

Both of our passages this morning come from the Hebrew Scriptures, and both are about Gardens.

Think about all the images of Gardens in the Bible: The Garden of Eden, The Garden at Gethsemane, The Mountaintops, all of which are Spiritual places of Tranquility and Peace, and each of which end with a barb. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve break the covenant and are sent out into the world. The Mountaintops are regularly places Jesus prays, yet the disciples regularly fall asleep. In the Garden at Gethsemane, Jesus prays that this cup might be taken away, but is arrested and taken to the Cross.

Years ago, a High School Youth Group held a dinner for their church. Youth Group often hold Fund Raisers for Mission Trips so this was not a surprise. Cost of admission was \$5 and everyone was seated at round tables for 8. When everyone had been seated, Waiters brought the meal to the first table, which was steak, a baked potato, a cup of peas, and a glass of water. Not as gourmet as we might have at a restaurant, but a very nice meal for the Youth Group which regularly served Spaghetti or Ziti. After the first were served, waiters brought the meal to the 2nd table, which had a baked potato and peas and a glass of water. At which there was a great deal of grumbling. The 3rd Table only had a handful of peas and glass of water. Several of the tables received a glass of water, all the rest were without food, water or a place to sit. Someone contributed \$100 because it was for the kids, but there was grumbling for the next months. The Youth Pastor was called on the Carpet, especially because the Senior Pastor, the Clerk of Session and the Choir were among those who received nothing. Someone said "It just was not right for us to come to support the kids, to buy tickets and then be sent away with nothing." And the Youth Director said, "You are right. And it is not right that children throughout the world are sent away every night with nothing."

Think about all the Gardens you have known. Maybe Zero-scape Gardens here in the Desert. Rock Garden. The smell of Rose Gardens. The Smells of Herb Gardens. Gardens with massive trees. Towering Pines and Spruce, Fruit Trees, Flowering Trees, Willows. Gardens with Water features. Water Gardens. Rooftop Garden vistas and Botanical Domes. We have several in the congregation who are Master Gardeners, who have studied all the different species of this region and who plant retreats for the soul. One of the things I had not anticipated is now many Gardens are designed to have surprises along the path.

Two weeks ago, we went to Seattle, where we had never been before, and our kids rented an Air BNB for us set in the midst of 20 Acres of Gardens! It was breathtaking and restful, with all of the above and statues hidden in the midst, several nymphs, one life-size statue of Mark Twain reading Huck Finn on a park bench, a child riding a bicycle, a life size Chess Game, and several enormous statues of Frogs with crowns.

The first portion of these words from Isaiah are from an ancient Jewish Poem, often sung as a lullaby. In the Bible, whenever you hear "My Beloved" we are talking about God. But more than an ordinary pronoun, the prophet is indicating an intimate relationship of trust initiated by God. Planting a Garden is an act of love, at significant expense and a great deal of work, in Latin this used to be called HUSBANDRY. All of us know from landscaping, a garden is prepared and planted with expectation for years of enjoyment, blooms and harvests to come. SO imagine your own disgust when the plantings do not flourish or simply die, but go wild or produce bad fruit! This translation is even kind, the Hebrew word literally means "stinking vines." According to the prophecy, God does not destroy the vines, pulling them up by the roots. Instead, God tears down the walls built as fences, to keep out vermin and pests. God removes the Watchtower and Irrigation system. In essence, because the plantings are unwilling and unable to do what is expected, the prophecy suggests the natural thing is to remove the Planter's investment of all the protections and benefits, leaving the plants to grow without the Gardener. But then, the plantings are we

the people of faith! I wonder if this was the original story behind Jesus' Parable of the Sower who went out to Sow, and some seed fell on Rocks, and some fell among Weeds, and some fell on fertile soil...

The second passage from I Kings, is not a prophecy or poem, or love-song, but a narrative of what took place in the time of King Ahab. In the decades after King David and King Solomon, before their exile to Babylon, King Ahab ruled the land. Ahab had inherited a rich and prosperous kingdom, under Solomon Israel was the largest and more powerful nation in the Ancient World. HOWEVER... And there is always a however, isn't there! However, with all the land and possessions of wealth King Ahab has been given, he can see from his window, a tiny plot of land farmed by Naboth one of the Noblemen of Israel. In all fairness, Ahab attempted to make a trade with Naboth, so Ahab could plant a vineyard, or if Naboth did not want another parcel of land to pay a fair price. Except Ahab had ignored a basic fact. LAND in Israel was not really bought and sold as we understand. All of the Promised Land in Israel had been given by God and appointed for all time through Moses and Joshua to each of the 12 Tribes and to every family. Every 50th Year was considered a Year of JUBILEE, so while you could work the land and divide land for sale, every 50th year all land reverted back to the ancestral family. We might describe that instead of buying and selling, you leased the land, and naturally you paid a higher price to lease the land for 50 years than if we were already in the 48th or 49th year. As an honest man of faith, Naboth stated to Ahab that the land was not really his to sell even to the King, as this was the land of his family.

Ahab returns to the palace in a fury, slamming doors and stomping like a child who had not gotten their way, he goes to his bedroom and throws himself on the bed. I love the description "SULLEN". And Queen Jezebel asks what is the problem? Prompting Ahab to tell her. To which Jezebel asks "Are you not the King of this Nation? I will get what you want for you."

Continuing the story, Queen Jezebel sent letters to all the Noblemen to come to the place for a Fast, signing the King's name and sealing the letters with the King's Royal seal. A Fast was more than a time without food, a FAST refers to a solemn occasion, when all the leaders are gathered to discuss a serious problem or offense. She also recruited to base fellows, who came to the fast to bear testimony that they had heard Naboth curse God and curse the King!" In response the Elders took Naboth and his sons outdoors and stoned them to death. Jezebel had solved King Ahab's problem, she killed Naboth and his descendants who could inherit the land.

Except, the next day when King Ahab went to inspect the land for his Vineyard, who she Ahab "run into" but Elijah the Prophet of God. And you can tell the kind of relationship Ahab has with the Man of God, because Ahab greets Elijah saying "Have you found me, O my Enemy?" And Elijah tells Ahab what God told him to say: "I have found you because you have sold yourself to do evil! Behold, I will bring evil upon you, I will sweep you away, and cut off from Ahab every male descendant." And of Jezebel the Lord instructed Elijah to say "The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the bounds of this place . Anyone who belongs to Ahab who dies in the city, the dogs shall eat; and anyone of his who dies in the country, the birds of the air shall eat."

Someone spoke to me this week saying "I really enjoy the Historic Stories from the Old Testament, because we do not know them as well as the New testament." Personally, I love the Old Testament, because instead of the preacher putting any spin on the story, the Bible simply needs to be preached, and like each person walking through a Garden, those with ears can hear!