

Lent 1. March 5, 2017.

This week I found myself captivated, in a way I didn't expect, with the contrasting locations of these two iconic temptation scenes: the garden and the desert. As I thought about these places, the garden and the desert, I began to see them running, intertwined and contrasting, all the way through Lent. Perhaps it is because this is the first year, I think in decades, that St. Christopher's does not have a Lenten garden tended by Rachel Bergstrom. Each year, Rachel would tend a small garden right up front in the church through Lent. It began as a desert, completely empty except for sand, and changed slightly each week until it grew into the garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus is again tempted and finally arrested on Good Friday, and then into the Easter garden where Mary Magdalene mistakes the risen Lord for a potentially perfidious gardener, until he calls her by name.

But once you've seen the garden-desert motif in Lent, you can't unsee it: Israel's 40 years in the wilderness, Jesus' 40 days in the desert, the gardens of Eden, Gethsemane, and Easter. Desert-garden, garden-desert, it's everywhere until you have no choice but to preach a sermon about it. The obvious point our stories today make is that temptation happens in both places. But we shouldn't think of the garden as the place where we fail and the desert as the place where we succeed. That simplicity is itself a temptation to be overcome, for Jesus is tempted too in the garden at Gethsemane: to dodge his fate, to allow his followers to take up arms to defend him, and he redeems the garden by his faithfulness then. And Israel fails many times in the desert in Exodus—hence their long stay there. No, the key to success or failure is not the locale, but the presence of Jesus or an unwavering dependence on God.

Nor should we think of the garden as the paradise of cliché: some kind of cross between a Disney movie with talking animals and a nudist colony with an all you can eat fruit buffet and a VIP section that is strictly enforced. No—notice that God sets Adam there to till the garden, to cultivate it, to work, to farm. It's not a place for holy eternal nude sun-bathing. The garden is lush, orderly, and bountiful, but with limits and opportunities for meaningful work and even some danger. It is, in short, the place of everyday life—a good life, to be sure, but the place where we live and work. Where we generally think that we know what the limits are and where the dangers lie. A place we cultivate and where most of the time we have some sense of what our labor will produce. It may be a bit boring, but it is also meaningful and rich.

The desert, on the other hand, is wild. It is outside our comfort zone, away from home, with limited resources and great unpredictability. It is unmapped, uncharted, untamed. It is not a place we visit—it is a place to which we are driven. Usually, we are driven to the wilderness when we have somehow messed up in the garden. There, we don't know what waits over the next hill. The contours of the land are unfamiliar, we are disoriented, lacking our usual familiar landmarks and environment. It's a bit like Riverside, Illinois, where turning right might take you backwards or underground or into an unnatural lake. The desert is a divorce, an illness, the death of a loved one, bankruptcy, being laid off from the job you've worked for 25 years, being betrayed by a friend.

We live in the garden and we go to the desert. And all of us have been in both places, though some of us feel like we've been in the desert for a long time. The point to

be made here is that the basic spiritual requirements for each place are the same. Temptation and adventure come in both places. In the garden, the challenges come in familiar forms, as things that we recognize, things that belong. The snake belonged there, as one of the creatures God had created. Adam and Eve are surrounded by their stuff, the normal stuff of their daily lives, and maybe this comfort played a part in them almost sleep-walking away from their true selves. In the desert, life is harder but in a way, the starkness of it makes the implications of our choices easier to discern. Jesus encounters the devil, not a snake. His temptation comes in the form of performing miracles and worshipping the devil, not just eating a nice looking piece of fruit. The desperation and wildness of the desert can actually make things easier to see. In the desert, we are tempted to steal a car or to start a fight; in the garden, we are tempted to shift some numbers around on a balance sheet or stay silent as our nation marches to an unnecessary war.

But the temptations work the same way, and the way to overcome them is the same, as well. Both the serpent and the devil essentially try to undermine the temptee's trust in God by telling them half-truths set in a false context. The devil assures Eve that she won't die right away, which in some senses is not a falsehood, but it also isn't really the question at the heart of the matter. The devil cites scripture to Jesus, but all in an effort to get him to hotwire his messiahship, to *take* food, power, and glory instead of embracing the patient delay of all these things that actually constitutes the way of the savior.

Not being God, we probably don't have a fool-proof way to overcome the ordinary temptations of the garden and the extraordinary temptations of the desert. But Jesus remembers and trusts the promises of God, whereas Eve and Adam do not. Jesus remembers not only who he is, but also *whose* he is. This work, of remembering that we belong to God and of making God's promises the ground on which our lives stand is not a one-time decision. It is an ongoing process, a practice, of consistently trying with the help of God and our friends to turn our lives in that direction. Of reminding ourselves that God has promised life out of death, justice through hope, and peace through love.

Some of us may be in the desert now, in a dark night of the soul, a bit lost. And I'm sorry because I know it's hard and my best idea is to ask you to invite some of us to go there with you. But for those of us who are more or less in the garden, in our normal orderly lives, Lent gives us a chance to take an imaginary trip into the desert—to go to that place where the choices are stark, where we can see that the serpent is a devil, that the forbidden fruit is a betrayal of who and whose we are, where we can see the truth about ourselves and our lives. And then we can see the garden aright: as a place of great spiritual adventure and danger, with opportunities on every side to choose love or faithlessness, to choose life or death. Amen.