

March 5, 2017 – Genesis 3:1-21 & Matthew 4:1-11

What do you call “wilderness?” What do you call “paradise?” You'd be surprised how different people can think of such different things with the same words.

Someone from inner city St Louis or Kansas City might drive through the endless stretches of field and forest that surround Boonville and say, “That's wilderness.” They'd look at it and see a barren wasteland. As forbidding to them as the Sahara Desert or Brazilian rainforest. Whereas I know there are more than a few men and women in this congregation who look upon these regions and see rich farmland and hunting and fishing and bike riding. A mouth-watering paradise of wildlife, clean air, and recreational opportunity.

The same is true of the city, I think too. Urbanites, young and old, see the city as a place of convenience and opportunity. A paradise of efficiency, sophistication, and commerce. Whereas, rural folks often just see a wilderness of pollution, noise, traffic, crime, and stress. More dirty and dangerous than anything nature could possibly produce on her own.

Who's right? It doesn't really matter. The point is that when we talk about these concepts, we need to realize that we're discussing a topic that is very much a matter of perspective. One man's trash is another man's treasure. One man's wilderness is another man's paradise.

And that's true when we're reading scripture too. Because the Bible also uses the terms “wilderness” and “paradise” with it's own particular perspective as well. Take, for instance, the Old Testament account we read today.

Here is Adam living in the Garden of Eden that God has provided for him. And contrary to the image that you may have developed in your mind or seen in pop culture, Adam was not just lounging around in this paradise all day, bored out of his mind. No, the Bible says that right after God created Adam, he gave him a job. Scripture tells us that God took Adam, put him in the Garden of Eden, and then told him to work the ground and take care of it.

In other words, Adam was a farmer. And I imagine he took that job rather seriously. After all, God had personally given it to him. And after the fall into sin, Adam keeps that job and continues to farm. But God tells him that his farming is going to be different now.

Farming the Garden of Eden was easy. In fact, it was fun and fulfilling to farm, because it was done simply as a pleasing service to God. God had promised to fulfill every one of Adam's needs, but he was still called to work the ground. This was Adam's Godly vocation. But after the fall, it's an act of survival. Adam would no longer be able to farm simply because he wanted to. He would do it because if he didn't they would starve to death and die.

And the work would be hard. The Garden was about life and abundance and everything grew and prospered easily. The earth responded to Adam as a blessing. But now, death and pain have entered into the world. And farming will be difficult and frustrating. Winters will be hard. Droughts will come. Plants will die. The soil will resist producing life in a way that it never has before.

And the plants it brings forth may not even be what Adam intended. Thorns and thistles and weeds will grow. Choking the life out of the fruits and grains that Adam needed. The entire earth had been created for humanity, but now it will fight against giving Adam what he needs to feed himself and his family.

In short, God tells Adam that the world will go from paradise to wilderness because of his sin. All of it. Adam isn't just cursed because of his sin. The ground itself is cursed because of his sin.

You may look rural farmland and see a paradise. Or you may look at the city and see a paradise. But in God's eyes it's all wilderness. Because it's all cursed. It's all tainted with sin. It's all less than God created it to be. Which means it's all less than God intended for us.

We look at something like the tornado that hit Perryville this past week. A storm that destroyed 60 homes, damaged many more, and killed one person. It was an ugly tragedy. And like most death and the destruction due to weather, we look at it and we say, "Oh, what a horrible act of God."

Um... no. That's not an act of God. That's an act of Adam. That's an act of humanity. It's our sin that cursed the ground. It's our sin that brought pain and toil and suffering into this world. You wanna point the finger at someone for tornadoes and earthquakes and hurricanes and wildfires, you point it right back at yourself. Because that's where the blame lies.

No, the only act of God here that we should care about, is the one that rescues us from this curse. For even though he had every right to walk away and wash His hands of humanity, God stayed with us. God guided us through the wilderness of this sinful world with His Law. God came and walked among us in His Son.

And in our Gospel lesson we watch him walk out even into the wilderness of the wilderness. The desert of the desert. And he faced down the serpent. The one who had tempted Adam into sin. And he endured all the same temptations.

He endured the temptations of the flesh. The hunger for fruit that is pleasing to the eye and good to eat, even as God is providing an entire garden of produce from which to feast. The craving for bread right at his fingertips, even as He dedicates Himself to being spiritually fed by prayer and God's Word through fasting.

He endured the temptations to arrogance and pride. The desire to be like God, knowing good and evil. The pursuit of power and authority over himself and over all the kingdoms of the earth if only he would bow down to Satan one time.

He endured the temptations to doubt. The doubt that asks, "Did God really say...?" The doubt that asks, "If you're really the Son of God...?" The doubt that drives us away from God's Word.

He endured everything that Satan had to throw against Him, because that's really all that there is. Satan's weapons are limited. The serpent is powerful, but not inventive. Crafty, but not creative. We know what to expect from Him, but even knowing that we still can't defeat Him.

Only Jesus Christ can do that. Only He can stand against the serpent's attack. Only he can be the new Adam. Only he can be our champion who comes to fight for us, as Luther says in his hymn. Only he can show us the wilderness this world has become. Not by casting us out of the garden, but by bringing us back into it.

By showing us through his ministry a world in which sickness becomes health. And disability becomes dancing. And shrieks of demons becomes shouts of joy to the Lord. And death itself becomes life once again.

By one man, sin came into the world. And all die because all sin. But by one man, also, sin has been cast out of this world. And many shall live because many shall be made righteous in Him.

In God's eyes this world is a wilderness. And, if we're honest with ourselves, I think we see how barren it is as well. The world may be beautiful and abundant to the eye, but there's a lot of really ugly sin in it. And if you live by bread alone, it'll starve your soul.

But in God's eyes this wilderness is just waiting to be made a paradise. Because paradise is where our Lord resides. To the thief on the cross, Jesus says, "Today, you will be with me in paradise." Because, for now, that's where our Lord sits enthroned in glory.

But there will come a day when the dwelling of God is with man. When the Lord descends on the clouds of glory. When the earth will be paradise once again. And to that we say with saints above and saints below, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus." Amen.