

A Watered Garden

Jeremiah 31:7-14; John 1:1-5

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Travel with me through time.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.

That was Day One.

Now if we are to trust in science and its experts, and I do, then that day, depending on your reading, was anywhere between 4.5 and 13.8 **billion** years ago. Our universe being an estimated 13.8 billion years old, and the Earth roughly 4.5.

Day One then, either way, was a very, very long time ago.

And, made even longer when acknowledging that humanity is estimated to be 2 **million** years old, and homo-sapiens 200-**thousand**. You don't need me to spell out that Thousand<<<<<<< Billion but it's basically like my net worth vs. Jeff Bezos.

There's a huge gap there, just as there is of time between Day One when light was first separated from darkness and Day Six when Genesis tells us man and woman were created. And thus, lots and lots of time where God, I guess, just waited and watched. Billions of years of nothing, seemingly, happening. Or maybe, a lot happening, but things like volcanic eruptions, and tidal movements, and plates shifting, and microbiological bacteria blooms... I mean not the kind of stuff that generally tells stories, or that at least gets to the heart of our Biblical and human story.

But you know what? That waiting, and watching, and the pattern repeating with apparently nothing new happening, is actually I think as human and as Biblical as it gets.

For instance, fast-forwarding just a bit on our travel through time, the Pentateuch tells us that Israelites were in Egypt for four hundred and thirty years. And that the Exodus and all that time wandering in the desert, before entering the Holy Land, lasted another forty. And while that's not measured in the thousands or billions, that's still lifetimes and generations and hundreds of years of waiting. And hoping. And, getting frustrated and tired and impatient of waiting and hoping.

Fast-forwarding again, Jesus was born around 4 B.C.E., and after that glorious day announced by shepherds and wise-men and angels and the whole Christmas pageantry, we don't hear from him again until about 8 C.E. or a full 12 years later when he appears in the Temple, teaching the elders as his parents anxiously search for him. For over a decade then, the only good news the people of his time would receive is that a child was born, and that he was and would be great, and then... radio silence.

Was the good news of that Holy Night enough for those early hearers of the story? To hold and grip them in suspense enough so that they would keep waiting and watching and hoping for his next

appearance? Or did they wonder as they also wandered, thinking why are things still the same? Why haven't things changed with this baby and Heavenly King now born in the world? Why am I still poor and poor in spirit, and subjugated to injustice and intolerance if this Prince of Peace was the Divine Incarnation to set all things right?

Making matters harder for them, I imagine, it wouldn't be for another 18 years after that short appearance in the Temple, that the people of God would meet finally Jesus again. Though this time in the River Jordan, as a fully grown man, being baptized by John, as he begins his public ministry at the age of 30. At 30.

Thirty long years of waiting after that scene in the manger, and the Messiah born, before the people of Christ's time began to see just what his ministry and God looked like in flesh and form.

Thirty years. Waiting and watching and hoping and being invited into the long and seemingly endless ritual of patience... yes, my friends, this is indeed our very human, Biblical story.

Back-tracking in time just a bit, the prophet Jeremiah's words, though often beautiful, were often heard as undeliverable promises by his audience. Yes, he said many pretty things (like, from our text, that those who believe will never languish again, and one day, those who are old and young would rejoice together in the streets singing and dancing), but to the people who heard these words, who were still suffering and languishing in exile, I imagine they often fell on deaf and tired ears.

For 70 years (70!) the people remained in the Babylonian Exile. Families and generations came and passed as Jeremiah kept writing and prophesying away. So no wonder then that many just tuned him out. But those who did missed something crucial that Jeremiah repeated over and over... that though these beautiful things will one day come to fruition, do not expect to see them immediately. Or soon. Or even in your lifetime. For *that* would be an undeliverable promise. So settle in, he urges them, and be patient. For one day, some time later, there will be dancing, and one day some years later, there will be healing. It will come. It doesn't invalidate the promise, if it simply hasn't happened yet.

This is something we frequently talk about on our youth mission trips. That it's all basically a step along the way. Often the work we do doesn't see an endpoint. A wheelchair ramp is started, a roof is half-shingled, a retaining wall mostly built, a concrete foundation put in, but not the rest of the house... but just because we don't finish the projects doesn't mean the work was pointless or that it won't be completed later by others. It all matters, and is part of a greater process, even if our own validation and satisfaction must wait.

And that's hard, and especially hard for us who live in this particular era of time. In this generation and society that lives moment to moment with expectations of immediacy and instant gratification. Though our human story and origin emerges out the long slow doldrums of time, so few of us today have any practice or patience with that which is delayed. And slow. And long.

And I think that's what has made these past two years so much worse. It was like a perfect storm. A society out of control, sped up to the max, all of sudden put on pause with no resumption in sight. We did everything so fast, all of the time, without breaking, that now that we are broken, and languishing, it's that's much harder. We were, and are, not geared up for this. Remember how at first it was only going to be a couple weeks, maybe a month? I honestly thought to myself... a month, of

no preschool, of no work, at home with Seth every minute of the day... how will I do this? A month I was worried about! And just how ridiculous and sad that seems in retrospect nearly two years later.

Just as he was then for those who were lost in exile, Jeremiah is our prophet for today, even if we don't want him to be. For none of us should anymore be expecting a clean and quick ending to this. A swift return home, and a return to normal. The drop of a ball in Times Square, the turn of a calendar page, a new booster and vaccine, even the celebration of a baby born in a manger, won't magically and immediately change the circumstance we find ourselves in. It will take time. It will take more time. And more waiting and watching. And, that much more hoping and praying. And dare I say, even that much more changing and doing. So help us, God.

I read a line the other day that made me laugh on one these little bio-tech forums I follow... it was posted around 6:28am, and it said, "Good morning, team! Who's ready for another disappointing day?" I probably laughed harder than I should, but it just so encapsulated 2021 to me. Where any ray of hope felt so quickly dashed. I mean Anya and I waited for well over a year for Seth to get vaccinated, only to have the day he received his second shot, be the exact same day that Omicron first appeared in the news. Talk about bittersweet. Moreover, news out of Congress and Washington is again, grim. And again, reports of general degradation and destruction follow. An abduction here. A murder and death there. Draughts out west and sudden wildfires and firestorms in tow.

It can be so easy to lose hope and get agitated like a people trapped in exile, especially when waiting and watching and hoping for some good news seems like a fool's errand and a waste of time. But just because our restoration might feel like and actually be a ways out, it doesn't mean that our outlook is yet completely hopeless, dark, and dim.

For somehow, perhaps foolishly, I yet believe there is light and a work already in progress. A garden that has been planted with seeds scattered and sown that will continue to grow.

I saw a vision of this last week when one of my post-college kids (who I should probably should just call an adult by now) called home and we got to talking. He shared how impactful the youth group at this church was on his development and maturation through college and young adulthood, and how belonging to a community that accepted and embraced him, even through his struggles and detours, gave him the support he needed to push onward even when he felt wayward and lost. And at the end of our conversation, he told me he hopes to one day father a child who will have the same experience at a church as he did. And this was a young person I might add, who barely wrote a statement of faith when he was here. Who was agnostic if not antagonistic as a teenager towards church and life in general. And yet here he was and is, saying these beautiful words to me.

Waiting and watching, planting and hoping for seeds to grow. This is what we do. This is what Marianne Mebane did.

Sometimes, my friends, the garden will be mistaken for weeds. Sometimes animals will invade and uproot its growth. Sometimes, no matter the seed or the sun, it simply won't grow as fast or as tall as we think it should. But that doesn't mean we should stop working the ground, and hoping for a better day and harvest ahead.

So travel with me through this time, this time that is ours. We might not have chosen it, but it has chosen us. And so as best we can, let us try to settle in, as hard as that is, and be patient. Living day

to day and moment to moment. Trying not to worry too much about what has come before, and trying not to make any huge resolutions or unrealistic expectations about what's yet to come. For tomorrow probably won't be perfect. It will probably be much like today and yesterday. And there will still be darkness. For just as in the beginning, it is still there to be tamed. But, it will not overcome us!

It will not overcome us. For the lord of light has come, and he lives and dwells amongst us. He came to us in human form, appearing as God in sandals, and walks with us still through the wilderness ways to lead us to brooks of water, to flower beds, and the sun rising again. Even in this pandemic. Even in this new-year, which is perhaps off to the same start as last, He is yet with us. Waiting and abiding with us. Watching with us. Comforting us and hoping together with us.

And he tells us that one day there will be dancing; there will be healing. Even if it hasn't happened yet, it doesn't invalidate the promise.

It just might take a bit more time.

Amen.