

## Sermon: Living in the Land of Nod

*Donald W. Haynes, preacher*

Scripture: Genesis 4:9, 16

The first eleven chapters of the Bible are a preface to the history of the human race. It is not about chronological history or literalistic questions like “Where did Cain get his wife?” We must not get lost in the underbrush of literalism when we read about “Adam,” “Eve,” “Cain,” Abel,” “Noah, the “Tower of Babel” which resulted in “babble” of not being able to really understand each other, and the rainbow which is God’s promise to never destroy the earth. These are not to be historically researched by chronology or geography or anthropology; but by what God is teaching us in telling us about all humankind through those biblical character sketches. In reading them I think of a comic strip years ago named “Pogo.” “Pogo” said, “We have met the enemy and he is us.” **The first eleven chapters of the Bible are a mirror about God, about us and our mutual roles as we live out our lives.**

There are three profound theological truths in these eleven chapters—**truths about creation, sin, and God’s rescue mission.** We learn that we were made in God’s image and that sin is about our behavior, but not about our identity. Genesis 1:27 is the climax of the creation story:” And God made humankind in God’s own image, male and female he created them.” Being created in the image of God means that, like God, we have a will. In some real but strange way, persons of all cultures have what John Wesley called a “sixth sense” of “God’s whispering to our hearts.” Younger people are calling this our “God moments.” We respond to our awareness of God by obedience or disobedience. We can live our lives God’s way or, as Frank Sinatra used to sing, “To Do It My Way.” So it is that we make choices and even God does not prevent the consequences of our choices. For the most part, good choices lead to good consequences and bad choices lead to bad consequences. In these opening chapters of the inspired Word of God, we see a reflection of the human soul—good, bad, and in between.

The Garden of Eden was perfect with climate, plants, animals, men and women. There was perfect harmony, perfect communication, perfect health, and perfect happiness. In Eden there was togetherness not separation, compassion not condemnation, grace not guilt, belonging not wandering. However, the description of that utopian “universe” lasted only two chapters!

Then the story went sour. In the third chapter of Genesis, we read that Cain murdered his younger brother, Abel. **When God asked Cain, “Where is your brother, Abel?” Cain shot back: “Am I my brother’s keeper?”** We have all been guilty of a somewhat “smart aleck” retort when we hurt a brother or sister human, or when we simply neglect our fellow human beings. We can say things like, “Why should I care?” “What business is it of mine?” We might even say cryptically, “So?”

Cain not only sinned; he refused to repent or even to admit the wrong in what he had done. His bad choice of having no conscience, no regret, no responsibility for his sinful action had a bad consequence. His action and his attitude contaminated the psychological and spiritual “bloodstream” of all humanity; therefore, we call what he did “original sin.” In Genesis 4: 12 and 16, we have not just **Cain’s** punishment but the common lot of all humankind. Everything broke down and came apart. Theologically we call it “original sin” because alienation, separation, conflict, disobedience, and hurting each other became the spiritual bloodstream of every person.

Cain was banished from the Garden of Eden. Eden was history; the doors of the Garden of Eden were closed and Cain became our theological ancestor—**he lived in Nod**. So, in our Bibles, the perfection of God’s creation described as the “Garden of Eden” is described in only two chapters of the whole Bible. We, like Cain live in the “land of Nod.” Again “Nod” is not to be found on an ancient map of the Middle East; it is a state of being. In Hebrew, the word “Nod” means wanderer, one who has lost his way. Adam and Eve and Cain all began to hide from God, **to practice God’s absence instead of God’s presence in their lives**. Eden was never replaced; Cain lived in the “land of Nod.” So has every human being, including us today!

My sermon today I wrote this week, but the insight about the land of Nod came from a visit many years ago when a retired Baptist minister who had become one of my mentors sent word for me to come to see him up from Asheboro to Lake Junaluska in the Appalachian Mountains. I walked into the study of that grizzly old genius, who exchanged a cassette tape every week with Karl Menninger of the famous Menninger Clinic. Dr. Marney did not greet me with any pleasantries or trivial welcome. Instead, he bellowed from his chair behind his desk, “Don! Does God live in Asheboro?” My answer I shall never forget either: “Yes, but we are still looking for him.” He leapt out of his chair and said, **“That’s right and you know why? It is because we live in Nod, and we think that God lives only in Eden.”** “Don,” he said, **“when we learn that Nod is our home,**

**and we cannot go back to Eden looking for God; then we'll know that God is in Nod with us.**” He lives in our town, and on our road and sometimes he even comes to church, but too often we do not meet him even in church.”

Then he said, “So good to see you, Don. Sit down and let’s talk about living in the land of Nod.” Dr. Marney then began to talk about the reality that we live in Nod, but we think that our real home is Eden, and we can move back there. We think our world has to be Eden, our nation can be Eden, our marriages and families can be Eden, our jobs can be Eden, or our church can be Eden. We think we can behave in a way that reflects our identity— “made in the image of God.” We don’t and we can’t. The stain of that “original sin” is indelible, personally and culturally.

The reality of who we are is that while we are physically in houses and marriages and jobs and churches, they are not located in Eden! Overlook the specifics about Adam and Eve and Cain. Just look at them spiritually and you will see us in a mirror. We are humanly settled and live in houses we call home, supported by people we call family and friends, **but we are spiritually troubled because we live in Nod! We never quite get life “fixed.”** In what the Bible calls “the land of Nod,” we are

- always running and never quite arriving,
- always hiding and never quite being found,
- always climbing and never quite reaching the top,
- always working but not without getting tired, often very tired; and old, sometimes very old

Life is somewhat like a jigsaw puzzle, but with all our efforts, our puzzle never quite matches the scene as pictured on the puzzle box top. Each of our lives always has a missing piece that we forever seek and never quite find. We can be saved from our sins, people of good character, good neighbors, and loyal church members but we have our downside, our quirks, and, yes, our sins.

Remember the mythical story called *Wizard of Oz*? Dorothy and her dog, Toto, lived with her Aunt Em in Kansas when a cyclone lifted the house up and set it down in a strange place with a yellow brick road. Dorothy said to Toto, “Toto, this is not Kansas.” They began walking and met Scarecrow who had no brains, Tin Man who had no heart, and Cowardly Lion who had no courage. When they finally met the Wizard of Oz, Dorothy had one request: “Take me home to Aunt Em.”

**Like Dorothy wanting to get back home with “Aunt Em,” we fantasize about Eden.**

**We sometimes are victims of nostalgia and say that “yesterday was Eden.”** When I was a little boy, my Daddy was a tobacco farmer. In August, when the tobacco was harvested, the late summer job of children from about age six was to pick up three leaves of tobacco from some boards lying on sawbucks and hand them to a woman who attached them to a long stick with string so the green leaves could be cured to gold color. Usually there were four children and two women, and as they worked, the children were silent, and the women talked. I remember one morning when the other lady began to talk about the “good ole days that ‘usta’ be.” She painted a picture that was a bit like Eden. Finally, Mae Norman, who was much younger said, “Ruby, there is no point talking about what ‘usta be.” **“Ole Usta” is dead and will never come back to life.**” Then Mrs. Norman because to point out things about yesterday that we not so good. **I was a little boy, but I learned a lesson about life that morning.** Mrs. Norman was so right; the bygone days will not return, and **Eden was not yesterday.**

**Another temptation is for us to talk about “tomorrow as Eden.”** A writer named Arthur Miller wrote a short story in 1949 called *The Death of a Salesman*. His fictional name was Willy Loman. Willie never had a good year in his sales. Money was short, family life was conflicted. But for Willy, next year would always be the best year ever—lots of sales, lots of money, new car, family trip, **Utopia!** It never happened. Perpetual denial impacts us and the ones closest to us. Willy’s Eden was an air castle that was a recurring victim of time and circumstance. Willy lived in continual denial of reality. Willy’s dreams never came true; they were fantasy. By and by, basically broke and never having that great year, Willie died. Then as the family gathered by the grave, Willy’s son, Biff, looked down at his father’s casket and said, **“Poor man. He had the wrong dreams. He never knew who he was.”**

Of all our temptations the saddest is to deny reality by building air castles that might well be one day gone with the wind. Life will never be perfect because we will never live in Eden; we live in Nod. **Eden is no more tomorrow than it was yesterday.**

Except for the first two chapters of Genesis, the Bible tells us about people who live in Nod. When Jesus began to call disciples, he did not call Temple priests or men known for their sainthood. He called ordinary people from Nod:

- He called fishermen who spent their days in the Sea of Galilee casting nets. The one named Peter was high tempered and too quick to fly off the handle.

- He called a quisling named Matthew who sold out to the occupying Roman army as a tax collector.
- He called a terrorist name Simon the Zealot.
- He called Philip who was not a Jew but a Gentile.
- He called Thomas who had a hard time with what we call “faith.” Thomas was like people from the state of Missouri. He said, “Show me.”
- Jesus also had women who traveled alongside the men. One was Mary Magdalyn who either had a mental illness or was a harlot.

**In his ministry out in the villages and by the roadsides, Jesus’s ministry was in the land of Nod:**

- Jesus healed the son of a Roman centurion;
- he had lunch at the home of Zaccheus, a man with a reputation for crooked business dealings.
- He entertained a Roman lawyer named “Nicodemus” on the rooftop of a home.
- He was friends with Lazarus and his sister, Mary and Martha
- He even died between two thieves and was crucified like a criminal.

One time in the life of Jesus, he took just three of the disciples—Peter, James, and John—up on a mountain. **It was called the “Mount of Transfiguration.”** We read about it in the seventeenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. The three disciples had a vision that was transfigured to be with two other people whom they recognized--Moses, the giver of the law of God, and Elijah the greatest of all the prophets. Peter was ecstatic. He said, “Lord, let’s build a tabernacle and live up here!” It was somewhat like saying, “This is Eden; let’s live here.” But Jesus said “Get up.” The Bible does not have the words but I think Jesus said, “Get real.” Then he explained to them that his ministry would not be a bed of roses, but that he was going to suffer.

You see, Jesus was teaching them that even he did not live in Eden, but with them in Nod. In Hebrews 4:15, we read in the New Testament, “*We do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses; we have Jesus who was tempted in every way that we are; just that he did not yield to the temptation.*” And Jesus did die on the cross at about age thirty-three.

We have a saying about the deaths of police or soldiers and sailors and marines who die in the line of duty, “They paid the supreme sacrifice.” The Bible is clear; Jesus paid the supreme sacrifice. **Jesus left heaven to live, suffer, and die in the land of Nod. He said of those who surrounded the cross, “Father, forgive them; they know not what they do.”**

**Our living in Nod is reflected in The Lord's Prayer.** The disciples said, "Lord, teach us to pray"; so Jesus taught us to pray, "Give us today bread for today." God does not protect us from trouble or even from temptations, but God does deliver us from evil. We live in Nod but God is with us! All disease, aging, and death is part of living in Nod. My only counsel is, "Be ready, our home is not Eden." **We shall never live in Eden; we live in Nod, but God is with us in Nod. We can trust his promises; we can have confidence in his Word!**

**Eden came with creation, left with human sin, and we can never live there again.** We live in Nod. However, somewhere deep in the human spirit, there is the God-given inner peace that comes with forbearance, integrity, hope; and the trust and confidence that God's name is love and his love for us is unconditional. **I cannot sing, but as a teenager I learned gospel songs that are still a central part of knowing that though I live in Nod, I am still not absent from God.** I love a gospel song I learned as a teenager; it is not in many hymnals, but it is my Christian creed: **"There's within my heart a melody, Jesus whispers quiet and low, 'Fear not, I am with thee, peace be still, in all of life's ebb and flow."** Another hymn was written and found, after his death, beside the bed of a man who lived alone in Michigan and went from house to house cutting wood for widows who had neither strength nor money. Most of us know it well:

"What a friend we have in Jesus, all ours sins and griefs to bear;  
What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer.  
Are we weak and heavy laden; have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?  
We should never be discouraged; in his arms he'll take and shield thee.  
Jesus knows our every weakness, Thou wilt find a solace there.

The most beloved hymn in the world was **written in 1779 by a sailor named John Newton who had been a slave trader and became a Methodist preacher. He named it and we sing it with a powerful adjective: "Amazing Grace."** One line describes living in Nod: **"Through many dangers, toils, and snares I have already come."** The last sentence is the title I have given my autobiography: **"It's grace that's brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home."**

John Greenleaf Whittier, a Quaker, taught us that in spite of our living in Nod, as we pray to remember 'the calm'--**"Where Jesus knelt to share with Thee, the silence of eternity, interpreted by love."**

Amen.

