

## The Well Tended Garden

The English author H. G. Wells, who was famous for science fiction novels like *The Time Machine*, *The Invisible Man*, and *The War of the Worlds*, once wrote a short story called “The Country of the Blind.” It’s about an inaccessible, luxurious valley in Ecuador where, due to a strange disease, everyone is blind. After 15 generations of this blindness there was no recollection of sight or color or the outside world at all. Finally a man from the outside—a man who could see—literally fell into their midst. He had fallen off a high cliff and survived, only to stumble into their forgotten country.

When he realized that everyone else was blind, he remembered the old adage (which my friend John Halligan likes to quote whenever I thank him for fixing one of our frequent computer issues): “In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.” He tried at first on several occasions to tell them of sight.

Wells writes: “Look you here, you people,” he said. “There are things you do not understand in me.” Once or twice one or two of them listened to him; they sat with faces downcast and ears turned intelligently towards him, and he did his best to tell them what it was to see.

But they never believed him. In fact, they thought he was crazy. Eventually the man fell in love with a girl there, and the girl’s father, Yacob, went to talk to a doctor about him. A conversation ensued: [The doctor said]: “I think I may say with reasonable certainty that, in order to cure him complete, all that we need to do is a simple and easy surgical operation—namely, to remove these irritant bodies [his eyes!].” “And then he will be sane?” [they asked]. “Then he will be perfectly sane, and a quite admirable citizen.” “Thank Heaven for science!” said old Yacob.

Wells goes on to point out that the man would not be allowed to marry Yacob’s daughter unless he submitted to an operation that would blind him. So what would the man do? Wells writes: “He had fully meant to go to a lonely place where the meadows were beautiful with white narcissus, and there remain until the hour of his sacrifice should come, but as he walked he lifted up his eyes and saw the morning, the morning like an angel in golden armor, marching down the steeps... It seemed to him that before this splendor, he and this blind world in the valley, and his

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love and all, were no more than a pit of sin. And the man who could see escaped the country of the blind with his life.<sup>1</sup>”

Now, H. G. Wells was actually an atheist, and a rather messed up guy personally... nevertheless, his insight into human nature expressed in this short story is undeniable. And it reminds me of two Scripture readings – both of which are Lectionary readings for today. I never really had connected these two passages before this week – and not surprisingly, they are so different.

One is from the Old Testament – the book of Exodus. The story of the people of Israel out in the desert - again. Moses this time, is up on Mt. Sinai; he’s meeting with God, receiving the Law from the very hand of God. Evidence of the holiness of God is everywhere – the entire mountain was cordoned off, from the base up. No living thing could cross that barrier, nothing living could touch the mountain *on pain of death*. The top reaches of the mountain were obscured by thick dark smoke.

[This is reminiscent of the line from that great hymn, where we sing: “*Holy, holy, holy, though the darkness hide thee, though the eye of sinful man, thy glory may not see...*”]

Well, they may not have been able to *see*, but they could *hear*. There were constant rumbles of thunder, as well as flashes of lightening coming from the mountain. In other words, the scene was frightening, scary. There was great mystery, there was fear... as these people, fresh out of 400 years of mindless slavery in Egypt now found themselves standing, so vulnerable, in such close proximity to the God of their ancestors. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob... the God of Joseph, and Sarah and Rebecca; the God that they *heard about*, and somewhat acknowledged throughout their history, now was before them; and he was sharing his own expectation of *their* part in continuing this relationship. I.e., God was on that mountain telling Moses and all the people, “Here is what I want from *you*.”

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<sup>1</sup> Lee Eclov, *Vernon Hills, Illinois*; source: [www.online-literature.com/wellshg/3/](http://www.online-literature.com/wellshg/3/)

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And, as humans have done for millennia, as we *still* do, their gut response was to go for the thing that they could *see*, the thing they could touch and understand... the thing they could *control* ... they chose *that* over the God of infinity, mystery, and utter holiness.

In H. G. Wells's short story, the people in the valley were just like the Israelites. When confronted with something that was so out of their realm of understanding, when confronted with something that would force them to alter their very perception of 'reality', they chose the easier way, and simply *rejected* this new thing completely. (Fascinating that Wells himself did the same thing in his own life! I read that it was his own inability to accept intellectually the Creator God of Genesis that led him to reject the Christianity of his youth, and embrace atheism!)

We'll come back to this passage...

The second scripture for today is a Gospel reading: Jesus' parable of the Great Feast from Matthew 22. In this parable, Jesus describes the Kingdom of Heaven in terms of a great feast put on by a King. The 'King' is clearly God. We've looked at this passage before (from the Gospel of Luke), and we're not going to go into detail about it today. Just notice the general line of the story once again, if you will:

The King finishes all the preparations for this wonderful feast, and he sends out his messenger with the invitation: "...*everything is ready. Come to my wedding banquet.*" We know that because this is an invitation from a King, that this was the best offer that any of those fortunate invitees were *ever* going to receive. That's a given. This invitation was truly the opportunity of a lifetime. But what is their response?

One after another they started making excuses as to why they couldn't come. Do you remember the excuses? They were *all* mundane things – they were 'life' issues that everyone faces.

Matthew's version of the parable is more summarized than Luke's, but you get the picture nonetheless from this single line, vs. 5:

*But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business.*

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See the similarity to the ancient Hebrews? “I don’t understand this invitation...” I don’t ‘get’ what’s so good about it.” It’s too much bother to get ready (whatever) so I’ll choose the things I know.” I can’t imagine anything this good, for *free*... there’s a catch in there somewhere. So, no thanks.” The Hebrews out in the desert, the people invited to the King’s feast all made a similar choice.

*“So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. <sup>4</sup> He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, “These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.”*

Of course a calf was the symbol of the local fertility gods of that day... in fashioning it they were reverting to the gods of their peers, to the polytheism that was all around them. The local deities. These, you see, were gods that they could manipulate and control – at least to some degree – they thought. *So, fashioning the calf was really a statement of their desire to be in control.* And I wonder if the rejection of the King’s invitation was another way of asserting self-control, as well – i.e., “I will not subject myself to you as King, even if I have to spite myself to do that.” I’m not going to your banquet. ....

This is where *we* live as well – in the country of the blind that is so proud of its science and technology, so sure of its health, dug into our wealth, oblivious to the light. Determined to do it ‘our way.’ Jesus had his own name for “the country of the blind.” He called it “the world.”

In both of these accounts – Exodus and Matthew – in spite of their separation by thousands of years, there is the hint of a very basic spiritual issue going on. Let me ‘recap’: the Hebrews form a gold calf to worship while Moses is on the mountain receiving *the Law* from the very hand of God. In Jesus’ parable, the people – people who supposedly had been waiting all their lives for this invitation – end up rejecting it when it comes. It is an invitation from *the King*.

... I mentioned a couple weeks ago my belief that the entire message of the Bible, from start to finish, can be summed up by one question: “What is at the center of my being?” If, when we take an honest look at what lies at the core of our being, what is ‘down there’ motivating us, what we are pursuing with all our heart, what gives us joy, stability, what sets the standards for our goals,

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values, morality, hope, and all the rest... if it is 'me' (if it is "I") then we are lost. We were not created for that.

If, on the other hand, in the center of it all, in spite of the difficulties that we may have occasionally in actually living this out, if the foundation of my soul is built around "YOU", on God, on the presence of Christ in me through the Holy Spirit, then I am not lost, I am 'found'. I have life – now and forever. It all boils down to this.

Let's take that thought a step or two further today...

Sometimes we hear people talking about being a Christian in terms of a 'decision' that we make at some crisis point in our lives, typically when we're 'younger'. We consider the claims of Christ, and we are asked "Will you say 'yes' to God?" Sometimes that decision is publicly affirmed by a person 'coming forward', a la the great Billy Graham crusades.

Now, I understand that culture, and I grew up in it, especially in college and seminary. But while I certainly can see the value and the power in an initial decision, or commitment to Christ, I've come to understand that, Biblically speaking, that being a Christian is making those same decisions for God every day of our lives. It's not just a 'one and done' deal. It's *daily putting to death the deeds of the flesh*, it is remembering Christ in every temptation, in every decision we make... it is seeing the face of God in the hurting people we walk by every day of our lives and acting as he leads us.

That's why I love (and frequently use) the metaphor of a *journey* to describe our life in Christ. It *is* a journey, it is a dynamic relationship, not a static state of being. It's a life, not a title. And we need to realize in this journey that the scenery changes frequently. Some days are beautiful and the walk is easy. Other days it gets steep, and it's really hot or really cold (whichever bothers you the most!); there will be dry days when you are bored from the same old thing over and over, there will be times of attack and trouble, and there will be times when we are frustrated because we don't seem to be getting anywhere – at least, not where we *want* to go.

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And we also – if we’re planning on actually *finishing* the journey – we also better realize early on that our very *nature* is going to be our biggest enemy working against us. When we decide to move from ‘I’ to ‘You’, our nature fights against that, and it doesn’t give up easily, either. There is a wonderful hymn, “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” written by a Methodist pastor (Robert Robinson) in 1758. The third verse is every bit as meaningful today as it was 150 years ago:

*O to grace how great a debtor, daily I’m constrained to be!  
Let thy goodness, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to thee.*

You know what a fetter is? Leg irons! This is a powerful image: let your goodness *bind* my wandering heart to you, God. It continues:

*Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love;  
Here’s my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above.*

**Prone to wander – Lord, I feel it!** This guy knew the human condition. Whatever it was inside the Hebrews that led them to think that the local nothing gods were better than that scary Jehovah up on Mt. Sinai... *we* have it, too! Whatever misguided thought process that was inside those people who received this chance of a lifetime invitation from their King to a Wedding Banquet – whatever made them think their daily business, their relationships, their money, their investments, whatever, were more important than attending to the King: well, before we write them off, let’s be honest: it’s in us too! Prone to wander! Lord, *I* feel it.

And if we are not actively...*actively*... fighting against that tide... it will erode our beach. You know what I’m saying? If we think that we’re OK, spiritual speaking, because we responded to an invitation all those years ago, but we haven’t done much to nourish ourselves spiritually, since then; or, if what we’ve done has been haphazard and half-hearted, and circumstance driven... we could be in trouble. I don’t need to go into any detail about that, we all know what that kind of trouble looks like. It all fits under the general category of ‘sad’.

Our walk with God is *way* too important to leave to chance...

So, over a period of five weeks (continuing after next weekend’s wonderful celebration of our Laity) Pastor HeyYoung and I are going to be preaching a series of messages that will lead us to the weekend November 22<sup>nd</sup> & 23<sup>rd</sup>. That weekend, for the second year, is being set aside as our

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Discipleship Covenant Celebration. I wrote about this in the Messenger for November, which should be coming out pretty soon.

Once again, we are going to give everyone in our faith community an opportunity to write a personal covenant with God regarding your plans for your journey with God in the year 2009. These are *personal* in that no one will read them except yourself. But we are asking you to do what you can to prepare yourself to complete these covenants with integrity.

The covenants will ask you about your plans in five important components of your spiritual walk:

1. your plans for spiritual growth (i.e., classes, reading, studies, devotional times, prayer, etc)
2. your accountability (who are you walking with in this journey?)
3. your plans for service
4. your plans for worship
5. your plans for giving

In our messages between now and then, Pastor HeyYoung and I will be sharing some information that will help you think about the preparation of your covenant. And on that weekend before Thanksgiving, we will write them, seal them in a self-addressed envelope, bring them up here and consecrate them to God on this altar. And at some point later in the year, we will mail them back to you, as a reminder of what you have planned, to check and see how you are doing.

We're asking two very important things of you: 1. please pray for this process. Pray for yourself and for our church in general. It is a powerful thing to make such covenants, and we will need prayer support. 2. we're asking that you participate as faithfully as you can in this process. Listen to our messages; start thinking about this ahead of time. And do all you can to be with us on the 22<sup>nd</sup> or 23<sup>rd</sup> in this joyful celebration of commitment, remembering who we are in Christ together. You'll see how many people are journeying with you.

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Every day I come into this place to work, and I notice the beautiful gardens all around our property – such variety, constantly changing colors, shapes, hues; it's like slow-motion fireworks. And I think to myself, "How fortunate we are that these gardens just happen to be growing right here for us to enjoy! What an amazing stroke of luck that these works of art year after year, plant themselves, and weed themselves, water themselves, and trim themselves... because it is sure worth it. We're all so blessed by them. We're so lucky."

Do I need to explain that?

Amen....