

In the Garden: In the Beginning Sunday, 3/17/19

1 How many of you order seeds for your garden from a catalog, or one of the online sites like “Seed Savers?” Have you already ordered the seeds for your 2019 gardening? Apparently, you’re supposed to wait until at least the new year before you start browsing for seeds, but some start as early as December. Now that’s hopefulness- browsing seed catalogs when the ground is frozen and the wind chill factor is thirty below zero!

This morning we’re kicking off a new worship series: In the Garden. You won’t have to be a gardener to appreciate it. I have to confess that I don’t exactly have a green thumb. I’m not even very good at growing grass. I remember one time back in graduate school when my not-yet wife, Jana, asked me and a buddy to help her move to a new apartment. Charles and I threw her beautiful potted geranium, overflowing with pink flowers, into the bed of the pickup truck along with all of her other belongings and we sped off across town at 60 miles per hour. You can imagine what that geranium looked like when we arrived, right? The trunk and branches of the plant were still potted in the dirt, but there wasn’t a flower to be seen remaining on the plant.

Fortunately, the God we worship is a consummate gardener. As we mark the days of Lent leading up to Easter, each Sunday morning we’ll recall the most important gardens mentioned in the Bible, and how those gardens from the past can give us hope for today and our future yet to come. Each Wednesday evening, we’re telling stories of hope. These stories are like seeds, planted in the garden of our hearts with the potential to grow and bear the fruit of hope and faith, eventually producing an abundance of fruit that we can share with others. I hope you’ll give Wednesday night a try this week. Not only will we watch a delightful video message by one of the most endearing speakers I’ve seen, but this week we’ll also hear a story of hope from Maverick Gilson. Join us for dinner at 6pm, and then a celebration of hope at 6:30. If you have a story of hope to share, bring that along with you.

2 Wikipedia defines a garden as a planned space, usually outdoors, set aside for the display, cultivation, or enjoyment of plants and other forms of nature.¹ So, in a way, the very first garden was all of creation: A space planned by God and set aside for the cultivation and

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garden>

enjoyment of life. Within that creation, God set aside a special garden that the Bible calls Eden,² or sometimes simply, “The Garden of the Lord,”³ but we won’t visit Eden until next week. For today, we’ll dwell for a while in that larger garden that God spoke into being, a garden that emerged from nothingness and was transformed from a formless, lifeless void into a magnificently ordered showcase of God’s glory and love.

The first chapter of Genesis bookends our Bible with the last chapter of Revelation. I believe God supervised the ordering of the scripture in that way to remind us of something crucial to our appreciation of Scripture and our life of faith in general. Both Genesis 1 and Revelation 22 show us creation as God intended it to be- radiant with the diversity of God’s creative imagination and power and the goodness and righteousness of God; free of anything foreign to God’s nature or will. There is no death, no disease, no sin- only beauty and the order of the divine will. Everything else in-between those two chapters is the epic story of God’s rescue of God’s willful and often disobedient children.

To put that in perspective, there are about 800,000 words in the English Bible, depending on the translation. Of those 800,000 words, only about a tenth of a percent is devoted to describing the perfection of God’s creation in Genesis 1 and Revelation 22. Most of the Bible’s attention is focused on the muddy middle, the same place we usually find ourselves in: somewhere between brokenness and healing, sin and repentance, division and unification, despair and hope. Genesis 1 and Revelation 22 remind us as we travel the ups and downs of life that we have an anchor in our past that we can cling to, and a vision of our future that is incomparable to any other. They’re seeds of hope, planted at the beginning and end of our Bible so that we never forget who we came from, and to who we’re returning.

3 Let’s spend the rest of our time this morning in that first garden, the garden of creation. We’ll read a second account of creation next week in Genesis 2, but today we’re living in the seven “days” of Genesis 1.

Let’s talk about those seven days, shall we? The number of Americans who believe God had a hand in creating people in one way or another is about three out of four,

² Genesis 2:8

³ Genesis 13:10; Isaiah 51:3

according to a 2017 Gallup poll.⁴ That's more than I would have expected. Almost four out of ten Americans (38%), believe that God created people pretty much in the biological form they have today within the last 10,000 years or so, despite scientific evidence to the contrary. A much smaller number of Americans believe that creation took place over six "days" corresponding to the twenty-four hour system we use today. I couldn't find a good estimate on the number of seven-day creationists in America, but I was surprised to learn that even some of the earliest Christian writers, such as Philo and Saint Augustine, argued against a literal interpretation of the days of creation. Their biggest objection was that it seemed to limit God's omnipotence.⁵ I wonder where our congregation stands on this?

Here's what I think. Like much of the Hebrew Bible, Genesis was written using poetry and story. The ancient writers of the Bible didn't feel constrained to write truth in the technical and analytical ways that we do in our western culture. There are ways to convey important theological truths in beautiful, nonlinear ways that speak to the heart as well as the mind. We struggle to read Genesis 1 because we're trying to read it like a Wikipedia entry or an instruction manual on repairing a lawn mower engine rather than a poem or a short story.

4 Here's another idea to chew on. Where did time come? I believe that God has always existed. Do I understand what that means, how anything can be eternal? Not really. I guess I take it both as an article of faith, and because if God had not existed at some point, someone, or something, would have had to create God. One thing that helps me to understand eternity is to understand that it's time that's the new thing, the thing that God created "in the beginning." Eternity was the natural state of existence until God spoke and created everything- the moon, the stars, this earth, and yes, even time. If you accept that God created time, does it really matter how long the days were? When Peter wrote that "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day,"⁶ I think this is part of what he was getting at.

God stands outside of time, and all the struggles we have in understanding things related to time, even the notion of a past and future, are simply not problems for God, who is

⁴ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/210956/belief-creationist-view-humans-new-low.aspx>

⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creationism>

⁶ 2Peter 3:8, New International Version

always present in the divine now. To be sure, God speaks to us in our created state, using language about time that we can understand. God even entered into creation personally, walking in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve, speaking to the Prophets, and coming in the person of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. But God's understanding and creative power escape all the limitations we humans repeatedly try to place on it, even time. As Jesus famously reminded us in John 8:58, "I tell you the truth, before Abraham was even born, I AM! "

5 There are so many powerful messages in the brief introduction to the Bible that is Genesis 1. The truth that there is only one God, rather than an entire family of Gods, was a new, radically counter-culture idea when Genesis was written. The truth that creation began as an act of love rather than a cosmic conflict was new. The truth that all of creation, including people, was fundamentally good at its inception was strikingly different. The truth that God created us to be in a love relationship with God and the rest of God's creation was a radical idea.

Genesis 1 isn't just a Sunday School lesson or a gauge of whether we're conservative or progressive in our theological thinking. It's a preface to everything else in the Bible, and your reading of it will inform your reading and living out of the rest of the Scriptures. The images can be a little confusing, what with all the cosmic separating of land and water, light and dark, and so on. But if you read between the lines, you'll see that the Garden of creation is full of hope. It's an unmarred glimpse of both the power and possibility of God.

Have you noticed how those seeds of hope we planted on Ash Wednesday are sprouting out of the dirt in the cross out in the lobby? Creation was a little bit like that, only a million million orders of magnitude beyond that. As we walk through Lent together, we'll see over and over again that God planted seeds of hope in that first Garden that even the darkest of days couldn't prevent from sprouting, growing roots, leaves, and fruit in their time. May God continue to do that amazing work in your hearts as we prepare to receive the Good News of Easter Sunday.



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