

In the Garden: The Kingdom of God and Gethsemane Sunday, 4/7/19

1 So far this Lenten season we've visited the garden of God's creation, the Garden of Eden, and the garden of the promised land, preparing our lives and our hearts to receive the good news of Easter morning by remembering that things weren't always so broken in life, and that God has never given up on bringing his children back into loving communion with God and God's creation. Eden wasn't just a place, but a way of life, and as God's creatures, we've never really forgotten Eden or stopped longing for it. Each of us has an Eden-shaped hole in our hearts, a longing to be close to God and to live in right relationship with the rest of God's creation, because that's the way God made us.

We lost paradise because we've never been content to be "adam adamah," God's dirt people, called to the lofty responsibility of the stewardship of God's creation, yet fashioned from the humblest of materials available. We've wanted to be in charge of ourselves, not servants of God. That remains at the heart of our sin today. The Old Testament is a long accounting of this basic rebellion against God's will in favor of our own will. It's what prevented Abraham from keeping possession of the land of Canaan and what later kept Moses and an entire generation of the Hebrew people from even entering Canaan. It's what went so wrong with so many of the judges and kings that tried to recreate the paradise that was lost. And ultimately, it's what led to civil war in the first Hebrew kingdom and what eventually landed God's people into exile in Assyria and Babylonia. Clearly, our forbearers weren't making much progress in their bid to restore Eden. So God decided to take the most daring and extreme action ever. That's where we're picking up today, turning our eyes from the garden of the promised land to the garden of Gethsemane.

By the way, on 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. Another way you can share the gift of hope is to help assemble some of the door hangers that you'll find on the table in the lobby today.

2 This an olive grove, perhaps like the one Jesus and his disciples visited in the garden of Gethsemane, although I'm pretty sure there wouldn't have been such lush ground cover.

Gethsemane means “oil press,” and so there may well have been an oil press somewhere in the olive grove as well. We’ll be spending quite a bit of time in this garden, touring it today, revisiting it next Sunday, on Palm Sunday, and then again on Holy Thursday. It’s worth lingering in, because it’s our connection between the earthly ministry of Jesus, and all those other gardens we’ve passed along the way. And it’s our launching off point to the redemptive work of Jesus done in the garden of Golgotha, and our hope of a restored garden of Eden in the final consummation of God plan for the salvation of God’s creation.

It was in an olive grove like this one that Jesus gathered with his disciples to pray after that last Passover meal in the week we now call Holy Week. It’s exactly that prayer that we’ll be studying this morning, because it’s a key to understanding not only what followed that fateful night, but also the teachings and actions of Jesus in the three years leading up to it. Let’s join Jesus and the Disciples now in the garden of Gethsemane, for a small preview of Holy Thursday. **{Read Matthew 26:30-41, NLT}**

3 Two times this morning we’ve heard Jesus pray, and whenever a prayer of Jesus is recorded in the Gospels, you can be sure that it’s a spiritual wellspring that we can drink from and refresh our thirsty souls. If you remember nothing else about this scene in the garden of Gethsemane, then remember these words of Jesus: “Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.”¹ Perhaps we’ve read or heard that phrase so often that we’ve stopped being amazed by it. Let’s consider exactly what those words meant for Jesus. Jesus, being fully God, knew that he was about to be betrayed by a friend, deserted by those closest to him, then mocked, beaten, and killed in the most humiliating and painful way possible. Jesus, being fully human, understood the emotional and physical pain he was going to suffer, as well as the spiritual pain of becoming separated from God on the cross. That should astonish us! Can any of us say we would have been able to do the same? Of course not!

One of the amazingly honest things about the Gospels is how so very often the behavior and attitudes of the disciples are contrasted with those of Jesus, and how lacking the disciples turn out to be! And by the way, in case this hadn’t occurred to you, each one of us is meant to see ourselves in their shoes, not only aspiring to emulate their moments of

¹ Matthew 6:39c, New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

courage and faithfulness, but also owning up to our moments of selfishness, fearfulness, and unfaithfulness. And here in the garden of Gethsemane, the shortcomings of the disciples are in full view. Judas outright betrayed Jesus. Peter and the others promised to follow Jesus to the death, a promise they couldn't keep. In fact, the disciples couldn't even endure the difficulty of staying awake! In effect, the disciples were saying one thing, "Not my will, Lord, but yours," but doing something entirely the opposite, "Not your will, Lord, but mine."

Isn't that just another repetition of that first sinful refrain pronounced in the garden of Eden? When Adam and Eve ate the fruit, surely they too were saying, "Not your will, Lord, but mine!"

4 Let's rewind to earlier in Matthew's Gospel, to the text we heard earlier, that famous scene of Jesus teaching on prayer. It's the same scripture that we derive what we call the "Lord's Prayer" from. Using the version we pray each week, the words I want you to hear again are these: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."² Do you see the connection with the prayer of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane? "[Y]our will ... be done, not mine." "Thy kingdom come." The bad news is that even as we pray that phrase each and every week, "thy will be done," we consistently follow the example of the disciples in our attitudes and actions: "my will be done, Lord, not yours." That is wrong on so many levels! We can't ask for the Kingdom of God to come and then fail to participate fully in letting it come. Even addressing God as Lord becomes an oxymoron when our attitudes and behaviors betray that lordship.

But here's the good news. That vision of Eden? It's still alive. That promised land? It's still promised. In Matthew's Gospel, it's called the Kingdom of Heaven. In the other Gospels, the Kingdom of God. And even though we persistently fail to fully submit to God's will in our day to day lives, Jesus did what we can't. When Jesus said, "Not my will, Lord, but yours," it was emblematic of everything he said and did and was about to do and it was a great sign of hope to all of us, a sign that that Eden is reachable after all- if not through our own efforts, then through faith in the one who is able.

² Matthew 6:10, Revised Standard Version

5 You see, that original sin from the garden of Eden keeps biting us, in at least two ways. The first way is when we imagine that we know better than God what's best for ourselves and the world we live in. That's the "My will, Lord, not thine" part. But it also catches us on the backside when, finding that we have less control over our circumstances and the world than we imagined or wished for, we decide that our situations are hopeless. The antidote to hopelessness is Jesus, the one who can do what we can't. Does that mean that we should give up trying to perfect the law of love like Jesus did? As the apostle Paul said so vehemently, "By no means!"³ We keep trying, but we do that while leaning on Jesus for the power and example of surrender. We find that in the Lord's Prayer, but especially in the garden of Gethsemane, a prayer with a huge spiritual exclamation point that punctuates the life and ministry of Jesus and points us toward the hope of the kingdom, the restored Eden when God's perfect will reigns and we once again live in perfect harmony with God, each other, and all of creation. As Christians we all have our share of struggles, every day. But greater than these struggles is He who lives within us and has overcome the world and conquered death! Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane reminds us that nothing can take away our hope of Eden, unless we ourselves choose to turn away from Jesus.

So how are things with your own soul this morning? Where is original sin biting you the hardest? Are you arrogantly trying to wrest control of your life from God, or are you hopelessly resigned to never measuring up to God's standards? Jesus reveals a different way, a more hopeful path. We do need to heed those words that inaugurated the ministry of Jesus: "Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near."⁴ But we also need to remember those ultimately hopeful words of Jesus: "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."⁵

³ Romans 6:2, New International Version (2011)

⁴ Matthew 4:17, New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

⁵ John 16:33, New International Version (2011)



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