

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Genesis 2/Revelation 22

"Eden"

Today's question in the *Ask The Pastor* series comes from one of our young people, who asks: *Do you think we found the Garden of Eden but we don't recognize it - like a rain forest or something?* I believe the thought was prompted by a *National Geographic* or *Discovery Channel* program about the wondrous worlds that are still out there to be explored. But I think it's a wonderful question, because it touches something very important and deep in all our lives. Is there a Garden of Eden, somewhere, someplace, some time? Does this ancient and seemingly mythical tale mean something to us still?

1) *Where Was Eden?*

Let's start at the beginning. What and where was Eden? *Genesis 2* calls it "the Garden," and the picture you are meant to get is not your family's vegetable garden with its neat rows, but a park. Eden and the word *Paradise* often go together, and *Paradise* is a word from an ancient Persian language that meant "a royal park." It's big, it's beautiful, it's well cared for. There are huge trees and flowering bushes and grass, and animals and birds, and of course water. It's a place to walk in, to relax in, to enjoy. Think of the Botanical Gardens, or Old Westbury Gardens, and you will get the idea. It's more an arboretum than a vegetable patch.

The Garden is a place of pleasure, but it's also someone's home: God's! Eden is like a

royal park surrounding a royal palace. Eden is "God's garden." Here "the LORD God walks in the garden in the cool of the day" (Gen 3:8) and enjoys the "very good" things he has made. Here's a poet imagining Eden: *"sands of gold... running nectar... flowers in beds and curious knots... hill, dale and plain, open fields... groves of rich trees, fruit burnished with golden rind... flowers of all hue, and without thorn the rose... frisking play around all the beasts of the earth... sporting the lion ramped.. bears, tigers gambolled before them... the unwieldy elephant to make them mirth..."* (John Milton: *Paradise Lost*, Book 4).

So where was this wondrous place? Here the Bible surprises us: it gives names and places. Four rivers run through the park, and two of them have names we still know: Tigris and Euphrates. It also says God planted Eden "in the east," which to the biblical writers always means "east of the Promised Land." So we are looking at a place like ancient Mesopotamia, modern Iraq, or perhaps a little further south - Kuwait or somewhere near the Gulf. We learn from the scholars that in the ancient east there were many stories of a wondrous fertile place, an oasis in the deserts, a place with deep springs of water, of rivers and trees. One story puts that on an island in the Persian Gulf - perhaps where Bahrain is now. So if we could find Eden - thousands of years ago though that was - it would probably be somewhere either in the Armenian Mountains where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers begin, or in Iraq, or near the top end of the Persian Gulf.

Whatever happened to the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve were expelled because they disobeyed God? Interestingly, our young questioner and some friends came up with what I think is the perfect answer: that Eden disappeared in the great Flood that all the ancient stories, including the Bible, say came through this area of the Middle East in something like 3000 BC.

2) *Where is Eden now?*

Now although Eden is gone, it lives on in people's minds. You heard the question: is Eden still somewhere on earth, like in a rain forest? Is there still some unspoiled beautiful part of Nature that we could find? This is "*the idea of Eden,*" the dream that somewhere there is "a better world."

Ever since the beginning of history, from the first stories that people told, the first books they wrote, there has been this idea of a secret better place. It might be the lost continent of Atlantis, or the "happy isles" of the Greeks, the "lost worlds" on the high plateaus of South America, the lost civilizations of the Amazon. And the idea lives on in every one of us who have ever dreamed of "escaping to the country" – of moving to a cabin in the Adirondacks, or to a fishing shack near a broad sandy beach.

It's Thoreau going off to live in his cabin in the woods near Walden Pond, it's John Muir taking breathtaking photographs of the Yosemite Valley, it's trekking up Mt. Kilimanjaro, it's exploring the rain forests of Borneo, or the Great Barrier Reef. In western literary culture the dream is at its peak in the early 1800s with the Romantic poets like Coleridge and Wordsworth and Shelley and Keats, who produced some of the most beautiful words ever written in English to express the longing for that more perfect place hidden in somewhere in Nature. Don't you sometimes wish you could "get away

from it all"? At heart we are most of us Romantics, people who dream that "Getting back to Nature" would heal all our sorrows, cure all our ills. If only...!

What is it all about- this *dream* of Eden, the longing for a better place, somewhere we could finally call "home"? No modern writer understood this better than C.S. Lewis: his fiction and his Christian essays return to it over and over. "*We do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words – to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it*"...(The Weight of Glory).

In The Last Battle, when Narnia is renewed: "*the new Narnia... was a deeper country: every rock and flower and blade of grass looked like it meant more. I can't describe it any better than that: if you ever get there you will know what I mean. It was the unicorn who summed up what everyone was feeling. He stamped his right fore-hoof on the ground and neighed, and then cried: "I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia so much is because it sometimes looked a little like this... Come further up and further in!"*

Or Psyche in Till We Have Faces, "*The sweetest thing in all my life has been the longing – to reach the Mountain, to find the place where all the beauty came from – my country, the place where I ought to have been born. Do you think it all meant nothing, all the longing? The longing for home?*"

3) *Where Eden Will Be*

Lewis understood the answer: "*At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door. We discern the freshness and purity of morning, but they do not make us fresh and pure.*

*We cannot mingle with the splendours we see.
But all the leaves of the New Testament are
rustling with the rumour that it will not always
be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get in.*"
(The Weight of Glory).

All the longing for Eden is a gift, *the whisper of God*, that one day all things will be renewed. It starts with God's promise to Israel during her Exile: "I will make streams in the desert... I will comfort Zion and *make her deserts like Eden*, her wastelands like the garden of the LORD" (Is 51). Eden becomes a symbol for the restoration that God will bring, the redemption of his people, the new life that he will give to his faithful.

And when you reach the end of the story – when you come to Chapter 22 of *Revelation*, what do you find? *Eden is restored*; in the city of God - the new Jerusalem that comes down from heaven, where God dwells with his people - lies *a central park*. And from the throne of God, down the main street of the city, flows the river of life, and on either side of the river grow the "trees of life." The *tree of life* stood in the middle of Eden, and would have granted life and immortality to Adam had he eaten it (Gen 3:22); it now lines either side of the river of the city of God, and it yields its fruits all year long, and it gives immortal life to people who live in God's presence, and its leaves bring healing to the nations.

Eden is restored; but notice what has happened – what was once a garden for two people is now a park in a city for the nations, for all the people of God; "ten thousand times ten thousand... people from every language and tribe and people and nation." That is what our dreams point to; that is the home we are all looking for; that is the answer to all the wistful longings that we experience in this life – not just in our sorrows, but in those moments when we glimpse beauty, or feel love, or grasp truth,

or hear music, or are moved by "mere words."

Eden is the presence of God among his people in a park in a city. As C.S. Lewis said, "*the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumour that... some day, God willing, we shall get in.*" Are you ready for that? To go home? To live in the park? To go there, you need to be one of those people who grasps by God's grace that "Jesus is the Way" home. Let him lead you, be his follower, and let "the river that flows from *the throne of God and the Lamb*" bring you the fruit of the tree of life.

Let us pray...