

**Landscapes of Faith**  
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**Session 1. Garden**  
**Genesis 2:4b-25, Mark 14:32-50**

*Introduction to Series:*

We learn in elementary school that stories are made up of various components: plot, characters and so forth. In this series we will look at the *settings* of various biblical stories to see how these places enrich the tales they contain. Wilderness, valley, the seashore—these are not just arbitrary backdrops for the stories of our faith. These places stimulate our imaginations in profound ways. We might even consider them archetypes, symbols that resonate with their own deep power.

How would the transfiguration of Jesus have been different in a boat rather than on a mountaintop, for example? Or what does it mean for biblical history to culminate in a city? What difference does the setting make to the story? And how do we understand God's presence within the different landscapes of our own lives?

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It all begins in a garden.

The Bible contains a number of gardens, but the first one is the most famous. We have very little description of Eden, the original garden and our first, fleeting home, so we must use our imagination—even as we know that our imagination can never do the place justice. In Eden, trees and plants sag with fruits that delight the eyes and nose as well as the belly. Eden is bursting with life; it is here that God creates animals of all shapes and sizes in one mad rush, as jumbled and indiscriminate as a child's imagination. These creatures will eventually settle in places as diverse as rain forest, arctic tundra and grassy savannah, but for a brief flurried moment, all find shelter here in Eden.

Along with this symphony of honking, braying and chirping comes the burbling of water. We are told in Genesis 2 that four separate rivers have their source in Eden. Each springs forth from a common spot, flowing out in four directions. Thus garden is the source: of creation, beauty, sustenance, and the water of life. Gardens remind us that we are dependent on the creation for our survival. As gardeners, we can employ every trick we know to maximize our yield, or to keep pests at bay, but ultimately, we are at the mercy of the elements of nature. God is the original gardener.

Eden is also the place where humans first encounter God—a fitting place for a meeting. Ask a room full of people where they feel God's presence most acutely, and many if not most will talk about finding God in nature. A good garden is a blessed thing, teeming with trees and flowers. The air feels thicker in our nostrils, with so much life concentrated in one fertile place. Much has been written lately about our technological age, how our connection to nature has been lost in favor of time in front of screens. It is a spiritual loss as much as a physical one.

Jesus seemed to understand the significance of gardens. John writes that Jesus often went to the garden to meet with his disciples (John 18:2). Gardens in Jesus' time were places of recreation and

gathering as much as of plant cultivation. It is possible that the garden was simply a place of refreshment for Jesus and his friends, and we would do well to follow that example. But we also know that Jesus' teachings were filled with images of food and plants—the mustard seed, the vine, the withered fig tree—images that intrigued his listeners. So the garden was likely a place of growth and struggle, as the disciples grappled with what it meant to be a follower of Christ, surrounded by living, growing metaphors of the kingdom of God.

Nowhere do we glimpse this garden struggle more clearly than at the end of Jesus' life, when Jesus returns to the garden (identified in other gospels as Gethsemane). In this moment Jesus is completely at God's mercy, throwing himself on the ground, breathing in the smell of earth, watering the ground with his tears, praying that the hour might pass from him. By this point in the story, his death is as inevitable as the changing of the seasons. He prays that it would not be so... and yet the crowd advances on him nonetheless, torches flickering among the olive trees.

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Gardens do not flourish on their own; they require regular tending. Even the idyllic Eden has its upkeep. Adam must "till it and keep it," and the work is difficult enough that he needs a partner to help him. Any gardener is quick to point out that behind each explosion of color, neatly-shaped bush or perfect row of cabbage is an incredible amount of unglamorous work.

Orthodox theologian, writer and master gardener Vigen Guroian ruminated on the radio program *On Being* about this process of working a garden, which occurs for him, fittingly enough, during the season of Lent, a time of self-examination: "I'm digging out weeds that have died; I'm cleaning out the garden. It's a messy business and it's not terribly pleasant. But the sacrifice is more than worth it. And in the process of doing this task, which one would rather avoid... my senses are being brought alive."

So it is with our own spiritual growth. Sometimes our prayers seem effortless, blossoming on our lips; other times they are as painstakingly uninspired as pulling weeds. And yet we persist in the work of faith because we know that it yields fruit in due season.

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## Study Guide

### Questions and Activities

Read each scripture passage (Genesis 2:4b-25, Mark 14:32-50) slowly and deliberately.

- Either verbally as a group, or individually on paper, have people describe these two gardens. Pay attention to all five senses: what do you see, hear, smell, taste and touch?
- How are these two gardens similar to one another in your mind's eye? How are they different?

Questions for Discussion:

- In what ways is the garden a metaphor for the spiritual life?
- According to the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, during biblical times gardens were used in a variety of ways: for recreation, as a shady place to gather, for bathing, and of course, for growing things. What other uses can you think of today?

- What do you think of the relationship between working a garden and working on one's spiritual life?
- In what ways do the seasons of a garden mirror the seasons in one's life of faith?
- What are the tools we use during the different seasons of our faith?
- MaryAnn writes about the loss of connection with the physical world in our technological age. How have you seen this played out in your life? What signs of hope have you seen to counter this trend?

### **Additional Scriptures to Encounter**

*Isaiah 65:1-5* ... a word of rebuke for "a people who provoke me to my face continually, sacrificing in gardens and offering incense on bricks"

*II Kings 21:17-18* ... Manasseh is buried in his garden

*John 19:38-42* ... Jesus' body placed in tomb in garden

*John 20:11-18* ... Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener

*Luke 8:1-15* ... the parable of the sower

*Questions for Discussion:* How do these texts support the idea of gardens as a metaphor for our spiritual lives? How do they argue against that metaphor?

### **Additional Activities**

*These are "mix and match" activities that could be combined in many different ways to be used in a retreat, workshop or other educational experience.*

#### *Gardens in Art*

Ask participants to bring to the gathering a favorite story, song or piece of art depicting gardens. Have them share their item with the group and offer a brief explanation of its significance. Even beloved hymns ("Morning Has Broken," "In the Garden") can evoke the theme. Begin your time by singing one of these songs.

#### *Master Gardeners*

Master Gardeners are people specially trained in the art of gardening, and they share this knowledge with others at gardening gatherings, farmers markets, and the like.

Have participants engage around the questions:

- Who are the master gardeners for you in your journey with Christ?
- If you had to come up with a "spiritual master gardening" training, what would such a training include?

You might also have a master gardener or other expert visit your gathering to share "spiritual lessons learned." Many of our churches have people who garden for their own self-care and nourishment, and as a way of tending to God's creation. Or find a book to study that contains such insights.

#### *Meet in the Garden*

We "hear" texts differently when we read them in different locales. Arrange to meet in a garden, at least for part of your gathering (the courtyard of the church, a church member's back garden). Read

the biblical texts there, allowing time for silence to experience the garden through their senses. Ask participants what they notice about the text while immersed in these sights, sounds and fragrances.

### *Hands-on Learning*

There are plenty of possibilities for a hands-on component to this theme, depending on the time of year and geographic region. Perhaps there is a community garden in the community that the group might visit and work. Or a group could go to a local “you pick” farm or orchard. Even a visit to a farmers market can get us in touch with the bounty of the natural world. If an outdoor excursion is impossible, participants might paint small clay pots with words or images from the day’s retreat to take with them for planting.

### *A Closing Ritual*

In the Genesis 1 creation story, God spoke each element of the physical world into being and called it good. The Hebrew word “tov” can also mean beautiful. As a closing activity, have participants take a nature walk and pick out one thing to notice about the surroundings that strikes them as good or beautiful. (If it would not disturb things too much, people could bring in a small example of it.)

When everyone returns, create a litany to close out the time:

Leader: God said, let there be [person names the thing they noticed and/or brings it forward]

People: And God said, “It is beautiful.”

### **Additional Resources**

The following is from one of Vigen Guroian’s books, *The Fragrance of God*, from a chapter entitled “Beauty in the Garden”:

“In my garden, I take hope from Jesus’ promise to the repentant thief on the cross that he will be with his Lord in Paradise. I know that the sweat of my brow and tears of penance bring Paradise near in my backyard. For a garden is a profound sign and deep symbol of salvation, like none other, precisely because a garden was our first habitation... Beauty will transfigure the chaos and deformity of our wounded world into the peace and harmony of a cosmos that God, from the beginning, proclaims to be good and beautiful.”

Also, Barbara Brown Taylor’s book *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* contains some beautiful passages about gardening and farming in a chapter entitled “The Practice of Carrying Water,” including the following:

“Many readers of this story have somehow gotten the idea that physical labor is part of God’s curse [after the Fall]... clearly this is not so. The earthling’s first divine job is to till the earth and keep it... Keeping the earth is hard work. You get dirty doing it... You also remember where you came from, and why. You touch the stuff your bones are made of. You handle the decomposed bodies of trees, leaves, birds, and fallen stars. Your body recognizes its kin. If you have nerve enough, you also foresee your own decomposition. This is not bad knowledge to have. It is the kind that puts other kinds in perspective.”