

“Flower Power”

When I think of power, strength, sheer physical force, I think of an avalanche. Tons of thundering snow come falling down the side of a steep mountain with the speed and irresistible force of a locomotive or freight train. In an instant an avalanche can sweep away everything in its path.

But there's something even more powerful than an avalanche, and that's a glacier. A glacier doesn't move as fast as an avalanche. It can be slow, inching forward a few yards in the course of an entire year. But glaciers are enormous. They can be a mile wide and hundreds of feet thick, a creeping river of ice that can move boulders like matchsticks and grind smaller rocks to powder fine as flour.

Avalanches and glaciers are powerful forces of nature. Very strong. Giants of the natural world. But there is something even stronger in nature. And that would be a flower.

I'm thinking of the Avalanche Lily and the Glacier Lily. Each spring as the snow begins to melt in the high mountains of the Rockies and Cascades, these tiny flowers push their slender green stalks upward through the softening ice, through the wintry crust and into the warming sun. The Avalanche Lily has white flowers with a yellow center, and the Glacier Lily is all yellow. Neither is very big. Compared to a glacier, they're tiny, the flowers just an inch or two in size. But the bud is inside a growing green stem that pierces right through the cold overlay of February and March and brightens into the promise of April.

Flowers are delicate forms of life, but hardy, too. They're part of the miracle we celebrate at Easter. Part of the story of how life rises up and all the Earth awakens into new awareness, new sensitivity, new loveliness.

You see, millions of years ago, there were no flowers. There were ferns. There were fungi. There were dull, mossy-colored plants that spread and reproduced by means of spores. But there were no orchids or azaleas, no blossoms of apple or peach or pear, no fields of grass or daisies or brightly colored wildflowers. It was a monotonous world, not only dull in color but also dull in sense and feeling.

For this was the age of dinosaurs, great hulking lizards who ruled the earth through brute force. They were giants of the animal kingdom, big and powerful, but dumb, like an avalanche or a glacier. They were no match for flowers, you understand.

For toward the end of the age of dinosaurs, about a hundred million years ago, something strange and very wonderful happened. Plants learned how to do a new thing. They learned how to reproduce through seeds instead of spores. And with the invention of seeds came all of the birds that feed on seeds, the cardinals and the grosbeaks and finches. And the grass made grasslands and all the creatures that thrive on the grassland, horses and zebras and antelope and deer. And plants learned how to produce fruit, as a source of food for the growing seed. And the fruit also provided meals for monkeys and chimpanzees and finally for you and me.

And it all started with the rise of the angiosperms, which is the name scientists give to flowers or plants that produce seeds and flowers and fruits. The Earth took on a whole new look. The ferns were crowded out by all the amazing

diversity of life we see today, and the slow-moving dinosaurs gave way, replaced by creatures who were not only quick but also quick-witted, warm-blooded and warm-hearted, sensitive and tender, as bright and agile mentally as the flowers were brilliant in all their purples and yellows and blues and crimsons.

No wonder flowers are the symbol of springtime and new life. And no wonder lilies are symbols of Easter. For there have always been empires that established their might through sheer raw power, kingdoms of this world based on military domination of their neighbors. The Roman empire was like that, its legions like glaciers that slowly crushed everyone who stood in their way, its armies like lumbering giants marching with fearsome armor into combat. Their rulers were tyrant kings, like Tyrannosaurus Rex. But they were no match for the power of one small man. No match for the purity and simplicity of his vision. Jesus spoke of the lilies of the field because he himself was like a flower. Almost effortlessly, the beauty of his words and deeds captured the hearts of people who listened and became his disciples. He said his kingdom was like a seed that could spread and grow, and that if we nurtured that seed of compassion inside ourselves it could become the greatest force on earth.

As in Martha's story this morning, one small act of kindness--a smile, a simple "I love you," a hug or a gift that brightens someone's day--can make the all difference between joy and sorrow, between hope and despair, between life and death. A flower really can change the world. It's happened before and still happens this Easter Day.