

In the Garden: The Garden and the Promised Land Sunday, 3/31/19

1 Someone asked me last week, “This is Lent- why are you preaching about the Garden of Eden?” That’s a great question, and the answer involves the whole reason we observe the Lenten season in the church. During Lent, we’re all used to hearing more about sin and all the ways we’ve failed to measure to up God’s standards. But that’s not the primary goal of Lent, to wallow in our guilt and self-condemnation. Lent is a time that we prepare our lives and our hearts to receive good news, the Good News that Jesus defeated sin and death when he rose from his tomb on Easter morning. It’s true that our preparation for Easter requires that we face our sin and turn away from it. Jesus started his earthly ministry by telling us to repent, to turn away from our sin. But it’s impossible turn away from sin if we don’t understand that to which we’re turning. In other words, holiness isn’t the absence of sin so much as the fullness of God. We need a clear vision of God’s unspoiled garden of creation in order to understand God’s hopeful vision. We need to remember our fall into temptation in the Garden of Eden, because the sin that began there still dogs us today. We’ll finish our tour of the gardens in the Bible on Easter Sunday, remembering not only the empty tomb in the garden of Golgotha, but also the promise that the resurrection of Jesus gives us for that glorious day when Eden will be restored as an earthly garden, and we will dwell in the presence of God, forever. Salvation history is a huge, sweeping story, and Easter is the main pivot point of that story. During Lent, we prepare for Easter by remembering that big story and our place in it.

By the way, we’re continuing to meet on Wednesday evenings, telling stories of hope, seeds planted in the gardens of our hearts. Join us for dinner at 6pm, and our celebration of hope at 6:30, when we’ll here from Curtis’s friend, Scott Anderson, who helped us with our last You Can Be the Difference mission. If you haven’t given Wednesday night a try this year, I challenge you to show up this week as a part of your Lenten discipline of preparing your heart for Easter. The following Wednesday, we’ll be meeting here for dinner and then going out into the neighborhoods around the church to pray for our neighbors and to leave Easter invitations on the door handles with seed packets attached- seeds of hope! If you can’t get in and out of a car or do that much walking, you can still come along as a driver or as someone who stays in the car and prays for our neighbors. We’ll even provide some prayer

prompts for you. You'll find a sign-up sheet for drivers on the bulletin board in the lobby under the heading, "Partners in Ministry."

2 When we left Adam and Eve last week, they had been driven from the paradise of the Garden of Eden, cursed along with all of God's creation. If that had been the end of the story, there wouldn't be much left to say, except maybe, "life is hard." But that wasn't the end of the story, because even though they were driven from the Garden, the perfection that Eden represented wasn't forgotten. Just as Adam and Eve had tasted the forbidden fruit of disobedience to God, so too had they tasted what it was to walk in harmony with God and each other, exercising loving stewardship of God's creation. Eden was lost, but the hope of Eden was never forgotten.

In our first reading this morning, we flashed forward from Eden in Genesis 2 and 3, past Cain's murder of Abel in Genesis 4, past the great flood of Noah in Genesis 6 and the chaos of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11, finally joining Abraham to be reminded that even in the aftermath of that turbulent past, the hope of and longing for Eden was still alive. God's promise was to lead him "to the land that I will show you."¹ The hope of the promised land was rooted in God's call to Abraham to be blessed and be a blessing to all people. It had even deeper roots in the experience of Eden, the longing to live in a state of harmony with God and God's creation, an experience God wants for all people. By the way, did you catch those particular words from God's promise? "I'll make your descendants like dust."² Dust. Do you recall that handful of dirt from last Sunday and Genesis 2? Even as God was promising a blessing to Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, he was also reminding them- and us, their spiritual children- that we are still adam-adamah, dirt people, God's humble creatures.

3 I suppose each of us might describe our own unique picture of what Eden, or the promised land, might look like for us. By the way, the promised land is described in Genesis as "well watered everywhere, like the garden of the Lord."³ With that in mind, here's a photograph of the promised land that comes pretty close for me. Surprisingly, this isn't a

¹ Genesis 12:1, New Living Translation (2nd ed.)

² Genesis 13:16, *ibid*

³ Genesis 13:10, *ibid*

place in Minnesota, which so many Minnesotan's affectionately call, "God's Country." Instead, it's a photograph from the Promised Land State Park in New Jersey. Yes, New Jersey! Didn't I tell you that God's creation was big and surprising? When I'm in a place like this, whether it's in the BWCA or even New Jersey, I become aware of God's presence in unique ways. How about you? If you could paint your own picture of living in harmony with God and God's creation, what would it look like?

For Abraham and Lot, as well-watered and abundant as the promised land of Canaan was, the seeds of sin planted in the garden were still producing weeds, and conflicts arose over the sharing of grazing land. As good as the land was, their hearts were not yet ready to take full possession of it, a problem that continued with future generations and eventually provoked God to send Jesus to show us the way. But that's a story for next week. For now, let's flash forward again, this time to the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, no longer living in the promised land of Canaan but living instead as slaves in Egypt for four hundred years.

4 Listen now to this familiar account of God's description of the promised land, as Moses encounters God in the burning bush. I'm reading from The Message paraphrase, the third chapter of Exodus, verse 7-10.

{Read Exodus 3:7-10, The Message}.

Exodus is where we first hear this peculiar description of the promised land: "the land of milk and honey." That's most likely a poetic way of saying that it was good land that would support livestock and agriculture, the kind of place that people could not only survive but thrive. The descendants of Abraham hadn't always been slaves and hadn't always needed a deliverer. In a way, they were victims of their own blessings, because their Egyptian neighbors became alarmed when, true to God's promise, the descendants of Abraham began to multiply and became as numerous as the grains of sand on the beach. That's why the Egyptians enslaved them. Generations of Abraham's descendants were born into and died under slavery. I wonder how they kept their hope alive. And yet somehow, they did. Somehow, they remembered Eden and the land promised to their spiritual father, Abraham, and they cried out to God for deliverance.

Have you ever been there? Are you there now? Are you in bondage to something in your life? Has it been so long since you've felt hope that all you know how to do is to get up and go through the motions of the day? Take a lesson from Moses and the Hebrew people. Cry out to God for deliverance, because God hasn't forgotten the promise of Eden, and God hasn't forgotten you either. It may take some time, and it will almost certainly require that you do your part in bringing about your deliverance, but God is faithful and God does deliver.

5 It's easy to think of the promised land the way we learn about it in Sunday School as young children: one of those fantastical stops along the way for God's people on the Candy Land game board, like the Peppermint Stick Forest, or the Gumdrop Mountains. It was never really like that, a place with literal rivers of milk and honey and no cares in the world except who would make it first to the Gingerbread House at the end of the road. Instead of the Molasses Swamp to contend with, God's people had to wander in a rugged wilderness, and they didn't just lose a turn, they got stuck there for forty years, which is a Hebrew way of saying, "a very long time." It was long enough for an entire generation of grumblers against God to die out, making way for a new generation of people willing and able to rekindle the hope of Eden, living in harmony with God and God's creation. The place they were going, Canaan, was important, because everybody needs a place to call home. But it really wasn't the place that was most important. It was the memory of Eden- God's faithfulness in doggedly pursuing them to fulfill the promise, and their struggles to learn how to live at peace with God and each other.

What's the promised land that you're trying to get to? We're all on a journey, and even standing still has implications for where we'll be tomorrow. God's people have always been on the move, if not physically, then at least spiritually and in relationship with God, themselves, and their neighbors. As we prepare for Easter, I invite you to reclaim your journey and the destination you're journeying to. Hopefully it's not a worldly destination that will lead you to disappointment, like the "Crooked Old Peanut Brittle House" on the Candy Land game board. We are spiritual beings, called to take spiritual journeys, with God and with each other. Are you ready to stand up and get your feet back on the Jesus path, the way that leads to life, the way that leads to a new Garden of Eden?



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