

Back to Eden
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
September 13, 2020

Genesis 2:4b-7, 15-17; 3:1-8

I love that we've been worshipping outdoors this summer, even if it did get a little hot from time to time! The more time we spend out here, the better. And it's fitting that today, on our final day of gathering outdoors for worship in this season, we hear a story about our ancestors, Adam and Eve, and their relationship to God's Creation.

Now, listen. I don't really think that their story was to be heard by us as "history", in the way we might understand it. The ancients used tales and myths like this one to try and explain the unknowable. Much like a child who hears their parent reading a bedtime story, we can use our imagination to better understand the deep mysteries of our world... our relationship with the divine, this earth and each other.

It began with a series of gifts.

The first gift God gave was to make us from clay, connecting us to the earth. Soon a second gift was given, that of a name... Adam, meaning 'human,' from the Hebrew root adama, meaning 'soil.' In this way, we are reminded that to be human is to be grounded, connected with the earth.

The next gift that was given was breath, in Hebrew... ruach. Our breath was to remind us of our connection to God. To share in that breath was to share a spark of divinity. To be human is to have a part of ourselves that is connected with, and drawn to, the Divine. Every breath we take draws us closer.

The next gift that was given was the Garden itself. In the garden, the humans could satisfy their thirst and hunger. We are told that God lived in the Garden too, strolling in the cool of the evening among rocks and plants and streams, the kittens and kangaroos, earthlings and earthworms, the bunnies and bears.

And that was the way it was, once upon a time in a Garden—connectedness among the creatures, living in the shade of the Tree of Life in God's new and wonderful world.

But the Garden was unfinished, and there was still much work to be done. Help was necessary: an on-site tiller of soil, someone who would care for the land and all the creatures that roamed and roared, swam and swarmed.

There was room in God's creation for involvement and participation, for teamwork and partnership, for evolution and improvement. Maybe that's why God made Adam, the world's very first gardener.

You've probably heard somewhere that God commanded the man and the woman to 'fill the earth and subdue it.' To multiply and have dominion. And God does say that, just not in this story. Genesis tells two creation stories, and in this one, God commands them to till and keep, name and attend.

So Adam has work to do, and it's joyful work, because as he cares for the earth, the earth cares for him. And soon woman, created from a rib that held and protected Adam's very heart, would join him in this sacred work. Not as a servant or slave, but as a true and equal partner.

And then the story takes a sad turn when a smooth-talking serpent appears to plant seeds of mistrust in their human hearts. That mistrust becomes a wedge that will split things, creating division in that which was once whole.

Before that moment, humans had never felt shame in being naked; but now they would. Their relationship with their own bodies would be broken.

Once they'd walked with God; but now they would be afraid and ashamed and try to hide... as many still do. Their relationship with their Creator would be fractured.

Once they called one other 'my flesh and blood'; now they would turn on each other in accusation and blame. Their relationship to other humans would be shattered.

So God closes the Garden and sends them out into the world where they would learn suffering, as well as joy.

The story says that's a punishment, and maybe that's true. And maybe the original sin is just a desire to know what God knows, so we don't need anyone's else's help. That's the sin: dis-connection, dis-trust, dis-ease. It's a cautionary tale for sure, an example of what can go wrong when we try to go it alone, without the help of others.

We are created in the image of God, who is, by very essence, relationship. We reflect the image of God most completely when we are in healthy relationship - with God, with one another, with everything God has created.

We were created to be so deeply connected to the world that when things aren't right with us, they're wrong in nature too. And nature won't be right again until we are.

Even with all its hardships that we are experiencing so keenly in these days, the world is still a wondrous place. Perhaps it has never fully satisfied us like the Garden once did. We've planted our own gardens, hoping to sense God's footfalls in the grass, to see flowers that don't fade, to hear God speak to our hearts. And sometimes it seems like nothing we can make is quite like that which we lost.

There was one who pointed us again to that paradise. The story says he came to find us, leaving his own Eden and taking on an earthy body, just like ours, with the same weaknesses and challenges, experiencing the same feelings of joy and pain.

It seems that by then, we were so good at ignoring our ties to one another that when he came to us in human flesh, breathing the divine breath, we did to him what we were doing to each other.

So even though he stirred a deep memory within us when he told stories of gardens and seeds, trees and birds, lilies, and harvests gathered into barns... we treated him like a foreigner and a stranger.

We said we didn't know him, even though he ate, drank, sang, and danced with the happy abandon of one who knew what life was like in the Garden.

In a cruel twist, when we seized him, it was in a garden. And when we killed him, we buried him in one too. Later, back at that garden tomb on Easter morning, Mary Magdalene saw him, but she thought he was a gardener.

And perhaps she wasn't really wrong.

We're in this life together, friends. For better, and for worse. Some say it's too late, but that kind of thinking only leads to despair. It might not seem like we can do much to heal the brokenness of today... but each small thing we do will be a kind of remembering, a reconnection of broken kinship, the planting of a seed, an act of love and hope.

Following the master gardener, small thing by small thing, we will ourselves become an oasis, a taste of Eden, at play and at rest as God intended for us and every creature under heaven.

May it be so, and may it be soon. Amen.