"Days of the Week" -- Sermon Series for Lent & Easter

"Days 3 & 4 -- Plants and Plantings"
Genesis 1:9-19 & Mark 12:1-12

Lent 3 Midweek -- March 10, 2004
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Boise, Idaho
Pastor Tim Pauls

Texts
Psalm 19
Genesis 1:9-19
Jude 8-13
Mark 12:1-12

Suggested Hymns (TLH)
Go to Dark Gethsemane (159)
The Royal Banners Forward Go (168)
Jesus Refuge of the Weary (145)

I.

If you're a gardener at all, you've got to love Days 3 and 4 of that holy week of the Creation. If you just enjoy eating and sightseeing, your appreciation can't be that far behind. Day 3 begins with the earth as a glob of mud, newly separated from the sky; Day 4 ends with all that you need for all the crops you could ever hope for.

First, you need the dirt, so the Lord gathers seas into one place and land into another. Then, by His Word, He brings forth grass and herb and trees-and from them come the necessary seeds and fruit to grow more as time goes on. The menu is set.

But there's more to gardening than dirt and water and seeds. You need plenty of light and just enough heat, as well as cooler seasons to reset the soil and prepare for the next go-around. So, while there's been light shining since Day 1, the Lord now assigns the task of providing that light to sun and moon and stars. By their movement and passage, night and day will be defined, seasons will come and go; and by the Lord's own determination, all of this is very good.

That the Lord does this all for you. He doesn't need plants or stars or anything else for Himself; He's doing this for man. Furthermore, consider the variety and beauty: The Lord doesn't treat the earth like a second-rate diorama, where He puts in only the bare essentials. He doesn't give Adam and Even only peanut butter and celery to live on while they dwell on a patch of dirt, nor does He leave the sky lit with unsourced light. He creates exquisite diversity and detail so that the heavens and earth proclaim His glory. He seeks to give His people every enjoyment and advantage.

Genesis 2 describes a specific application of this creative work of Days 3 and 4: God plants a particular garden called Eden, and that is where He places Adam and Eve to live and labor. They are

to care for the Garden, but the work is all joy because there is no sin. You gardeners and lawncare warriors know that much of your efforts are devoted to beating back all those pests that want to destroy your yard, but none of that destruction is to be found in Eden. In the Words of God, it's very good.

Of particular note is that God places trees in this Garden, trees of three types. There are your normal sorts of fruit trees, and Adam and Eve are to eat from these to sustain their physical bodies. There's the Tree of Life, and Adam and Eve to eat from that tree in order to live forever. And there's the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the one tree they are to avoid; but just in case they want out of God's care-just in case they want to say goodbye to the Lord's blessings and presence and life, that tree provides them a way out into deprivation and death.

But why would they ever want that?

Along comes the devil in the form of a serpent to tempt Eve and Adam. Now, understand that the devil has nothing to add to the Lord's generosity. God has created everything, and the devil has nothing to contribute. But the evil one despises the Lord and His goodness and wants to do as much damage as possible. His goal is to convince Adam and Eve that less is more, that they should exchange all of God's care for some independence and life on their own. According to the devil, the absence of God's favor is better than His presence. Thorns and thistles and pain are better than this Garden. Sickness-the absence of health-is better than vigor. Destruction is better than creation. Death is better than life.

Of course, this is not going to sell if the devil spells it out that way, so he lies. That's all he ever does; when you're trying to destroy people and make them give up everything, you've got to deceive to get the job done. So, twisting the Word that God has given to Adam, the serpent convinces Eve to eat from the one forbidden tree. Adam takes a bite, too; and sin and death have come into the world.

Of course, the world doesn't die right away; this is still God's creation, and it is up to Him to pull the plug. But because of sin, this creation is dying, moving from perfect life to total death, from good creation to utter destruction. However, while Adam and Eve have chosen to reject all of God's goodness, the Lord does not abandon them. He continues to maintain this world, though He salts it with enough consequences to remind us constantly that this world is cursed with sin and death. And, to Adam and Eve, He promises a Savior: In God's good time, the Seed of the woman will crush the serpent's head.

The Savior will come to destroy sin and give eternal life. And when He does, the devil will do his evil best, once again, to convince mankind that life is better without the Savior-even though life without the Savior is a living death that leads to eternal condemnation.

II.

When Jesus teaches the crowds on Days 3 and 4 of Holy Week, the earth is a far cry from the Paradise of God's perfect creation before the Fall; the Old Testament is full of historical accounts of man's rejection of God and life, and cruelty to others. Jerusalem is a long way away from the Garden of Eden, and the thoughts of many in the crowd are most thorny and thistly toward the Lord.

And to this crowd, Jesus tells many parables; and reflecting God's gracious and creative gifts in

Eden, some of these parables focus on a garden of grapes-a vineyard. His parable before us tonight (Mark 12:1-12) sounds vaguely like the plot line of the Garden of Eden, where God meticulously formed a garden for Adam and Eve, only to have them rebel against Him. So goes this parable. A man carefully constructs a vineyard with all that it needs for good production, including hedge and vat and tower. He leases it to some vinedressers; and at the right time, sends a servant to collect his share. The vinedressers beat the servant and send him away, and they likewise treat his other servants whom he sends. Finally, he sends his son to collect, believing that they will respect his son. They do not. Instead, they kill him and throw him out of the vineyard. They've become blindly convinced that the vineyard is better without the lord who owns it. They have become so deluded that they think that they will get to keep the vineyard if they only kill the son. It is not so: The owner comes and destroys them.

With these words, Jesus warns the people of their folly. God has given them everything they have and continues to provide for them; but by turning to other gods, they have stated that life is far better without the one true God who gives it. This is the devil's strategy at work, tempting them to exchange everything good for a god who cannot save, and who will lead them only to destruction.

As for the hearers, many are outraged at the parable, because they perceive that He is speaking about them. They perceive that He is teaching that they will seek to kill the Son. And because they are so angered that the Lord would imply this about them, they depart and plot to kill the Son. In attempting to deny the parable is about them, they fulfill it. This is the climax of the devil's strategy. He is getting those plotters to destroy the Son of God rather than repent and be forgiven. If they're forgiven, they have the kingdom of heaven and all of its riches. If they reject Jesus, then they will have nothing left; and if they die that way, they are absent from the Lord and His good gifts forever.

As for Jesus, He fulfills the parable, too. He is the Son of the owner who is put to death on the cross-but His death is not in vain. It is not the vineyard owner's desire that the people be lost, so He wills that the only Sacrifice that will save them be offered. The crucifixion of His Son eviscerates Satan's plan. The devil wants you to have nothing of God, and thus have only a lack of righteousness and death. On the cross, Jesus suffers that in your place. He is forsaken by His Father, and He is judged for all the sin-the absence of holiness-of the world. He endures an eternity of hell on that cross. He suffers the absence and lack that the devil desires for you. Why? So that He might restore all good things to you. He forgives you, giving you His righteousness where you had only sin. And with that forgiveness, He gives you faith and salvation and eternal life and all of the kingdom of heaven.

And so He gives you the Garden. In Revelation, heaven is called Paradise-it is the Garden of Eden restored. This is your hope: Where sin, death and the devil seek to remove you from all the good gifts of God, Christ restores them all to you by His death and resurrection.

III.

Dear hearers in Christ, be warned. On this Lenten evening we must soberly understand that the devil still prowls around, and his strategy doesn't change. He still has absolutely nothing that he can give you. So this is what he does: He seeks to take away from you the gifts of God, and to convince you that you've profited from the deal.

For instance. If you are married, God has given you a spouse-a companion for life. Therefore, the devil tempts, "That one over there is better for you." If you entertain that temptation in thought or

deed, your marriage will be less than what God intended.

If you are a parent, then God has given you children: He has entrusted you with the privilege of caring for life that He has created, of giving them food, clothing, a home, love and instruction in His Word. So the devil says, "Kids-what a hassle. You've got a life to live, so make sure that your kids don't get in the way." If you succumb to that temptation, your family life and your children will not be all that God gave them to be.

God gives you things, all that you need to support this body and life. The devil says, "Don't be content. Get more."

Because sex is such a powerful thing, God gives a stated code of morality. The devil takes fornication and renames it "sexual freedom," as if you gain by indulging. There is a good chance that the gains you get include depression (the loss of good mental health), disease (the loss of physical health), and distrust of others (the loss of the ability to have a committed relationship). You won't find these "gains" trumpeted on primetime TV.

Regarding all of these examples, God gives His Law; and keeping His Law is good for you. He warns, How long, O you sons of men, Will you turn my glory to shame? How long will you love worthlessness And seek falsehood? (Ps. 4:2) The devil then argues that God's Law is restrictive, enslaving; and that you're far better off on your own, with your independence intact. But this independence means separation from God and His gifts. Did you make you? Can you keep you alive? Can you independently raise you from the dead? No.

Do you see? God gives you good gifts, all that you need. The devil seeks to make you think that the Lord's gifts are burdens, and that you need to get rid of His life in order to really live. But apart from the Lord and His life, there is only decay and death.

Now, please take note: While the devil uses these temptations, they are not his primary target. All of these are distractions as he seeks to get you to give up the gift of forgiveness.

This is how it often works: The devil will first convince you that some sort of sin gives you more than the Lord does; therefore you don't want to give it up. As long as you want to hold on to the sin, you don't want to hear the Lord's Law. You don't want to hear that sin is wrong, and your Old Adam will do its best to argue that you don't need forgiveness. As time goes on without repentance, your faith weakens and finally dies. You've gotten to keep your sin that you like, and it might feel good for a while. Don't you just hate it when forgiveness gets in the way of life?

But do not be deceived: What you have done is tried to keep the vineyard and get rid of the Son. Apart from the Son's presence and the forgiveness He brings, all you have left is His absence. All you have left is death and destruction.

Each one of us has an old sinful nature that wants to hold onto some favorite sins: prejudice, gossip, lust, covetousness, greed, to name a few. Each of us has an Old Adam that seeks to make us think that these sins somehow make us complete. Therefore, each one of us ought rightly to confess, "Though I like that sin for me, it is still wrong. Even if I think it brings me gain, the Lord says that it promises only loss. Therefore, by faith I confess with my Lord that this sin is wrong. And by faith, for the sake of Christ, I ask for forgiveness, that the Lord might give me His precious gifts of

forgiveness, life and salvation."

And then rejoice, for the Lord who created and redeemed you, also restores you. Christ has suffered all loss at the cross-loss of life and reputation and health and His Father's favor; He has endured all the loss and absence that sin brings. And having suffered that loss, with forgiveness He gives to you all that was lost at the Fall. He gives you faith, righteousness, His presence and servanthood. He sets you free to serve others. He gives you the kingdom of heaven.

Our old, sinful natures would have us be discontented gardeners, workers in the vineyard who do not want the Son around. Take heart, brothers and sisters in Christ: The Lord made this vineyard for you; and the Lord has died to restore to you the paradise of heaven. Therefore, rejoice to confess your sin, for it gives nothing but only takes away. And instead, be assured that all the kingdom of heaven is yours with the gift of these little words: You are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen