

## **“People of the Garden”**

Genesis 1: 9 –2:1; Psalm 146; Philippians 2: 5–11

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*The Rev. Dr.*

A few weeks ago, I came across a little story that has had me thinking ever since. It was retold by John Cleese (you remember John Cleese, from Monty Python, and the Ministry of Silly Walks), and he called it, “A Profound Joke.” A man walking along a street at night comes across another man who is standing under a street light and bent almost double, clearly searching for something. “What are you looking for?” the first man asks. “My keys!,” says the second man; “Can you help me find them?” So for a while both men search and search under the street light, but they fail to find anything. At last the first man says, “Are you sure this is where you dropped them?” “Oh no,” says the searcher; “I lost them over in that dark alleyway.” “What? Why are you looking *here*, then?” “The light is so much better over here!”

While this little story is just a joke (which you *may* have heard before!), John Cleese feels that it points to the way human beings tend to approach difficult topics. We use the tools — the light, if you will — that are near at hand. But the tools that we have, whether they are yardsticks or telescopes or logical constructs or scholarly methodologies, may not fit the matter at hand. Perhaps there are some mysteries that the light that we have simply cannot reveal; we might not even know our own limitations. (There are the unknowns that we know about; and then there are the “unknown unknowns.”<sup>1</sup>) We cannot always look out far, as Robert Frost put it; we cannot look in deep. But we can remain curious, humble, and open to new ways of seeing.

What might we miss when looking at Genesis I? As 21<sup>st</sup> century people, immersed in a scientific way of thinking that for the last few hundred years

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<sup>1</sup> Per Donald Rumsfeld.

has yielded insight after insight into the nature of the physical world, we may assume that the Genesis story is meant to be the sort of thing that we might write, an attempt at a scientific theory about cosmic origins. But looking at the story in this way is a little like looking for the keys you dropped in one place, somewhere else, where the light is better. The Genesis story emerged in a time when a lost and dispirited people needed encouragement and vision. The people who told the story and the people who heard it were not enquiring into the origin of the universe. They were a defeated, exiled, and distressed people. Evicted from the land in which they had been established as God's people, they were asking, "Who are we now?"

Who are we now? What are we to do now? And the story says to them: Look! Look at what the world is like! It lays out first the physical nature of the world — the earth and the sky, the oceans and the dry land. And then it shows how each part of the creation is populated with the creatures that are suited to it — vegetation over the face of the earth; fish in the sea; birds in the air; every kind of creeping thing on land; and in the midst of all of this life, human beings, men and women, also. Look! The story tells those early, exiled Israelites: the world is still crowded with good things. It affirms the abundance and sufficiency and goodness of the world and of life itself, and it affirms humanity's place in it. Even we 21<sup>st</sup> c people will allow that the world is orderly, that it is fruitful, that it is abundant, that it is beautiful, and that it is our home. We, like them, are people of the garden.

Each year during the month of September, many parts of the world-wide church, including, for example, the Church of Scotland, recognize the Season of Creation. This year, the theme of this celebration is "Peace with Creation." A symbol of this theme, printed in your bulletin, "depicts a white dove flying over a tree. . . . The right side of the tree is lush, . . . green, [and] . . . flourishing," like the landscape it inhabits. But "the left side of the tree is barren, with roots digging into dry soil, . . . [in] a landscape that is arid [and] desolate." For our garden home is in trouble, war-torn in some places, overexploited in others. "The dove [that carries] . . . an olive branch in its beak [as it] flies toward the right" symbolizes the

need for a new peace with the created world, so that it may indeed be as “fertile, thriving, and hospitable” as it is meant to be.<sup>2</sup>

Brian McLaren associates the trouble in the world with the activities of greedy and rapacious imperialists and colonizers, and he points out that the Bible took shape as these rapacious colonizer civilizations were taking over. The land of Israel, after all, was overrun by empire again and again, by Egyptians and Assyrians and Babylonians and, later, by Romans. The perspective of the ancient Hebrews, he feels, is profoundly anti-imperial. The Bible affirms the dignity of those the empire exploits. God feels their pain and identifies with their suffering. God wishes God’s people to be free and whole. And the personages of the Bible, like Abraham in his wanderings, are often seeking not wealth and power but *belonging* (116) — a family, a tribe, and a homeland that they can tend, a garden where they can flourish.

This perspective — the perspective of people rooted in the land, responsive to it and responsible for it, a people of the garden — is important for us to consider in these days of environmental “overshoot.” For McLaren, “overshoot” names the environmental and ecological strains that our natural world is exposed to, and which have compromised the water, the land, the air itself, and all of the creatures that inhabit them and rely on them. Our economic and technological and industrial systems have overshot what the earth is able to bear. This is not a cheery proposition. Last week, we heard about how Jeremiah, known as the “weeping prophet,” prophesied doom for the people of Israel. McLaren, who is a former English professor, a former pastor, an activist, contemplative, and writer, calls his most recent book *Life after Doom*.

And he notes, as we might note too, as we return to the Genesis story, that in the midst of the garden there was a tree. Amidst all of the abundance and fruitfulness of the garden, there was a limitation. But it was a healthy limitation. For Adam and Eve were meant to stand in for God, to be fruitful and caring as God has been, but not to usurp God’s role.

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<sup>2</sup> Season of Creation *Celebration Guide 2025*. The Guide notes that the logo is not meant to diminish the unique value of desert ecosystems and their creatures, which are also part of God’s creation.

“Don’t overdo it,” is the message of that forbidden tree. “Don’t take too much, or you will die.” Taking too much has come to be a bit of an addiction for human society, Brian McLaren thinks, an addiction that has come to threaten life itself. The people in the garden, he writes, “can’t live a life of ecological overshoot and still have access to the tree of life.”

The antidote to this way of being, this grasping and overreaching, this greed and overshoot, is love. And love, as our reading from Philippians this morning shows us, is the way of Christ. This passage is thought to have been a hymn in use in the early church; and it is thought also to be the earliest scrap of writing to appear in the New Testament. And it shows us that the way of Christ is exactly opposite to the way of overreach. Where the couple in the garden reach up, Christ reaches down. Where they seek to lift themselves up, Christ is willing to lay himself down. Where they are trying to become gods themselves, Christ is emptying himself of all divine power and glory and entering into our humble, troubled, mortal life.

There is a goodness worked into the very nature of the things of this world. There is kindness and sweetness all around. The trouble in our world helps us to see and to celebrate and to hold close to our hearts the beauty and the preciousness of all life, of which we are part.

As summer ends and autumn begins — this “season of mists and mellow fruitfulness” (Keats), let us remember that humanity was originally called to tend a garden. Let us continue to reflect on the connection between caring for creation and fostering peace (Season of Creation). And let us remember the words of Paul

Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Ph. 4: 5–7):

People of the Garden: May it be so.

Amen.