“Paradise, Christianity, and Empire”
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For those of you who are keen gardeners, it probably will not surprise you to learn that the word “paradise” originally comes from a Greek word meaning a kind of garden. You gardeners can understand this connection, I’m sure. Tending the soil, getting your hands dirty while soaking up the sunshine, being in the midst of cucumbers and parsley and mint and fresh tomatoes – what could be any closer to Heaven than that?

This connection of paradise and the garden goes back a long, long time. The Garden of Eden story, which begins both the Jewish and Christian Bibles, is partly based on even older Sumerian stories. In the Biblical version of the story, the first two people, Adam and Eve, lived in a lush paradise between four rivers. They lived in harmony with the world, ate a vegetarian diet, created language, and loved each other well. The garden of paradise didn’t last, unfortunately, and they were kicked out, but in the Christian and Jewish theologies the garden of paradise is always a possibility.

As you might expect, pictures of the paradisal garden are common in early Christian art. Images of fruit and vegetables, vines and orchards harkened back to the garden of Eden – as well as being symbols of the good life in their own day.

What’s more surprising is what you *won’t* find in early Christian art. Two theologians (who are the authors of the book that is the source of much of this sermon)[1] went on an art tour of ancient Christian churches, and mysteriously, they noticed there was something missing in every place they looked. What was missing? The dead Jesus. You know all those pictures you find in Catholic churches throughout Europe and America, of Jesus suffering and dying on the cross? They couldn’t find a single one in pre-tenth century churches. They went to Rome. Istanbul. Ravenna. Everywhere they went, they found picture after picture of the living Jesus. Jesus the shepherd. Jesus being baptized at the river Jordan. The resurrected Jesus, back from the dead and talking with his flock. But no Jesus dying on the cross.

[1] *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of this World for Crucifixion and Empire* by Rebecca Ann Parker and Rita Nakashimi Brock

It wasn't that the cross was not an early symbol of Christianity. You could find crosses on the walls, along with the fish, another early symbol of Christianity. You could find crosses; you just wouldn't find pictures of Jesus dying on one.

Why not? Well, to answer that mystery the authors combed through all the ancient manuscripts they could find and read hundreds of scholarly tomes. (A little like Tom Hanks in the Da Vinci Code, but maybe not quite as exciting). And what they found, in a nutshell, was that the early Christianity of the Middle East and the Mediterranean and the medieval Christianity of Europe were different in some very important ways.

In the first three centuries after Jesus' death, early Christian communities generally met in people's homes, often in secret. Depending on who was Roman Emperor at the time, Christians could be persecuted and killed for their religion. Because of this constant threat of persecution, and because life in general was often nasty, brutish and short, suffering was very real in the lives of early Christians. But they did not worship suffering. They worshipped Christ as the Shepherd – often using the metaphor and imagery of Orpheus, the Shepherd figure of Greek mythology. Jesus was the life-giver, one who brought loaves and fishes to the hungry, the King of life who was so much alive that even death could not contain him. When the early Christian communities took Communion – the eating of food and drink which to the faithful become the body and blood of Christ - this Communion was not so much a celebration of Christ's sacrifice, as it often is today, but an act of *theosis*. By *theosis* I mean, in eating the bread and wine (or sometimes honey and other foods), the believer sought to become like God, to become one with the Divinity that is ever present in the world. The people of the church would become with the mystery of all creation, one with God. Therefore, paradise was not just some otherworldy reality, waiting for us after we die. Paradise, for the early Christian, was right here, in the midst of this world, near enough to touch, and to taste. Communion – and the life of the church in general – reminded participants that they lived in the midst of paradise.

Christianity was an extremely radical movement during those early house church days. In a world where the Roman Emperor was worshipped as a God and the Empire was all-powerful in every aspect of people's lives, Jesus was a subversive figure, a king of a different kind of a world, a world not of success and worldly fortunes but of peace and relationships. Many Christian communities defied the social norms of the Roman Empire, often refusing to serve in the army and sharing all their goods in common (Karl Marx was not the first socialist – when he

wrote, "each according to need," he was quoting the book of Acts in the Bible, a description of these early communities). [2]

One of the things that attracted people – and repulsed others – about the house church movement was how these communities reacted when two plagues swept through the Roman Empire in the second century. When most people were abandoning the sick to die, especially the poor, and were running to the countryside, many Christian churches stayed together and served each other, helped each other, through the outbreaks. As you can imagine, the risks of staying in close contact were severe – and they were aware of these risks. But they felt called by their faith to stick together, not because they sought death, but rather because they sought the good life, the life of service to one another.

Christianity quickly grew more popular, and from the fourth century on it even became the official religion of the Roman Empire. This was a complicated shift for the religion to make: from criticizing worldly powers, to all of a sudden, *being* a worldly power. Predictably, before long many Bishops were using this power to try and persecute those that weren't Christian. Structures of hierarchical power were built up in the church, and allegiance to Christianity and allegiance to the Roman Empire became less and less in conflict with each other as the two began to conflate.

But even with these developments, for many centuries, the cross remained a symbol not of death, but of life. You have to remember, to the average person in the Roman Empire the cross was a terrifying symbol of the Empire's power. Roman legions used to carry crosses at the front of their armies when they marched, specifically to strike fear in the hearts of their enemies, because to die on a cross was such a horrendous event. So by adopting the cross as a symbol, early Christians were saying "we're not afraid of death. We're not going to embrace death, but we aren't going to let you make us afraid. Even the cross cannot scare us." However, to put an image of Jesus suffering and dying on their churches would have seemed utterly insane to them – images had power, they knew this, why would you want to give power to the image of the Roman Empire killing Jesus? The living Christ and the risen Christ had power, not the dying Christ.

But now we come to the second half of our mystery story – if these images of Christ suffering on the Cross are nowhere to be seen in early Christianity, how did they become so popular? And for that, we turn first to Charlemagne. Charlemagne was a Ninth-Century European

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[2] Acts 4:35

Christian King who was fighting various tribes of Saxons, who were Pagan. If you've seen the movie Avatar, you probably have a pretty good idea what happened during those wars. Hungry for resources, Charlemagne not only destroyed Saxon towns and villages, he demolished their sacred shrines to try and kill their spirit. He forced them to convert to Christianity, in mass baptisms held at swordpoint. Charlemagne's armies – in an incredibly ironic twist of history – marched with the Cross at the front, in the same show of power that the Romans used before the Roman Empire became Christian. The symbol of the cross had come full circle – rather than a symbol of resistance to oppression, it now was a symbol of oppression again.

In the centuries after Charlemagne violence swept through Europe. The theology of the church became more and more focused on paradise in the next world, not on this one. Soldiers and peasants would stare at images of Christ suffering on the cross, now in all the European churches, and hope that there were better days ahead than the ones they had to live through now. They were told their suffering was holy in the eyes of God, that suffering was the path to salvation. The soldiers were told even their violence against others was holy in the eyes of God. Though there had been Christian soldiers throughout Christian history, Christianity had been very uneasy about violence before the Middle Ages. In some Christian communities, soldiers could not take communion, and for all soldiers bloodshed was thought of as sinful, no matter who was killed or how just the cause. Soldiers prayed the night before they did battle and did penance after, sometimes for many years.

But then came the Crusades. The European powers needed a theology that would facilitate the mass killing of Jews and Muslims. They found this theology in the image of the suffering of Jesus. Anselm of Canterbury wrote that Jesus' suffering was a voluntary gift that He made to atone for the sins of mankind. God demanded penance for the sin of Adam, and so Jesus chose suffering as a kind of trade to make things even with God. We, in turn, said Anselm, should seek suffering and doing God's will. If we kill infidels in a foreign land, it's OK, because we're doing the will of God. Bernard of Clairvaux took this theology one step further by saying that our suffering united us with Christ in love. Bernard preached that participating in the Crusades was an act of love. He even coined a new term, *malecide*, the killing of evildoers, to claim that killing someone in a Crusade was not a homicide but a good deed that brings one closer to God.

As all this happened, paradise moved further and further away from us. The idea of paradise became something you escape to, an otherworldly reality worth any amount of suffering, oppression, and death in this world. This vision of paradise did not end with the Crusades. It was instrumental in the European expansion into the New World. Christopher Columbus thought paradise might be in the East, and he sailed West to find the gold of paradise and to

convert any heathen people he found along the way. Slavery was justified as a gift to those enslaved, that by being forced to become Christian, they might one day see paradise. The suffering they experienced was thought of as inconsequential, as it helped pave the way to paradise. Women who were abused by their husbands and their families were encouraged to focus on how their acceptance of suffering would look good in the eyes of God. And on and on and on.

I speak of our past today so that we might better understand our present and live into our future. You may have already glimpsed how this history still affects us today, whether we are Christian or not. Two hundred years after Jefferson spoke out for the separation of church and state, patriotism and faith are still uneasy bedfellows in our national self-identity. Also, and tragically, in the homes and congregations of battered women and children and all people oppressed by society, suffering is still preached as holy in and of itself, something to be grateful for rather than to try and change. And finally, people are still structuring their life toward a heaven in the next world, with almost no recognition of the heaven that greets us every morning, as Mary Oliver puts is, “under the orange sticks of the sun the heaped ashes of the night turn into leaves again.”[3]

But there is great hope that we, Christians and non-Christians alike, will find new ways of being in the world. In my seminary education alone I spoke with Lutherans, Presbyterians, Catholics, Evangelicals and many others who were grappling with Christian history, not shying away from or denying the sins of the past but searching in faith for what must changed and what can be redeemed. The house church movement is going strong again (I kinda think of this fellowship as a bit of a house church, to be honest with you). And the people of the world are grappling with the idea that we orient our lives towards something that is of this world, but also special, something we can lift out of our everyday experiences and hear within the proclamation that “the earth is exactly what it wanted.”[4] May we each live this life not too far away from the garden of delights that nourishes and sustains us all. May we each no paradise, right now, and right here.

Blessed be, and
AMEN

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[3] Mary Oliver, “Morning Poem”

[4] ibid.