

# Summer



## August Sermon and Study Series

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St. Paul's United Methodist Church  
Kensington, Maryland  
August 2017

# A Taste of Paradise

When you think of paradise, the adjectives that first come to mind:

\_\_\_\_\_

Adjectives that do not describe paradise:

\_\_\_\_\_

In this season of summer, we often look to an escape, a chance for retreat and time away from the usual demands of our lives. The expectation of such a time away fuels our yearlong dreaming and imagination. We look for a taste of some idyllic location with the space and time to breathe differently. In our everyday use, paradise describes an ideal setting or state of being—sometimes a beautiful place here on earth: “Our trip to the beach was a little slice of paradise.”

Where do you most experience paradise here on earth?

\_\_\_\_\_

When the appointed time arrives to be in this place, what do you need to do in order to savor the paradise stretched before you?

The English word **paradise** has Persian (“area enclosed by a wall” or “garden”) origins. An early Greek translation of the Bible, the Septuagint, uses *paradeisos* to describe the Garden of Eden. In English translations, paradise is often used to refer to God’s gardens or the heavens.<sup>1</sup>

When we think of paradise as “the heavens” at some distance, we are often projecting forward into some greater moment and circumstance in reunion with God. We envision loved ones who have died enjoying a place beyond the cares of our troubled world.

Paradise in our minds can feel simultaneously near and far, available and elusive, familiar and exotic—paradoxical words we might also use to describe Scripture itself or even our experience of God. As we spend some biblical moments in paradise over the month, let’s explore what it means for our Creator’s beauty to 1) infuse the life we lead in the here and now, and 2) point us to the mystery that comes in life beyond what we can now know. We consider the joys and frustrations that come as paradise feels both within our hearts and beyond our reach.

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<sup>1</sup> In the *New Revised Standard Version*, which our church uses most often, the word **paradise** is found in 2 Corinthians 12:4, Luke 23:43, and Revelation 2:7.

## The Garden of Eden

Week 1 (July 31–August 5)

Whether or not you are familiar with the creation stories from Genesis, imagine what the beginning of God's creation might have looked like from the perspective of the earth. Write 3–4 sentences describing the emergence of humankind into the garden of life.

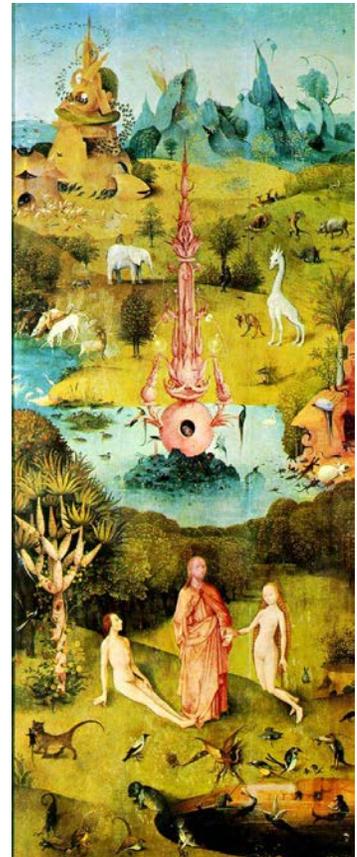
### Genesis 2:4b–17

<sup>4</sup> These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, <sup>5</sup> when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; <sup>6</sup> but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— <sup>7</sup> then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. <sup>8</sup> And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. <sup>9</sup> Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

<sup>10</sup> A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. <sup>11</sup> The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; <sup>12</sup> and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. <sup>13</sup> The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. <sup>14</sup> The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

<sup>15</sup> The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. <sup>16</sup> And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; <sup>17</sup> but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."



The word **Eden** may mean “delight” or “pleasure.” Think of the abundance of food in the garden. What flavors make you think of paradise?

Paradise is a place, an ideal location. Think of the place where you live. What combinations of weather, activity, and people can make that place seem like paradise? Describe your perfect day.

Note that the man is to “till” the garden. There is good, honest work to do. In what ways do you need to “cultivate” the garden you are in now?

The man is also to “keep” the garden, which is another way of saying guard or protect it. In what ways do you need to protect the garden you are in now?

## The Land of Milk and Honey

Week 2 (August 7-12)

Exodus 2:23-3:8c



After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. <sup>24</sup> God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. <sup>25</sup> God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

<sup>3</sup> Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. <sup>2</sup> There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. <sup>3</sup> Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.” <sup>4</sup> When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” <sup>5</sup> Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” <sup>6</sup> He said further, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

<sup>7</sup>Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, <sup>8</sup>and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

Moses' people had endured much suffering and more suffering was yet ahead. Describe a current cry for help for help you or someone close to you is offering to God.

Are there ways in which you have experienced God taking notice of you and your situation? How would you prefer that God take notice of you and your situation? What would the promised land of deliverance look like?

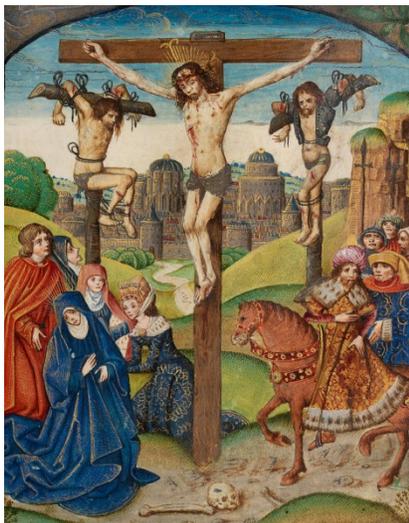
Knowing that the Israelites' deliverance through the leadership of Moses will require a long journey, what might you need to leave behind or take on in order to keep your eyes on a paradise yet to come, a land flowing with milk and honey?

Milk and honey were both tastes of prosperity. The people would require fertile pastures and ample resources for life to thrive. Are you thriving? What resources or blessings would be necessary in order for you to feel prosperous?



## The Kingdom

Week 3 (August 14-19)



Luke 23:32-43

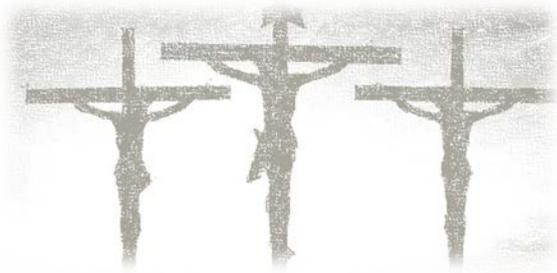
<sup>32</sup> Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. <sup>33</sup> When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. <sup>34</sup> Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. <sup>35</sup> And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" <sup>36</sup> The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, <sup>37</sup> and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" <sup>38</sup> There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

<sup>39</sup> One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" <sup>40</sup> But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? <sup>41</sup> And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." <sup>42</sup> Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." <sup>43</sup> He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Here "paradise" leads us to images of heaven beyond the brutal suffering of the current moment on the cross. In what ways are Christ's "kingdom" and "Paradise" the same? How might they differ?

What are the differences in the two criminals' responses? How do heaven and forgiveness come together for Jesus?

What would it mean for Jesus to be crucified by the state today?



How are we yet preparing for God's coming kingdom? As we think on our own lives and the realities of this world, how are we in need of forgiveness?

How does our response to Christ's love through the cross affect our expectations about this life and the life to come?

What would it mean to be "remembered" by God in your dying? What do you imagine it was like for the criminal to hear Jesus' assurance? What would Christ's voice sound like offering you paradise in your time of need? (Practice praying the phrase inserting your own name: "Truly I tell you, \_\_\_\_\_, today you will be with me in Paradise.")

## New Heaven and Earth

Week 4 (August 21-26)

Revelation 21:1-6

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup>And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup>And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

"See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

<sup>4</sup> he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away."

<sup>5</sup>And the one who was seated on the throne said,

"See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and

true." <sup>6</sup>Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.



An exiled follower of Christ on the isle of Patmos, John, scribed the book of Revelation in a time of much uncertainty. He points to the cities and the peoples of the age with great rebuke and warning. He is divinely inspired with images of what the coming kingdom or "new Jerusalem" would be like.

Could we define paradise as "the home of God among mortals?" (v.3) If so, how might we derive comfort when we fall short of the glory of God?

What are your current pains? What are other sufferings you observe among friends and family and more broadly in this world?

This biblical passage is often read at funerals. How might the verses offer comfort to those are grieving on earth?

How does the promise of eternal life in Christ affect your daily living? How and when do you experience foretastes of God's water of life?

### Paradise Next

As you move beyond this month, consider claiming each glimpse of God's love in your life as tastes of "paradise." Although it may be difficult for us to imagine all the pieces of God's new creation



coming together, Scripture helps point us to paradise as an extension of the love that initiated creation. That same love stretches beyond us and our suffering into something far greater than we can fully imagine. As the people of Christ, we claim that the coming kingdom of God has already broken through into this world. As we wait with expectation for full restoration, we can live, move, and breathe with confidence that paradise is both near and far, available and elusive, familiar and exotic. Paradise is already and not yet here.

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