

Ecclesia Spiritus, Part 4: Ecclesia of Eden

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Countryside Community Church

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Scripture: Romans 5:12-17; 1 Corinthians 15:45-49

On Easter Sunday, some of you were surprised by the connection that was made between the risen Christ who, in John's gospel, appears to Mary Magdalene in the form of a gardener, and the world's very first gardener, Adam. I stated that this connection between Jesus and Adam was far from accidental. It was, in fact, a clear reflection of the early church's belief that Jesus was the Second Adam. If John's depiction of Easter is in any way connected to how it really transpired, then Jesus's appearance to Mary may even have been the event that generated the belief in the risen Christ as Second Adam to begin with.

One reason why this connection between Jesus and Adam matters to us in our day is because the early Christian community was a lot happier group of people than much of the Christian community in our day even as, on the whole, they endured greater struggles than we do. So if we can take a few moments out of our busy lives to look back and discover what was present for these early Christians that was lost on later Christians, then perhaps we modern Christians will be better prepared not only to weather the storms that afflict us, but to move through them "singing in the rain," so-to-speak. And what allowed our ancestors to "sing in the rain" is that a great many of them experienced the "rain" from the perspective of those who have been welcomed back to the Garden of Eden, whereas many in our day have never even heard of or experienced the invitation to return.

If we are going to experience what the ancients experienced in some way here this morning, I've got to leave the biblical and theological stuff aside for awhile and take you to a few places inside yourself. These are places where you can walk right up to the Garden's gate and peer inside. If we can find these places together, then all that biblical/theological stuff will become quite clear, and quite *real*.

Of course, I can't describe those places within you that stand close to the Garden. I can only describe mine. Yet while the specifics of our experiences may differ, I trust you can find inside yourself all that I am ultimately describing of my own experiences.

One of the places where I most regularly find myself standing just a few millimeters outside the Garden is when I get out of the city, leaving even the countryside behind and enter deep into wilderness untrammelled by human civilization. The experience of such wild places years ago is what kept me returning to the coastline of Alaska for thirteen consecutive years – that, and the promise of making the money needed to pay for my education!

Two of those summers I was aboard a 214 foot floating processor that, during peak processing season, more closely resembled Dante's 9th Circle of Hell than the Garden of Eden. Yet, that dingy ship took me to places physically and spiritually that turned out to be quite precious.

I remember, for instance, being anchored in Fox Farm Bay near Kodiak, Alaska, one spring while we were freezing herring to ship to Japan. The arc of the bay was rimmed by snow-capped mountains that rose steeply from the tree-lined shore. If you stood on the roof of the ship, you could turn 360 degrees and see nothing but exquisite wilderness and ocean. If the breeze blew away the diesel of the ship's engine, you could smell nothing but clean, salt air carrying hints of pine, Douglas fir, and granite. And, when the ship momentarily cut the power to switch over the generators, you could hear nothing but that cool breeze, the call of seagulls, and the lap of waves against the ship's hull.

One morning on the bottom deck, as we were freezing pans full of herring, a few of the crew were having some fun on break taking single, frozen herring and tossing them into the bay. Each time they tossed a herring, a flock of about 100 seagulls would race each other to claim the prize. Only, because the herring was frozen, whatever seagull tried to fly off with it quickly found that the frozen herring would slip out of grip and land back in the water where rivals would fight to become the next sucker to try to get away with the loot.

We were all laughing hysterically as we watched a frozen herring being grabbed and dropped all over the bay when suddenly, from about a hundred feet up in the air appeared an immense bald eagle. The eagle had spotted the herring and, once over it, dove straight down to the water, effortlessly snatching the herring from the protesting mob of gulls and just as effortlessly flying away with the prize firmly in its talons.

That incident took place in all of about two seconds. The sight of such poetry-in-motion is still etched deeply in my mind. It literally took my breath away. Twenty-six years later I still don't quite have my breath back! Moments like these are what bring us close to Eden's Garden, standing so close that we can see it, smell it, *feel* it ... sense it in our soul.

Can you find such an experience – and such a soul-stirring breathlessness – in yourself? Now, keep this experience in the back of your awareness as we stand in another spot outside Eden's Garden.

As many of you are well aware, one of my family's greatest joys is to spend time at our cabin on a little lake on the southern Oregon Coast. Melanie's sister and her family live nearby, in the town of Bandon, and her father lives within easy commute as well. My mother and brother now live a few hours away, which has made it possible to get a lot of good family time in on both sides of the Elnes family.

Each year, one of the highlights of our time is what we call “The Oyster Fest” where we invite all our family members and a handful of friends we’ve made in the area to come grill fresh, local oysters over a giant fire pit in the center of our deck overlooking the lake. This little “Oyster Fest” has become quite a “happening” over the years, which means that as soon as we arrive the big question on everyone’s mind is, “What day shall we hold it?” Then, on the appointed day, people bring their very best potluck food. One of those who comes is the head professor of a culinary institute in Coos Bay, which has the effect of raising the bar on everyone’s food game.

So the guests arrive and we start the fire. And we start a pot of butter melting on the stove that will simmer garlic for a couple hours so that when the oysters are ready we can drizzle this butter-and-garlic ambrosia all over them. Wine is poured. Hors d’oeuvres are served. And thus commences hours of hearty conversation on the deck or on the beach or in the cabin that continues long into the night until the graham crackers, marshmallows, and chocolate bars make an appearance and are swiftly turned into s’mores.

One year (many years, actually), I remember standing on the deck of our cabin having just consumed an oyster on a cracker, washed it down with a hoppy microbrew, and picked back up my waiting cigar to enter back into an argument with a good friend over politics and theology (yes, both together!) when suddenly it was like time slowed down and froze in its tracks.

Though I kept up with the conversation happening on the outside, inwardly, I was looking around at a scene that was utterly still. The scene was of a dozen or so people radiant with joy. We radiated the joy of those who have consumed amazing food, and perhaps a beverage or two with it. We radiated the joy of those who are standing on a sunny deck overlooking a peaceful lake with the smell of a bonfire in the air. But mostly they radiated the joy of being in each other’s presence. And this is what captivated me.

Captivated me because it was abundantly clear that all of us were imperfect, fractured people. And our political and theological differences could be measured in light years, not miles. At times, all of us had allowed our differences and the faults we found with one another to divide us. Yet, in this moment – as in many others in the past – we were all radiant with joy in each other’s company.

As I looked into the face of each person on that deck – looked through the window of my soul, not merely my eyes – each face appeared to be a flickering of light and darkness. Because I knew each person well, I was familiar with the particular ways they struggled through life, as well as the ways they danced through it. I was familiar with their imperfections (at least those traits I perceived to be imperfect) as well as their perfections. Yet it was clear as a bell that each person’s particular struggles with life’s hard knocks and with their own imperfections (real or perceived) had produced a lot more light in them than darkness.

It was then that I finally recognized and accepted a Truth that had been within me for many years but that I had kept pushing away: that God loves the darkness in us even as God loves the light. God loves the darkness in us because our struggle with it actually makes the light grow brighter, provided our hearts are oriented toward the Light. It's like the way Van Gogh could brush some yellow paint on a canvas and then make that warm yellow shine like the sun by edging it with dark blue or brown. Without the darker colors, a patch of yellow is simply a patch of yellow. Pretty, but with no particular identity or character.

Have you ever stood in the presence of a few good friends and realized you were looking at the equivalent of human Van Gogh paintings? Then you have looked through the gate of Eden to behold the Garden. You have an intuition of why God never intended for us to separate life – and people – into Good and Bad. It's not that Good and Bad don't exist. It's just that they exist in ways that cannot be clearly separated from one another. So when it comes to loving another person, you've got to take Frank Sinatra's advice: love all, or nothing at all. Frank's advice doesn't just apply to loving other people, but to loving life itself. So if you will, permit me one final illustration of Eden.

Have you ever read that story by Margery Cuyler called "That's Good, That's Bad"? It features a child at the zoo who is given a giant red helium balloon by his parents. The narrator exclaims, "That's good!" Then, immediately changes her mind, "No, that's bad," as the balloon is so large that it carries the child into the air and pops several miles away from the zoo. "That's bad." "No, that's good." The boy falls into a tree and he is able to latch onto a branch, breaking his fall to the ground. "That's good!" "No, that's bad." It turns out the branch is actually a giant snake that turns and hisses at him. "That's bad!" "No, that's good." And so the story goes, with one thing after another happening to the boy, each of which appears to be good or bad but turns out to be the exact opposite until finally a stork picks the boy up and carries him off. "That's bad." "No, that's good." The stork flew back over the zoo and dropped him right back into the arms of his anxious parents. "That's good." "No," says the narrator, "that's GREAT!"

Like Adam and Eve, we may have eaten from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, but what good is this knowledge if it causes us to label every experience of life as either Good or Bad? Can we really be so sure of what is what, or what will lead to what?

By far the largest lesson I've ever learned in this regard is when our eldest daughter, Arianna, was diagnosed with a cancerous brain tumor nine years ago. Back in the day, I would not have labeled that development as "evil," but I would have wholeheartedly called it Bad. Bad, period. End of story. But thankfully for us, that tumor diagnosis wasn't the end of Arianna's story nor our own. It was the beginning of a new one. Since many of you are intimately familiar with this story, I won't belabor it here (If you're not familiar with it, you can read about it on CaringBridge or in my book, *Gifts of the Dark Wood*.)

The main thing I really want to say about it is this: though I would never in a million years seek to have an experience of a daughter having a brain tumor, and though I would take away Arianna's tumor in a heartbeat if I had the chance, I also must admit that the experience gave me one of the strongest glimpses of Eden's Garden that I have ever beheld. It is a glimpse that can only be seen when one is at one's lowest point in life, not a step higher. While I believe I speak for my whole family, I will only speak for myself: My concern for Arianna's safety and well being drove me to the pit of utter despair. At no point in my life have I ever been more tempted to let go of hope, throw away all belief in the goodness of life and even the goodness (or even existence) of God. Yet when every ounce of strength within me gave way and I fell head over heels into my own personal abyss, I discovered something there that was the last thing I expected to find.

I found myself being held by an energy that was not my own. I discovered a strength that arose within me whose Source I could not identify within myself. And I experienced a sense of peace that had made peace with even my darkest worries about the future. Somehow, at the farthest edges of my darkness, I discovered that Light shined well beyond those edges. As deep as the darkness went, the Light went deeper. I fell, but I fell right into the arms of God.

It was deep in this abyss that I realized more than ever before what the Cross is about. It's not about darkness, though darkness is ever-present. It's about discovering that as deep as the darkness goes, the Light goes deeper. Once you realize this – really take it deep into the coding of your soul – there is no experience of darkness that can really scare you too terribly much again, at least when you're being self-aware.

If I were to combine the awe and wonder I experienced in Alaska as I beheld the poetry-in-motion of a bald eagle swooping down to snatch that herring, with the radiant joy I experienced on the deck of my cabin in Alaska when a group of imperfect friends and relatives gathered and loved each other too much to care about the imperfections, I believe I would know just how it feels to stand at the gate of Eden's Garden and peer inside. We're really not so far from the Garden as we think we are.

And if I combine these happier experiences with my experience of life's deep darkness, when I discovered that God's Light outshines even my deepest darkness, I believe I know why those early Christians believed that the resurrected Christ had become for us the Second Adam. It is because when you lose your fear of life's worst aspects, you don't just stand outside the gate of the Garden, you step into the Garden itself. Who, more than Christ, showed us that we have nothing to fear from the worst life can throw at us? Who more than Christ showed us that the greatest evil is surpassed by a far greater good? Who, therefore, more than Christ, showed us that we are to love all human beings, and all of creation itself, or nothing at all?

Outside the Garden, the temptation is always to choose "nothing at all" if the only other choice is to love everything – the bad and ugly along with the good. Inside the Garden, you look around and you see struggle, you see imperfection, and you even see

darkness. Yet more than anything else you see Life. Life made more beautiful when it is loved in its entirety, not merely in its parts.