

Soil as the Face of God
Sermon, Faith Mennonite Church, June 9, 2013
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The Garden of Eden is a strange story to be included in our summer series on the goodness of creation. This second creation story, which starts at the point in chapter 2 where God begins to be referred to with the word LORD, or Yahweh, is very different from the version in chapter 1. There, everything is separated and ordered by God on high, everything is declared good, and everybody gets a well-deserved rest at the end. In the Garden, on the other hand, with the tree and the serpent, everything seems to be going downhill from the beginning, everybody miscommunicates with each other, and by the end everyone has extra work to do. In fact, this is a characteristic of a whole host of Yahweh stories in the first books of the bible—Cain & Abel, parts of the Flood story, the Tower of Babel, parts of the Joseph story, and wilderness wandering stories. These are narratives about psychologically complex characters who go through periods of struggle, suffering, and loss—stories about how we fall short in our ability to manage and control things. They are parables on the limits of human knowledge, wisdom, and power. Very different from the stories associated with hierarchical, priestly traditions, such as Genesis 1.

The Garden of Eden is also a text that has been used in disturbingly imaginative ways to justify all sorts of questionable theology and gender assignments. In the Middle Ages and the Reformation, it was used to support the doctrine of original sin, typically with Eve playing the role of the scapegoat, and the primordial parents as tragic figures in a sort of a cosmic Fall, to be reversed only much later through the redemptive death of Jesus. And the “ruling” of male over female—a result in this story of *the Fall*—gets turned around 180 degrees into a recommended societal norm. Isn't it amazing what grand thoughts the human mind can manufacture out of an ancient tale about a talking snake? But it *is* true that if the motto of Genesis 1 is “and it was good,” the motto of Genesis 2-3 that we're left with has to be, “well, I guess it wasn't so very good after all.”

And yet, when you move beyond the allegorical, sometimes overly spiritualized if not downright oppressive interpretations and take a fresh look at the nature images in this story—what it is saying about ecology and about the role of humans—then there's really some quite amazing stuff, here. An Old Testament scholar from Mennonite Brethren background, Ted Hiebert, wrote a book awhile back called *The Yahwist's Landscape*. He investigates the environmental context out of which this ancient layer of Yahweh stories emerged around 1,000 BC.

Look at the opening, for example. The landscape described is not one of a complex river irrigation system as in arid Egypt or Mesopotamia, rather it is an area dependent upon rainfall. The rivers listed here are interesting—there is no actual geographical location in the Middle East where rivers with such names come together. But this does suggest that Eden is pictured as a central high place that serves as the *symbolic* source of headwaters for rivers that will fructify the entire earth in all four directions. Exactly the kind of sacred ground you'd expect to arise out of a people living in the rain-fed hill country of central Palestine. In other words, the ancient Israelites were imagining the place they lived as the original paradise at the center of the entire world. Sound far-fetched? Let me ask you, where do the headwaters meet for the Great Lakes and Mississippi river systems? Minnesota! It's no wonder the Dakota people chose to locate their sacred Eden spot at Coldwater Spring, just south of here near the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers. So, very much like central Minnesota, Eden is pictured as a

heartland, a sacred high place of rolling hills, abundant rainfall, and fresh-water springs—the source of all that is life-giving, the place where Yahweh is present on the earth.

Now, why are humans placed in the Garden? To till it—to cultivate it! The earth is a farm, and farming is evidently the original calling of human beings. Verse five describes their home as a place where plants of the field, or field crops for humans to eat, and herbs of the field, or pasturage for animals to eat, are to be grown. (That’s the meaning of these words in the Hebrew.) Furthermore, the words for “ground” and “dust” used throughout are actually the Hebrew concepts for *arable land* and *soil*. So all of this adds up to describe the mixed-economy small scale farming that was practiced at the time in central Palestine that was familiar to the Yahwist community. When things are in sync, in harmony, then we humans are connected with the arable land—we sustain it, and are sustained by it.

Next, there is in this passage a more humble view of where humans come from than in Genesis 1. There, we’re the most developed form of creation, brought into being by a verbal command. Here, we’re crafted out of mud. The author likes word-plays in this story—from the male came the female—from the *ish* came the *ishshah* (is the way it sounds in Hebrew). And similarly for humans and arable land: Yahweh formed the *adam*—the human—from the soil of the *adamah*—the arable land. A good way to represent this in English would be to use the word “humus” for soil—“from the humus came the human.” Near the end of the Eden story, 3:19, this is emphasized again “For you are soil, and to soil you will return.” (It’s not “dust”—that’s not what I plant my broccoli in! It’s arable land—soil.) So when we remain in healthy relationship with our soil, we remain true to what we are, to our deepest selves.

Also, I just have to point out Eve’s role, here. Eve is the culminating point of creation, and she tends to have a more active role in the story than Adam. The *adam*, at the beginning as the representative human, gives names to everything. The *adam* likes to talk a lot and control things—but it doesn’t work out too well—life remains lonely. Eve, on the other hand (who, by the way, was never commanded directly by God not to eat the fruit), seems to be the more evolved of the two. She is the one who first becomes aware that the tree is good for food (she’s entrepreneurial!), is a delight to the eyes (she has a sense of aesthetics!), and is to be desired to make one wise (she’s the philosopher!). And she, as well as Adam, are both equal recipients of the spiritual lesson here that the natural world, despite our best intentions, places limits on what we can know about it and do with it.

What can this tell us about the nature of God and about our relationship to nature? It’s very instructive to pay attention to how the image of God is handled in these stories. It might seem sort of shocking to you for me to point out that the “Yahwist” stories usually don’t picture Yahweh as *up in the sky*. In the Garden story, Yahweh walks in the Garden and enjoys the evening breeze. And Yahweh gets down right into the soil in order to form the *adam*—there’s no other way to create humans than to get your hands dirty!

Furthermore, in the next story, after Cain kills his brother and Yahweh confronts him, Cain cries out, “My punishment is greater than I can bear! You have driven me from the face of the *adamah*; I shall be hidden from your face.” The alienation of these ancestors from their arable land—from their farming home—is understood as at one and the same time an alienation from the presence of God. The soil itself is not God, but according to the original Hebrew idiom that is used, here, soil can function as a reminder of the face of God. Isn’t that amazing? When you’re looking at soil, it’s like you’re looking at God’s face! Researchers tell us that it takes 100 years for an inch of soil to fully form, and that soil contains all the material building blocks necessary to create animal life. So soil is an extremely valuable part of creation for us. Soil

stands as a vital connection to that source of creativity with which we must be in healthy relationship if we as living organisms are to survive on planet earth.

Yahweh in the Eden story is the model of an immanent God, as opposed to the priestly, transcendent picturing of God in the first chapter. This Yahweh is intimately connected with and cares about the earth and life processes. This Yahweh points us to a healthy, life-giving connectedness to the soil. And Yahweh is also key for helping us understand what is happening when we abuse and destroy the ecosystems that keep us alive. We've run amok with our images of God—they're often way too separate, too dualistic, too disconnected from the environment, too anthropocentric. When in this ancient story Yahweh comes to us symbolically in the image of the soil, we realize that when we erode, pave over, trash, poison, and heat up our soil, as we have been doing very efficiently over the past 150 years, we have, as it were, done it to Yahweh.

You know, I've been spreading some bags of dark compost on my raised garden beds over the past several weeks. I always think, "Oh, this is dirt—I'm getting my hands all dirty and I'll have to wash them off." We use these words "dirt" and "dirty" as if working with soil is something to be ashamed of. But if we were more Yahweh-like, we might say, "This is great stuff. The source of life. The presence of God in my garden—to help it grow! Connecting to the face of this soil helps me connect to what I am, and to connect to the very face of God."

And you know, we could put this into practice as a congregation. We just had some new City of Minneapolis waste bins delivered to the church for our congregation to use. One of the bins is for organics, and to use it properly we're going to need to, in this building, start separating out biodegradable food and food-related paper products from regular trash when we have meals here. Maybe that is one small way we can remind ourselves that (to use 21st century language) "We are made out of compost, and to compost we will return." I'm not actually sure how to think of an organics waste bin as somehow representative of the face of God in our midst, but maybe you can think of a way! Let's think creatively together about how we can, as 21st century Anabaptist-Mennonites, recover a sound creation-centered ethic, and focus our most creative, imaginative energies on, at long last, actually practicing nonviolence towards the earth itself, starting right here on our own land and in our own community.

Prayer: Yahweh, Creator God, in the face of global warming and the ecological crisis that we face, show us anew how as in the Eden story there are very real natural limits, sometimes severe limits, on our temptations to label, categorize, organize, control, exploit, and dominate. And yet, help us to see how our images of that which is at the center, at the heart of things, can be so very liberating and empowering in helping us to reconnect with who we really are and in helping us to heal our ecosystem from the injuries we have inflicted upon it. And, with your help Yahweh, God of the soil, may we discover anew the grace of your salvation in Jesus Christ, for the whole earth, and for every single creature on the face of it. Amen.