

Come to the Garden: 3. The Promised Land
Genesis 13:10; Exodus 3:7-9; Isaiah 51:3
March 11, 2018
Pastor Steve Richards

A week ago, Amanda and I spent a day in the botanical gardens of Naples, Florida. If you've not been there, it is a magnificent place, featuring plants and flowers from tropical places around the world. One of the blessings when I travel is that a photograph travels with me – and as long as I carry all her gear, I have beautiful photos to remember where we've been! We began inside the butterfly garden and then found a tour guide who took us through the Caribbean Garden pointing out trees and flowers that on our own we would have missed. Like this one called the Jade flower. It's a kind of garden paradise that just might give us a glimpse of what God intended. It was our first visit to this garden, but our tour guide told us that what we were seeing was nothing like the garden it used to be. Last September Hurricane Irma nearly destroyed the garden. 250 trees were lost, another 250 severely damaged and enough debris to fill two football fields. Paradise was lost – and nobody's fault, circumstance outside everyone's control. And that often happens in this world. We lose sight of the paradise we are seeking when tragedy strikes. But more often, paradise is lost as a result of internal forces – we say or do what we should not have done or fail to do what we should have done. That's the message we heard last week.

God made everything and called it good, but we look around and see a world that is messed up and broken. We know we should not, but we do the very thing we should not do. And we attempt to cover it up or blame others or at least say it's not my fault. Paradise is lost. We hurt others, and we hurt ourselves. We end up in a world where there are plenty of resources, and yet 17,000 children die every day from malnutrition and related causes. Even our communities need Food Shelves and still people are hungry. What kind of world is this? It is a broken world. Paradise lost. We believe in a world where there is liberty and justice for all, but we know not everyone experiences that equally. We are called to love our neighbor, and yet we end up hurting the people we claim to love the most. Paradise is lost over and over again.

But inside our hearts, there is a memory of Eden. It may have been lost, but deep inside, we remember it. It's like the monarch butterflies. The butterflies that leave at the end of summer are not the same one that return in the spring. It's generations later and yet deep in their DNA is the memory of a place they've never been but long to return to. Somehow God has planted the memory of that garden deep within our souls, and we long to go back. Our mission as humans is to work for that – to return to Eden. Even if you have no faith, there is still this memory deep inside, and you feel it every time you watch the news and see something horrible, and say, "It's not supposed to be that way." How do you know it's not supposed to be that way? Because inside, there is this memory of what should be. Some have called it utopia or paradise. Jesus called it the kingdom of God. It's this ideal in our hearts that we know we should be but we recognize is not and if we are honest, we will admit that we are part of the reason it is not. And we are part of the solution.

In the Old Testament, this image of returning to Eden is the Promised Land. It's never actually called the Promised Land until the book of Hebrews, but it's this idea that originates with Abraham when God says, I want you to go to a land where I will send you. And you will be blessed to be a blessing to others. And that's returning Eden – when what we have is not for ourselves but to be used to bless others. So Abraham and Sarah and Abraham's nephew, Lot, make their way to Canaan. **Lot looked around and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan**

was well watered, like the garden of the LORD. They had come from the desert and entered what appeared to them to be the “garden of the LORD.” They’d returned!

Later Abraham’s grandson, Jacob, would take his family to Egypt because there was a famine in the land of promise. There, Jacob is reunited with his son, Joseph, and they stay in Egypt. At first the people prosper, but then the Egyptians enslave them. 430 years later, God finally sees their suffering and calls Moses to liberate them. **The LORD said, “I have seen the misery of my people... I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”** It’s the garden – do you remember? So Moses leads the people out of slavery, and for forty years, they travel in the wilderness until they finally reach the Jordan River. Moses is about to die, and God calls him to the top of Mt Nebo so he can at least see the Promised Land before he dies.

There have been groups from this church that traveled to the Holy Land and even climbed this mountain to get a glimpse of what Moses saw when he looked over to see the land flowing with milk and honey. Dick Ellis sent me this photo that he took. He’s standing in the Promised Land, looking back toward Mt Nebo. Does that look like a land flowing with milk and honey? It’s desert! But after 40 years of travel, that’s the land. Maybe the Promised Land is not about a plot of land, but an ideal – a place where people live out of the goodness God created, where people love God with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength and love their neighbor as themselves. The book of Deuteronomy is Moses’ final speech delivered before the people enter the Promised Land. He says: **If you pay attention these laws and are careful to follow them, then the LORD your God will keep his covenant of love with you, as he swore to your ancestors. He will love you and bless you...** But when we keep reading the Bible, we find that it’s not long after they enter the Promised Land that the people turn away from God. They stop loving God and loving each other. God withholds his protection, and in 729 BC, the Assyrians from the north come in and destroy the northern kingdom. Then in 586 BC, the Babylonians destroy Jerusalem and carry the people into Exile. And while they are in Exile, they keep remembering the Promised Land. The prophet, Isaiah, says: **The LORD will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the LORD.**

So here we are – not longing to return to a plot of land but an ideal that there is still the hope and promise of a garden. And we can be part of creating that. We look at a world that is messed up, and we stand up and say, it doesn’t have to be that way. It’s our job to do something – to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with God. To do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

On April 4th, it will be 50 years since Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed – shot while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis. The night before his death, he delivered what we remember as his mountain top speech. He’d gone to Memphis to stand up for the sanitation workers (black and white) that deserved a living wage. In his speech that night he offered the image of Moses, climbing Mt Nebo and looking out over the Promised Land. The Promised Land that he sees is an America where people are judged, not by the color of their skin but the content of their character. Can you see it?

What is your Promised Land? For you, what is the world supposed to be? Where are the things that are broken that you are called to restore? It can seem so overwhelming – and we can get so caught up in our own lives that’s all matters. It’s easy to narrow our focus – so my life is all about me – and how I want a certain relationship or a certain family; I want a certain job, if I can

just make enough money or have the right house or be able to vacation wherever I want – and all of that may be important. It's just not the Promised Land. Twenty years ago, Ron Heifetz wrote a book titled, *Leadership without easy answers*. He says the role of a leader is to articulate the reality we live in today and then what the world is supposed to be like – the Promised Land. And the role of the Christian is to close the gap. So what's my part in that? Because we long for the Promised Land. We long for Eden.

Let me describe what our youngest daughter is doing. It makes me proud and at the same time hugely concerned for her. She's 32 and out of the trauma of her life she's decided this world needs to be the kind of place where people don't experience that kind of trauma. So she has a vision of world where people love each other and are connected through art. She calls it Strawberry Propaganda – because a strawberry looks like a heart and it has seeds on the outside – and she wants to spread the seeds of love. Right now she is in Katmandu, Nepal, spending the next three months creating art that will lift up the rights of women and children. A year ago, she was there for a few weeks, creating murals and telling her story on International Women's Day. Last week, she returned to one of her murals. This is a mural where school children and even people walking down the street were invited to add their hand print to a Wall of Hope. That's the proud part. That part that concerns me is that she lives on almost nothing so that everything she has can be used to create the world that she is longing for.

Our own Carol Erickson will be returning to Kenya in a few weeks, working toward the Promised Land. Most of us are not able to leave everything and do this. So, I've also been thinking about something Leslee Jaeger invite us to do in Haiti, one of the poorest countries in the world. And last year you gave \$3218 to Helping Haiti Work, a program that provides microloans that enables women to start their own business. Your gift provided 16 microloans of \$200 each. These loans must be repaid over 10 months and once repaid can be renewed. \$200 doesn't seem like much. For some of us that's one trip to the grocery store. But in Haiti, where average wage is \$4 a day, \$200 can change an entire family. Here's Yvette. She now works as a seamstress. A microloan provided the seed to get her started. She has five children. I think this photo provides us glimpse of the Promised Land. She is now able to pay the school fees for all of the children, rather than picking and choosing which children get to go to school each year. Yvette recently had a large lipoma (benign tumor) removed from her lower back that had been slowly growing and causing her pain with daily activities. She was able to pay for the surgery out of the money that she had saved from her sewing proceeds. You didn't have to go to Haiti. Leslee did that for us, and through your giving, you are working to heal a broken world.

Working to return to Eden. We all can do something to move in that direction. The Promised Land is not a location, but a way of living. Every time we worship, we are called to Eden. We renew this vision of what is not yet but can be. We remember the garden. We are given a kind of taste that makes us long for more, so that when we leave here we renew our commitment once again to work toward the Promised Land.

In the words of a hymn written in 1787 by Samuel Stennet:

*I am bound for the promised land;
Oh who will come and go with me?
I am bound for the promised land.*

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of March 11, 2018

Weekly Prayer: Lord, you are the One who gave us life. You call each one of us in a different way, naming us uniquely beloved in your eyes. Help us to follow you faithfully, that we may know your pleasure in us. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Monday, March 12

Scripture: Genesis 12:1-3

The LORD said to Abram, "Leave your land, your family, and your father's household for the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and will bless you. I will make your name respected, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, those who curse you I will curse; all the families of the earth will be blessed because of you."

Observation: God made great promises to Abraham, "the ancestor of all those people... who have faith in God" (Romans 4:11), including leave "for the land I will show you," and "I will bless you." A common human reaction to promises like that might be, "Praise God! I'm more special than anyone else!" But God had something different in mind. God blessed Abraham so that he and his offspring could share the blessing: "All the families of earth will be blessed because of you."

Application: These stories probably took their final form during the time of Israel's monarchy. The Israelites who first listened to these stories experienced these promises as coming true in their own time. Much later, when Israel and Judah had been conquered, these old promises gave a vision about who God's people might be again in the future. In what ways is God's promise not just ancient history, but a promise that points to God's ideal for you and your church family?

Prayer: Lord God, sometimes I'm tempted to only count how many blessings I've received. Please grow in me a heart that's just as interested in how many ways you've enabled me to bless others. Amen.

Tuesday, March 13

Scripture: Exodus 3:1-8

Moses was taking care of the flock for his father-in-law Jethro, Midian's priest. He led his flock out to the edge of the desert, and he came to God's mountain called Horeb. The LORD's messenger appeared to him in a flame of fire in the middle of a bush. Moses saw that the bush was in flames, but it didn't burn up. Then Moses said to himself, Let me check out this amazing sight and find out why the bush isn't burning up. When the LORD saw that he was coming to look, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" Moses said, "I'm here." Then the LORD said, "Don't come any closer! Take off your sandals, because you are standing on holy ground." He continued, "I am the God of your father, Abraham's God, Isaac's God, and Jacob's God." Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God. Then the LORD said, "I've clearly seen my people oppressed in Egypt. I've heard their cry of injustice because of their slave masters. I know about their pain. I've come down to rescue them from the Egyptians in order to take them out of that land and bring them to a good and broad land, a land that's full of milk and honey, a place where the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites all live.

Observation: After rashly killing an Egyptian slave master (Exodus 2:11-15), Moses fled from Egypt and lived for about forty years as a refugee among the Midianites. Moses was surprised when God called him, of all people, to free the Israelites after their long years of slavery. This was the first place in Scripture (but not the last) to call the Promised Land “a land of milk and honey.” The powerful phrase recalled the beauty of the newly-created garden in Genesis.

Application: By this time, Moses had escaped death twice in his life – once as an infant, and again when he fled from Egypt. To go back to Egypt was, from a human point of view, to risk his life again. What qualifications did Moses have that might have led God to choose him rather than other Hebrews? Did God’s call instantly fill Moses with confidence and courage?

Prayer: God, open me to your Word. Guide me on my journey, through my personal trials and tribulations. Let your love wash over me like a river in the Promised Land. Amen.

Wednesday, March 14

Scripture: Deuteronomy 3:23-28, 34:1-5

It was also at that same time that I begged the LORD: Please, LORD God! You have only begun to show your servant your greatness and your mighty hand. What god in heaven or on earth can act as you do or can perform your deeds and powerful acts? Please let me cross over the Jordan River so I can see the wonderful land that lies beyond it: those beautiful highlands, even the Lebanon region. But the LORD was angry with me because of you! He wouldn't listen to me. He said to me: That's enough from you! Don't ever ask me about this again! Go up to the top of Mount Pisgah. Look west, north, south, and east. Have a good look, but you will not cross the Jordan River. Instead, command Joshua, strengthen him, and encourage him because he's the one who will cross the river before this people. He's the one who will make sure they inherit the land you will see.

Then Moses hiked up from the Moabite plains to Mount Nebo, the peak of the Pisgah slope, which faces Jericho. The LORD showed him the whole land: the Gilead region as far as Dan's territory; all the parts belonging to Naphtali along with the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, as well as the entirety of Judah as far as the Mediterranean Sea; also the arid southern plain, and the plain—including the Jericho Valley, Palm City—as far as Zoar. Then the LORD said to Moses: "This is the land that I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob when I promised: 'I will give it to your descendants.' I have shown it to you with your own eyes; however, you will not cross over into it." Then Moses, the LORD's servant, died—right there in the land of Moab, according to the LORD's command.

Observation: At least from the time of the burning bush, which we read about yesterday, Moses had a God-given dream: living in the Promised Land. The Scriptures seem to offer various reasons why God didn't allow that. But before Moses' earthly life ended, God did give his faithful servant a panoramic view of the place he'd hoped and dreamed of. It seems likely that the extraordinary vision of the Promised Land's beauty was the last thing Moses saw before he died.

Application: Moses' story wasn't over. He reappeared centuries later, and in the physical Promised Land. Now he had a greater honor—he helped to encourage Jesus, the LORD he'd served all his life, as Jesus prepared to face the cross on which he would save the whole world (see Matthew 17:1-3). How does it comfort and strengthen you to realize that, when you place your life in God's hands, your story will never be completely over either?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for the gift of life. Grow in me a heart committed to serving you faithfully all the days of my earthly life—and all the days of the eternal life you've promised me. Amen.

Thursday, March 15

Scripture: Isaiah 51:1-5

Listen to me, you who look for righteousness, you who seek the LORD: Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry where you were dug. Look to Abraham your ancestor, and to Sarah, who gave you birth. They were alone when I called them, but I blessed them and made them many. The LORD will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her ruins. He will make her desert like Eden and her wilderness like the LORD's garden. Happiness and joy will be found in her— thanks and the sound of singing.

Pay attention to me, my people; listen to me, my nation, for teaching will go out from me, my justice, as a light to the nations. I will quickly bring my victory. My salvation is on its way, and my arm will judge the peoples. The coastlands hope for me; they wait for my judgment.

Observation: Many Bible scholars believe the second part of Isaiah was written after Babylon conquered Israel, leaving the physical Promised Land ruined. But the prophet told Israel that the Babylonian army couldn't destroy God's vision for the Promised Land. God's faithful people, like their spiritual ancestors Abraham and Sarah, were the true kingdom God sought, and he would give them eternal inner beauty comparable to the LORD's garden.

Application: The prophet's vision reached far beyond any piece of physical land on this earth. Verse 6 said the earth would wear out, but God's kingdom of salvation and righteousness (the true Promised Land) would be "unbroken." What makes that eternal perspective important to your faith in God's promises at times when physical realities are disappointing or painful?

Prayer: O Lord, I value your justice as a light to the nations, when we humans fall so short of that justice. And I'm grateful that your salvation will endure forever, because I know so many of the things of this earth will not. Amen.

Friday, March 16

Scripture: Leviticus 26:3-5; Luke 8:4-15

If you live according to my rules, keep my commands, and do them, I will give you rain at the proper time, the land will produce its yield, and the trees of the field will produce their fruit. Your threshing season will last until the grape harvest, and the grape harvest will last until planting time. You will eat your fill of food and live securely in your land.

When a great crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from one city after another, he spoke to them in a parable: "A farmer went out to scatter his seed. As he was scattering it, some fell on the path where it was crushed, and the birds in the sky came and ate it. Other seed fell on rock. As it grew, it dried up because it had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorny plants. The thorns grew with the plants and choked them. Still other seed landed on good soil. When it grew, it produced one hundred times more grain than was scattered." As he said this, he called out, "Everyone who has ears should pay attention." His disciples asked him what this parable meant. He said, "You have been given the mysteries of God's kingdom, but these mysteries come to everyone else in parables so that when they see, they can't see, and when they hear, they can't understand. "The parable means this: The seed is God's word. The seed on the path are those who hear, but then the devil comes and steals the word

from their hearts so that they won't believe and be saved. The seed on the rock are those who receive the word joyfully when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while but fall away when they are tempted. As for the seed that fell among thorny plants, these are the ones who, as they go about their lives, are choked by the concerns, riches, and pleasures of life, and their fruit never matures. The seed that fell on good soil are those who hear the word and commit themselves to it with a good and upright heart. Through their resolve, they bear fruit.

Observation: Leviticus understood the Promised Land as a physical place. Jesus, preaching the Kingdom of God, used similar images of garden-like growth to picture the spiritual life of Kingdom citizens. He depicted various states of the human heart (soil), showing how each affects our ability to live out God's word (seed). If our heart is "good soil," he said, "concerns, riches, and pleasures of life" won't be able to choke out the good fruit God wants to bear in us.

Application: What is your "Promised Land," the most important focus in your life? Who or what first planted "the seed" of God's Word in the soil of your life? What are some concerns or interests that have become less central to you as you've made God your top priority? Which of the four types of soil in Jesus' parable best describes how receptive you are to the seed right now?

Prayer: Lord God, the fruit you bear in my life is wonderful, and I want to be good soil for it. Give me clear vision as to what gets in the way of letting that fruit grow. Amen.

Saturday, March 17

Scripture: Hebrews 11:8-10, 11:39-12:2

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was going to receive as an inheritance. He went out without knowing where he was going. By faith he lived in the land he had been promised as a stranger. He lived in tents along with Isaac and Jacob, who were coheirs of the same promise. He was looking forward to a city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

All these people didn't receive what was promised, though they were given approval for their faith. God provided something better for us so they wouldn't be made perfect without us. So then let's also run the race that is laid out in front of us, since we have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us. Let's throw off any extra baggage, get rid of the sin that trips us up, and fix our eyes on Jesus, faith's pioneer and perfecter. He endured the cross, ignoring the shame, for the sake of the joy that was laid out in front of him, and sat down at the right side of God's throne.

Observation: Hebrews said that not only did Abraham not see himself as a citizen of Ur—he also didn't root his identity in Palestine, the land that God showed him. He was "looking forward to a city... whose architect and builder is God." As his spiritual descendants, all of us, too, are "immigrants on earth," looking for a heavenly Promised Land. Being citizens of God's kingdom means our ultimate allegiance is not to any earthly country or ruler, but to God's kingdom and its principles.

Application: When Abraham died, the "great nation" God promised was just one person—his son Isaac. Moses saw a vision of the Promised Land, but couldn't go in. King David dreamed of building God a beautiful Temple, but his son, King Solomon, got to build it. Hebrews 11 listed many heroes of faith, but concluded, "All these people didn't receive what was promised, though

they were given approval for their faith.” The true Promised Land, toward which all God’s people journey, is not in this dark, broken world—it is God’s eternal realm of light and unending life. What are your biggest God-given dreams? How can you pursue them fearlessly, knowing that however they do or don’t work out in this life, beyond the limits of this world all the worthy parts of them will come fully true in God’s eternal kingdom?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, keep my eyes always focused on your timeless Promised Land. Help me not to let anything on this earth draw me away from my citizenship in your eternal kingdom. Amen.