

metaphor for a moment: God's presence and life-giving love is as pervasive around us as the air that pushes in on our bodies. It's always there, waiting, for us simply to breathe it in. When we do, we have life.

The greatest of gardens can start with one seed. Seed is programmed to do one thing and one thing only – to burst forth into new life. Given the opportunity it will grow. A seed simply waits patiently for the opportunity to do what it is built to do. It is the same with us. We are created for a deep life in God. We only need to help it along by tending to that growth a little bit daily, with the trust and hope that the garden in us will grow. As a congregation we have a role as well. The church is to be like an oasis in the desert. Our life together here is to help each of us glimpse a little bit more clearly the presence of God as we gather in worship. Here we can live out the life of love that Christ called us to, and as we do that we can be a sign of God's kingdom here and now, present and alive. Here we can share our stories of faith, and encourage one another, so we can go back into the world with a bit more confidence that, yes indeed, God walks with us. And the more we are an oasis in the desert that is out there, the more people beyond these walls will wonder what we have, and desire what we have.

One of my favourite books is "The Divine Conspiracy" by the Christian philosopher Dallas Willard. In it Willard shares this wonderful image. He says we should, to begin with, think that God leads a very interesting life, and that God is full of joy. Undoubtedly God is the most joyous being in the universe. The abundance of God's love and generosity is inseparable from this infinite joy, and so good and beautiful things can become for us "tiny droplets of soul-exhilarating joy" for us to drink. So, if we imagine life to be like a desert that we can only struggle through, we miss God's hope for us for becoming rainforests soaking up God's love that teems down upon us. Water slips through sand so quickly and is quickly gone. But the rainforest gobbles water up greedily, which drives its vitality. It's all in how you look at it.

The seed for that rainforest is within you.

## "Of Gardens and Deserts"

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Text: Genesis 3: 8 – 18, Revelation 22:1-7

Rev. Peter Coutts

Genesis and Revelation are the bookends of the Bible, and not just in terms of being the first and last book. Both books provide glimpses of God's hope for our relationship. The creation stories are ancient spiritual tales to answer questions such as "how did all this get here?", and "Why is life the ways it is?" Here we find an insight into God's first hope for us. In the second creation account we hear that God created the heavens and earth, but it was a wasteland until God caused a life-giving stream to come up from the ground to give moisture to the dust and provide a place for life to take root and grow. The tree of life was in the middle of the garden. God walked through the garden, talking with its inhabitants. Companionship with God is imaged as face-to-face, which we can't even imagine. To leave such a place would be hard... to leave such an intimacy with God would be hard. But according to this ancient tale that is what Adam and Eve did. They left life in the garden for a new life of humans struggle, that included the struggle to see and know God.

But God's hope never disappeared. In his last vision, John caught a glimpse of the new heaven and new earth. We read, "The angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God" (Rev. 22.1). Sounds familiar now, doesn't it? On the banks of this river we again find the tree of life, producing a different fruit each month, its leaves for "the healing of the nations" (vs. 2). We hear that Christ will be in the midst of God's people, where "they will see His face" (vs.4). God's hope for us, for an intimate relationship, has been eternal, never wavering. And the angel said to John, "These words are trustworthy and true" (vs. 6).

So what do we make of these parallels? The garden is a symbol of humanity's hoped for intimate relationship with God... bathed in God's presence and love. It suggests that this vision is both our heritage and our promised land, where we rely upon grace as our ultimate security. As the bookends of the Bible it sets all the stories of the Bible in a context. It sets the history of the world in a context. They provide hope for what our life with God can be. And we need that hope, because between these garden bookends is something different where life is not so easy, in the here and now... where intimacy with God takes intentionality, where God's life-giving wonders aren't so obvious, where spiritual dryness

can be chronic, where life has its pains and limits, where there are so many things that distract us from God.

In scripture life is frequently imagined using the metaphor of the desert – a natural image to arise in the dry and barren land of the Jewish people. It shouldn't surprise us that this desert language finds a common home in the poetry of the Bible – the Psalms. There we read that the soul thirsts for God “as a deer yearns for running waters”, that it thirsts for God as if it was “a dry and weary land”. These psalms build upon an analogy that our life is as dependent upon God in the same way as our bodies are dependent upon water. Other psalms convey the idea that the experience of life causes us to thirst for God. We read, “some wandered in desert wastelands... growing thirsty, their soul fainting within them” (107:4,5). We want to know God, and to have that rich, garden-like companionship with God that we see in the bookends of the Bible, but we are in the in-between time of God's history. In this time it seems that our thirst for God can never be fully quenched.

I think there are two kinds of desert that we face, here and now, between the bookends. The first desert is out there beyond the walls of this sanctuary. There's the true story of an American church staff that attended a college basketball playoff. As they sat in the stadium and looked across the court, there on the other side was that universal sports spectator with the handmade sign saying simply “John 3.16”. Now, right in front of the church staff sat two well-dressed couples who noticed the same sign but had absolutely no idea what it meant, at all! One was overheard to say it might be an ad for a new restaurant in town. A few other suggestions were made. Reduced to guessing, one speculated that it might be a signal to someone to meet at the John on the third floor, stall 16. What shocked the church staff was not that these people didn't recognize the verse, but that they didn't even know that it was a reference to a line in the Bible. Our culture is quickly losing touch with its Christian roots.... has been for some time. The landscape is drying up out there. That makes it harder for us as Christians to sustain our faith. And the evidence for that is all around us.

But the other kind of desert can be internal and personal. The culture of our society works at rearranging our priorities, expectations, beliefs – how we deal with life – and that can have an impact on our spirituality. For example, we live in an instant society, which breeds an expectation that everything should happen nanoseconds. Even faith things. In our time of need we can want a sense of God's security now... in our time of prayer we can want God to respond now... in our time of uncertainty we can want a greater sense of confidence in

faith now. Christianity, like the other major world religions, says that growth in our spirituality and our sense of connectedness with God takes time and personal spiritual practice. Yet the orientation we develop in this instant society makes us impatient to wait for it and develop it. We too easily make spiritual deserts of our own lives as a consequence.

If we think we live in a spiritual desert, then it becomes so easy to view faith as a struggle. We can see faith as being hard – taking effort – because we believe we are living between the bookends of the gardens – the bookends of intimacy and peace and eternal, joyful life with God. But a major thrust of Jesus teaching is that the Kingdom of God is near to you. Jesus was Emmanuel – God with us – God became fully human in Him. The Holy Spirit is God's gift to us which makes intimacy possible. God makes nearness possible.

On the Mount of Olives the night of His betrayal Jesus prayed, “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us” (John 17.21). Intimacy. Jesus told His followers, “I came that you may have life, and have it in abundance” (John 10.10). Now. Jesus himself picked up the image of creation... the image we later find in Revelation, saying to the woman at the well: “Those who drink of the water *I give them* will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them *a spring of water gushing up to eternal life*” (John 4.14-15). Jesus message was clear: garden living can be for us now.

If we think about this, and look deeper into our life experience, I think most of us will come to appreciate that we've had moments of the garden experience... or periods of the garden experience. Like so many people my sense of connectedness with God drifts – it has its ups and downs – like the changing shape of sand dunes, formed and moved by the winds of my own desires and the ways of our world, yet also worked on by Spirit of God blowing through me. God does not leave us alone in the desert, won't leave us alone in the desert. And when we recall those garden times in our faith, when we have sensed God more closely, we can know we haven't been left alone in the desert. And that, my friends, gives hope.

So we need not imagine the life of faith being like living in a desert. Really, it's a matter of perspective. If we think communion with God was something Adam and Eve enjoyed way back when and something we will enjoy only once we get to heaven, then the here and now will always be something different – a dry place. But if we believe God's order for creation is spiritual, first and foremost, if we think that God's greatest desire is to see us flourish, spiritually, like a lush jungle, then we can begin to see that God wants our life to be a garden, as we begin to live out now the wonder of the paradise to come. To change the