

Grace to you and peace from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

[Introduction]

When Adam and Eve decided they’d live by rules of their own devising, it wasn’t enough that they blushed and scampered behind a tree to sew together some leafy underwear.

It wasn’t enough that they were interrogated and rebuked by the Divine Judge.

It wasn’t enough that they heard the gut-wrenching curses pronounced upon their future crop-raising and child-birthing.

It wasn’t even enough that, at that hour, they started down the slippery slope that would finally land them 6 feet under.

More was coming.

As a final, necessary action, their landlord kicked them out. And at the front door of their former garden paradise was stationed a Secret Service agent—the angelic kind—a sword scintillating in his hand, barricading the way to the tree of life.

And so it was that they became homeless criminals on the run—our not-so-great-grandparents.

[Not-so-great]

Not-so-great. But, of course, the apple doesn’t fall very far from the tree . . . especially the tree that gives the knowledge of good and evil. Like father, like son; like Adam, like me.

In Adam we have all been one,
 One huge rebellious man;
 We all have fled that evening voice
 That sought us as we ran. (LW 292:1, © 1969 CPH)

And so we who are also not-so-great have been hightailing it ever since.

Climbing up our mountains of pride.
 Clawing through thickets of lies.
 Barreling downward into valleys of depravity.
 Stampeding over anyone who dares to get in our way.

We've come a long way, all right, a long way from home. So here we are, no longer creatures of Eden, but now creatures of the desert.

Say what you like about the peculiar, mysterious beauty of the desert. The truth is, most folks agree it doesn't have much going for it. Especially if your canteen is bone-dry.

There's a reason people call such places a godforsaken wilderness. Fiery sands, killer snakes, and vegetation bristling with thorns certainly do give the appearance that even God has forsaken such haunts.

In such a world we Adams and Eves are born and live or, at least, we exist.

Go ahead, irrigate this desert, air-condition it, pretty it up to your heart's content—all is futile.

So instead we practice and refine self-deception. We act like the sand of prosperity or fame is the fertile soil of paradise. We convince ourselves that chewing on cacti is just as good as the ole tree of life once was, in fact, even tastier.

So we ruminate on our trophies, our sweet acts of revenge, the forbidden fruits we've enjoyed. But it's all lies, a million grains of dirty, rotten lies.

Our hands are weak from scratching and clawing out an existence in this world. Weak from digging our own grave in this desert wasteland. Our knees are feeble from kneeling before the gods of money, pleasure, and power. Feeble from trying to uphold the weight of the Law, the tonnage of guilt strapped atop our back. Our hearts are anxious about everything from what to wear to where to retire; from finding work to work that never ends.

But that's the way life is in the desert, far, far east of Eden.

[A Preacher in the Wilderness]

But there is a preacher out here, a man of the wilderness. The Reverend John the Baptist. Into this desert world he is sent with the scroll of Isaiah in his hand and upon his lips. And his is a message that will leave this godforsaken land permanently changed, for the message is that God has “not” forsaken us.

Quite the opposite.

John preaches to the desert “Immanuel,” God-with-us, even, yes, especially, in this world.

So “the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus” (Is 35:1 ESV). For John proclaims a change is coming and, indeed, has already come; a resurrection change, a from-death-to-life change. For all the way from Eden, the One who ousted Adam and Eve has come.

THE LANDLORD HAS COME TO BRING YOU HOME TO EDEN.

And heaven trails after him.

[The One Way Back to Eden]

The Landlord’s advent into this desert world signals the reversal of all that has been. For everywhere he goes, there springs forth life.

The eyes of the blind are opened. The ears of the deaf are unstopped. The lame man leaps like a deer. The tongue of the mute sings for joy.

It is for you that he has come. He has sought you out, tracked you down. Not to accuse you nor to berate you, but to save you. That’s why he’s come.

He strengthens your weak hands, makes firm your feeble knees, says to your anxious heart: “Be strong; fear not! I have come to lead you home, to take you back to Eden.”

Waters break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert when Jesus is born.

All is reversed.

He who turns water into wine, sickness into health, and death into life comes to change you.

In a desert world, there is only one place where there is life—the place where there is water.

And the waters that break forth upon his arrival are a fountain of life. No mirages are they.

He takes you in his hands, carries you into that fountain, and lets you soak up the life that is his own.

This water, where does it come from? It is from him, from his spear-pierced side, a flowing river that streams through the wound suffered for you.

The Israelites quenched their thirst from the rock struck by Moses. And that Rock was Christ.

The same Rock is a body, struck by the weapon of war, gushing forth with peace and life from him who was dead but now lives. And in him, in his water, in his river, you live.

A highway is in this wilderness also, the Way of Holiness. It is the way of the Church, a path constructed from the raw materials of his flesh and blood.

And you, the one redeemed by God, travel on it.

There is only one way back to Paradise; only one pathway that leads to life. It is he who is the way, the truth, and the life, the only road back to Eden.

The Israelites wandered forty years in the wilderness, leaving behind corpse after corpse littering the desert sands. But the Way of Holiness is not a way of death but life.

In this Church, in this Christ, on this highway, you have already passed from death to life. You have been baptized into Jesus. You have streamed into his death and been washed back out of the grave into newness of life.

[Conclusion]

So now, we journey. Citizens of Eden once more, there and not there yet. Already tasting the fruit of the tree of life, as we dine on our Lord's body and blood, yet also awaiting the day when we, in our resurrected flesh, will see him face-to-face in the garden above.

And seeing him, we long-lost Adams and Eves will forever bask in the goodness of his love.

THE LANDLORD HAS COME TO BRING YOU HOME. Amen.

“Now may the God of peace... equip you with everything good that you may do his will, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.” (Heb 13:20-21)
