

Sermon: From Garden to Desert and Back Again**Scripture: Luke 4:1-13****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: February 14, 2016**

It's a good day to consider Jesus facing the temptations of the devil in the harsh elements of the desert. It's a different kind of wilderness that New England offers in winter, but this is good for as an object lesson this has got to be Winchester at its most forbidding, threatening, and lifeless! -33 wind-chill?! C'mon now, I thought we would get warmer by moving here from Vermont! It's only -31 wind chill in Burlington! In any case I would guess many of you can better identify as well with what it means to be tempted as I imagine you were tempted not to get out of bed and drag yourself to church this morning?! But great job! You fought the temptation and won and now we are all cozy and warm again together in here.

And for that, I am not just going to consider the forbidding desert and the temptations that Jesus faced there, I also want to take a moment and call to mind the inviting warmth and green of gardens. Remember those? For in this world there are lifeless, threatening, frigid or scorching deserts and there are lush, warm, fertile gardens. And in our lives there times when we are frolicking through the green gardens of new life and new love, accomplishment and satisfaction, peace and harmony and there are deserts of struggle and depression, suffering and trial.

This interplay between garden and desert plays a central role in our sacred scriptures. There's something here in these opposites that is apparently key to the mystery of our lives and the wisdom of God. For the whole story of salvation in our scriptures begins when the human being is created in the garden. And the story ends once you read through the Old Testament and come to the end of the Gospels, where? In the garden with an empty tomb.

In between, as the story is told, there is this movement back and forth from garden to the desert back to the garden and exiled again and another return. Adam and Eve in the garden until they are exiled to wander the earth. Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness and eventually after 40 years make it to the Holy Land, the garden of milk and honey. Over the centuries they are dispersed and exiled and

return again. Jesus is born in the Holy Land but immediately he and his parents become refugees, exiled into desert lands of Egypt. He returns, grows and is baptized along the fertile banks of the Jordan and immediately driven out into the desert for 40 days and nights. And then night before his trial, his suffering and death on a cross, do you remember where he goes to pray? He goes to a garden, the Garden of Gethsemane where with an *internal* anguish of the desert he prays to God to take the cup from him. He's taken by force out of that garden and driven to the desert hilltop of Golgotha where he is crucified and dies until his body is returned to the garden. And it's there the empty tomb is found and on Easter morning the new shoots of life begin to form.

That is the shape and form of the Christian story of salvation - this movement between garden and desert, home and exile, departure and return. It is also the story of our own personal journeys and the story of the turning epochs of world history. The promise of our faith is that it's all derived from the garden and returning to the garden eventually. But you might notice within these stories of garden and desert and back again there is also this recurring theme of temptation.

In the garden of Eden, the temptation comes in the form of being tempted to eat from the fruit of the Tree of Good and Evil. In our scripture for this morning Jesus in the desert is tempted by the devil 3 times. And at the end of his earthly ministry, in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus must pass his final temptation: he goes with his disciples and he tells them to stay there with him, to stay awake and pray so that they will not fall into temptation (stay here with me, remain here with me, watch and pray, watch and pray). And he goes a stones throw away, the scripture says, and kneels on the ground praying "father, take this cup away from me!"

Have you prayed that prayer before? Take this cup from me... or take it from my child or my loved one. Through Jesus we have permission to pray that prayer to God with all our hearts. It is the prayer of the soul in the barren lands of the wilderness when all remembrance of the green aromatic garden has been replaced by the gray ash of something that is but that we do not want to be so. The temptation is to somehow choose an easier path, one with less integrity or less fidelity or less love, anything to make the struggle easier, the pain less, but the

invitation is to turn from our desires and finally say “not my will but yours, O God, be done.” A final letting go of what I want to have happen and a trusting that the dead lifeless pit of this moment will somehow be planted by God in future’s garden and from it will arise new life that we cannot now imagine.

The temptation is to rely on our own sense of things and to disbelieve that the providence, power, and love of God holds real sway in our lives and the life of the world. We resist the temptation by living with integrity, fidelity and love as best we know how, come what may, whatever the cost may be and trust the rest to God. The temptation is to curb and short-cut and bargain and fudge our way to a future that we can understand and imagine and believe in. But our future is not necessarily God’s future and God’s future will be more fitting for who we are and where we need to be. The temptation is not to trust it, to devour the fruit of the tree of knowledge and run with the limited knowledge we have... when usually our knowledge is short-sighted and limited and tends toward the self-serving while God’s knowledge is – to state the obvious – bigger and broader and serves the whole that we cannot see. If we can only give over to God in trust...

Tracy and I spent the last 24 hours over at the Benedictine Monastery in CT where we first met. We gather occasionally with a lay community there at the Abbey that Tracy has been a part of since her teen years. One of the couples in that group has a good friend, Nelba Marquez-Green whose 6 year-old daughter was killed at Sandy Hook about 4 years ago. Talk about a desert. The garden of their lives was brutally converted into wasteland desert by a mentally ill Adam Lanza and his semi-automatic rifle one morning. How many times must her parents have prayed at the start of a new day for that cup to be taken away somehow, for it all to have been a nightmare from which they could awaken? But if you were to Google the Ana Grace Project, you would find there a remarkable thing, for what that mother has done is taken the gray ash of her desert and she has developed an organization that seeks to promote good in this world, to intervene in the lives of Adam Lanza-type children who are crying for help with mental illness or traumatic childhoods and they are connecting them with mental health professionals in schools and elsewhere

to get them the help they need. From her desert is being planted a garden, a garden of renewal and new life from the seed of the life of her little daughter.

But somehow, still, such a journey from desert to garden is not so neat. It does not make ok completely something that was so horribly tragic and wrong in this world. Her daughter's death is final and irreversible. There are things in the desert-lands of this world, like the leadened water of Flint Michigan, where we have despoiled the garden and the effects simply aren't redeemable or reversible. There are tragic deaths like LouAnne Clavette or Kyra Komen from this community that can't be written off as just desert moments that will turn to garden one day.

Sometimes the movement just isn't so neat and simple from garden to desert and back again. Sometimes it feels as though it's only sub-zero wind-chilled desert in this life.

But this is where we cling to the promise of faith, not naively but boldly, trusting that which we cannot know or see for sure but that we have been promised: that in the fullness of time, at the end of all things, all of this does not just fade away into the desert of oblivion but in the end it is all restored in the Garden of Life. Let me end with some of the last words from the last book of the Bible. Revelation, chapter 22: "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb, down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing 12 crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of nations." From Garden to desert and back again. May God give you strength for the journey, Amen.