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Loving the Garden
Genesis 2: 4-15
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The Bible often has a Lays Potato Chip approach when it comes to the most important stories, “your going to need more than one.” The story of Jesus is told four times in four different gospels. The story of King David is told in 1st and 2nd Samuel and also in 1st and 2nd Chronicles. And the story of God creating the world is important enough that the Bible needs two stories for that too.

In Genesis 1, God creates the world in six days, and on the sixth day, after God has created everything else, God creates humankind. The Hebrew word for humankind is Adam. God creates humankind, Adam, in God’s image, male and female God creates Adam. There’s some gender bending going on in Genesis 1. Then God blesses male and female humankind and says, “be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, have dominion over the fish and birds and all living things.”

We often get tripped up on the last line of this story, and many people link our ecological problems to Christianity embracing this last line in the story. But this story was originally for Ancient Israel. Ancient Israel’s reality was that they were almost always an oppressed people, struggling to keep their identity, hoping that someday they wouldn’t be pushed around by their powerful neighbors. In this story you can hear a call to nation building, “Make babies Israel!

Get bigger, God wants you to get bigger and stronger.” God’s blessing gives worth to an oppressed people.

But in 2012, our problem is not trying to keep up with our enemies or subduing a harsh creation, our problem is that we’ve become so fruitful and we’ve subdued creation so drastically that creation is biting us back. Fortunately for us, there’s another creation story, if only we will keep reading our beloved bibles. And this story gives us an understanding of humankind and our role in the world that will help us address today’s ecological problems and it will also help us correct our distorted readings of Genesis chapter one.

In Genesis chapter two, God creates the heavens and the earth again. This time it takes one day. The more you repeat things, the more efficient you become. This time God creates Adam first, and plants and animals later. In English we’re told, God forms Adam from the dust of the ground. But we miss something important in translation. The word for “dust of the ground” in Hebrew is Adamah. God creates Adam from Adamah. The language of this story would have reminded ancient Israel that the earth was their family, their kin. If you have the name Johnson, at some point in your family tree that meant you were John’s son. The same is true for Adam from Adamah. The language of the story made clear that to forget the earth was to forget your family. To destroy the earth was to destroy your mother. Just as our names often tell us where we come from, there’s a Lipper land in Germany, Adam from Adamah tells all of us Adams, that we are from the Earth. Human from humus says the same but not as clearly as the Hebrew. Anytime we hear someone saying, “The Bible says the earth is here for us to use, often meaning use up, Genesis two reminds us, that’s not how we treat our family.”

God creates the Garden of Eden, and lots of pretty trees, lots of tasty fruit, and then God places Adam, earth-child, mud creature, in the garden to till it and keep it. This is about more

than planting a few tomatoes and making sure you have a tiller in the garage. This story is telling us that our God given vocation, our work, our purpose, is to keep the garden, care for creation. This isn't a bonus good deed, this isn't some feel good update to keep Christianity current with the times. This is instruction from the beginning of the Bible, this is how our story starts: care for everything. And when we remember that we are Adam from Adamah, humans from humus, we'll remember that we are all creation too. We aren't called to care for the birds and the fish and the bears and wolves and the water and not care for one another. We are to care for each other, AND the amazing web of life on which our lives depend and everything else depends too. The world needs communities of people who are living this vocation: keeping the garden, caring for human creation and the rest of it.

What's one step we can take that will help us live out our vocation? I suggest that we pay attention to awe-inspiring experiences. I suggest we do something spiritual first, and continuously. When we do, we are really paying attention to God, God revealed in humanity, and other creatures, in the beauty of everything that surrounds us. The more we pay attention, the more we love and care for the garden. We start loving and caring for the garden because we realize that there's something sacred in the garden.

As a child I would always help my parents with the planting and harvesting of our family garden, not the weeding. My favorite vegetable to plant was the carrot. I'd hold these tiny seeds covered so the wind wouldn't blow them out of my hand, drop them in the ground, and then, after my Dad did some good work helping the carrots along, I'd help dig them up end of July and eat that first sweet carrot of the summer and wonder, "how does this happen, every time from that tiny seed?" As a child, I didn't know how to talk about this experience, but I knew it was amazing. That experience had some depth to it.

In July and August we'd always have monarch caterpillars climbing along some dill and milkweed in our garden. Every year I'd watch them in their tiger stripes munching away, and then either in a jar or in the garden I'd watch them shimmy into a chrysalis and then come out in their butterfly clothes and fly away. For many years our maple trees in the front yard were monarch hotels during their migration south. For a few days the trees in our yard were simmering with thousands of restless butterflies, and then one morning, poof, they'd all be gone. How could that caterpillar in my garden, and the thousands in the trees, zip itself up into a sack, sprout wings and fly to Mexico? It was beautiful and impossible at the same time.

The approach of spring was marked by the great horned owls nesting in the park across the street. All of a sudden we'd see this huge shadow swoop from the trees and fly absolutely silently through the softball field and land quietly in the maple tree on the corner, ears sticking up and voice singing through the night, "who-who-who...who." A few years about the time we were digging our garden to prepare for spring planting, we saw baby owls, kicked out of the nest but not yet prepared to fly. So they were hopping around like bowling pins with feet. And there would be robins hatching in our shrubs and every once in a while a mama wood duck would lose her babies in our garage as she was trying to find her way to the nearest pond. Those experiences were more than fun, they brought me deep joy.

And now I plant a vegetable garden and my children help, they enjoy putting the seeds in the ground, they enjoy the fruits of not just our labor but of sun and soil and rain. And I think about the generations of my family that have spent time in the garden. And I think not only about the time that has passed but about the love that lives on, from one generation to the next, never going away. It's all a gift, a beautiful, holy gift.

The more we pay attention to these experiences of awe and wonder in the garden, the more we love and care. We grow in love for the garden, because we realize there's something sacred in it. God is there. These experiences give us new eyes for seeing. I see not just my children as sacred, I start to see everyone else's children as sacred too. I don't just see human beings as sacred, because I know that there's something sacred about the owls, and the wood ducks, and the robins, and monarch butterflies, and the carrots and the miracle worker the soil. Not only am I given new eyes that see the sacred in more places, my actions change. I don't want to hurt what is sacred, I want to live in harmony with it. As I grow in love for God's garden, I am more motivated to tend it and keep it.

This is where the church comes in. The church nurtures this love. The church nurtures our ability to pay attention to awe, to wonder, to God. Sometimes the church gives us new eyes for seeing, other times it helps us keep the new pair of glasses on. Sometimes the church leads us to new action, other times it holds us up as we walk a new and difficult way.

Here, in the church, we worship, try to say thank you to God for the miracle of life and the blessings of the garden. And we engage in practices that help us stay close to and pay attention to God: we pray, we sing, we study the Bible, the stories of Jesus and the faith that shaped him. And through this practice our hearts are always changing. Our faith and trust is growing deeper, and as the church sends us to tend and keep the garden, we act differently than we would have otherwise. We die to old ways and rise to new ways, because we've encountered a love and now carry a love that changes everything.

We give thanks for the gift of life in the garden, for God's sacred presence throughout, and we give thanks for the church that nurtures our life with God and gives us holy purpose and work: caring for everything. Amen.