

February 21, 2018 – Genesis 3:14-24 & Revelation 22:1-5

In less than two months, my wife and daughter and I will be traveling to the happiest place on earth. Yes, we'll be taking a family vacation to Disney World. We're going to Disney World at this particular time for a couple reasons, among which is the fact that while we are there they will be having the Epcot Flower and Garden Festival.

We were there once before during the Flower and Garden Festival, so we know how Epcot is transformed for it. There are flowers everywhere. There are food stands with all sorts of dishes featuring exotic fruits and vegetables. There are massive topiaries of Disney characters, that make it feel like you're walking through the Parade of Roses.

The whole park becomes paradise. Full of beauty and food and happiness. In many ways, you could say it becomes like the Garden of Eden.

And maybe, on the surface, it is. Maybe, visually, the Garden of Eden looked a little bit like the Epcot Flower and Garden Festival. But there was a lot more to the Garden of Eden than just its visual appeal or comfort level. And I think we sometime miss that fact.

You see, the thing that defined Eden as “paradise” was not it's flowers, food, or comfort. It was the presence of God. Genesis records that Eden was a place where God dwelt with Adam and Eve. Where creator and creation walked side-by-side in the cool of the day. With nothing separating them. Nothing interfering with their relationship.

And at the center of this garden – of this paradise – was a tree. The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. And it too was a part of paradise. That's sometimes hard for us to imagine. How can a tree that they were forbidden to eat and that caused so much suffering to come into the world – how can a tree like that be a part of paradise?

But that tree was a part of Adam and Eve's relationship with God too. Because God had said, “Don't eat the fruit from this tree.” And every time they walked by that tree and didn't eat from it, that was an act of obedience. An act of worship.

The tree was called the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil for a reason. Because every time they didn't eat from it, Adam and Eve effectively said, “God knows good and evil. We don't. We shouldn't. We should only know the good that He has given to us. So if God says don't eat from it, then we won't eat from it.”

It was the most basic, most perfect act of obedience and worship that you can possibly imagine. God knows better than I do. That's my relationship with him. To listen and obey. Because he has given me every good thing. That is paradise. That is how Adam and Eve walked with God every single day.

Until they didn't. Until they fell for a lie. Until they decided that they wanted to be like God, knowing good and evil. Because that's what the fruit of the tree gave them.

You know, I've heard it said that the worst deceptions are those woven from the truth. Which is the deception that the devil used. He told them that the fruit would make them like God, knowing good and evil. And that's what it did. God himself acknowledges that fact in verse 22 of our Old Testament lesson. *“Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil.”*

But here's the difference between God and man. God knows good and evil, and he has the power to do good. And the knowledge of good and evil plus the power to do good yields a God of justice and righteousness. A gracious Father who gives His children every good thing.

But man? Because they ate that fruit, man now knows good and evil, but doesn't have the power to do good. And the knowledge of good and evil without the power to do good yields only evil. It makes us corrupt to the core. Sinful in every way. Creatures who may share one similarity with our creator, but are totally different in every other way. Lacking his image entirely.

And so we lost paradise. We were exiled from the Garden. Barred from entering Eden ever again. And that meant we didn't just lose a place of beauty and food and happiness. We lost the presence of God in our lives.

We lost those moments of walking with God in the cool of the day. We lost that perfect obedience and worship of walking by the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and doing exact what God commanded.

Because we made our choice. Simply accepting the good that God gave us wasn't enough anymore. We wanted to decide good and evil for ourselves. We wanted to be our own gods.

And we still do. We can sit here and blame Adam and Eve for committing that Original Sin. For getting cast out of the Garden. For giving us pain and sadness and death. But we still sin. Everyday. And every time we sin we tell our first parents, "Thank you. I like being my own god. I would have made the same choice."

In our sinfulness, we are very far from paradise. And yet paradise is exactly what Jesus promised to that thief on the cross. And paradise is exactly what Jesus brought throughout his life. Because paradise is indeed about far more than beauty or food or happiness.

Paradise is the presence of God. The presence of God walking with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day. And the presence of God made flesh in Jesus Christ.

And paradise is what Jesus brings every day of his ministry. Every person he heals. Every demon he casts out. Every dead man he raises. That's paradise. That's a world without sin and death. That's a world with every good things that God can give us.

We see only a glimpse of it in Jesus' ministry. But we'll see it in its fullness on the last day. When we return from exile and see Eden restored.

A paradise of beauty and food and happiness. With the same river flowing through it. The same tree of life in its center. The same presence of God, sitting on his throne. The same perfection that Adam and Eve once knew.

The only thing missing will be that tree. The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Our lesson from Revelation makes a point to show every single aspect of Eden restored except that one. Why?

Well, in a sense, the tree will be there. Because the Lamb will be there. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The Lamb who was slain and whose blood has made our robes white.

The Lamb who bore all the suffering of this world. Who took the curse of death upon himself. The Lamb who was nailed to a cross because we wanted to be like God knowing good and evil. He'll be there.

Instead of looking upon the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in obedience and Law. We'll look upon the Lamb of God in grace and Gospel. We'll look at him and know good and evil in a new way. Because we'll see his wounds and know that it was our evil that put those wounds there. But it was also his goodness that forgave us and allowed us back into Eden once more.

Paradise is about more than beauty or food or happiness. It's about the presence of God. The presence of a God who is coming back one day. But also the presence of a God who is with us always to the very end of the age.

The presence of a God who comes in Word and Sacrament. In water and wine and bread. Who, like he did throughout his ministry, gives us glimpses of the fuller paradise that will come to us on the last day. That we may wait with faith and hope. And worship in Law and Gospel, obedience and grace, the God who gives us every good thing. Amen.