

“IS THERE A PATHWAY BACK TO EDEN?”

April 23, 2023

Earth Sunday

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Good Earth Sunday Morning!

I hope you are enjoying our modest attempt to create a semblance of the Garden of Eden here in the Chancel. And thank you to all who have helped us create this bountiful setting in which to worship as People Created to Live In and Care For God's Creation.

Today's text from Genesis is one of several origin stories, which provided a way for the People of Israel (and subsequent generations) to understand – from a faith perspective – where we came from and why. It's a STORY. And as we worship together on Earth Sunday 2023, it can also serve as an extended metaphor, for what God may be trying to tell us these many centuries later. But remember, it's a STORY. It's not intended in any way to compete with scientific versions of how we – and life as we know it – came to be.

The Garden is the context for this story, but it is the soil, the *adamah*, that is essential. It is not just part of the scenery. It is the stuff that is capable of absorbing water, which means it can be cultivated. It can produce food. It can support life. It is also the stuff from which the earth creature, the human, is formed. Picture God playing in the dirt – and *voila!* There's Life!

In other words, human existence is portrayed from the very beginning, as inextricably related to that which makes life possible: dirt, water, and Divine Presence. The earth creature is not identified as having a gender. (Apparently the need for pronouns was further down on God's To Do list...) This creature is simply a being, created from the earth, who finds itself in a verdant garden, which it is invited “to till and to keep.” To be responsible for.... To steward....

Then, we're told, God is concerned that this earth-creature needs companionship, so animal life is created. Helpful.... Wonderful ... but not quite what the earthing has in mind. So God goes back to work – and a more appropriate partner is created. And so it is that gendered life becomes part of the Garden, and the earth-creature, now known as Adam (note the connection to *adamah*, the earth), bursts into song.

Once the characters are in place, the story moves on... It turns out God has some rules. Life in the garden, while abundant, has LIMITS. “Eat anything you want,” God says. “BUT.... there are two trees from which you should not eat.”

So (of course) the couple, aided by a wily serpent, begin to ask questions: “Why not?” “Why can't we have it ALL?” And they foolishly assume that God won't *really* mind. “*It's only two measly trees among so many....*” (Well, you know the rest....)

Like every young but verbal human, they don't like it when a parental figure says NO. They have plenty of food, but they want MORE. They don't want to be limited ... by God or anything else. (Does this perhaps sound a bit like a toddler you may know?) And it doesn't take long for God to say ENOUGH! ... and show them the gate.

It's a simple and obvious lesson: To live in God's world, you need to live by God's rules. It's also a hard lesson...one we humans are still struggling to understand and achieve.

So, it seems this story is not about gender hierarchy or original sin or any of the other things that scholars and theologians have gone on about for centuries. It's about CONSUMPTION. What should and should not be consumed. And to our contemporary ears, perhaps, it might be a story about the extent to which the Garden/the Earth should (or should not) be exploited for personal gain and human profit – often to the detriment of the planet.

Let's now fast forward to the Early Church. Some years ago, two scholars, Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, traveled to the Mediterranean, to study how the Early Church captured its life in its art and worship. They started in the catacombs, where it all began, and then moved on to a number of ancient churches. Everywhere they went they saw similar images, but it was different from what they assumed they might find. There were no crosses, no crucifixes, no images of a suffering Jesus. They could not find an image of a dead Jesus anywhere. And why was that? Because, they eventually realized, to the Early Church, Jesus wasn't DEAD!

The images they found in every sanctuary they visited are verdant. They show greenery and animals and abundant water. And when Jesus is pictured, he is not suffering and dying. He is ALIVE, and he appears as we know him from the gospels: teaching, healing, sharing food with friends and followers. The paintings are, in essence, telling us that Jesus' death and resurrection created a pathway back to Eden. "Paradise" is on earth. It's alive and well and being experienced in the Resurrection Community known as the Early Church.

Baptism is literally interpreted as the portal to Paradise. Through the waters of baptism, Christians are once again welcome in the Garden. The angel with its fiery sword has disappeared. In these paintings of Paradise, life is characterized as full of sharing, healing, peace, and balance. There is Beloved Community, as all parts of Creation – plants, animals, and humans – live and flourish together. And no one seems to be griping about wanting MORE.

And why would they? Their Communion tables were laden, not just with bread and wine, but with fruit and nuts and grains – reminiscent of the food available in the ancient Garden.

We perhaps yearn to return to a bit of Eden ourselves. But how could that be possible? We are a people more inclined to consumption than ever before. We refuse to acknowledge the need for limits. Too often we say NO. Even more often we demand MORE. And the consequences are becoming ever more evident. And alarming....

The United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel of Climate Change released its latest report a few weeks ago, just as our Climate Action Team was beginning to plan this Earth Sunday event. According to the U.N. Secretary General: "Humanity is on thin ice – and that ice is melting fast...." He calls for "climate action on all fronts – everything, everywhere, all at once."

Here are 5 quick points from the Report:

1. The time is now. The crisis is urgent... but there IS still time.
2. There is, however, a rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a livable and sustainable future for all. But if that doesn't happen -- and soon -- we should expect millions of our fellow humans to be on the move to places where they hope to fare better. (That's called CLIMATE MIGRATION and it's already happening.)

3. Without a strengthening of worldwide regulations about carbon emissions, global warming of 3.2 degrees Celsius is projected by 2100. (That's a mere 77 years from now, a reasonable lifetime for someone who's now a young child).
4. Every region in the world is projected to face further increases in climate-related hazards, and...
5. Public- AND private-finance-flow in support of fossil fuel is still *far* greater than it is for climate adaption and mitigation.

We humans have been putting tons of CO2 into the air on a regular basis ever since the Industrial Revolution began. It's got to stop, and here are a few of the reasons:

- The glaciers and polar icecaps are melting, and oceans are warming, forcing water levels to rise, which then critically affects many low-lying islands and lovely coastal beaches where we like to vacation. Not to mention entire island nations like the Philippines and Bangladesh.
- Those warming waters also bring on serious storms – stronger and more violent and way more frequent than we have ever experienced. And the cost of rebuilding both homes and infrastructure after such storms is overwhelming... and often interminably slow.
- The warming air dries out the land, and the plant life, as it did in a community, ironically called Paradise, California in November 2018. It was the dry season. The earth was parched and plant life with brittle with thirst. All it took was a lot of wind and a spark from an inadequately-maintained PG&E power line – and within mere hours, 85 people were dead, and their community was virtually non-existent.
- Rising water temperatures are also affecting the coral reefs and endangering sea life – thus affecting the economies of fishing communities that have no other way to sustain themselves. Many coastal areas are also being damaged by rising seawater, as salination ruins both cropland and forests, making life untenable.
- Vast areas of Africa are becoming uninhabitable due to many things, including drought. People leave their land and head to a border, and ultimately a port, in the hope of finding a way to survive. IF they are able to find a boat that can take them ... somewhere, anywhere ... they may well capsize enroute or be turned back upon arrival at a Greek island or a European entry point. Stories like this hit the headlines way too often.

Whether from lack of water or too much of it, these are CLIMATE REFUGEES, and their numbers are growing by the year.

People come to the U.S. borders for a variety of reasons as well – poverty, violence, war, hope for a better life – but Climate Change is contributing more significantly with every year that passes. And on a global scale, vast national and international resources are being put forward to address migration as a “national security issue.” In many cases that means that migrants are seen as a THREAT.

These are starving, travel-worn people, torn from their homes, seeking refuge in a place that is (at least for the time being) relatively livable. And they are being met by surveillance systems and armed guards. And plans are being made for even more repressive measures in the future.

Several years ago, the Department of Homeland Security hauled in chunks of WW2-era wall, leftover from the Normandy Invasion, and stuck them into the ground along the U.S./Mexico border in Southern Arizona. The area was parched from drought, barren of vegetation, and overgrazed by cattle. When Hurricane Odile blew through the area in 2014, with unprecedented wind and rain, it picked up a piece of that wall, blew it past the international border, and eventually dropped it in the interior of Mexico. I'll get back to you with the rest of that story in a bit...

Is there a pathway back to Eden? I think there is. But it will take some CHANGE on everyone's part. Us! Policymakers and politicians, of course! Oh... and corporations, especially energy-related ones.

I am an aging Baby Boomer. It's often been said that it's up to people like me – and many of you – to lead the way in order to leave a livable planet for our children and grandchildren. However, the current, and even stronger message, is that it's not up to us anymore. Why?

Because, a more important job for us is to LISTEN to the demands of our children and grandchildren, and be prepared to form intergenerational alliances to help them lead the way.

Whatever your age, if your current annual income is more than \$38,000 a year, you're in the top 10% of the global income spectrum. I would wager that's quite a few of us. BUT whatever our income, we all need to take a long, hard look at our climate legacy – in terms of both our personal lifestyles (what kind of a car do we drive? how often do we hop on a plane? is there ever a time we use public transit of some kind?) and the political, economic and cultural systems we help create, support and empower.

Do the answers to these questions represent the legacy we each want to leave behind? If not, it's time to take stock.

Several years ago, in the midst of a global pandemic, with a locked-down building, this congregation set about developing a new Strategic Plan, which was subsequently adopted by the congregation. One of the plan's goals was for Plymouth to become a “vital force for racial, economic and ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE.” That's how our Climate Action Ministry Team came to be. And you will soon be hearing more about the steps that we will be initiating in order to become a Creation Justice Congregation of the United Church of Christ.

The UCC has been a leader in this area. It began with a clear focus on environmental JUSTICE, not merely saving creation so we can enjoy its beauty – and breathe cleaner air – but to be faithful communities that will work to assure that clean air and toxin-free water and arable land is available to all.

Current efforts are centered largely around Climate Change and the need for JUST TRANSITION – to assure that people and communities that are economically displaced by our movement away from coal and other fossil fuels will be able to find new ways to sustain themselves as we, as a nation, transition to sustaining ourselves and the earth with different sources of energy. It's a huge issue, particularly for those of us in the Western States, like Colorado, where so much of our current economic life is centered on fossil-fuel-related industries.

SO WHAT CAN WE DO?

There is an Earth Sunday Fair in Fellowship Hall, where you can learn about what some Plymouth members are doing – and what Plymouth itself is doing and hopes to do. And you can also visit with some fascinating guests from the community. And check out a survey from CAM to test the congregation's interests and encourage involvement.

Plymouth has been working at this for a while, but there are some upticks you may have missed:

- With the help of money available through the City of Fort Collins, we are in the process of transitioning a significant portion of our lighting to LED. And because we use the North Wing and Fellowship Hall to shelter families experiencing homelessness through Faith Family Hospitality, that portion of the transition will be covered by the City IN FULL!
- The flowers that adorn our mini-Eden here this morning will be planted outside our sanctuary windows. They will help attract butterflies and other pollinators. They will eat carbon dioxide and release oxygen. They will be pleasing to our eyes ... and those of our Creator. They will use less water because of changes in our irrigating system.
- At the recommendation of the Climate Action Ministry Team last year, Leadership Council voted to move our Endowment Funds to the Beyond Fossil Fuels option within United Church Funds, where our funds are invested. If you are considering a gift to Plymouth's Endowment, either directly or through your will, you can be sure that your funds will NOT be used to build pipelines to bring oil from Alberta to Commerce City or anywhere else in the lower 48.
- And conversations are underway to explore how we might undertake the needed repairs that would lead us to being able to lower our carbon footprint every time we heat or cool this building. It's still in the "If You Dream It, It Might Happen..." stage, but stay tuned...

Since we began with a story about the beginnings of the inhabited world in a verdant garden, I would like to close with another one.

Remember that piece of the Border Wall I mentioned a bit ago, the one that blew away during Hurricane Odile? It landed in a fragile part of northern Mexico, just east of the Agua Prieta/Douglas entry point. When Todd Miller, a journalist based in the Southwest, visited the area, he came across it. It was covered with dust and cobwebs and a lot of little purple flowers. It seemed like a beautiful work of art, resting peacefully near a wash, where a stream was gently running. Embedded 15 feet deep in the riverbed were wire cages filled with rocks. (This was a return to an ancient technique of placing stones in river beds in order to slow down the flow of water.) As a result, after years of mechanized farming, cattle production and now a nasty drought, this parched and barren landscape was once again able to ABSORB precious water – as it gently flowed, rather than rampaged, through the riverbed – allowing time for it to replenish the soil and stimulate new life.

Before, rushing water from monsoon storms would strip away the top soil and leave erosion in such washes. Now there was water year-round! There were native grasses and sprouting desert willows and cottonwoods. The water table had risen 30 feet – in the middle of a 15-year drought! Everywhere else in the area, drought was sucking water out of the land, and animals, grass and the earth

itself were dying. Yet here, and 15 miles downstream, water was returning ... and recharging the earth, in a place where people hadn't seen water for over a decade. Bees were returning. So were butterflies. The land went from brown to green, from completely dry to lush and abundant.

It must have felt for all the world like a miracle. And looked (dare I say it?) like a bit of Eden in the midst of the Sonoran Desert. Within sight of the international border, with its Border Patrol vehicles and sophisticated technology, there was a re-emerging Paradise. And because water is no respecter of international boundaries, the water table rose on the U.S. side of the border as well.

Just think, Miller mused, what could happen if the \$20 billion or so the U.S. uses annually for border and immigration enforcement – for exclusion – could be used to restore the land instead? For starters, many people would be able to stay in Mexico and continue to farm their ancestral lands. And at least some climate-driven migration could end.

There IS a pathway back to Eden.

The question is what kind of changes are we in the Global North willing to make to assure the survival of our fellow humans, and prevent the unnecessary desperation that so often leads to migration? And then create SYSTEMS within societies throughout the world so there is equity and justice for all.

I believe that Eden is still there and waiting for us. The pathway exists and is getting clearer by the day. The real question is: Will we be able to make enough change for this Garden we call HOME to return to its regenerated lushness? And how can each of us become less of the problem and more of the solution?

And, I wonder, how it will differ from the world in which we now live?

- Will at least some of the endangered species we worry about still be here?
- Will there be energy sources that assure a good life for all of earth's inhabitants, without endangering the health and future of any?
- Will we all – or at least more of us – be vegetarian?
- Will there be justice?
- Will there still be PLASTIC????
- Will abandoned oil rigs be transformed into wind machines or huge solar installations? [and perhaps most importantly....]
- Will our grandchildren's grandchildren be having grandchildren of their own?

I hope the answers to all these questions – and all the others we may have – is a resounding YES! May it be so!

So may it indeed be so! Amen!