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Genesis 3:22-24; Rev. 22:1-5
“Garden to Garden: Eden to Heaven”
Year B – Lent Midweek 1
February 21, 2018

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Whenever I start up my computer, the screen turns on and lands on what’s called the lock screen, which is where I enter my password and sign in to my computer. And that lock screen always has a picture, which changes on a daily basis according to the wisdom of Microsoft. And it’s usually some beautiful scenery or landscape of a fantastic place somewhere on earth.

My favorite is whenever it shows some place tropical. There are bright blue skies, crystal clear waters, palm trees, white sand, and usually some green mountains in the background. Because my gaze sometimes wanders out my office window, just behind the computer monitor, and I see Northern Michigan weather in February, which of course, is beautiful in its own right. But I also let my gaze drift back to my computer, and I can’t help but get lost in that scenery. I think to myself, “Ah, what *paradise*.”

But I was thinking, as I was preparing for this evening’s service, that no place that could appear on my computer screen, no place that I could visit in person, could ever compare to the paradise that God created in the beginning, a garden called Eden. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. He created the universe and the earth. He created all living creatures that crawl on the ground, that swim in the waters, and that fly in the air. He created mankind; in His own image, male and female He created them. And it was good! *Very* good. It was perfect.

He placed man and woman, the crown of His creation, in the garden called Eden. There was no need to for hard labor to work the ground, because the ground produced all that they needed in abundance. There was no need to worry about the weather because the world was perfect and danger did not exist. There was no need to worry about anything because everything was exactly right, exactly perfect, and exactly how God intended for it to be. It was paradise.

And the best part of this paradise was the relationship God had with mankind. God and mankind were united together in perfect harmony. God and mankind walked hand in hand, talked face to face, and lived side by side in perfect communion. Nothing was there to separate them. And so it was from the beginning.

But then, mankind desired something other than what God had given them. Adam and Eve desired to be like God. The old, evil foe tempted our first parents to question the relationship they had with God by casting doubt on God’s integrity. Satan whispered that God was hiding something from them, holding back the ability to be like Him. And the tragic thing was, they believed the lie, and so they ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—and they tasted death.

At that moment, this perfect paradise was lost. And more was lost than just a geographical place. The relationship that mankind had with God was now severed—a chasm opened up. An eternal immortality in perfection was exchanged for everlasting suffering and

death. And it corrupted the relationship that humans had with creation, as life would now be hard, and it corrupted the relationship that they had with each other.

Adam and Eve now knew good and evil. They lost the image of God that they had been given. They were subject to pain and suffering and deadliness, all as a result of sin. Therefore God could not allow them to continue eating of the fruit of the tree of life, otherwise, they would live forever in this deadly state of sin and suffering. If they were allowed to keep eating of the tree of life, they would be sentenced to a literal hell on earth.

Therefore, as terrible as it was, Adam and Eve had to be driven away from the Garden of Eden. Their return was forbidden by the flaming sword of the cherubim. They were exiled from a perfect place of light and beauty and thrown into the darkness, a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. And they would know what it was like to be mortal.

Dust to dust, as we heard last week—we were created in God’s image from the dust, but because of our sin, we return to the dust in disgrace. We were created to live forever in the presence of God, but now we are exiled to a land of darkness and death, separated from God, and from His courts in heaven, by a wall of our own sin. How tragic for Adam and Eve. How tragic for their children. How tragic for us!

If only we could become perfect once again; if only we could resist all sin and walk in absolute purity; if only we could be found righteous in God’s sight by the works of our hands, then—only then—could we return to the garden. Its gates would be thrown open, and we would be received with great rejoicing. Once again the garden could be our dwelling place and God would be our constant companion, as we would walk together once more in the cool of the day—if only we could become perfect.

But our sin is ever before us. It is ever within our hearts. We cannot return from our exile by our own reason or strength. We cannot enter into the presence of God by the work of our hands. We can’t. We find ourselves helpless and hopeless, wandering in the darkness. We hang our heads unable to look our Creator in the face, unable to see His glory, unable to meet His eye.

From the standpoint of our exile, we find that the journey is too difficult, too demanding, too treacherous. We need help. We need a Champion. We need One who could do it for us and restore us to God’s presence, One who could return us to the garden.

A Redeemer, a Messiah, a Christ. And this is exactly who God promises Adam and Eve before they were expelled from the Garden of Eden. God told them that the darkness would be overcome by the One who would do battle with the evil serpent. The Seed of the woman would crush the head of Satan, even as her Seed suffered the pain and indignity of bruised flesh. The Promised One would overcome; the ultimate battle would be fought on a cross. The burden He would carry to the cross would be our sin. The sacrifice would be His body. *Christ* would suffer what we deserve. *He* would bear what we could not. And He would accomplish that which has always escaped us: a return from the exile of sin and death.

Jesus Christ, on the tree, removed the dividing wall of hostility. The dividing wall of sin. The blood of Jesus, the Lamb, cleanses and returns us to our God. And to all those who die believing in him, Jesus declares, “Today you will be with Me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).

And so, it has come to pass. We have been redeemed and restored by our Savior Jesus Christ. He has fought the good fight in our place and overcome all that exiled us from the garden. From paradise lost to paradise won. And now, the gates of the heavenly garden stand open before us. We who were exiled from Eden will return through the gates of everlasting life.

Yes, the day will come when we will walk through those gates and see the Lamb on His throne. There we will see the waters of life flowing around the tree of life, and we will be able to eat of it once again. There we will bask in the Light that is the Lamb and dwell in His presence forever. Garden to garden—from Eden to heaven—a return from exile. In Jesus' name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

(This sermon is adapted from CPH materials for the series, *Return to Exile: A Lenten Journey* 2017.)