

“Where Are You?”

Genesis 3:1-9

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Next to the cross, there isn't a greater symbol in the entire Bible than that of a "garden." The Old Testament opens with an allegory concerning the first two human beings--Adam and Eve—in a garden called EDEN. It was in Eden that the Fall took place with Adam DISOBEYING God and thus resulting in the loss of their innocence and the introduction of sin, suffering, and death to the rest of the world. However, in the NEW Testament, we are introduced to ANOTHER garden- one called GETHSEMANE where Jesus Christ--the SECOND Adam--OBEYED God with his decision to die on the cross. As a result, he OVERTURNED the effects of the Fall to bring grace and salvation to our fallen world. In both Eden and Gethsemane, those two gardens become a place of decision. They are symbolic of the place where the soul's deepest and most intense struggles are often held- like the cave where Elijah sought refuge from the fury of Jezebel, or the "Valley of the Shadow of Death" spoken of by the Psalmist.

It may be said that EVERYONE of us has spent time alone there in that garden AT ONE TIME OR ANOTHER, and some of us may even be there RIGHT NOW. It may be a garden of loneliness, a garden of temptation, a garden of pain, a garden of tears, a garden of sorrow, a garden of addictions. You see, it is a garden not found on any maps because it is not an exterior place but an INTERIOR garden located within each of our hearts. It is the garden we have found ourselves in when a friend or family member has died and we retreat there to silently grieve. It is the garden we have found ourselves in when we have been deeply hurt or betrayed or abandoned, especially by someone we love. And so that garden becomes a sanctuary from our deepest and most private hurts.

Sixteen years ago, a novel was published that soon became an international bestseller and was subsequently made into a major motion picture- I'm talking about William Paul Young's *The Shack*. It's a story about a daughter's murder and the love and redemption one finds through such a heinous tragedy. In interview after interview, Young explained that his "shack" served the same purpose as that "garden" has for us, that it became for him "a metaphor for that place where we get stuck or damaged, or where we've made really bad choices, or where we've piled up a lot of stuff in our lives that we don't want to go back to and deal with." At one point, he explained that the "shack" was a symbol for all the ways he hated himself. After his wife discovered that he had been having an affair with one of her best friends, he was forced to confront his wife and his own actions. He said it took four days for him to tell her his many secrets- the sexual abuse he suffered as a child...the deep rejection he felt by his father...the thin layer of perfectionism that covered a profound sense of shame. It took years for the healing to take place--in his soul as well as in his marriage—but in the end, he learned the most important lesson of all, that there isn't anything so damaged that God can't heal it." That shack in his book became his "garden"- the place where all the pain could come out and the healing could finally take place.

In our account this morning, the Fall has already occurred. Through their disobedience, both Adam and Eve have moved from what had once been a place of trust and security in their relationship to one of un-trust and insecurity- both in regards to themselves as well as with God. They can no longer look at each other without guilt and fear and suspicion coming between them. The serpent had promised them knowledge and power so that they TOO could become like God and they would never again have to feel like they were his servants. They were attracted to the promise of absolute autonomy and total independence but ESPECIALLY the knowledge that they could live WITHOUT having to be accountable to someone else- like God.

However, instead of the freedom and power they were promised, they are now overcome with feelings of guilt and shame and they know they must now face the consequences of their action. Their initial instinct is to run from the face of God, to go into hiding so that God cannot find them. Thus, not only do they experience a rupture in their relationship with each other and in their relationship with God but they are deceived into thinking that by withdrawing into the furthest reaches of that garden, they can actually elude the voice and the approach of God. They believe that if they can only flee as fast and far as they can, they just might possibly be able to ESCAPE God and thus find safety and security beyond the reach of his approach.

One of the greatest self-deceptions is to tell ourselves that we can successfully escape the presence of God, that we can live our lives completely apart from him. What makes God GOD in the FIRST place is the fact that no one CAN escape his gaze or his presence. The Psalmist put it best when he said:

*Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night',
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.
-Psalm 139:7-12*

The reality is that nothing can be more futile or deceptive than to think that we can escape the notice of God as God knows what we ARE and what we DO. God penetrates the innermost parts of our spirits so that our entire inner life--every one of our thoughts and desires, our feelings and imaginations--are known to him. Hence, there can be no ultimate privacy or final isolation for us as we are always held and comprehended by something, someone far greater than ourselves who has a claim upon us and demands a response from us. The bottom line is that we can never escape our responsibility to God or to one another no matter HOW hard we might try.

We are told that in the cool of the day, God came walking among the garden. He was looking for the first couple and as he walked, he called out to them, "Adam, where are you?"

Eve, where are you?” At the sound of his voice, we would have expected them to jump for joy and to come running as fast as their feet could carry them, yelling, “Here we are, God! Over HERE! Gee it’s great to see you!” but not at all. Rather, at the sound of his voice, they retreated ever deeper into the dense thicket hoping that God would just give up and go away. By now, they had to be living in terrible fear of having to face God. Martin Luther points out in his commentary on Genesis that following the Fall, the first couple’s dread of God had become SO great that the sound of a small leaf rustling across the ground was enough to stop their hearts out of fear! It’s the same reaction any of US might have when we’re driving down the highway when suddenly a police car appears in our rearview mirror. You know you haven’t done anything wrong- certainly not speeding or driving recklessly. Yet, at the sight of that black and white vehicle behind you, you’re seized with panic and dread as your whole life suddenly appears before your eyes.

You see, everything about their relationship to God had now changed. They no longer viewed God the same way a son or daughter might look upon a doting father or mother- with a loving, trustful, and secure gaze. No, that kind of a close and intimate relationship which they had once enjoyed with God was now gone. Rather, they view God as a stern and demanding figure who wants nothing more than to punish them the same way an unmerciful judge would throw the book at a guilty criminal- in their mind, that’s how they now see God.

That question, “Where are you?” is one that reverberates in the heart of every man, women, and child. It is the very first question God ever asks of any human being, and there is no more basic or profound question that can be asked than THAT one. With those words, God was not inquiring behind which bush or tree they might be hiding behind for as we saw, God ALREADY knew where they were. What he WAS asking was, “Adam, Eve, do you know where you now stand in relation to me, how because you couldn’t trust me, you caused a breach in our relationship that will affect us as long as you and your posterity shall live. Do you not know that your current actions yield eternal consequences and that nothing YOU do will ever be able to change that.” What’s MORE, he was asking, “Do you know where you are now in your relationship TO EACH OTHER, that from now on, instead of enjoying a healthy love relationship filled with trust and security between the two of you, your relationship will be henceforth filled with all kinds of selfishness and suspiciousness and animosity.

That selfishness and distrust emerges ALMOST IMMEDIATELY as they both try to vindicate themselves before God. Instead of confessing their sin and thus gaining a chance to experience the mystery of God’s grace, they wander down the ages-old path of self-exoneration and blaming the OTHER for their own misdeed. So the great game of passing the buck now begins. Verse 12 of our text says, “And he [Adam] said, ‘The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.’” In other words, he’s saying that she’s the ROOT CAUSE of the whole problem because she enticed him to eat of the tree. He reasons that Eve knew she had done wrong and because she didn’t want to be punished all by herself, she purposely lured him in and caused him to share in her sin. Thus, SHE’S the one ultimately at fault. Not surprisingly, the woman is EQUALLY as defensive. She tells God, “Don’t blame ME, the SERPENT- he TRICKED me. It’s all HIS fault!” She doesn’t want to take responsibility for her actions any more than ADAM does.

The great German theologian and preacher Helmut Thielicke, however, goes one step further and imagines God now turning to the serpent and asking him to give account of HIMSELF. Thielicke writes:

If God had pursued the questioning further, I have no doubt that the serpent TOO would not have been at a loss for an answer. He certainly would have replied: "Why should you call ME, of all people, to account? Why talk to me AT ALL? Weren't YOU, the Almighty, the one who made the devil and set him loose on earth? Wasn't it in YOUR name that I became a devil. Wasn't I just carrying out YOUR orders?...But if that's the case, then YOU are the one who is responsible. Then you can't call either me or my victims to account. YOU, God, and you ALONE are the cause of the mischief. YOU'RE the one who pulls the strings in this wicked game.

In other words, Thielicke, a good Lutheran HIMSELF, is trying to show that not only does sin in our lives alter the way we come to view ourselves and our relations with one another, it so distorts our perspective to the point that in our desperation, we will go so far as to attribute the source of all life's problems TO GOD if we have to in order to keep from taking responsibility for our actions. And so Adam tells God that it was all EVE'S fault, and Eve tells God it was the SERPENT'S fault, and the serpent tells God that of all persons, he—GOD--is the source of all their troubles, the one who deserves all the blame.

Thus this first act of disobedience on humanity's part was really not the innocent gesture of taking a bite from an apple as it is usually portrayed in the cartoons or comic books. No, it was nothing less than an act of TREASON on humanity's part, an attempt to OVERTHROW THE AUTHORITY OF GOD so that we could be rid of God FOREVER and never again have to be accountable to him or anyone ELSE for that matter. In this story, we see the terrible depth and logic to that sin, how the heart will go so far as to blame GOD HIMSELF for all the problems in the world and in one's life so that we might go on affirming our own innocence and goodness in the sight of all.

Church, isn't this also the logic of sin in our OWN lives? The story of the first two human beings is not about two actual historical persons so that we might object, "Oh those two jerks- if only they hadn't of done what they did, then we wouldn't be in the mess we find ourselves in today." NO, THAT'S not the purpose of the story. Rather, it's an allegory about the human condition. The story of Adam and Eve is actually the story of OURSELVES. It is meant to be a mirror held before our eyes so that we can see finally who we really are and understand the consequences of those many acts that often break trust with God and with each other. The fact is that Adam is US and EVE is US, and if we can't see OURSELVES in this story, then we have missed the point of it ENTIRELY.

Each time we intentionally deceive someone, every time we steal to enrich ourselves or lie to protect ourselves, every act of infidelity or betrayal committed against those who are nearest and dearest to us whether they be our wives, our husbands, our children or our closest friends, we wind up recommitting the SAME act that Adam and Eve did in that garden- we break trust with them and so the Fall takes place ALL OVER AGAIN. Subsequently, in the depths of our being, deep in our heart of hearts, there is a still, small voice that softly and gently inquires, "Where are you? Do you know where you are?" It is not a voice of judgment but rather a voice of pardon and mercy and grace. It is the voice of God trying to awaken us to our own true

condition. What that voice is ACTUALLY asking is, “Do you know what you have just done? Do you understand how it has profoundly affected your relation to your wife, your husband, your brother, your sister, your neighbor, your employer? Don’t you realize that the greatest things in the world are loving friendships filled with openness and honesty and trust, and that by your dishonest actions, you have now caused people to look at you with suspicion and distrust? And furthermore, do you not know that when you hurt others, you also hurt and disappoint ME, that it causes a breach in our OWN relationship?”

Like that first couple, our initial instinct is to run and to hide, to escape from that which we think has come to judge and condemn us. But we soon discover how running away is always FUTILE because the REAL judge is never that voice or God but actually OURSELVES--our own HEART, our accusing CONSCIENCE--and that is something we can NEVER escape. But we try all the same- we try to drink or drug ourselves in an effort to forget, or else we lose ourselves in every kind of pleasure thinking that such activities will help ease the guilt and shame that continues to hound us, but ultimately they don’t. Yet, not all the drugs or alcohol or pleasure in all the world can help a person escape himself or his conscience.

What I wish to say to you this morning is that every one of us at different times in our lives will find ourselves in the midst of our very OWN garden, in what may be a time of trial and testing and great temptation. It is then we will hear that same voice in our heart of hearts inquiring of US, “David, where are you?” and “Mary, where are you?” It’s not asking where in that garden we may be or behind which bush we may happen to be hiding, but rather asking each of us to take full account of our lives that we might be awakened to our own true condition. It’s not a voice any of us can ever escape or should be afraid of for it is really the voice of GOD, in fact, it is the voice of JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF addressing us through his Holy Spirit. And he does not draw near to CONDEMN us but rather to HELP us, to SAVE us, to offer us his MERCY.

Jesus comes to us, NOT as our judge and executioner, but as our DEFENDER, as a PATIENT FATHER who loves us--his children--with an everlasting love and who desires nothing but the very best for us. It is he who will protect us from our conscience, he who tears up the bill of indictment against us, and he who grants us a new, unburdened future that we might breathe freely again. He says to us, “Accuse yourself if you will, but trust that I will stick to you EVEN when you despise yourself. I will NEVER give up on you!” Only his continuous offer of love and grace can help us to become honest with ourselves and with God. If we only risk coming out from behind our bush and opening ourselves up to him and receiving his generous offer of pardon and of love, we may then discover that we will never have to hide from him ever again. Let us pray...

Heavenly Father, thank you for coming to us even when we try to elude your presence. You have proven to us again and again how you will never let us go. And you do not come to judge or condemn us but to offer us your love and the opportunity for a new beginning. Help us to receive your offer of forgiveness and new life so that instead of guilt and shame, we may abide with you and our neighbors in a new relationship of trust and love. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.