

LIKE A WATERED GARDEN *Gardening East of Eden*

a prompting offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
February 20-21, 2010 ♦ First Sunday in Lent
Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Genesis 2: 4b- 9

In the day that God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up – the God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a mist went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground – then God formed a human creature of dust from the ground, and breathed life into the creature’s nostrils the breath of life; and the human creature became a living being. And God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there God put the human being whom God had formed. And out of the ground God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Revelation 22:1-5

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. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there anymore. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

***“And God planted a garden in Eden...
and there God put the human being whom God had formed.
And out of the ground God made to grow every tree
that is pleasant to the sight and good for food,
the tree of life also in the midst of the garden,”***

Genesis 2:8-9

This past Wednesday was Ash Wednesday. It is the day we kick off the season of Lent. So if you missed our Ash Wednesday worship, let me catch you up.

Our theme for Lent is ***Like a Watered Garden***. The theme is ripped from the pages of Isaiah, from Isaiah 58, which is a text that is always assigned to Ash Wednesday. You’ll find these words on the front of your bulletin each Sunday of Lent to keep us focused:

If you get rid of unfair practices, quit blaming victims, quit gossiping about other people's sins, if you are generous with the hungry and start giving yourselves to the down-and-out, your lives will begin to glow in the darkness, your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight. I will always show you where to go. I'll give you a full life in the emptiest of places - firm muscles, strong bones. You'll be like a well-watered garden, a gurgling spring that never runs dry. You'll use the old rubble of past lives to build anew, rebuild the foundations from out of your past. You'll be known as those who can fix anything, restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate, make the community livable again.

-- Isaiah 58: 9b- 12 (from *The Message*)

On Ash Wednesday, we were all invited anew to water our dry and dusty souls with the water God. We were invited to allow our thirsty and parched lives to soak up the water of God. And more than invited, we were challenged to become ***Like a Watered Garden***. “Like a watered

garden”: green, growing, lush, fruitful, soft and beautiful. “Like a watered garden” is an image of bounty and life and wholeness and unity for all creation in God. To become **Like a Watered Garden** is the hope of our Lenten repentance and renewal; to become **Like A Watered Garden** is the promise of our Lenten journey with God.

Did you notice that the texts we read today are both stories set in a garden? One is from the opening pages of the Bible in Genesis. The other is from the closing chapter of the Bible in Revelation. Our faith story begins in a garden and ends in garden. And notice that the “tree of life” is central to both. If that is our faith story, then where do we find ourselves now? Our reality is that we find ourselves living somewhere between those two gardens.

Think of the garden as the symbol, or metaphor, for the unity of God and all of creation in all of its fullness and glory. The garden is the alpha and omega of our journey with God. The garden is the ideal image of harmony and peace between God and human beings and human beings with God and each other and all of creation. This is what Jesus would call that the Kingdom, or Realm, of God, but the metaphor we are exploring is “garden.”

If we live somewhere between these two idyllic gardens, then we find ourselves doing our gardening somewhere beyond Eden...somewhere East of Eden...somewhere on our way to that peaceful and bountiful and shining *new* Jerusalem, which is, but is not yet. We do not live in perfect paradise now. Constant utopia is not our experience. We find ourselves as human beings – as the church – both in exile from the Garden, yet also called to live and to be and to experience “Garden” even as we are apart from The Garden. We seek to be and become Garden NOW (Kathy Swensen, who is part of our Lenten liturgy writing team, called it Oasis). We are called to be an Oasis even in the midst of exile and estrangement and wilderness. We are called to be Oasis not only for ourselves, but for all of creation, for all that lives. We seek to be and to become “like a watered garden” in the image of Isaiah.

The season of Lent is all about the process of the gardening of Oasis in the midst of the dryness, the wilderness, the desert, the fallow ground surrounding it. We are talking about the process of tilling, planting, weeding, watering, tending, and harvesting. You will notice that that is the movement of our worship as we gather during Lent. The tools we have to work with, as we do our gardening east of Eden, are worship, prayerful attentiveness to God, repenting or reorienting, study and spiritual formation, acts of compassion and justice, reconciliation, and renewal...the willingness to die like a seed planted in the ground in order to rise and be born again. These are the tools that help us become “like a watered Garden.”

In story and myth gardens are often presented as the idyllic, but we know that gardens are complex places. Jan L. Richardson notes that

as the scriptures lead us through the gardens of Eden, the Song of Songs, Gethsemane, and beyond, we find they are complicated places. Against, the backdrop of the cycles of growth, decay and rebirth, a garden eventually exposes everything: the difficult dance of union and separation, our sharpest desires, our capacity for betrayal, and the possibility of new life.

The Genesis passage speaks of both “breath of life” and the “tree of life.” The relationship between the two is uncertain. What is obvious is that even when the first humans are excluded from the tree of life, they retain God’s breath of life. Thus, the tree of life must represent possibilities for life not entailed in the breath of life. I think that is our hope as we do our gardening east of Eden. That this tree of life, central to both our alpha and omega garden stories, can still feed our imaginations and nurture our spirits and lead us into wholeness and the fullness of life. Like a watered garden!

Gardening is just another way to talk about paying attention to the soil of our earthly lives and earthly experience, and being intentional in our spiritual quest for this abundant life. To garden brings our lives closer to the pulse of life, and it is in the pulse of life that God is found. When we work the soil of lives, tend the land where we are planted, when we get down and dirty in the dirt, we are really drawing near to the pulse of life. And we have to be close to something to see it very well, to really notice the life processes at work. This is another reason why gardening is a

good metaphor for spiritual practice and our Lenten discipline. Gardening requires one to pay close attention by tilling, planting, weeding, watering, tending and harvesting...to be intimately involved in a process that nurtures life.

Perhaps this is a shift in theological perspective for some of you. Sometimes Christians get caught in the trap of believing the world is inherently wretched, that the world is fallen, that our bodies are wracked with the stench of original sin and a prison of the soul. The physical world and our flesh is merely an obstruction to the divine. And if we think the world distracts us from God, we try to transcend the world to get to God; the further we get from the world, the closer we come to God. However, both our Hebrew and Christian tradition couldn't be more different. Not only does God delight in creating all this worldly stuff, not only does our humanness bear the very image of God, but the Creator calls it all good, very good. And instead of calling it original sin (as did some of our early Christian theologians, namely Augustine, may he rest in peace), we can call creation, along with Matthew Fox, "original blessing...original goodness." It just seems to me to be a better place to start...a more biblical place to start!

It is not as if God created this masterpiece of goodness and beauty and then stepped back and said, "Let's see how it works." The Bible portrays God crashing in all over the place, calling, cajoling, impregnating, inspiring, terrifying and transforming. God is in the middle of history, not apart from it. God is intimately involved with life as we know it and experience it. And if we don't find God here in this world, in this life, chances are we will not find God anywhere, which is to say, if we don't pay much attention to the people and world around us...if we don't do our gardening well east of Eden..we are not very likely to find anything terribly sacred in our midst either.

One has said that "The movement of spiritual practice is not 'Up, up and away,' but rather 'down, down and deep.'" (Attributed to Parker J. Palmer) It is a willingness to open ourselves to the startling truth that our lives are a garden brought to life and abundance by God and God alone. And even though we live between these two magnificent Gardens, even though we do our gardening east of Eden, we know that the life of God at work in our lives still creates an oasis in the dessert, still creates goodness and life and hope in the most impossible of situations.

Well, leave it to Mary Oliver to capture this wisdom beautifully and poetically, in a poem she calls "The Garden."

***What I want to know, please, is
what is possible, and what is not.
If it is not, then I am for it.
My heart is out of its flesh-phase.
I am done with all of it, the habits, the patience.
Whoever I was, it is growing hazy and forgettable.
Whoever I am, it is for mere appearance's sake.
It is for coin, and foolishness,
and I am thinking of something better.
All morning it has been raining.
In the language of the garden, this is happiness.
The tissues perk and shine.
Truly this is the poem worth keeping.
A mossy house anyone with sense would enter
as soon as the soul begins
to desire the impossible.
I have never felt so young.***

Let us garden well. Amen.