out of their comfortable shell, encountering unfamiliar terrain, straining to reach the light.

The good news is that God has been here before too. God comes to us this season of promise as a little baby, a child too small and frail to care for itself. And our Gospel reassures us that even in the midst of life's changing tides and heavy burdens, God is "Emmanuel" — God is with us.

This story appears in the **2022 Advent Essays** feature series. View the full series.