Last week we studied the story of the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2 and 3, where everything was good and beautiful. Then Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit and, in the words of Milton, Paradise is lost. This is not a story about ancient history—it is an archetypal story meant to tell us about ourselves and why the world is not the perfect paradise we wish it was. The answer in that story: because human beings turn away from God’s purposes, succumb to temptation, and when they turn from God’s path, at times they bring pain and shame to themselves and others.

At the end of that story Adam and Eve are thrust out of Paradise, out of what was called the Lord’s Garden or the Garden of Eden….Paradise might have been lost, but it was not forgotten. Inside each of us, though this is the only world we have ever known, we long for Eden, for a world where there is no suffering, sorrow or pain. We long for a world where poverty has ceased to exist, where swords are beaten into ploughshares and they don’t make war any more, where justice and kindness are practiced by and for all. We long for this deep inside. Aristotle and Plato wrote of it. Jesus, as we’ll see next week, preached about it, and since the time of St. Thomas More we’ve referred to this as a utopian vision. We feel the longing for Eden most clearly when we experience pain, or witness the injustice, the heartache and the brokenness of the world we live in.

What things particularly move you to say, “It shouldn’t be that way?” Have you ever realized that those feelings are a God-given yearning to return to Eden?

I’d like to make a connection for you today between the Garden of Eden and the idea in Scripture of The Promised Land. Only once is the land of which we think of as the Promised Land actually called this in the Bible, and never in the Old Testament. But we think of this land where so much of the Bible takes place as the Promised Land because God

**Small Group Discussion Guide – March 26, 2017**

*The Garden and The Promised Land*

**From Pastor Hamilton’s sermon:**

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promised it to Abraham and his descendants. It was first called the land of Canaan. Later it was Israel. Sometimes it was called Zion.

Abraham, Sarah and his nephew, Lot, eventually settled here. Listen carefully to Genesis 13:10, as it describes the Jordan Valley in the land of Canaan: “Lot…saw the entire Jordan Valley. All of it was well irrigated, like the garden of the Lord.” Here for the first time we find the land promised by God to Abraham and his descendants likened to “the garden of the Lord”—that is, to Eden.

Abraham’s grandson Jacob takes his family to Egypt during a famine and they settle there. Eventually those descendants are enslaved by the Egyptians and serve as slaves for generations, until the day when God calls Moses from the burning bush. God said to Moses: “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt…I know their sufferings, 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.” The Promised Land is likened to a land flowing with milk and honey. This, too, is a metaphor for a land of abundance and goodness, a kind of Eden where people will not go hungry any more…. Last year I walked to the top of Mt. Nebo to film the final session of a small group study on Moses. What struck me as I was standing there was, this looks pretty barren, not like a land of milk and honey. Then this: maybe the Promised Land was never just about a piece of land. It was a piece of land, but more than that.

The Promised Land was a vision of a land where God’s people would seek to love God, and to love their neighbor, where they would live in peace, with freedom, where God was king, people did his will, and where justice and mercy reigned…. the Nile River Delta, where most of the Israelite slaves had lived, was much more lush and fertile than Israel. The promise of the Promised Land was not primarily about having more to eat. It was about freedom, and a place where people lived according to God’s will. That is what would make it a return to Eden.

- In the Kansas City metro area, many of us often cross the Kansas/Missouri state line—we even have a street named after it. In what ways do God’s promises of a return to Eden become more powerful and inclusive when you realize they reached (and reach) far beyond any human ways of separating one piece of land from another? What parts of the ideal of Eden mean most to you?

**From Pastor Hamilton’s sermon:**

When Christians and others speak of the Promised Land today they don’t usually mean the modern State of Israel. In the early church, as a child or adult was baptized, they were given a drink of milk mixed with honey. It was a sign that the Christian life was the beginning of the journey in and towards the Promised Land. The Promised Land for them was not only heaven, but also the community of believers here on earth.

I think of the Negro spirituals which often used places in the Promised Land as metaphors for freedom, deliverance, and hope. The Balm in Gilead, Crossing the Jordan, Marching to Zion (not technically a spiritual but adopted as one) and others spoke of the Promised Land. By it they meant a place of freedom, of deliverance. That’s what Dr. King spoke of the night before his death to the sanitation workers in Memphis, both black and white, who were striking for a living wage. He used the imagery of Moses ascending Mt. Nebo to look over the Promised Land just before his death.
So I want to ask you: what’s your vision of the Promised Land? What is it your heart yearns for? What is it that you see as heaven on earth, the ideal for which you’re willing to spend your life in the hope of seeing it realized? King was willing to die for his vision of the Promised Land, and tragically the very next day he did.

Too often our vision of the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey, is sadly inadequate. We may think, “If I could only get the promotion, or have a better house, or a million dollars, or win the lottery,” or “if I could marry the right person.” But these cannot be your vision of the Promised Land, for which you’d give your whole life.

Some years ago Rick Warren’s The Purpose Driven Life became one of the best-selling books of all time because it spoke to something deep within tens of millions of people in America. They were living lives without purpose. Long before, Victor Frankl wrote a book called Man’s Search for Meaning. He noted the same thing: we need to feel that there is a purpose bigger than ourselves. Why do we have this existential need? Because God placed it in our hearts. It is part of our yearning to get back to Eden. Something in us says, “You were made for more.” And the “more” you were made is to love God, love your neighbor, and do what God wills....

Those who discovered there were kids in Kansas City without beds, and started our beds ministry with a dream that no child in Kansas City sleeps on the floor, had Eden written on their hearts. They had a picture of the Promised Land, where no child has to sleep on the floor, and they are moving the needle toward that vision, one bed at a time.

The Promised Land, like much in life, is more about the journey than the destination. You’ll never fully get to the Promised Land in this life, because we all still struggle with the tempter, and as a race we struggle with doing God’s will. The last hymn in the United Methodist Hymnal is a reminder of both the Promised Land we’ll finally inherit, and the fact that the journey towards it is what matters now. The hymn is called “Marching to Zion”—another name for the Promised Land. “We’re marching to Zion, beautiful, beautiful Zion. We’re marching upward to Zion the beautiful city of God.”

Before we close, I’ve got to say one thing that is particularly pertinent to us here at Resurrection on this opening weekend in our new sanctuary. I believe it is true for all of you at our partner churches as well. One thing the Promised Land is not: the Promised Land is not a building, no matter how beautiful it is....This building is not the Promised Land, it only points people to the Promised Land. It’s meant to remind you of Eden. As you gather here for worship, it’s meant to inspire you with a vision of what the world could be, so that you leave longing for the world the way God intended it to be. It reminds you that no matter how dark the days are, there will come a day when the Garden will be perfectly restored, when we will stand together in the Promised Land.

God has placed the memory of Eden in every one of our hearts—a longing for the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey, a place where people know, love and serve God, where they do his will, where they love each other, where there is no more sorrow, suffering or pain.

So I ask you: what’s your vision of the Promised Land? What is it your heart yearns for? What is it that you see as heaven on earth, the ideal for which you’re willing to spend your life in the hope of seeing it realized?

- Have you ever thought that a smaller goal—a building, promotion, or anything else—was the “Promised Land”? What showed God’s bigger ideal for all people?

- Who are the people in your life who most know, love and serve God and extend God’s love to you? In what ways are you able to return those Promised Land qualities to them?