

Come to the Garden: Luke 13:1-9

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God of life and mystery, remind us that we are your living creatures and only in your tender care shall we flourish and blossom. May the words from our mouths and the meditation from my heart be acceptable to you, oh our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Lent is about the power and possibility of the Paschal Mystery; our Christian belief that the way of the cross, the way to Easter, is through death and the dying of the “old self.” Strangely then, to live for Christ, to know and share in his righteous abundance - we must die with him. Lent is an in between time where life and death, this world and the next, sin and redemption, brush so closely against one another, their breath can be felt upon our skin.

One of my favorite mysteries is “Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil”. The movie is set in Savannah, Georgia under the specter of Spanish moss and ageless tombstones. It’s based on a true tale of love and betrayal, privilege and poverty. A young hustler named Danny is killed by an older and wealthy internationally known art dealer named Jim. And as all sorted, salacious tales go, nobody is sure what truly happened, or what the truth really is.

A writer named John Kelso becomes wrapped up in the search for the truth. Along the way he meets a woman named Minerva, the widow of a powerful witch doctor. To solve the mystery John meets Minerva and Danny’s grave. Under a pale moon Minerva welcomes John to her “garden.” She ominously elaborates saying:

“The half hour before midnight is for doin' good. The half hour after midnight is for doin' evil -- seems like we need a little of both tonight.”

John's face is an expression of skepticism and mistrust, questioning the premise that the past and present and future can collide and that the dead could somehow speak. She sees his skepticism and says:

“John, in order to understand the living, you need to commune with the dead.”

Lent is all about - mysteries. It's about the fine line between truth and lies. It is about the collision of power and poverty. It is about love and betray. The pascal mystery itself blurs the lines between life and death. And in this in between place our Gardener, Jesus Christ, meets us. He is willing to show us a way of living, a timeless faith, that allows us to fully commune with one another and with God.

I wonder what expressions cross our face when we confront the Paschal mystery on the road to Jesus's tomb where he shall be raised from the dead?

In our scripture we find Jesus is in the middle of a series of fast-paced warnings speaking ominously of the impending judgment of God. He eludes that inbreaking of God in the work of the cross would have transformative effects on family life, economics, religious traditions and ultimate human destiny. But the Galileans had their own agenda. Jesus's proceeding prophesies aroused the Galileans - angry. They make sure that Jesus knows what's really on their hearts for:

“At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.”

Pontious Pilate was occupying their country without warrant, without any inciting atrocities causing the persecution of eighteen of their friends. Pilate had sent his

soldiers and cut down these followers not “out there” but in Jesus’s hometown- most likely in the temple in Jerusalem while they would have been on pilgrimage. There alongside the sacrificial slaughtered lambs offered to honor God, the blood of their friends would run together. Justice and honor, murder and defilement - all in a house of worship. A place meant to be a garden for the soul had become a cemetery for the faithful.

About Jesus response to his fellow Galileans, one theologian comments:

*“What is clear is that it was an appeal to Jesus nationalistic sympathies. He (Jesus) is expected to hear the story and galvanize in heated moral superiority with his countrymen, very much against the outside Romans, those inhuman forces of evil.” - Rodney Clapp*

Exemplifying the enigmatic manner of any true mystery; Jesus does not go along. Instead of getting all ginned up by these terrible claims or fueling some form of vengeance or reproach to Pilat or the Romans, Jesus turns the tables back on his fellow Galileans. His birthplace buddies. Jesus provides an immediate rebuttal to their righteous anger and queries them:

*Do you think that because the Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?*

*Worse than say, you?*

Just like today we have narratives, misconceptions, meant to control us through anger. Jesus needed to address a prevalent misconception in his day. The people of Israel believed that those who were experiencing pain and suffering were being punished by God for their sinfulness. This sinfulness was believed to be handed down, intergenerational, and God’s judgment was then heaped upon the children of those who defiled God in prior times.

Even Jesus disciples held this common misconception. At another point in the gospel, they implored him saying “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2).

In the midst of the unfolding mystery of Jesus life and death and resurrection, where life and death overlapped in the journey cross, Jesus invites us even further into the garden. He invites us to set aside skepticism, doubt, discomfort, misconceptions - to grow more deeply in his abundant love. He is our advocate and gardener.

In the parable of the fig tree, one might assume that once Grace is received once and for all that the life of the fig tree and its fruitfulness are cemented. It is as if the fig tree now, under its own will, can decide to bear fruit. This is not the case - in fact it is the gardeners’ will, desire, and commitment to advocate for the figs luscious fruit, that fruit comes forth in due time. Our gardener constantly tends to us. The soil around us is constantly amended with seasonal needs, roots are aerated. Our gardener pleads in our behalf. Storms come and go. Under the gardener’s watchful eye our stem and leaves are kept safe. Water must come at the right time.

Living creatures are in constant need of Grace, and grace can only fully blossom in tender relationships. And

*“Far from offering cheap grace, or forgiveness with no reckoning, the gardener advocates that every chance, be given before a final decision is made.” – Sharon H Ringe*

We learn about God’s judgment in God’s choice to renew the fig tree. God judgment is coupled with mercy, most fully realized in *metanoia*, or repentance. Repentance being the total about face requiring our effort and attention to fall most completely upon God. In the garden that Jesus loves into being throughout scripture, God is judging us. God judges our apathy and our infantile efforts to

bear fruit. God judges us, through nourishment; nourishes us into becoming something new. And the lag time it takes, is allegorical of our naturally slow, inching efforts, to turn in repentance, and fully receive the life that God has for us.

It is then, facing towards the glorious divine Sun, who rays fall upon and whose Spirit wind refreshes our lungs, will we flourish and flower into true maturity.

Lifeless vines to luscious fruit, cemeteries to gardens: God has judged us as worthy of his only beloved Gardener.

Lent is all about mysteries, growth, and taking the time to remember. Our Psalm says today “On my bed I will remember you, and through the night watches I will meditate on you. – Psalm 63:6

There is an ancient Hebrew myth says that when a child is born an angel comes down from heaven. The angel then takes the child under his wing and recites the Torah - in its entirety. At the end of the recitation, the angel places a finger upon the child’s upper lip, creating the indentation that all human’s possess, and whispers the word “forget.” The child then journeys throughout life trying to remember, motivated by the loving and healing words that God spoke into their young soul so they might grow strong and righteous.

Isn’t this our story as well? We forget God and we go off and we seek our own way. We search for someone and something in distant places and find ourselves trying to remember that which we cannot name. All the while God waits for us, in the Garden, until we attempt to find our way back, to become something more.

What do you need to remember this Lent?

In what mystery does the Gardener await?

At the close of the movie, Jim lies about the circumstances of Danny’s death, is set free, and then dies a mysterious death, perhaps from a broken heart, perhaps

from some supernatural interventions. John meets Minerva outside the cemetery, and he says:

“I still have so many questions”.

“You know all you need to know” Minerva says, “But one thing, don’t commune so long with the dead you forget the living.”

Without a doubt, Jesus grieved the loss of the eighteen Galileans. But his words and parable were meant not for the dead, but for the living. For the Son of Man came for so that we might remember the Word, spoken upon us, to enrich us to bear fruit.

May Lent be a time to wrap ourselves in the mysterious search for divine truth. May this journey deepen our sense of the beauty of Grace and repentance. May we flourish, knowing we are planted beside streams of living water. And may we live trusting in our advocate, friend, and Gardener who is, our bridge, our midnight between life and death - and life - eternal.

May we - Remember. (holding out hand to lips whispering)

Amen.