

appears about 50 times, and it usually refers to a location near a home where the resident could spend some leisure time. In this biblical usage, “garden” comes closest to what we mean by a lawn.

With that in mind, listen to these lines from John's vision of the heavenly New Jerusalem as recorded in Revelation 22: *Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations* (vv. 1-2).

This description is of a garden-like setting, coming as it does at the end of the Bible, implies a restoration of the Garden of Eden. The Bible introduces us to that garden in Genesis. Eden was a place of direct fellowship with God, and it represented fullness of life: life before it was corrupted by sin and all the accompanying consequences. Now, here in Revelation, we hear that Eden will be restored. The Bible begins and ends with a garden: a garden of the divine presence; a garden where creation and Creator are one; a garden of communion and companionship.

In the New Jerusalem garden, says John, citizens will see the face of God (v. 4). That's a statement extraordinary in its implications. When Moses spoke with God on Mount Sinai, God told him *you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live* (Ex. 33:20). Yet, here in New Jerusalem, seeing God is a commonplace occurrence, which, far from taking life, is what makes life everlasting. As John puts it, *They need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever* (v. 5). No more night, in this sense, means no more death.

In this garden that Revelation describes: there is a life-giving river; there's a tree of life; it's a place where one can see God face to face; and there is no death. All of this matches the Eden of which Genesis speaks. In Eden, a river flowed to water what grew there. A tree of life grew there. And, although Genesis does not say explicitly that our first parents viewed God's face, that's implied in the fact that God walked in the garden, and that the humans felt it necessary to hide from God after they had eaten the forbidden fruit.

What John sees, then, in his vision of the New Jerusalem is Eden restored. Just as the Bible's opening chapters are about humankind being expelled from paradise, its closing chapters are about humankind being welcomed back into paradise. All things are restored. Revelation

mends the rip first opened by our disobedience in Genesis. With this vision, we learn the end of the human story, and it is a satisfying one.

But...we aren't there yet. We're still mowing the lawn, as it were. We currently live neither in Eden nor in the New Jerusalem garden. That's why it's helpful to hear one more biblical garden story, one that's found in the book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a priest, snatched from his homeland in Judah and forced to live in exile in a foreign land with many of his friends and countrymen. In Babylon, Ezekiel became God's spokesperson to the exiles. He foresaw the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and the grief this event would bring to the Jewish people.

But then, Ezekiel saw a vision of God's restoration of the people. So he says: *This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden* (Ezek. 36:35). Not only would the people be restored to the land, but they also would experience a newness in their spirit. Through Ezekiel, God told them: *A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you...* (36:26). In time, the people of Judah were restored to their land, although things were not always easy or glorious. Still, words such as these from the prophet Ezekiel kept the people looking forward for a fuller restoration still to come.

We who don't live in Eden and who haven't yet arrived at New Jerusalem are like the people of Judah in Ezekiel's day who hear that that restoration is coming, but who still live in the midst of a world in which some things always seem to be broken or ragged. We experience broken relationships, frayed promises, worn-out hopes, lost dreams, and derailed plans. And too often we settle for this second-best existence, calling it "real life."

What's more, living in the hope of restoration is extremely difficult because the Bible talks of a restoration to a state we don't remember. The Bible talks of the garden called Eden, a place we've never personally experienced. So to hope for that restoration means longing to return to a situation in which we never lived.

Still, restoration is one of the words the Bible uses to encapsulate the return of Christ and the arrival of the kingdom of God in all its fullness. In Acts we read of an impromptu sermon that Peter gave to a crowd gathered on the temple grounds. Among the things he says to them is this: *Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah*

appointed for you, that is, Jesus, who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets (Acts 3:19-21). The hope of restoration is one of the things that allows us to carry on when everything seems to go wrong.

There's a story that following the great Chicago fire of 1871, a shopkeeper returned to what had been his shop but was now a smoldering ruin. He set up a table and put up a sign that read, "Everything lost except wife, children and hope. Business will resume as usual tomorrow morning."

That sign could describe the circumstances of many of us who trust God: a lot of things haven't worked out as we'd planned, but we are carrying on in hope, which is business as usual for Christians, because we have God's promise of restoration. That's a universal restoration or, if you prefer, the Lord's lawn work, bringing the garden of this world back to the glory for which God originally created it.

It's important to be reminded of the great hope in which we live as Christians. That hope is the confidence that no matter what in our life goes to the weeds of disappointment, no matter what in our life gets overrun by the crabgrass of unfulfilled dreams, no matter what in our life is undermined by the moles and voles of sins and mistakes, God will ultimately restore all that has been lost. That's some good news to ponder the next time you're mowing the lawn.

Prayer: Restoring God, sometimes, the world seems consumed by fear, division and despair. Lord, give us the vision to see where there is hope and opportunity. Give us the strength to speak out grace and healing. And give us the belief that love will triumph over hate. We pray for all those who are angry, scared and confused today. We pray for those who are consumed with grief, hatred or hopelessness. Move in all of our spirits, turning hearts and minds towards you. Lord, we need you now more than ever. We cry out for your light to banish the darkness and for your love and grace to rule in this world. In Jesus' name, Amen

Source: Crossen, Cynthia. "Why do we all work so hard on our lawns? Blame habit, snobbery." *The Wall Street Journal*, May 4, 2005, B1. www.wsj.com. (NOTE: On the WSJ site, this article is behind a subscription wall. If you happen to want to read it, it's reprinted and free at *Center for Grassland Studies* newsletter, Summer 2005, Vol. 11, No. 3, grassland.unl.edu/documents/summer05.pdf. But note, the writer's last name is Crossen. It is misspelled in the *Grassland* version.)

The Lord's Lawn Work

Sunday, May 1, 2016

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

Now that it's springtime, the annual task of cleaning up the yard beings. There are leaves to rake, sticks to gather, flower beds to prepare, and garden plots to turn over. Many of us will soon be resuming that once-a-week exercise routine we call "mowing the lawn"! But, of course, mowing is simply the first step. After mowing, we'll grab the weed whacker, apply grass shearers to more delicate or intricate areas, roll and edge the lawn, apply weed killer, dig out crabgrass, and spread some fertilizer, which ensures that we will have to begin the whole process over again as soon as next week!

Writing in *The Wall Street Journal* about the bustle of lawn care, staff reporter Cynthia Crossen comments, "Lawns of smooth, green grass pit humans against nature in a pitifully lopsided contest. Nature has all the big guns: moles, voles and other obnoxious animals, droughts, floods, insects, viruses and, the *coup de grace*, weeds."

"In contrast," she notes, "people have a few defensive weapons: sprinklers, lawn care services, weed-whackers, pesticides, herbicides and fertilizer. Yet nature always wins." We know she's right. Leave your lawn untended for very long, and inevitably it becomes the forest it was before our ancestors or some more recent land developer cleared it.

So why do we do all that work? Prior to the 20th century, Americans were too busy raising food and feeding livestock to devote much time to beautifying the ground around their homes. But, with the advent of suburbs and the salaries that enabled people to live there and especially with the introduction of the rotary mower, things changed. Landscaping developed as a career. Those practicing it encouraged their customers to have lawns that were a "velvet robe" around their home. *Better Homes and Gardens* even argued that not to mow was "to attack one's neighbors." So now, one way or another, if we have a lawn, we ensure that it's regularly mowed and properly tended.

Of course, we're here to talk about Scripture, not give lawn care advice. And, in point of fact, the word "lawn" does not appear anywhere in the Bible. The word "yard" does, but only as a reference to an enclosed area that functions as a courtyard. The word "garden," however,