

# The Not-So-Secret Garden: *A Journey of Faith*

24 April 2005

*(St. Luke's and The Garden)*

Bible passage: **Isaiah 43:18-19** (TEV)

But God says,

"Do not cling to events of the past

or dwell on what happened long ago.

Watch for the new thing I am going to do.

It is happening already—you can see it now!

I will make a road through the wilderness

And give you streams of water there."

Whether we are aware of it or not, we're all on a journey, a faith journey. Sometimes it feels as though we're on a clear path, and at other times, we seem to be lost in the wilderness. How do we begin to understand the journey, or where this journey is leading us? This morning, I'm hopeful that in the process of sharing a bit of my faith journey and how God has worked and continues to work in my life, each of us can begin to see the germinating seeds of God's work in our own lives. I hope you'll join me on the journey.

One of the first seeds of my journey in the church and in life happened when I was quite young, although I wasn't aware of it until 1987. That year, thanks to the generosity of St. Luke's continuing education funds for pastors, I was able to spend three weeks studying in Oxford, England.

It was while I was there that something happened that took me back to the very beginning seeds of my journey of faith. One of the places we worshipped and visited was Coventry Cathedral. If you haven't been there, I would encourage anyone who can to make that a must-see on any trip to England. It was late in the afternoon, and our daughter Erin, then 12, and I were sitting on a park bench between the new cathedral and the ruins of the cathedral that was bombed during World War II.

It was 5 o'clock in the afternoon, and we were both tired after a full day of visiting the cathedral. We were gazing at the ruins when we noticed that a number of people were climbing up in the bell tower of the destroyed church, and while we watched, they took their positions around the tower, each holding a bell rope in their hands, and they began to pull on the cords, one after another, creating a beautiful melodic sound!

Immediately I was transported to my very young days in Madison, Indiana, when I used to go to Trinity Church with my grandfather. He would always unlock the church, and then he would ring the bell. Now, the sanctuary in Trinity is upstairs, and the bell cord did, and actually still does, tie around the banister on the stairs to the left of the entryway. Grandpa would be standing on the floor, and I would stand up above him on the stairs so I could reach the cord, and together, we rang the bell calling the town to come to church.

That was a memory that I had completely forgotten until that experience at Coventry, but I knew at that moment, that my grandfather had been one of those early guides God had put in my life to lead me toward a life of faith. We all have those guides along the way, and I hope that, as we each reflect on our own journey, that we'll remember and feel the gratitude for

those whose lives have intersected with ours.

Let's fast forward now from those early growing up days to 1969, when my husband Mike and I were new to Indianapolis and in the St. Luke's new member class, where I know many of you have been. In fact, there are some here this morning who were in the same class with us back in October of '69. Something happened during that class that changed forever the direction of my faith journey.

We were given a theological questionnaire to examine our beliefs, and I recall distinctly one of the very first items to which we were asked to respond. It read, "I believe in the virgin birth...Agree...Disagree...Undecided." That absolutely stunned me! After all, I'd been an active church go-er since my very young days, and I had just accepted all the assumed tenets of the Christian faith without question. This was the very first time that I ever realized that I had a choice! That was the beginning seed of a new way to consider my faith.

Again, fast forward...this time to January of 1975. I had just finished a day of teaching French at Northview in Washington Township, and the secretary came over the P.A. system into my office to tell me there was a call for me, and "oh, by the way...Mike's called, and he's on his way here. You're not to leave until he gets here." When I picked up the phone, I knew immediately what the call was about. We were about to become the parents of the daughter I've come to believe is the most beautiful, intelligent, kind, loving and grace-filled person I've ever known! (Much like her parents, of course! J ) We are so proud of her, and I simply cannot imagine living life without her—although there were days during some of her teen years....

However, her arrival meant that I could no longer continue teaching, at least not until our adoption was final, and by the time that had happened, I realized that I wasn't ever going back to that life. So, another piece of the journey had begun, and as she grew, so did my understanding of myself, and even what I was beginning to understand as God's direction for my life.

I had always been involved with church, and while teaching, had been active with the youth ministry here. In those days, there wasn't much in the evenings for those of us who were career women, but now that I was a stay-at-home mom, that meant that I could perfect my tennis game, continue to sing with New Song, and join some of the daytime book and Bible studies.

That's exactly what I did, and over Erin's formative years, I too was forming into a new person, exploring the gifts God had given me and how I might use those strengths in a different way from what I had previously envisioned. The path of self-exploration that I was on coincided with my evolving volunteer work here at St. Luke's and in other venues that lead me in the late 1970's to explore with Wayne Trevathan what it might be like to go to seminary. Of course, it was to pursue a degree in pastoral counseling, because I didn't even realize that women could be ordained ministers! At that time, Cindy Bates was working here with the youth, but I didn't know her at all, and so there was really no role model of women in ministry.

When Erin began first grade, I started seminary full time, still convinced I was going into pastoral care and counseling. It took going half-way through my first full-time semester for me to realize that ministry was what I was supposed to be doing in my life. So I went into the dean's office and changed my degree declaration to the Master of Divinity degree and began the path toward ordination.

I cannot begin to tell you how blessed I feel to have been able to continue my ministry in this setting. St. Luke's is a unique and special church, and it was here that I and others like me have come to realize that we can be ourselves, regular ordinary people, and God can work in and through each of us to touch and transform the world! I am so grateful to all of you here at St. Luke's and to those friends and colleagues who have nurtured, accepted and supported me in this journey.

Now that really gets us through the first ten years of my ordained ministry here at St. Luke's, but let's fast forward again to 1993. There were the changes. Those of you who were around then know what it was like when a much-loved senior pastor like Carver McGriff retired after 26 wonderful years of serving an incredibly talented congregation like this one! It was very hard for me, and I think for others of us who were clergy colleagues. I know that I was searching for where and how I was to be in ministry now. What did God possibly have in mind?

You've read the story or you've heard it before about working on my doctor of ministry degree, flying to Colorado to shoot

some footage for my final project—a video on the role of women in leadership in the church. Suzanne is certain that there was a drop in cabin pressure, but I know better! It was definitely a God-thing, a revelation from God in a dream, as to what my future in ministry might be. All the angst, turmoil and uncertainty were gone, and I was filled with a deep peace that has never left me. I was sure God was leading me in a new direction. I didn't know where, when or how, but I was sure of one thing, my ministry was to be far different from anything I had ever done before!

When I came back from Colorado, I shared the story of the dream with Kent, and I will be forever grateful that he responded with, "If this is a 'God-thing,' then I want to be on God's side." I believe the two of us have worked hard to forge a heretofore unknown partnership. St. Luke's has long been known for its "coloring outside the lines" ministry, and Kent and this congregation readily embraced the concept that came to be known as The Garden. While its shape was yet to be seen, we were on our way.

There are so many ways in which this could not have happened without the commitment and talent of so many St. Luke's persons. I wouldn't dare try to name everyone for fear I'd miss someone, but I certainly have to mention Doug and Suzanne Stark and Bob and Sharon Zehr. While they weren't really sure what I was talking about, they agreed to be supportive, even offering Beef and Boards Dinner Theater to us on Sunday mornings at no charge, and that has continued throughout these ten years. Little did we know at the time that Suzanne would become such an important part of The Garden and what The Garden has become, and that Bob and Sharon would eventually own The Mansion at Oak Hill, the home of our second Garden site. Thank you, my friends, for all you have done and continue to do.

It's also important to thank the many who came along with us to help seed and staff this ministry, especially in that first year. There were those who volunteered to create and work in marketing, hospitality, worship design, tech, music, video, and much, much more. Together we shaped the ministry; together we envisioned what it would become; together we worked to make it happen, and many of those who helped us begin back in 1995 are still actively involved! Thanks to each and every one of you who has given so much to make this happen. And I want to say a special "thank you" to my husband of almost 40 years, Mike. It's been a wonderful journey, Mikey, and I thank you for encouraging me and walking by my side through it all.

The Garden, *A Blossom of St. Luke's United Methodist Church*, is and always has been connected at its roots with St. Luke's. We are pleased with that connection, and hope that you are, too, even if you've never been or had any desire to go to The Garden at Beef and Boards or The Garden at Oak Hill. I truly believe that the essence of the message we share is the same; the methods we use to share it are quite different. As a result, there are hundreds who are engaged in their own spiritual journey, and now experiencing a relationship with God that is changing their lives and they in turn are changing the world around them. Many would not, for any number of reasons, find their way into a more traditional setting, and they are finding a spiritual home at The Garden. Thanks to all of you Gardeners for making The Garden so warm, loving and faith-filled.

Let me tell you a story that I believe captures what God had in mind for The Garden. In about year two of our existence, the United Methodist Church held a conference here in Indianapolis on congregational development, and the attendees were urged to visit The Garden among other churches on Sunday. A year later, I ran into a gentleman who had come to The Garden on that Sunday, and he told me the story of what had happened as a result of his visit.

He said that he had been absolutely livid that we would do what we were doing, and dare call it church! He was angry and upset about it for quite some time. Then, he told me, something happened. As I remember his words to me, they were something like this: "One night, God woke me up from a sound sleep, and said to me: 'Who are you to decide how I'm going to reach my people?'" That man was kind enough to share that story with me, and then to tell me that he was now able to see in a whole new way the work God was capable of doing in our world today.

We've put together something with the music from the stage musical *The Secret Garden*, something that may give you a sense of our Garden path. Let's take a look.

[Video: "Not So Secret Garden"—original produced by Mike Jensen and Joleen House](#)

So OK. We've come this far and looking back on what has been is revealing and fun. I hope in our mind's eye, each one of us

has revisited the persons and experiences that have shaped our faith path to this point in life. However, let's not dwell on the past. Instead, let's try to see what's ahead. What does our own garden path look like?

That's really what the Bible passage we have for this morning is talking about. It is found in Isaiah, and the writer believes that God is addressing the people of Israel. The passage reads this way:

But God says,

"Do not cling to events of the past

or dwell on what happened long ago.

Watch for the new thing I am going to do.

It is happening already—you can see it now!

I will make a road through the wilderness

And give you streams of water there."

The way I understand this passage, God is urging the people not to keep dwelling on the past, and God's past saving work. Yes, being led out of bondage in Egypt was a wonderful experience and good to celebrate, but there's more happening today. God is very much acting in their world and ours today, right now. God is doing a new thing, but can we see it? God will provide a way and give us the nourishment we need along the way, if we're ready to let go of the things that have held us in the past and move into today and tomorrow.

I'm firmly convinced that God is at work in each of our lives this very moment, nudging us, shaping us, whispering in our ear, pulling us along, perhaps in some surprising ways. We never know when an impromptu conversation, a chance encounter, a mountain-top experience, or a seemingly devastating event just might be the door opening to a new day for us.

Are we ready? Are we doing our part to be open to the new thing God is doing in our midst? Thank you for your readiness to be open to the new thing that God has done in my life and in the lives of all those connected in any way with The Garden.

In a traditional service, there is usually a collection of monies to help support the ministries of the church. However, we don't do it that way at The Garden. Instead, we have watering cans at the doors. Today, we're going to do something nontraditional for both St. Luke's and The Garden. We're going to pass the offering plates now, but this time, the plates are filled with seed packets. Would you please take one, and then, as you encounter someone who's searching for the seeds of God's love in his or her life, would you give them this packet

While the plates are being passed, listen to another song, a Sandy Patti song entitled "The Little Narrow Gate," sung by Ann Conrad.

*Song: "The Little Narrow Gate" (lyrics on screen—PPT)*

Closing part 1:

Meister Eckhart once said, "God does not ask anything else of you except that you let yourself go and let God be God in you." Are we open enough to let God be God in us, right now? "It is happening already—can we see it?"

Let us pray.

Closing part 2:

Enjoy the journey down your own Garden path. Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.