

Sarah Kretzmann  
September 22, 2013

Summer officially ended yesterday. We will never see summer of 2013 again. What will summer of 2014 hold? Some good times, to be sure.

Some bad times, to be sure. Who knows what next summer will bring us?

One thing we do know for sure, is that the summer is over. Farmers are in the field. The afternoon light has shifted from blue to golden. The cicadas are singing their hearts out, announcing like trumpets the arrival of fall.

Moments before writing this sermon, I went to my garden to see what might be left to pick. The carrots are all dug up. The butternut squashes are at their prime. The green beans are done, the peppers nearly so. My tomatoes, which have been abundant and faithful all summer long, are starting to show signs of depletion. My basket was full coming up to the house, but it was not brimming or overflowing. Things in the garden are winding down.

As I picked these late season tomatoes, I spotted one that didn't seem to be so very far out of reach. And so I reached for it and reached for it, and had just grabbed it when my hair got caught on one of the tomato cages, and then I lost my balance and fell face first into the tomato plant. But when I opened my hand, I saw with smug satisfaction that I still held the tomato, and it wasn't even smashed. I was disappointed by its size, however...it was smaller than I thought it would be, fairly insignificant really, and I couldn't believe I had gone through so much effort for one silly, unimpressive tomato.

What if I had decided to not go after that tomato? What if I had decided it was too small to make any effort to pick it? What if I had decided it wasn't worth my effort, or my time, or the risk of falling face first into the garden? Would, then, the tomato had been sad? Would it have wept? Would it have been devastated to have been left behind when all its other friends

were picked? Would it have been terrified, knowing that it was going to be left to die alone on the vine, shriveling and shivering in the cold, abandoned garden? Of course tomatoes don't have feelings or think such thoughts...or maybe they do. Who knows? But people certainly do.

The harvest is past, the summer is ended and we are not saved.

So says the prophet Jeremiah.

My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick, says the prophet.

Think again of the image of that last-picked tomato...the prophet is deep in grief...the people of Israel, the ones whom he loves with all his heart, are in the midst of a terrible drought, both geographically (the rivers and streams have all dried up, the harvest was scarce and the people are hungry) and spiritually (God has not given them any signs of hope for a long, long time, and they are beginning to lose their faith in God altogether). They are a despairing people, preached to by a despairing prophet...who is

only able to muster these words—harvest is past, summer is over, we are left behind.

The people of Israel are that last tomato on the vine, but instead of being picked like all the others, it alone is left behind, the shrivel and die on the vine. Abandoned by God. Salvation has come and gone, and we are left behind.

Who among us cannot relate to that? When I was a little girl, my mother used to sit on the edge of my bed and sing to me. One of her favorite songs had words that went like this, “Children died, the days grew cold, a piece of bread could buy a bag of gold...I wish we’d all been ready...There’s no time to change your mind, the Son has come and you’ve been left behind.” Then she’d switch off my light, say, “Good night, sweetheart,” and shut my door, leaving me in utter blackness trying to figure

out what in that heck that meant and why couldn't she sing "Twinkle,

Twinkle, Little Star" like all the other mothers?

Being left behind is the core human fear we are talking about today. Soldiers talk about it, and it's presented in almost every WWII movie. A soldier falls behind due to injury and the others press on, not yet noticing their friend is missing. When they do, they turn back around to rescue him, because no man is left behind. Every once in a while, though, it is simply impossible. The gunfire is too heavy. He is unreachable. Or, worse, he is already dead, having died alone in a ditch. No one wants to be the one left behind. Even the littlest kid yells to his older siblings, "Hey, wait for me!!!" And he double steps just to keep up.

None of us want to be the army soldier who is left behind, abandoned by friends, left alone to face either the enemy or death or both. We all want to be that tomato, who is reached for and reached for and finally grasped and

held in a firm yet tender grip. So which are we, the abandoned soldier or the rescued tomato? Which is God, a God willing to cut his losses and save the majority or the God who stretches with all his might to capture that one, unimpressive tomato? God is the latter.

God is the Lord of the harvest, God is the one who sees value and worth in the small and insignificant. God is the one who gathers and collects us all in his basket of salvation, from the biggest beefsteak tomato to the smallest cherry tomato, from the beautifully shiny and red to the deeply scarred and bruised. From the old and wise heirloom tomato to the young and chic Roma. All gathered together by God's saving grace.

We do not need to fear the dark, like I did as a little girl, when the door closed, feeling like God was pulling further and further away from me...too small and insignificant to be of any worth...We do not proclaim a God who makes a feeble attempt to reach us and then gives up...No, we

proclaim a God who keeps reaching, keeps stretching to reach and pick and  
take home the smallest, the unimpressive, the wounded, the bleeding, the  
hopeless....always reaching and stretching until he reaches you, gently  
picked, firmly held, safely brought home.