

Once Upon a Time In A Garden
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Genesis 2:4b-25

The ancients used stories to try and explain how it was that things came to be. Mind you, this one we heard today is not meant to be received as science, or, or for that matter history. Rather than telling us HOW something happened, like a textbook might do, I believe that a story like this one can help us grasp a little better the WHY.

We see the WHY through our own interpretations. Much like a child who hears their parent reading a bedtime story, we use our imagination and focus on the bits that help us better understand the deep mysteries of our world... our relationship with the divine, this earth and each other.

And that is where we can find our truth. Not one that clobbers and excludes or oppresses, but one which humbly recognizes that we all carry a different perspective as we struggle towards understanding.

Join me in the garden (or in the swamp, as it were), as we explore a story of creation. It all began with a series of gifts.

The first gift God gave was to make us from clay, which connected us to the earth. Soon a second gift was given, that of a name... in this case Adam, meaning 'human,' from the Hebrew root adama, meaning 'soil.'

To be human is to be grounded, connected with the earth. When we remember that we're nothing but dirt perhaps we learn humility... another great gift.

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. And 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, bunnies and bears.

And that was the way it was, once upon a time in a Garden—connectedness among companions and kin, creatures all, made-in-the-shade of the Tree of Life in the East of God’s new and wonderful world.

But it wasn’t all play and no work for the human. The Garden was unfinished, and there was much to be done. Help was necessary: God needed an on-site tiller of soil, someone who would care for the land and all the creatures that roamed and roared, swam and swarmed.

God’s creation had room in it for involvement and participation, for teamwork and partnership, for evolution and improvement. That’s why God made Adam, the world’s very first gardener.

You’ve probably heard somewhere that God commanded the man and he woman to ‘fill the earth and subdue it.’ To multiply and have dominion. And God does say that, but not in this story. Genesis tells two creation stories, and in this one, God doesn’t say fill and subdue, but rather.... till and keep, name and attend.

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

What we know is that the story will soon take a sad turn. We didn’t read this part, but you probably remember what happens next. A smooth talking serpent will appear and 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.

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. Many still do. Their relationship with the Divine would be broken.

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 broken.

So God closes the Garden and sends them out into the world. There they would discover that their relationship to nature had been damaged too. Participation would now bring suffering as well as joy.

The story says that's a punishment. But I think it's also a cautionary tale, 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 relationship - with God, with one another, with everything God has created. And maybe the original sin is in part a desire to know what God knows so we don't need anyone's help.

You see, 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, the world is still a wondrous place. And yet, perhaps it has never fully satisfied us like the Garden once did. We've planted gardens ourselves, hoping to sense God's footfalls in the grass, to see flowers that don't fade, to hear God speak to our hearts. But it seems like nothing we can make is quite like which we lost.

Once upon a time, in a Garden...

For Christians, there was someone who pointed us again to that Garden... Jesus, God's Child. The story says he came to find and stay with us who'd become so lost and lonely. He left his own Eden with God and took an earthy body, just like ours.

But by then, we were so practiced in ignoring our kinship with creatures and God that when he came to us in human flesh, breathing the divine breath, we did to him what we were doing to each other.

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

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.

We treated him like a stranger, even though we heard the accent of Eden in the way he talked and the way he lived.

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 she wasn't really wrong.

Genesis is the Bible's first book, recounting stories of the first creation. Revelation is the Bible's final book. It promises a new creation. The new earth, it says, will be like a jeweled city with walls and towers, but in its center God will plant a Tree of Life, just as God did once upon a time in a Garden. Its leaves will be medicine for the healing of the nations—for all people.

It's hard to imagine. We stockpile guns and weapons in our gardens. We bulldoze thousand-year old olive trees. We believe we can demean, ignore, oppress, unhouse, and kill each other, and exploit water, earth, air, and animals, and suffer no lasting harm.

But now, as we witness the effects of this self-delusion, the truth scripture teaches is stark.

In melting ice caps and disappearing bees and very sick children we see there's no separation between human beings and nature, between this nation and that nation, between our own generation and those to follow.

Because we're in this together. For better, and for worse.

Some say it's too late for the earth, and maybe even too late for us. That kind of thinking can lead to despair. Sometimes it is good to remember that although earth has been entrusted to our care, it's still God's creation, not ours.

I think we won't despair. I think we will read and study and revisit the story, over and over. I think we'll speak to each other about Eden and earth, about creatures and God and mud and divine breath, about Adam the gardener and Eve the mother and Jesus our brother, the new Adam, the harvester of life.

We have this great green story and woven through the words is a mission and a calling. You and I are called to set it right by doing what we can to heal the brokenness.

So I think we'll decrease our use of plastics and turn off our energy efficient lights when we leave the room. We'll nurture our soil and tend to those entrusted to our care, especially the widow and the orphan, the prisoner and the refugee. We'll go on baptizing children, not to wash away original sin but to remember the original blessings and our call to care for one another.

It might not seem like much against the odds... but each small thing we do will be a kind of remembering, a reconnection of broken kinship, an act of love. Small thing by small thing, we will ourselves become a Garden, 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.