

Back to the Garden

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Scriptures: Deut 11:10-15; Psalm 147; Revelation 21:1-4, 22-27; 22:1-5; Mark
4:26-32

I have mentioned before of my first foray into gardening, a half baked venture that shot way too big and too complex. The plot that we decided to till up gets bigger and bigger each time I tell the story, so this time I will say it was at least 150 square feet, a good margin bigger than the simpler and much more productive 4x8 raised bed that we now tend at the Ryden house. I remember how as Brittany and I worked to till this ground by hand, a concerned neighbor offered to let us use his motorized tiller to make the job easier. I remember how we foolishly left for vacation almost immediately, returning to find the freshly tilled ground had been sprung upon by weeds, up to our knees. I remember, whole plants munched off by animals at night, meager returns, and vegetables left too long on the vine. I remember a lot of toil and not much benefit.

At the end of that first growing season, I would have resonated with the curse of Genesis 3 where God tells Adam that because he has eaten the forbidden fruit, “cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground...”¹

¹ Genesis 3:17-19

I daresay I would have even taken this curse a step further, and been inclined to say that it was not just the toil of working the earth that was a result of sin, but the task of gardening itself! I was done! I was happy that for the next few growing seasons we lived in an apartment, no green space for me to manage. The curse of gardening had ended.

And while I may dip back into that mindset from time to time these days, usually when my mower is choking on too much grass because I have let it grow too high, I was wrong. The gardening itself is not a curse, but the toil, the struggle, the sweat and failure.

Lest we forget, gardening existed before the Fall. Adam and Eve work as co-laborers within God's good garden, tending to the things that bring them sustenance and joy, relishing not just the produce, but the task itself. What sin does is introduce death into the Garden of Life, meaning that plants, and animals, and people, die. The dust that Adam struggles with his whole life to get to produce things for him to eat is the same sort of dust that he will become when his time has ended. Gardening isn't the problem, death is. Brokenness is. In an Edenic world, seeds are planted and they grow. In a fallen world, birds pick up seeds, weeds choke out young plants, rocks prevent deep roots, thieves come and steal produce, and all of this continues until the farmer returns to the ground himself.

Not surprisingly, this theme of the struggle of agriculture is a prominent theme repeated throughout the Bible, both in the literal sense of provision for God's people, and in the images God gives us for thinking about the things of life in the Kingdom.

What you will see from the Scriptures is that God, both physically and spiritually, is inviting his people further back, closer and closer to his Garden.

We have one such case in our reading from Deuteronomy this morning. Moses gives the people of Israel an invitation into a land that is a bit of a step back into Eden, a welcome contrast from the Sinai desert that they now call home and the metropolis of Egypt, where they were slaves.

There is a contrast drawn here between Egypt and Canaan, the land into which God is calling his people. Did you catch it? Lets look back at Deuteronomy 11: “ For the land that you are entering to take possession of it is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you sowed your seed and irrigated it, like a garden of vegetables. But the land that you are going over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water by the rain from heaven, a land that the LORD your God cares for. The eyes of the LORD your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.”

Both Egypt and Canaan were places where you could grow your food. Either was a better place for agriculture than the desert of the Sinai. But notice the difference between the two. In Egypt, water came to the crops through irrigation, through the efforts of human beings. Through the sweat of the brow. But in Canaan, water came from God. God’s eyes are always on Canaan, Moses says.

One of the consistent struggles of the people in the desert is that they seem to continually want to go back to Egypt. “At least we weren’t hungry there, at least we

had water there,” they would say. Left to themselves, they would choose Egypt when Canaan was available.

We desire to control our circumstances. The known entity is preferable to the unknown one! We make for ourselves the means of our salvation. We build towers to heaven, we irrigate dry land, we develop a portfolio of investments, we lay up treasures and trophies, we pat ourselves on the back for our own good deeds. And yet, God invites us back toward his Garden, where the rain that falls is the grace he offers to all and the produce that is gathered is his work and his work alone.

There is no water in the desert. The people needed a place to thrive and grow. They had a choice - to return to the sure thing of human effort, a system that existed off of their toil as slaves to that system, or the boundless abundance of God’s provision. The catch was that the land of Egypt was known, and trusting God meant facing the unknown. A whole generation lived and died in the wilderness because they were not ready to trust God. Don’t miss out on Canaan by reminiscing about Egypt.

The pattern of trusting in known human power instead of the life-giving power of God would be repeated throughout Israel’s history. King Hezekiah would even go to Egypt itself when he was faced with the threat of Assyrian blockade. The Egyptian irrigation canals of the past centuries had become the Egyptian war-horses of the current day, both insufficient replacements for the true power of God. Will we ever learn?

We seek to take hold of and control for ourselves what God seeks to give us in his own timing and in his own way. We are good at looking for and taking shortcuts. Far too often, we forget the trust we claim to have placed in God, and instead we rely on the bank account, the political crusader, the life we've built for ourselves. But man-made irrigation is a poor substitute for God's rain.

Don't be tricked into going back to Egypt. I don't mean literally. It seems like a fine place and I would love to visit there someday. But do not go back to the spiritual wasteland that relies on your own efforts or the efforts of some other human system to give you meaning, purpose, and fulfillment. You will find that those systems eat people up, use them up like slaves. Continue instead into the promised land of plenty, where no irrigation wrought by human hands is necessary, because every drop of water that is needed comes down from the sky, courtesy of the one who made both water and sky.

So what about us? It is easy for us to travel back in time among the people of Moses, knowing how the rest of the story would go, and be on the side of Joshua and Caleb who were ready to go into God's Promised Land. But what about in our wilderness? Where is the Egypt to which we are tempted to return and where is the Canaan into which we are called? More importantly, how do we get there?

Jesus gives us a clue in our Gospel reading. He tells us that we need to have the faith and patience of a farmer.

Two parables, short and all about seeds. First, a reflection on how seeds grow - in their own, but right time. The farmer plants the seeds, then what? He sleeps. His job is done. It is time for the seed and the earth to do their collaborative work. I daresay, we haven't got much further down the lines of making seeds grow these 2000 years after this parable was told. To be sure, farming practices and fertilizers help things along, but there is something inherent to a seed that it knows what to do and when to do it on its own. We can't tell it when to start growing. But when the time is right, the growth and in turn, the harvest comes.

What does it mean for Jesus to say that his Kingdom is like that? I saw a video of a former MLB coach this week, speaking about how many of the players who make it to the baseball Hall of Fame are so-called late bloomers. His advice? Don't focus on results, focus on process. When the bigger and better team takes you for a ride, a results focused athlete will get discouraged, but a process-focused athlete will get to work. God calls us to faithfulness; we can leave the results up to him. By any measure, Jesus' ministry at this time wouldn't have looked like much to the outside viewer, and yet, it would change the world. As Jesus says in another parable, the seed must fall to the ground and die in order for the new life to spring up. Blessed are we when we have the patience to wait for God's timing and trust in his process.

And then Jesus talks about the sort of thing that his kingdom will produce - a mustard seed making a bush that the birds come and make their nest in. This image of the mustard seed becoming a home for all the birds of the air is an image from Hebrew prophecy, specifically that of Ezekiel and Daniel, referencing the great

worldwide Kingdom that God will inaugurate through his restored people.² Jesus was the fulfilling of that promise, even though what he was doing would have seemed small and insignificant.

So also are our own acts of faith and trust in God and his Kingdom seemingly small on the surface, but they bring a bounty that is worthy of God's everlasting Kingdom. Just like the Israelites were beckoned into the better land of Canaan, where water would flow generously from the sky and the land would be fruitful, we are invited into a new land of New Creation brimming with life and abundance.

John got a glimpse of that final dwelling place of God's children and our Scriptures end with his vision of that very place. Something newer and better than Canaan is here. John's description begins with an invitation:

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."³

² Ezekiel 17:23; 31:6; Daniel 4:12–21, as noted in Wright, N.T. *Mark for Everyone*

³ Rev 21:1-4

Like he was all the way back in Deuteronomy, God is calling his faithful people to be on the move, but this is the final stop on their trek. For it is his city that is coming down, a city not built by human hands, ready and prepared for his beloved people. Unlike the first city of the Scriptures, formed by the murderous Cain, this city's foundations are justice and truth. At its center is the Lord's true Temple, not a building, but a Lamb, and its light shines through its ever open gates, illuminating all of God's good creation.

And here is the final piece, God has restored and sealed forever the goodness of his original Creation by making this final city a Garden City. Not the cities of humanity, built on oppression and needing artificial means of irrigating crops for sustenance, not even the good land of Canaan where the water comes in the form of generous, God-given rain. No, in this city we have returned all the way back to Eden. Listen to John's description:

"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him."⁴

If slavery in Egypt represents the furthest steps that can be taken away from God's good garden, and the invitation into Canaan is God inviting his people back towards

⁴ Rev 22:1-3

Eden, the heavenly garden city of Jerusalem is the full return, come to fruition. The curse has been reversed. The water of life now springs up from the ground, filling the heavenly city, bringing life to all who dwell therein.

And if that sounds like something you want to sign up for, God is taking mustard seed sized faith all day every day. Whether for the first time or for more times than you can count, it is growing season. Let's get to planting seeds of faithfulness and good work done in Jesus' name, seeds of hope and goodness in the world. It is not us who gives the growth, but we are the ones who marvel at the goodness of what God can do with even the smallest of things.