

Eden, Sustainability, and Climate Change
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A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash
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Introduction to the Scripture Reading:

Today's scripture reading, like last week's, has a fair amount of cultural baggage attached to it. Over the millenia, people have added interpretations and meanings that aren't really in the text. And people have skipped over God's invitation in this text for humanity to care for and be in right relationship with the earth. This text is not a factual account of actual historic events, but rather, it recounts an ancient people's yearning to understand their relationship with their creator and the land upon which they lived. Perhaps, today, we can hear this text as a parable about sustainability. You are invited today to listen with fresh ears for wisdom in this text from Genesis chapters 2 and 3.

Scripture: Genesis 2:15-2:17; 3:1-11; 23 NRSV, adapted

15 God took Adam and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. 16 And God commanded Adam, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; 17 but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die."

1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, Eve, "Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" 2 The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 3 but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.' " 4 But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; 5 for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." 6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. 7 Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. 8 They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. 9 But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" 10 He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." 11 He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" 23 therefore the Lord God sent humans forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which Adam was taken.

Sermon

My Lord said unto me,
Do you like my garden so fair?
You may live in this garden if you'll keep the grasses green.
And I'll return in the cool of the day

Jean Ritchie, an Appalachian songcatcher, captured this traditional folk interpretation of the Garden of Eden. Hearing it changed my understanding of our text. Eden used to reside in my imagination as a place where people could frolic, with no deep thoughts and no work, no responsibility. The moment they eat the apple (no where in the text does it say apple), they are expelled into a harsh world and consigned to work.

It turns out, the traditional musicians kept it closer to the text. The work of caring for the Garden was always part of God's gift to Adam and Eve. In this second creation story, God creates human beings out of the ground, and God plants a garden.

God plants a garden,
and God walks in that garden.

God's steps are audible.

"They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze..."

Here is something beautiful and abundant, God says to the earliest people.

It will sustain you, if you sustain it.

God puts the first archetypal human in the garden, the first human with a body, a body formed from the clay of earth, and says, "work the Garden and take care of it."

Take care of this beautiful place.

Here I have brought forth strong trees and colorful bushes, flowers that turn into fruit - raspberry, apple, rose; and herbs that give delight to the tongue and heal the body - dill, anise, tansy.

There is enough for you, if you will care for it carefully.

Be in good relation to the world that I have made;

love this place and do not take more from it than you need. Give back to this garden, that its beauty may continue.

Careful, God says.

If you take too much from this beautiful place, it will be harmed, and you will be harmed. This is the one boundary humanity is asked to accept.

There is something in humanity,
not always,
and not all of us,

but there is something in humanity that does not like limits even when they are good for us.

There is something in human beings that wants everything. And so the tempter comes. This snake is just another way of describing the temptation to take everything that we can see. The tempter comes and says,

God who has charged you to care for all of this abundance and beauty,

God our creator,

God the creative force,

God who formed you from the earth,

to live in relation to the earth and all its creatures...

the tempter says, that God is selfish.

That God is holding back something for no good reason. Don't you want it? And so we take the fruit from the tree God said not to harvest.

We take the tops off mountains.

We crack the earth to pull out fossil fuels.

In the 1800s industrial air pollution killed people in London, which you would have thought would have taught us something, but in 2019 we are still burning coal and oil, and this week, the children of Delhi cannot go to school due to air pollution.

We have known since the 1980s that continuing to burn fossil fuels would lead to climate disruption, and now we live in a world of drought, storm, and wildfire, in which agricultural collapses send refugees fleeing around the world.

Theologian Lisa Sharon Harper writes,
“Because we choose our own peace above the peace of all, creation suffers...damage to creation stands as a witness to our rebellion.”

But, we do the same thing that Adam and Eve did - we point the blame at the person, or serpent, or tempter, to our right.

The way in which humanity has treated God’s creation also has parallels in the oppression of indigenous people and people of color. This week I am thankful for Womanist and Eco-womanist theologians who make this point, along with African theologian Mercy Oduyuye who writes:

“Just as we say some plants and animals are endangered species, so are some human beings, either because of what they look like, where they live or some other aspect of their being or part of their identity. We hear discussions on the ecological racism that saves some and lets others die. People who have less access to modern technology are the ones suffering for our over-use and abuse of creation.”

This is a moment of profound crisis in our collective lives. Having used more resources than we should have in this beautiful Garden, having dominated the body of the earth in parallel to dominating the bodies of people of color, and indigenous people and people who are poor, humanity finds itself separated from the Garden, and out of right relationship with creation.

And the very difficult news is that every plant, every animal, every human being will feel the consequences of that for the foreseeable future.

But.

But.

We are not without hope. And we are not without ways forward.

If breaking our good relationship with the earth and our neighbors and ignoring God’s call to care for the Garden got us into this mess,

then, rebuilding a good relationship with the earth and our neighbors and embracing God’s call to care for the Garden has to be central to how we get out of this mess.

My Lord said unto me,
"Do you like my garden so free?
You may live in this garden if you'll keep the people free.
And I'll return in the cool of the day."

I see hope in SoulFire Farm in New York state, founded by Leah Penniman. Listen to a piece of the mission statement of this extraordinary place:

“Soul Fire Farm is a BIPOC-centered [Black, Indigenous and Persons of Color centered] community farm committed to ending racism and injustice in the food system....With deep reverence for the land and wisdom of our ancestors, we work to reclaim our collective right to belong to the earth and to have agency in the food system.”

There were a million black farmers in the US in 1920...now there are 45,000. SoulFire Farm is one project dedicated to reversing that trend, drawing upon the agricultural knowledge of African communities and making a community of resilience today that addresses food insecurity, racism, and climate change. Penniman writes:

“Part of the work of healing our relationship with soil is unearthing and relearning the lessons of soil reverence from the past.”

If you want to hear more about this piece of history, and this most amazing farm, I invite you to watch a video of Leah Penniman, which will be shared on our Facebook page.

At the Interfaith Garden here in Lexington folks like Mary and Duncan and others from Pilgrim and people from a dozen faith communities stand shoulder to shoulder, composting and planting, growing and weeding, harvesting and carrying food to the Food Pantry. “If there is something mystical about this place,” wrote the Colonial Times, “beyond soil conditions that are unusually fertile, it’s....friends....Ehtnic, social, denominational, and all other sorts of differences may try and divide...but ankle deep in the tilled earth, those differences seem to disappear.” The planners and planters of the Interfaith Garden see the connection between local and global: “Many people are just beginning to realize that growing food in this way also helps us to address climate change.” I must admit I haven’t gotten to the garden yet but I will tell you this: in March, when you sign up, I want to go with you.

Dealing with climate change requires deep, systemic changes to our energy use, our transportation system, our economy, the economies of every country. We’ve got to be advocating locally, regionally, nationally, internationally for public policy changes and for a just transition that helps all workers. When our middle and high school students strike for their future we have to keep showing up.

All this is manifest, so hear me clearly:

I do not mean to say that climate change can be solved by growing more kale.

On the other hand, our system of agriculture, forestry and land-use, is responsible for as much as a quarter of greenhouse gas emissions, which means coming into right relationship with the earth might go a very long way toward addressing climate change.

Now, you may not be a gardener, so I invite you to translate this into your own practices if needed...or maybe try it next spring. Try standing next to someone, rich soil under our finger nails, smelling the herbs, scaffolding the peas and mounding the potatoes and weeding the kale, teaching our children how food grows and what a miracle that is, remembering the abundance of creation and working toward a just and integrated food system is part of our call in this moment.

Gardens, local and sustainable and carefully cared for, present an integrated and symbolic - and more than symbolic - step toward addressing climate change.

If relatively small and symbolic actions - eating the wrong fruit - show the way in which humanity got out of balance with creation and broke relationship with God, then relatively small and symbolic actions may show us a way to restore balance and right relation to the earth and our God.

Gardening is also a form of active prayer for the earth. When we go outside, and touch the earth with care, and move toward a healed creation and a world where everyone has good, fresh food to eat - this draws us back to our Creator. This is a spiritual practice that helps us glimpse a path back to God's bounteous garden. This is a spiritual practice of active hope, of living into the future that we want to be true.

Dill, anise, tansy./ Holy winds blow in us.

Rhododendron, zinnia, mum.

May our prayers be beautiful. May our remembrances be as incense to you, O God.

As we smell and remember the ancient gardens of earth. Amen.