

MAY 30, 2021

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

“Connecting people with Jesus Christ so all can experience his love and joy.”



In The Garden - John 20:11-16, Genesis 3:8-13, 21-23

This week the hymn we are considering is In The Garden. This is widely thought to be only second in popularity to The Old Rugged Cross. It is understandable that this hymn would have that popularity. It sings of radical and unabashed comfort. We are reminded that Jesus is our constant companion, wanting to chat with us and claiming us as His own. The lyrics are soothing, peaceful, and intimate.

Unlike last week's selection, for this hymn we know the writer and composer. Which helps us understand both the what and the why. In 1912 C. Austin Miles was asked to compose a hymn that captured the tone written above. In his own words he wrote the following about the inspiration for his work:

“One day in March, 1912, I was seated in the dark room, where I kept my photographic equipment and organ. I drew my Bible toward me. It opened to my favorite chapter, John 20-whether by chance or inspiration let each reader decide. That meeting of Jesus and Mary had lost none of its power to charm.

As I read it that day, I seemed to be part of the scene. I became a silent witness to that dramatic moment in Mary's life, when she knelt before her Lord, and cried, “Rabboni!”

My hands were resting on the Bible while I stared at the light blue wall. As the light faded, I seemed to be standing at the entrance of a garden, looking down a gently winding path, shaded by olive branches. A woman in white, with head bowed, hand clasping her throat, as if to choke back her sobs, walked slowly into the shadows. It was Mary. As she came to the tomb, upon which she placed her hand, she bent over to look in, and hurried away.

John, in flowing robe, appeared, looking at the tomb, then came Peter, who entered the tomb, followed slowly by John.

As the departed, Mary reappeared, leaning her head upon her arm at the tomb, she wept. Turning herself, she saw Jesus standing, so did I. I knew it was He. She knelt before Him, with arms outstretched and looking into His face cried “Rabboni!”

I awakened in full light, gripping the Bible, with muscles tense, and nerves vibrating. Under the inspiration of this vision I wrote as quickly as the words could be formed the poem exactly as it has since appeared. That same evening I wrote the music.”

In all the years I've sung this hymn, never did it occur to me that this was the Biblical inspiration for it. The idea of it being a tomb inspiring the garden was nowhere on my radar. Yet in many ways it makes perfect sense. After all, in the scripture Mary didn't recognize Jesus at first. She thought He was the gardener.

Reading this I was reminded of a country song back in the 90s called I Want To Be Loved Like That. One of the verses goes “An old man kneeling all alone, plants his flowers in a garden of stone. For fifteen years now she's been gone, and his devotion is still going strong. I want to be loved like that.”

The garden of stone is, of course, a cemetery. The place where we lay those who have passed to rest, and mark the place with headstones. These are places of reverence, recognizing that each stone represents a life, and also the pain of loss at their passing. People tend to their loved ones grave to keep it looking nice. We have men and women whose task and job it is to maintain the overall grounds out of respect.

What more appropriate backdrop for this hymn of comfort? These places are where we grieve and mourn tremendous loss. Even after time has passed, visiting the grave so often that pain of loss comes back. We need comfort here. That comfort shows up in our loved ones, and when we are alone it shows up with the presence of Christ in our hearts.

This was where Mary was. A place of powerful grief compounded by the confusion and fear that Jesus' body had been taken or moved. Jesus responds with a simple question. “Why are you crying?” Tone becomes important as we hear the words.

This isn't the old "why are you crying? I'll give you something to cry about!" This is a tone of compassion, healing, and comfort. It's comforting to know someone cares enough to ask us about our pain. It's comforting to have an ear to share. Sharing the burden can ease the intensity of whatever we are feeling. First Jesus comforts, then Jesus brings unspeakable joy.

She doesn't recognize Him. Then He calls her by name. The sheep know the voice of the Good Shepherd, and He knows them by name. Her eyes are opened and she realizes standing before her is the Lord.

Jesus' character is revealed in all its glory. He's been tortured, crucified, conquered death, and in some strange verses in 1 Peter we see He proclaimed victory to spirits imprisoned and spoke to souls held in Sheol, the land of the dead. In other words He's been busy. We might be tired or even a little cranky after all of that, but not Jesus.

In this moment and in the weeks that follow Jesus is all about His followers. We are to be all about Him, yet He is all about us. He is comforting, commissioning, and empowering them for the work to come. That Jesus will comfort us is not in question.

Before we move further, we need to split some hairs with terminology. In The Garden has some similarities to How Firm a Foundation. Both of them are heavy with reminding us that God is a constant presence with us. Though they share this, the difference is that in How Firm a Foundation that presence is reassuring. The presence in In The Garden, however is comfort. What is the difference between reassurance and comfort?

To my mind, reassurance carries with a layer of comfort, but the purpose overall is to inspire confidence. Being assured can be comforting, but the end result is to convince that what needs done can be done. It is about helping us recognize that the desired outcome can be achieved. There is an end in mind.

Think about a child on a baseball or softball team going up to bat at a critical moment in the game. The coach sees a look of terror on the player's face and talks to them. "You can do this, you've done it a thousand times before in practice. You have the skills, you got this. If you need a reminder just look at me and I'll give you the thumbs up to let you know you're able to get that hit." The point of the assurance is to convince the child of their ability to accomplish the task.

Comfort, on the other hand is much broader in scope. Comfort is what comes not only with assurance, but also in times when no assurances can be made. The news is bleak, the need impossible, the outcome at best uncertain or certain to end tragically. Comfort is the presence or voice that takes the edge off of the fear, the pain, the frustration, the anger that the reality is cultivating in us. It is the healing of that brokenness. Comfort is what helps us endure the circumstance that may have no happy ending with a sense of peace.

This is In The Garden. He walks with me, talks with me, and claims me as His own. No matter what or where, this is a truth, and in that we can take comfort.

Mary needed comfort. She received it. Her heart was clearly in the right place. She loved her Lord and mourned for Him. Her reaction to recognizing Him is a clear testimony to the depth of her faith. What about when our hearts aren't in the right spot? What about when we are in the midst of sin or failure? Does God only comfort when we are in a correct state, or does God comfort no matter what? I believe God comforts no matter what. To that point, we go to another garden.

The story of the Garden of Eden is well known. In the Garden God had an intimate, conversant relationship with Adam, and I think we can also add Eve to that short list as well. God and Adam had a kind of partnership. The animals weren't named by God, they were named by Adam. I can almost hear God saying "look buddy, you're the one that's got to live with them, you may as well decide what to call them." Everything was fine until that fateful mistake when they ate the fruit they were told not to.

They ate, they gained knowledge, they were ashamed of their nakedness and covered up with fig leaves. They hid. Why did they hide? It was more than shame. It was guilt and I would imagine fear as well. No one had ever disobeyed God until that moment. What would God do? It harkens to that terrifying comment many children have heard. "Wait until your father gets home." So they hid.

What does God do? God asks. "Where are you?" This begs some consideration. If we believe God is all-knowing, then God already knew where they were. God knew what they'd done. So why the question? God could just as easily come at them angrily, popping up behind them with a "Surprise! You messed up, out you go!"

I believe God was trying to bring them some comfort. The consequence was already decided. That was harsh enough on its own. They were already racked with shame and guilt. What's the use of piling on? God was connecting with God's children and drawing them to Godself.

There is a term for what God is doing here coined by a researcher named Gottman. The term is "bidding". Gottman had an interest in the nature of marriage, specifically if there was anything that could indicate whether the marriage would endure or end. He wasn't trying to give marital counselors a fool proof crystal ball. The aim was to understand the nature of the relationship and perhaps offer a heads up.

The results were intriguing. In his research, how much fighting occurred between couples, how harsh the words got, all those things we might assume would predict the outcome didn't really factor in all that much. What was a dominant factor

was what he termed “bidding” for or towards one another. Bidding is those large or small acts that let the other know they are noticed. They communicate that you are aware and even glad they are there. It can be making a favorite meal, sending flowers, or going to a favorite restaurant. It can be hollering “hello” when you get home from work or when you notice the other came back in. It’s a peck on the cheek before leaving. It’s the random “I love you.” It’s a scratch on the shoulder or head when you walk behind their chair in the living room. It’s having coffee and taking the other’s cup to the kitchen when you take your own or maybe asking if they’d like some more. All of these things connect. And the more they occur, the stronger the relationship. They connect and they comfort.

Let’s face it, it’s comforting to know someone is on our team, Especially when things are going sour.

God is bidding towards them. Connecting and comforting. In the midst of perhaps the greatest blunder in history, God is still reaching out.

Even the eviction from the Garden was more an act of compassion and protection than angry consequence. We are made privy to a conversation in the heavenly realm. The concern is that now that they’ve demonstrated they can’t be obedient and have this newfound knowledge, the risk can’t be taken that they won’t next eat from the tree of life and live forever. Clearly they can’t be trusted to stay away from forbidden fruit. If they are prone to disobey, and have forever to do it, what chance does humanity have? None. The only answer is to make sure there is no way for them to get to that fruit. They have to go.

The story also answers questions asked throughout all time. Why is it so backbreaking to get this ground to produce anything but weeds? Consequence. Why is childbirth so painful? Consequence. Why do so many have an irrational fear of snakes? Consequence.

Yet in the consequence what does God do for them when they leave? God makes them comfortable clothing. Even in consequence, God comforts.

This is such great news for us. No matter what you are going through God is there to comfort. Victory or failure, correct acting and bad living, celebration or mourning, it doesn’t matter. God is present with us, and willing to comfort us through the circumstance.

There is one more piece of this hymn that is both comforting and encouraging. “The joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known.”

The moments each of us have where we experience the comfort of Christ, and the joy that comes with it can never be duplicated or replicated. That we are all unique and individual means that even if we have had similar experiences, what makes us individual also makes how we experience that comfort individual as well. They belong to you and you alone. They are treasures no one can steal, and no one can say don’t exist. They are yours.

These moments are anchors in our faith and lives. We return to them when we start to waver or doubt. They are ever present when the going gets rough and can be more than comfort, sometimes they can be hope. Take time to reflect on life and faith to be reminded and keep these treasures close to the surface. Never forget that He walks with you, He talks with you, and He tells you that you are His own.

(Bible Study groups are taking a break until Fall)

