

In the Garden: Paradise Lost Sunday, 3/24/19

1 This morning we're continuing with our visits to the most important gardens mentioned in the Bible, learning how those gardens from the past can give us hope for today and our future yet to come. Along with our Sunday worship, each Wednesday evening we're telling stories of hope, seeds planted in the gardens of our hearts. I hope you'll give Wednesday night a try this week, when we'll see a video testimony from Rita & Oti's daughter Sheila and son-in-law Andy about God's provision through their long adoption ordeal. Join us for dinner at 6pm, and our celebration of hope at 6:30.

Last Sunday, we considered in Genesis 1 the totality of creation, a space planned by God and set aside for the cultivation and enjoyment of life. Today we're hearing a different account of creation, earlier from Genesis 2 and in a few minutes, the origin story for the problem of sin from Genesis 3. Before we get to Genesis 3, let's linger a bit in Genesis 1 and 2. If you've ever made a careful comparison of the details of Genesis 1 and 2, you noticed that the order of creation is different. People were created last in Genesis 1, on the sixth day, while Adam was created before plants and animals in Genesis 2. If that makes you uncomfortable or confused, I encourage you to read these accounts as theological statements more than history or biology lessons. Both accounts are true, with each account offering us something we need to know to grow in our faith and faithfulness.

2 I have to admit that it's sometimes hard for me not to demand scientific answers as I hear these creation accounts. For example, Genesis 2 tells us that God formed the first human out of the dust of the ground. I wonder, was that actually more like silt, as you see in this picture, given the tendency of those Mesopotamian rivers to overflow their banks and leave behind silt deposits? It couldn't have been soil, like the black dirt we're used to in the midwest, because there weren't any plants created yet, and soil is made up of minerals, water, and dead plants and animals. But asking those questions misses the point. Whether it was clay, silt, peat, loam, or dust, the point is this: God took something as basic as a handful of dirt and fashioned it into an amazingly complex caretaker for God's garden, Adam.

There was a time, a couple of decades ago, when I could read a limited amount of Biblical Hebrew. Those days have long since passed. However, I can tell you that the Hebrew writers of the Bible enjoyed word play. We see that in several of the Psalms, where

verses are organized alphabetically by the first letter of the verse, what we call acrostics. A good study Bible will point those out for you. Much harder for us to appreciate is the frequent and intentional play on word sounds, because those puns are literally lost in translation. I mention this because the connection between the first human, Adam, and that handful of dirt is amplified in the original Hebrew by one of these puns: Adam, meaning human, and adamah, meaning soil.

Why is that important? Because in so many ways our understanding of humanity needs to be anchored in this image, a handful of dirt. Just as the first creation account crowned humanity with the honor of representing the pinnacle of God's creative genius, so Genesis 2 brings us down to earth, again quite literally. And somehow both are true. We were created as God's crowning achievement in creation, bearing God's image in a unique way that nothing else in creation can claim. But part and parcel to that greatness is the bedrock assumption that we are God's creatures, and anything and everything we can achieve is due to the greatness and goodness of our creator. The handful of dirt also reminds us of our kinship with all the other life forms found on this planet, the very lives we were appointed to as stewards, caretakers first of the Garden of Eden, and caretakers today of all of creation.

After the lofty introduction of human kind in Genesis 1, Genesis 2 adds an important perspective to our reading of everything else in the Bible. We were created to care for creation, and yet we were all made from the dust. The story of why we must all eventually return to the dust is given in Genesis 3. I'm continuing our reading from The Message paraphrase, with the first 13 verses of Genesis 3.

{Read Genesis 3:1-13, The Message}.

3 Ah, the serpent and the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. To ask what kind of snake it was that tempted Eve or whether the fruit was an apple or a pomegranate misses the point again. Even asking why God didn't tell them not to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Life is probably not a tremendously helpful question. Instead, let's focus on what did happen. Genesis 2 and 3 are a study in contrasts, and the action in the story is what brings us from the perfection of creation in Genesis 2, to the tragic outcomes of Genesis 3.

How many of you have had children or grandchildren? I used to have an old black-and-white photograph of me as a toddler sitting on the floor in front of the kitchen sink in our old split-level house in Golden Valley. I had managed to get the cupboard doors open, extract the coffee can filled with apples, and systematically taken bites out of each one. I wish I could have found that picture to show you, but do you get the picture, at least in your mind? Have you been there? I can't recall what was going through my two or three-year-old mind, but I imagine it went something like this: "Mom said you can go anywhere you want to in the kitchen, but stay out of the cabinet under the sink. Hmmm. I wonder what's under the kitchen sink?" Right? Why is it that when something is made off-limits to us, we want it all the more?

Remember that handful of dirt? We were made from the earth and given the earth – not to lord over or exploit, but to care with the love of the Creator. Having been given everything, there was only one rule, one boundary imposed, and so naturally, that became the focus of Adam and Eve's temptation. Haven't we all been there, not just as children, but also as adults? What are some of the things that you've been tempted by? And lest you think that it was the fruit they were after, remember the promise of the serpent to Eve: "you will be like God." That was the real issue for Adam and Eve. Pride. They weren't content to be Adam from the Adamah, human from the dirt. They wanted control. They wanted to be like God.

4 The consequences of that "original sin" are well known to us, as they're recorded later in Genesis 3. Adam and Eve were driven from the Garden of Eden and they and all creation inherited a curse that marred both creation and the image of God within us. Where's the hope in that? Isn't the Garden of Eden just another story of human failure and divine judgment? Doesn't this story of "the fall" equally indict God as a foolish or imperfect creator? What kind of God would put that tree there in the first place, and then curse the very thing He created?

Let me ask the teachers and students in the room. Are tests ever given in an environment where it's possible that a student could devise a method to cheat? Of course. Teachers, do you ever give the students homework, assignments that they're expected to work their way through without your direct, in-class guidance? Of course. Parents, do you

allow your kids to get on a school bus or drive away for college, knowing that you've done your best to clearly communicate your expectations of healthy behavior and wondering all the while how well they'll stick to them? Many of us have been there. We were made in the image of God, and part of that image is the ability, and really the need, to make choices, to exercise our own will. None of us want to be helicopter parents that micromanage our children's lives. The latest version of this I guess is "bulldozer parents," parents who throw all their resources and energy into clearing the way so that their children never have to face resistance or rejection. Thankfully, God doesn't parent us that way.

God is not a helicopter parent or a bulldozer parent. But neither is God an abusive or negligent parent. God loves us. God wants the very best for us. God walks through every part of our lives with us, whether we acknowledge God or not. And that curse? A big part of the curse was something we ourselves accomplished. Before that incident in the garden, Adam and Eve were innocent. Indulging in that temptation opened their eyes to evil, at least in part by giving them a first-hand experience of what disobedience to God felt like. It opened the floodgate to future temptations as well.

5 As I said last week, most of the scripture that follows this scene in the Garden of Eden is the amazing love story of God's rescue mission to his wayward yet beloved children. Eventually, we know that Eden will be restored to perfection, and that God will restore our innocence. The Biblical path to that restored Eden is a long one, though. The next stop on that road will be in the Garden-like abundance of the promised land, in Canaan, portions of which might have looked something like this cultivated land that I saw on my trip to Palestine and Israel. Before the descendants of Adam and Eve got to this next garden, they endured the devastation of the great flood, the chaos and confusion of the Tower of Babel, four hundred years of oppressive living in Egypt as slaves, and forty years of wandering in the wilderness.

Through it all, the image of God remained imprinted on their lives and remains on ours. It was marred but never destroyed. Looking back from this side of the resurrection, we know that the Law of Moses couldn't restore that image. We know that no Judges or Kings appointed over Israel could make whole what was broken. Our true hope, all along, was in

the Son of a King, who gave us the gift of hope we needed in three more gardens that lie yet ahead on our Lenten journey.



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