

## **GOD'S ABSURD PATIENCE**

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Matthew 2:33-46; Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16

The Bible begins and ends in a garden. Eden of old long ago, and the New Jerusalem. I'm speaking in poetry now. Not science. For this is the language of faith, not of geology, biology, or physics.

We start, according to the old sages, as dust and mist, an idea in God's mind, and in time, eons of time, the idea becomes an action and God forms of the dust and the mist a living being. A man and a woman at first (the details are controversial, so we'll leave it at that). And the man and the woman desire each other.

They have children, this man and this woman, and the garden that is their home is glorious. It is warm enough to go without clothes, bright enough to see by day, and dark enough to sleep by night. They warm each other by the fire and hold one another close, a natural kindness.

There are glorious trees in the garden, fruit trees to brighten the eye and apples and pears and oranges and lemons to delight the palate; and while the Genesis writer tells us more about the trees than anything else, there must have been wonderful flowers there as well, and figs and dates and grapes, and wheat and grain enough to make bread, after a bit of experimentation, more than enough to sustain the man and the woman.

It was a wonderful place to be, this garden. Think Sanibel Island, or Tahiti, or Turks and Caicos, lush and verdant, warm and welcoming, and even though it contained at least one serpent and one tree the fruit of which was not permissible to eat, it was the best place anyone ever lived because there were so few worries, so little danger, no death, no suffering.

It was a time before the anxieties we now bear, the ones that occupy our minds most of the time, job security, and economic collapses, and depleting 401K's, an era where it was not necessary to work, and women did not feel the pain of laboring in birth. It was too good to imagine, and unfortunately, too good to last.

We all know what happened, the one tree from which we could not eat, we ate. And never mind who ate first, and who tempted who, and the specifics of the thing; we are, after all, in this thing together. We fell, we humans, we fell. We fell from grace. We fell off the wagon. We fell from the lofty, soaring, enviable situation in which we were, to the one we now occupy. A world that must set aside its gardens in well placed locations, and fenced in areas, and plant them in special designs, except of course in the dwindling forests where God still does the planting, where God can get a seed in edgewise. It was all a garden, once, this earth, and now it is not.

And if the Bible began in a garden, a glorious Eden, it ends in a garden as well. In a sense Eden is reclaimed the way God sees it. In the last vision of that impenetrable book of Revelation, in chapter 22, there is a glorious, clear, and brilliant vision that emerges, for in the end the city is transformed into a garden once again, and in the New Jerusalem the throne of God has come down, and God dwells among us once again. A

river flows from the throne through the city, and on its banks is situated the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, and the leaves of the trees are for the healing of the nations.

In this inspiring final chapter, the creation is restored to its former completeness, and humanity lives in harmony with all that God has made. The people dwell in peace, and all things are made new again. It is a city unlike any other, because it is a garden, lush and verdant, green and hospitable, a place where life flourishes and God's people are one.

It is not like any city we know. It is not Calcutta, or Paris, not New York or Beijing, not even London or Dubai. And, of course, comparing our modern cities to the heavenly city seems absurd because our modern cities are such a counterpoint to what is yet to be that it does not yet appear to human eye or earthly imagination how we shall get from where we are to where God will take us. For our cities are not God's city.

We know this all too well. We have seen the effects and the after-effects of our tending of this garden earth. We know that we have despoiled the landscape and overwhelmed the creation, seized the resources and stunted the earth's regeneration. We are profligate in discarding waste, and we burn coal and refine oil that belch into the air the carbon and pollutants that are destroying the protective layers above the earth essential to a stable climate.

This has been the price of progress. Our creativity has made light and heat, warmth and comfort... but it has exacted a price. God admonished Adam and Eve to claim dominion over the earth, yes. But dominion is one thing, destruction is quite another.

There is abundant evidence that the earth is not healthy in the way it ought to be. And we know at least some of what we must do to correct the situation. Comparatively speaking, we have come late to a realization of our responsibility to be caretakers of the earth. And much of the time we feel overwhelmed by the task. We've seen the clips of the sloughing of the icecaps, the shrinking of the coastlines of Iceland and the North Pole, and we've heard the warnings from the scientists and the rebuttals contradicting them. We know the inconvenient truths that we have tried to avoid.

This summer we saw Beijing clouded in carbon emissions and shrouded in smog. And we know that the emerging economies of China and India are hungry to use more and more of the world's oil supply, competing with the United States for a larger take. All of which promises only to add to the problems we already experience. In time, they tell us, the climate of New York will resemble that of Miami.

Only the most thick headed have not yet gotten the message. I remember a conversation I had a few years ago with a chemist in my former church who was convinced that the chemical and oil industry had never contributed to ozone depletion. I remember the feeling, as he spoke, that there was no point in even challenging his thinking, so heavily had he been drinking of the Kool Aid!

The truth is that for far too long our stewardship of the earth's resources has been under indictment. And the evidence is stacking against us.

It is precisely the issue of stewardship that is at the heart of the lesson today taken from Matthew's gospel, another parable about a vineyard owner. But this time the issue at stake is not pay scales and unfair labor practices.

This time, the story is about a landowner who bought a vineyard and leased it to tenants who worked the land and took in the produce and at harvest time, decided to welch on the landowner. When the owner didn't get his check in the mail, the proceeds of the crops in payment for the use of the land, he sent a bill and asked that the tenants to pay their rent.

A reasonable amount of time passed but there was no word from the tenants. So the landowner sent a messenger, but the tenants refused him. In fact they roughed him up a bit and threw him off the land.

The owner decided to send another messenger but they had a smack down with him as well and threw him out.

At this point the owner, you would think, would understand that he had very unsavory types for tenants on his hands. And most of us here could understand if the landowner hired his own wiseguys to go over and break a few kneecaps. Surely by now it was clear that the tenants were disreputable, and the only thing they could understand would be a show of force.

You would think so... but this was no ordinary landowner. No *ordinary* landowner at all. Which is why the next move in the parable is virtually unthinkable. It is not anything you or I would do. The next move in the parable is risky. It is not something you should do at home. What the landowner did, believe it or not was to send his own son as his representative to collect the rent. The landowner's reasoning was at the very least naïve, "They will respect my son," he thought.

But the son was the heir of the owner, a fact not lost on the wicked tenants. The son was the one who, if anything happened to the landowner, would inherit the property. So true to form, when the son of the landowner showed up on the property, the tenants shot him dead. He never had a chance, so evil and reckless were these tenants.

And Jesus asked, "When the owner of the vineyard comes, what do you think he will he do to those tenants?" The people said to him, "He will put them to a miserable death, and leave the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time..." And Jesus said, "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produce the fruits of the kingdom."

In its original context the parable was thinly veiled as a warning to the leaders of Judaism. As Matthew tells us, "the chief priests and Pharisees, when they heard Jesus' parables, realized that he was talking about them." In other words, the Judaism of Jesus' time was being likened by Jesus to the wicked tenants who treated the prophets and the Son of God woefully. From them the kingdom of God would be taken away; or so he warned.

Now that is a dangerous interpretation for contemporary Christianity; we have handled it so badly in the past, our anti-Semitism and prejudice getting the best of us. It is not the primary meaning for the parable anymore. For that I think we need to hear the

same note of judgment on ourselves that Jesus sounded for those who first heard the parable, allowing it to speak to us as it did to his first listeners.

Heard in today's context, the parable sounds a note of warning about the creation, the garden which we have been given on loan. If the vineyard of the parable is likened to the creation that God has made, then we are the tenants, and the haunting question that the parable poses for us is the question of our stewardship, the care we are taking of the earth. What will we return to God of all that we have received?

Maybe like me, you are somewhat overwhelmed by the enormity of the challenge of environmental care and conservation. It seems like such an overwhelming responsibility.

But for us as Christians there is a particular accountability that we have as stewards of the earth, a responsibility that is uniquely born of our relationship with God. A lot of what stands as environmental concern is mixed in with energy independence and so it is politically charged. The whole "Drill, baby, drill," issue confuses patriotism, with need, and leaves the stewardship of the earth orphaned. At the same time the warnings of environmental decay of so many environmentalists sound so "doomsday" in nature that and they tend to paralyze rather than inspire.

For us, as Christians, our motivation to care for the earth, must be rooted in our accountability to God for the gift that God has given us in the earth, and the trust that God has placed in us as tenants. We need not act out of fear but out of faith, not out of pessimism but out of hope, not out of terror but out of trust that the earth is God's creation and we are its caretakers, accountable to the One who has given it to us as tenants to keep for a time, and to sustain us always.

Here at the church a small group of people concerned for our stewardship of the earth's resources have focused the attention of the Session and the congregation on the simple acts of care and concern that we can perform as good stewards of the earth. The Conserve First committee has reminded us to use renewable resources, they have sold water thermoses that can be brought to church and used again and again. They have challenged us to give up the use of Styrofoam cups which don't degrade. They have encouraged our office staff to use recycled paper, and to shred and recycle used paper. The children in the church have asked the Session to consider how to use energy efficient lighting here in the sanctuary and throughout the building in order to save on oil. And in the improvements that are being planned for the Mellin-Macnab Building, the expectation is that there will be many features of the building that will become more energy efficient and reduce wasteful heating and cooling losses.

They're small steps, but they're important ones. Small steps, added together can make a big difference, you know. If just a quarter of American families used 10 fewer plastic bags a month, we would save 2.5 billion bags a year.<sup>1</sup>

Every ton of recycled office paper saves 380 gallons of oil. Imagine how many tons of office paper are created in New York City every day! Americans use 50 million tons of paper annually – consuming more than 850 million trees.

About 1% of U.S. landfill space is full of disposable diapers, which take 500 years to decompose. With as many babies as we have in our congregation, well, there are a lot of diapers!

If you turn down your central heating thermostat just one degree, fuel consumption is cut by as much as 10%. And one ton of carbon dioxide released into the air can be prevented by replacing every 75 watt light bulb with energy efficient bulbs.

Small steps are signs of true stewardship, and while such insignificant conservation actions may not save the earth in and of themselves, the earth will not be preserved without them either.

Christian stewardship is understanding that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein. It is understanding that we are the tenants of the vineyard and that we are accountable for our watch, not only delivering to our children and grandchildren a world that is habitable and sustainable, but also to God a return on what has been entrusted to us. God, if the parable teaches us anything, is absurdly patient with us, waiting for us to do rightly, to live justly, to wake up and understand that we must care for this vineyard with the same patience and love that God has cared for it.

On this World Communion Sunday, in far corners of the earth, we are connected to people whose faces we have not seen, in places we have not been, in settings we cannot imagine. We are united at this table by our oneness in Christ, and our stewardship of the earth which is our home, a trust from the One who placed us in the garden at the first, and who stands in the garden at the last. In his name we have come today, to be sustained by the fruits of the earth, so that we may be better stewards of the earth.

May God grant us the strength and the faithfulness to return to God the produce of that which we have been given, and to do so with thanksgiving.

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<sup>1</sup> These environmental "factoids" that follow are quoted from an online source, "<http://library.thinkquest.org/11353/facts.htm>".