

The Garden of Desolation

Luke 13:31-35

Introduction

George Bernard Shaw, the great Irish playwright, once said:

The best place to find God is in a garden. (George Bernard Shaw)

Welcome to the second Sunday in the season of Lent. Together we are on a journey to find God, and we are spending these days looking for God in the gardens of Scripture. We began on Ash Wednesday in the Garden of Eden where sin entered the world, and we will continue our journey until we reach the Garden of the Empty Tomb on Easter Sunday.

From Garden to Garden. That is our theme for this season. Along the way I hope to show you the devastating impact that sin has on our world and in our lives with the goal that you, with me, will long for that empty tomb on Easter Sunday.

- I have long thought and preached that no Christian can fully rejoice on Easter Sunday unless they have grappled with the reality of sin. In other words:

The joy of Easter is birthed in our repentance on Ash Wednesday.

As a part of our journey I have asked you to memorize our theme verse for this year, as recorded in 1 Corinthians 15:

For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. (1 Corinthians 15:21-22)

That verse is important because the story of redemption is the story of these two gardens – from Garden to Garden. Eden to the Empty Tomb. This memory verse illustrates that with the two men associated with those gardens: Adam and Jesus.

Last Sunday our journey took us to a garden in Bellvue TN. Today we begin with a single word, recorded in our Gospel text today:

(Jesus speaking) Look, your house is left to you **desolate**. (Luke 13:35)

That is a powerful word. Desolate. The Hebrew word describes ...

... something that is left in ruins because of a drought (Hebrew word)

The English dictionary describes ...

a place that is empty and abandoned (English word)

Desolate is used many times in the Bible to refer to something that is in a state of emptiness, ruin, or abandonment, either in a physical and spiritual sense or both.

- It is used to describe lands, cities, and even individuals who have been forsaken or left in a state of devastation.
- That desolation is usually the result of sin and our disobedience to God.

Let me give you two examples:

When they were facing captivity by the Assyrians, the Old Testament prophet Isaiah begged the people of Israel to repent of their sin and return to God, but they refused over and over again. They continued to chase after false gods and their own lives of selfish pleasure. This prompted Isaiah to lament:

Your country is desolate, your cities burned with fire; your fields are being stripped by foreigners right before you, laid waste as when overthrown by strangers. (Isaiah 1:7)

It is not clear whether this was a prophecy of what was soon to come or a picture of what already was, but we know it did happen.

The desolation of Jerusalem and the land of Israel is a recurring theme, particularly in the context of the Babylonian exile. Jeremiah describes the city like this:

The roads to Zion (Jerusalem) mourn, for no one comes to her appointed festivals. All her gateways are desolate, her priests groan, her young women grieve, and she is in bitter anguish. (Lamentations 1:4)

When the Gospel of Matthew talks about the events in our text today, he pictures Jesus standing on a hill overlooking the city of Jerusalem. Luke's gospel just gives us these words:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. (Luke 13:34-35a)

So today our garden is a house. The city of Jerusalem and the whole Jewish nation are presented here as a house of desolation because they rejected Jesus and his message.

- Dry, empty, lifeless. Remember the definition? Left in ruins, abandoned.

As I thought about how to apply this message, I remember two other "houses" described in the Scriptures:

I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord." (Psalm 122:1)

Places of worship are houses and can become desolate if they reject Jesus and His message. They have all the forms and programs, but if the message of Jesus is rejected there, they become desolate.

You and I are houses as well, as the writer of Hebrews points out:

But Christ is faithful as the Son over God's house. And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory. (Hebrews 3:6)

Go back to the words of Jesus, and the progression is clear. When we don't walk in close relationship with Jesus, the result is desolation.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. (Luke 13:34-35a)

I know many of your testimonies and I have heard you describe how you came to a place in your life that was empty and meaningless. You were as dry as the desert. No hope. No purpose. Nothing.

- You may have been surrounded by people, but you were all alone.
- You may have been so busy that your calendar was bursting at the seams, but deep inside you know it an attempt to distract your mind from the desolation that would take over if you ever slowed down.

A life without God wasn't working. You needed Jesus.

In the words of an old hymn, from that place we cry out:

I need Thee, oh, I need Thee;
Ev'ry hour I need Thee.
(I Need Thee Ev'ry Hour, Robert Lowry)

Eventually our spiritual journeys will bring us to that place – to the Garden of Desolation. It's from that place that we start walking toward the cross and the Empty Tomb.

- It is in that moment we know that the only answer to those feelings of desolation is Jesus.

I want to offer you three suggestions when you find yourself in that place. These suggestions are meant to bring you into the presence of God.

SUGGESTION #1: ENLIST IN CHRISTIAN SERVICE

Sometimes people will suggest that you do something for other people so that you realize someone else is worse off than you.

- That in so doing you will feel better about your situation.

My suggestion is based on Matthew 25:

³⁴ “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

³⁷ “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

⁴⁰ “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

In serving others we find Jesus.

SUGGESTION #2: ENGAGE IN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Often when we are desolate, we add to our situation by isolating ourselves. That doesn't necessarily help us find Jesus either.

The Scriptures tells us:

For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them. (Matthew 18:20)

You meet God in community. He promises that. And God cannot lie.

SUGGESTION #3: EMERGE YOURSELF IN THE BIBLE

Even if what you read doesn't make sense, you are putting yourself into the presence of God so that He can speak to you from His Holy Word:

Blessed is the one
who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers,
²but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,
and who meditates on his law day and night.
³That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers.

The desolation is replaced by life.

APPLICATION

There is an old preacher story that I've heard every preacher use at least once. I don't think I've ever told it before. But now that I am an old preacher, it's my turn to tell it. The story goes like this:

A man and his wife went out to dinner one day. He drove and she sat on the other side of the vehicle. They were passed by a young couple who were sitting so close to each other it was hard to tell who was actually driving their car.

The wife looked at her husband and said, "We used to sit that close. What happened?"

To which the husband responded, "I didn't move."

God hasn't moved. But our sin has moved us away from Him. And at some point, when we realize it, we need to respond to His invitation to return.

Amen.