

“Back to Eden”

Sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant (Lynchburg, VA), 10/6/19

Yesterday a group of us embarked on a historic journey united in purpose as we entered into silent retreat together here on the grounds for the day --for our Annual Renewal Retreat, marking our church's 65th year of existence as a faith community. In the end, there were twelve of us (though some of us weren't able to be here the whole day). 12. I don't think it was by accident, but a wonderful symbol of God's completeness (like the 12 disciples), reminding us that even though we are small a community, we are still significant, still relevant. Today we return to our larger church family refreshed and intentioned, filled with renewed faith and hope in the idea that there is more to come, that together we are “going somewhere good,” which was our retreat theme. Several of us have committed ourselves as Covenant or Community Members, reexamining our call to commitment and signing the “covenant one with another.” By the way, I have placed the book on the piano and invite those who were unable to be here yesterday but feel the call to commit, please feel free to sign it after the service today.

Like the source for the responsive readings today, our retreat theme was borrowed from Richard Rohr's recent book *The Universal Christ*. His seventh chapter was titled “Going Somewhere Good,” which most of us read and worked through. Within its pages was a very basic principle: If we are to be godly, we must be okay with constant change—because that is our Creator's pattern. If we are God's children, then we must embrace death and life within ourselves—even if it hurts. And in that suffering, real love flows.

To understand God's universal plan, which is mostly a mystery in many ways and I would not pretend to understand its completeness except for glimpses now and then, I have always thought a good starting place is at its genesis. God has been revealing herself from the beginning. Our origin story in the Garden of Eden has been a secret obsession of mine. I love to think of it as a literal garden, but I am also fascinated with it as a figurative one too. There is so much in that story and even how it mirrors the stories of the ancient peoples around the world. I don't typically pull my secret obsessions into sermons for fear of seeming obsessive or foolish. However, the Garden of Eden story has much to tell I believe about God's interaction with humans and their relationship. I love how God seems to truly love Adam, and even enjoys walking in the Garden with him in the evening each day. There is something beautiful about that, so deep, so relational, so intimate. Then the love Adam and Eve seem to share. Then how that pesky serpent and the forbidden tree, and the choice to eat its fruit would cause all sorts of problems like a chain reaction. Once they eat of this forbidden fruit, they feel ashamed and suddenly realize their nakedness as if it's a bad thing now. How strange... since not all cultures around the world view nudity as something bad or sexual or anything but normal. But here we have Adam and Eve feeling so embarrassed, and no longer want to be bare before God. The symbolism is fascinating. Before there were not secrets with God, nor with each other. All was bare (literally). Now, suddenly there was a secret, a shame. They hid in the bushes in both fear and shame as God came, a welcome presence on most evenings, for a walk in the garden with “humankind” if we fold in the metaphor to its fullness here. Now God's presence wasn't welcome anymore, but instead Adam and Eve didn't want God to see them. They hid and then when they did emerge from the bushes, they covered themselves with the leaves from a fig tree. They could no longer accept themselves nor accept their Creator. The next part is heart breaking. God sends them out of the garden, banished, never to return. The relationship between Creator and creation had been severed. A once welcome presence between them both was now not a

welcome presence at all. Many of us as humans are often in the bushes, hiding, or when we do come out, we are covered with layers of built-up defenses to mask our true selves. It hurts too much to be real, to be vulnerable. However, unlike Adam and Eve that day in the Garden, you and I are at a different place spiritually, mentally. We want to return to that “welcome presence” relationship with our Creator. We want reconciliation. *Tikkun Olam* – restoration –the broken shards are returned and put back together.

But we know that this didn't just happen over night. It came often out of some sort of trauma, some sort of suffering. Richard Rohr, in *The Universal Christ*, says that, “*Love and suffering lead us toward the beginnings of a contemplative mind if we submit to them at all, and many of us do submit to them for a while. Too often, though, most of us soon return to dualistic inner argumentation and our old tired judgements, trying to retake control. Most of us leave this too-naked garden of Adam and Even and enter instead into the fighting and competing world of Cain and Abel...East of Eden...before we find ourselves longing and thirsting for what we once tasted in Eden. Perhaps we need to wander for a while to find the path... If we have good teachers, we will learn to develop a conscious nondual mind, a choiceful contemplation, some spiritual practices or disciplines that can return us to unitive consciousness on an ongoing and daily basis. Whatever practice it is, it must become our ‘daily bread’*” (p. 209). In our community we have tasted and we have seen that there is life in Eden, a place free from judgement, free from hatred and violence, oppression and subjugation; we do not have to live outside of God's goodness any more: God's kingdom is here and ever expanding. So, we return to Eden each time we practice our disciplines or make ourselves vulnerable and honest, naked and bare before God and one another –when we suffer with those who suffer, cry with those who cry, rejoice with those who rejoice, stand up for or with those whose voice is drowned out by society. And feed the hungry, shelter the abandoned, break the chains of those in bondage. God's kingdom is here. Eden is back! Now the question is: Do you want to walk in Eden? If so, God is a welcome presence in your life daily, but it comes with a price: Honesty, personal discomfort, being stretched in faith and actions. However, the price pales in comparison to the personal benefits of walking in Eden: Love, joy, peace, and hope. And these will fill you, permeate your essence, enliven you, embolden you, shape you, and shape the world around you. You will live a more fulfilled, purposeful life. You will be free because you made a single decision—to return to God's Eden. The downside is that it takes self-discipline.

Like Saint Paul's praise of his disciple Timothy (2 Timothy 1) for having a sincere faith (remember Jesus said that God seeks “worshippers who worship in spirit and in truth”-John 4), he also reminds him that God gives us the power to enact self-discipline. There is an importance to finding your own personal spiritual practice. These become the keys that unlock mysteries, unveil mirrors, and catapult you into God's presence over and over. As Richard Rohr says, it is “choiceful contemplation.” In other words, we choose whether or not to let ourselves fall deep into the presence of God. My encouragement for us all on this 65th year of this church's founding, is to choose to go deeper and further. Let us return to Eden together and be a light to the community at large, showing a path beyond the perpetual violence between “Cain and Abel,” where there is peace and unity, reconciliation with our Creator and each other. As Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God.” Let peace and love flow out from our walk, our talk, and our attitude as we choose to return to Eden daily.

Shalom