

# IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, September 10, 2023

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I hope we never take for granted the gift of all the children that we have here at Idlewild. I was just walking through all the classrooms and we're having to imagine new spaces and things like that this morning, and I'm just grateful not only for the the kiddos but for all the volunteers, all the parents who are making our Christian formation for our young people happen, and all the other volunteers as well. We're grateful for you. It is a sign of a vital and growing church—this sort of children's ministry we have. So, friends, this day we return to the Narrative Lectionary. This lectionary is a little different from the Revised Common Lectionary. It will carry us as it did through the spring... it will carry us through the Fall season until we get to Advent. This morning we begin in Genesis, Chapter 2. We're going to start with the second half of the fourth verse and go through verse 17 together. This sermon is going to be kind of part education, part proclamation. The educational piece is that this is the beginning of th... the second creation narrative, okay? Our Hebrew siblings would tell us that Genesis 1 is the first narrative about creation; and, actually, just in the verse prior to this, the verses prior to where we will begin reading scripture today, God has completed the work of creation over six days; and then God has rested on the seventh day, blessed it, called it Sabbath, and made it holy. And then we have, from a distinct author and a distinct perspective, we have this second narrative about creation. We'll read from Genesis 2, beginning at the fourth verse, but before we do, let us go to God In prayer.

Creative Spirit, as you moved across the waters of the deep drawing forth life, we pray that you might move amongst us and even within us this day, that you might draw forth life from us once again that we might be your faithful people. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

Beginning in the fourth verse of the second chapter of the Book of Genesis

GENESIS 2:4B-17

## **World's creation in the garden**

On the day the LORD God made earth and sky—<sup>5</sup>before any wild plants appeared on the earth, and before any field crops grew, because the LORD God hadn't yet sent rain on the earth and there was still no human being<sup>6</sup>to farm the fertile land, <sup>6</sup>though a stream rose from the earth and watered all of the fertile land—<sup>7</sup>the LORD God formed the human<sup>8</sup>from the topsoil of the fertile land<sup>9</sup> and blew life's breath into his nostrils. The human came to life. <sup>8</sup>The LORD God planted a garden in Eden in the east and put there the human God had formed. <sup>9</sup>In the fertile land, the LORD God grew every beautiful tree with edible fruit, and also God grew the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

<sup>10</sup>A river flows from Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides into four headwaters.<sup>11</sup> The name of the first river is the Pishon. It flows around the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. <sup>12</sup>That land's gold is pure, and the land also has sweet-smelling resins and gemstones. <sup>13</sup>The name of the second river is the Gihon. It flows

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around the entire land of Cush. <sup>14</sup>The name of the third river is the Tigris, flowing east to Assyria; and the name of the fourth river is the Euphrates.

<sup>15</sup>The LORD God took the human and settled him in the garden of Eden to farm it and to take care of it. <sup>16</sup>The LORD God commanded the human, "Eat your fill from all of the garden's trees; <sup>17</sup>but don't eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, because on the day you eat from it, you will die.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So if you've spent any time in church, you are probably familiar with the Garden of Eden, perhaps not this part of the story. If you grew up in the South and you happened to have this Christian tradition when you were a child, you probably heard a whole lot about the garden. I know I certainly did. The garden was preached in a particular way. It's a scene that comes a little bit later in this second chapter of Genesis. It's a scene where Adam and Eve are there in the garden together, and they eat of the fruit of which they have been told not to eat. And we theologians would call that later—the fall, and others who like church doctrine would give it a name—the doctrine of original sin. This is the beginning and the way in which we make meaning of brokenness in the world. As a child this garden scene was hammered into me, over and over, original sin, original sin. It's one of our reformed doctrines as well. Then a few years ago, and I've spoken about this from this pulpit before, a few years ago, I stumbled upon an author and theologian that I respect a great deal, who introduced to me this concept of original blessing and the idea of actually reading scripture in the way in which it was presented to us. So in Genesis 1 the creation story shows God bringing forth creation, and then at the end when God is done creating, God says of the creation that... it is good.

And that for me was a beautiful reclaiming of the creative nature of God, that what God makes is good. And so it was easy for me, particularly over the last few years, to grab on to this idea of original blessing and goodness that we find in Genesis 1 and to just lop off this whole idea about the garden. It was a little too loaded for me and had been used to wound a whole lot of people. It has been used to wound a whole lot of people over time. I wondered what if the church had never been burdened by the image of this Garden, the idea of Good and Evil, the idea of a Tree and Fruit and Sin and Paradise Lost? Can you imagine how much time the church would have back?

I was talking to a friend early this week, and he...he mentioned tuning in to a church that his grandparents go to, his parents go to. It's, uh, he said the amount of time that that preacher spends on brokenness and damnation is pretty remarkable. The amount of time that is focused on sin and the originality of it and fall, it's almost overwhelming. Personally, I prefer the emphasis on original blessing, and I'd prefer for us to forget about the garden and about original sin, but when I do that I miss out on a fuller, more meaningful revelation of God that we get here in Genesis 2, because there is the fruit and that will happen a little bit later on, but then there is this portion of Genesis 2,

where the creative nature of God begins with the planting of a garden. The garden reveals something significant about God. In verse 8 the Lord God planted a garden in Eden in the east

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and put there the human God had formed. Genesis 2, with all the other things that it reveals, first and foremost reveals God as a gardener.

And a gardener has some unique traits that I think are of value to us. Gardeners are first and foremost unafraid to get dirty. They'll get on their hands and knees, and they'll get dirt under their fingernails as they work the soil.

The gardener is not worried about what isn't there. The gardener is only concerned about what can grow in the soil.

If you drive East on Central Avenue, and when you get about a block and a half before Highland Avenue, there'll be 3427 Central. It's the...it's hard to miss. It's the only house in about the three mile stretch of Central that has a dirt front yard. I've owned that house for about 10 months now. I planned on moving, I've told everyone I'm moving in next month for about the last six months, okay? A couple of months ago, I mentioned this before, we flattened out—Ed was really helpful with this transaction—and we...we cut down four White Oaks, whose roots had been compromised. They were going to fall over at some point or another anyway. So we took those out, and then a couple of weeks ago, I got someone out there, and they leveled out the yard; and it is a dirt patch that I'm sure my neighbors are not happy about. So this week I had a meeting with a fellow named Brett. Maybe y'all know him. He works over, and he's a proprietor of Urban Earth, here in Midtown. I'm not getting a kick back for shouting out his business, um, kind of wish I was. We'll talk about that in a second. So, um, so Brett comes out, and we meet about midday on Wednesday, and there's this dirt canvas, right, and Brett and I introduced ourselves to each other, and then he makes his way over to one corner of the property, and he kind of peers back at the other corner and just sits in quiet. Then he walks closer to the house, and he kind of looks back towards Central.

And then after doing this for about 15 minutes of not talking very much, we find a little shady spot under a tree, and he...he starts to describe what he is imagining. He says, "I...I imagine, see there's a lot of beautiful sunlight coming through here kind of just after noon, but...but we really need to put some anchor trees over here too that would be lush and kind of fill in and give a little bit of shade to the ground. And then the grass—I know you don't want... I know you want native grasses, but we need to have at least some grass that comes out towards the tree. And maybe we make this bed, and it's kidney shaped but not quite kidney shaped, and maybe we put some rocks over here, and and then we'll have a hedge against the road too, just to knock down the noise a little bit as well. And...and all I can hear in my head is the cash register going ching, ching, ching.

Until I'm able to just pause and be in the moment and be amazed.

See Brett has the mind of a gardener.

He has the imagination of one who can look out upon an arid, dry, dusty landscape and imagine that the water is going to flow this way, and the people are going to move in this fashion, and we want...we want to have plant life in this place, and grass here and rocks here; and he's able

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even in a moment—I might call it a gift of God that comes upon him—to imagine what might be from this arid place.

You see, the gardener must believe that something can come from nothing.

And in that way the gardener teaches us hope.

Henry Mitchell, I've quoted him before from this pulpit, he says this. He says, "Now the gardener is the one who has seen everything ruined so many times that even as his pain increases with each loss, he comprehends, no, he truly knows, that where there was a garden once, it can be again.

Or where there never was, there yet can be a garden."

I love that Genesis 2 reveals to us that the God that we know is a gardener. The first thing God does after drawing Adam from the soil—each of us from the soil—is to plant a garden and place humanity in it.

I couldn't help but be transported this week as I reflected on Genesis—kind of the beginning of our story in scripture to the gospel of John's depiction in John 20 of the resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Mary, the text tells us, goes early in the morning to find and to adorn the body of her savior, really just to weep even in that place; and instead the stone has been rolled away, and she comes upon this figure that she can't recognize, and...and scripture tells us that she supposes him to be the gardener.

The beautiful symmetry.

The gardener carries with them confidence in what they cannot see. They believe that life can spring up with a little bit of an...of intention and some tenderness and some time. The gardener has the ability to imagine how transformation can take place.

God is in the garden, but God is not just concerned about the garden. That is also what Genesis 2 reveals to us. That's interesting, I think. Most of the Christian narrative about this particular Garden has been really hyper-focused on the garden itself and being thrown out of the garden. We get really focused on Adam and Eve and what that interaction looks like, but it turns out—and maybe you missed it—that God is not just concerned with this particular garden that we read about in Genesis 2. Verse 10 says a river flows from Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides into four headwaters. And I stumbled over those names as I was reading it the first time. What's interesting to me about that is that God is concerned about the garden that God has just planted, but God is actually sending and caring for life outside of what that first human can experience.

God is nurturing the land that is beyond what can be seen. It strikes me that if we are to gain anything from that portion of the text, it is that God is always working beyond our ability to see.

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And I don't know about you, but I need to know that God is working beyond what I can see. I need to know that while I'm occupied in my little own garden, God is making life spring forth in all sorts of other places where I haven't even been, and I can't even imagine.

As I was reflecting this week, I was wondering, "Is there a more meaningful gift that this God could give to the world than a group of humans who have the heart of a gardener?"

it seems to me that the city in which we live is in need of a group of people who are willing to be gardeners, a group of people who aren't overwhelmed by that which hasn't taken root yet but are willing to get on their knees and get a little dirty to turn soil again and again and again, and imagine that something beautiful and life-giving might come forth, despite all the aridness— that there can be something verdant that comes.

Wendell Berry is one of my favorite poets. He has a poem entitled The Mad Farmer's Liberation Front. I'm not going to read the whole thing to you this morning, but a couple of excerpts that I think are important for us, because after God creates the garden and plants the human there, he leaves the farming to Adam. That's what the text tells us. He leaves the turning of the soil and the nurturing of it to humanity. Berry's words go something like this. "Ask the questions that have no answers. Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias. Say that your main crop is the forest that you did not plant, that you will not live to harvest. Say that the leaves are harvested when they have rotted into the mold. Call that prophet. Prophecy such returns. Put your faith in the two inches of Earth that will build under the tree every thousand years.

Go with your love to the fields. Lie down in the shade. Rest your head in her lap, and swear allegiance to what is nighest your thoughts. As soon as the generals and the politicians can predict the motion of your mind, lose it. Leave it as a sign to mark the false trail, the way you didn't go. Be like the fox who makes more tracks than necessary, some in the wrong direction. Practice Resurrection.

There are many lessons that can be drawn from Genesis 2. but it seems to me that the most significant one this morning is that the God that we know in Christ is a gardener... concerned about drawing life into the world, planting us in particular places at particular times, so that we might be co-laborers in and on those fields. Beloved, you have been born of the Earth, planted in a garden, so may you and may we together hold the hope of our maker, hope for what we cannot quite see yet, but what we know can grow, hope for our neighbor, hope for our city, hope for each of us, and hope for the world.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.