

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7
Psalm 32
Romans 5:12-19
Matthew 4:1-11

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Lent 1
Year A

Where, oh where has the Garden gone?

Long ago, when the earth was so young and fresh you could still hear the song of the stars; when the air was so delicious and inspiring, every breath of it laughed with new life. You could actually hear the delight in the streams and mountains, in the rivers and valleys, in forest and ocean, in every living thing. In that long ago time, a secret garden was planted deep in the heart of this sweet, awaking world. The name of the garden was Eden.

The one who planted the garden knew the secret of life. In fact, the one who planted the garden was life, the life of all that was living and all that would ever live. And because the gardener knew the secret of life, every plant, every animal, every person living in the secret garden was healthy – whole, able to do and be *anything* its nature could possibly imagine. You see, the gardener had planted life that was completely true to itself. So, everything worked wonderfully, and all the kinds of life there supported one another. They were complete, together. That was the real secret of the garden. Its life, its reality was unhindered. It was full of grace then, before its vision was so devastatingly altered.

Sin has that power, you see, the power to alter our reality. Not trusting God changes the way we see everything. The serpent in the garden actually said as much, didn't he? He wasn't talking about what we mostly like to think of as sins - the little moral lapses of judgment and poor planning. The serpent was talking about a power that could change the whole structure of our reality, a power that can imprison our minds and souls and bodies, effecting all of nature, even the productivity of the soil, we hear in the Genesis story. No, the serpent wasn't talking about personal shortcomings we can rectify ourselves. He was talking about something with God-sized dimensions.

"Now," asked the serpent, "tell me again, *exactly* what the Lord God said to you."
"Because, you know, you will not die. You will know good *and* evil. And when you open your eyes, everything will look different to you. You have the power to change the way you see everything, and that power is yours for the taking. God knows you can change it all, and he's afraid you'll do it! Can't you tell? I think you owe it to yourself to prove that you can figure things out for yourself. Or, maybe you *don't* think you could find your way around this garden without him? Maybe you think this gardener-God holds secrets too big for you to handle! All I can say is, if you don't take things into your own hands pretty soon, you will really be humiliating yourself. You can see that, can't you?"

And so, one day – in that secret garden planted deep in the heart of our sweet, awaking world – they thought to themselves, "Why not?" and gave up the precious truth of who they really were from that day forward. Immediately, the first thing they found was they couldn't face standing naked before God any more. And so the great human torment began: all our desperate addictions to covering up our fears and delusions about who we are and who we are not. They had chosen to take things into their own hands, and found themselves – as do we all – with a godlike power that is much too big for us to handle. The serpent had told them the truth, as far as it went: we do have the

knowledge of good *and* evil. What the serpent did not say was that we don't – any of us – have the competence to handle that knowledge.

But there was no going back. Nothing looked the same anymore, and they could no longer find their way in the secret garden. Everything looked so different. It was like trying to find your way in the dark in a place that's so easy and familiar in the light. The serpent was right. They had the power to change the way they saw everything. Their whole reality was altered, right down to the productivity of the soil. They had turned the garden into a wilderness.

Ages passed, generations with out number, born to struggle and hope and die, obsessed with countless ways to put off knowing that nakedness before God and one another. The story of the secret garden, when the earth was young and fresh, was still told, passed down age after age. But it got more and more muddled as time went on until it became a fairy tale to those who heard it, a strange old archive from a time when people were less sophisticated and less evolved.

It was just a story. Nothing to do with our insatiable hunger or terrible loneliness and longing for home, safety, love, trust. It was just a story... until one day, in the land between Samaria and Judea, a man like the first, like all of us, followed the Spirit of God into a wilderness, just after he'd been baptized in the River Jordan.

It was curious, really, wasn't it? The same three principle characters were there in that wilderness place as had been in the garden: the Spirit of God providing the setting, and a human being faced with a choice. Even the devil's questions and arguments sound the same: "You deserve better than this. You should be able to eat what you want, when you want it! You can use your power to stop feeling vulnerable and weak. If you are God's son, why should you be powerless? You can have it all. For heaven's sake, reach out and take it!"

Up to now these two stories are a very good match. The garden is lost, of course, but – other than the look and feel of the wilderness – the elements of the plot are in perfect accord. But here we come to the all-important difference between the two stories – to the reason we want to follow this man Jesus. Here we come to *the reason for the hope that is in us*.

Instead of taking the devil up on his suggestions about the advantages of power, Jesus turns him down. He chooses to be powerless. To be dust and ashes. He chooses to be truly human. He chooses what we do everything we can to avoid choosing – whether we try to avoid that choice with the power of blaming others, or the power of money or work or working out, or with the power of food or drink or drugs or shopping, or exaggerated unselfishness or any of the games we people play to feel some kind of power. Jesus chooses to be powerless.

That was the whole point of entering the wilderness: stripping himself naked of all the daily defenses we use to cover the truth of our humanity, the truth that we are almost-gods who are terribly frail, yet forever shaking our proud fists at the heavens and wondering why we can never seem to get this evil thing under control - no matter how clever and evolved we get, no matter how much power we seize.

Jesus knew that there is no way out of the mess we are in until, in the wilderness, we face the demons of our frailty in *all* their disguises. The wilderness is a fearful place – a

place where, finally, we must trust God instead of desperately trying to patch up our failure to measure up one more time.

The wilderness *is* a fearful place to be. There is no doubt about that. But what if Jesus was right? What if once we had turned the Garden into a wilderness, we would have to enter the wilderness to find the Garden again? What if the Garden is not lost? What if the Garden and the wilderness are really the same place, if only we could see God's reality?

Lent is a great time for gardening. It is a time to get out our trowels and our pruning shears and our rakes. It is a time to dig deeper, prune what's dead and just posing as life; to expose what's under all the debris to the air and water it needs. God's secret garden is waiting for us, right in the midst of what looks like wilderness.