

## “Gardeners for the Master”

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Based upon Genesis 2:4b-22; Rev. 21:1; 22:1-5

When God called me to go into the ministry, one of the things I did before deciding to accept the call, was to visit the Holy Land. I wanted to see if I could feel God while I was far away from the comforts of my home church, and to see if walking where Jesus had walked would confirm or diminish my sense of call. So for twelve days I joined a bus load of other church goers on a tour designed to show us the high points of the Holy Land. We went to famous biblical cities like Jericho, Bethlehem, and Jerusalem. We shared Communion on a boat in the middle of the Sea of Galilee and processed from the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem following the route Jesus most likely took the first Palm Sunday. We prayed at the Temple Mount and walked on ancient stone steps which Jesus must have climbed, and all the while we did these things, I journeyed with my spiritual antennae out trying to feel the tingle of God’s presence or the direction of the Spirit. In the end, I was not disappointed, but I was surprised, because I did not find God in any of the famous churches we visited or feel the Spirit of Jesus walking with me on the ancient stairs. In the end, I felt God most in three places: the Mount of the Beatitudes in Galilee **[slide]**, and in Gethsemane **[slide]**, and in a place known as the Garden Tomb **[slide]**.

As you probably have recognized from the slides, I was outside at all three of these sites in gardens. In Galilee, the garden at the top of the hill where Jesus may have shared his Sermon on the Mount is lush with bougainvillea and other blooming plants. In Gethsemane, the olive grove which marks where Jesus prayed before his crucifixion contains trees that look ancient and are surrounded by a graveyard. The trees’ twisted branches and haunting grey-green appearance made me feel that as Jesus prayed there, it must have felt almost as though creation itself was grieving with him. At the Garden Tomb, I could almost imagine Mary confusing the risen Christ with the gardener because the tomb was located in the middle of a beautiful garden. Historically-speaking, the site is not the most likely place where Jesus was crucified and buried. The more likely sight is now marked by the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. But as you can see from these slides **[slides]**, there is little there now which conveys either the starkness of Golgotha or the beauty of the garden. Christians from multiple denominations have desired to venerate the Lord at these sites for so long that every square inch of the church is encrusted with lanterns, incense burners, icons, and silver. The Garden Tomb, in contrast, matches the description in the Bible more closely of what the site would have looked like in Jesus’ day. There is a cliff face that looks like a skull and a tomb in a garden which seems to radiate new life.

Now it may be that I found God most palpable in these outdoor locations because I am a plant and nature lover. People have been experiencing God in nature for millennia. But I like to think that I also found God there because that is where God is most at home too—out in the beauty of the creation God made. That is where we find God at key moments in the Bible after all. We find God in gardens. The story of God’s relationship with humanity first begins in *Genesis* in the

Garden of Eden [slide] and ends in *The Book of Revelation* in another garden; in between, are the two other gardens that spoke to me on my trip: the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed about his imminent death as the disciples slept, and the garden where Jesus' body was entombed. Last week on Easter we celebrated that the tomb was empty because the risen Christ was on the loose, making the garden burst with new life in more ways than one. These stories tell us something important about God and God's Creation. They tell us that God is as connected with the natural world as God is with humanity; and God speaks to us through that world; or as Thomas Aquinas put it: "Revelation comes in two volumes: Nature and the Bible."

Given the role that gardens play in God's story, it isn't surprising that Paul would choose to explain the good news of the Resurrection by using the metaphor of a "the new creation." Christ, the "Second Adam," was resurrected in a garden, symbolically cancelling out the death which had poisoned the first one ever since Adam and Eve ate the fruit they were not supposed to eat. John then added to Paul's metaphor in *Revelation*, by envisioning that in the end of time, the new creation Christ began would be complete with a new Eden on earth. This restored paradise would include rivers of living water to irrigate the land and have trees that have healing in their leaves. It's a beautiful image, and one that makes sense because God and gardens go together; they always have.

But gardens and people.... well, they do not always go together, at least not when the garden in question is God's whole Creation. We haven't been good at taking care of God's Creation and it shows. Regardless of who or what you believe is to blame for it, climate change is real and a threat to us all. This week's speaker at the Forum, Lori Gross, who works in Antarctica, has been able to see the changes herself down there and joins the scientists who work there in being concerned about how rapidly huge ice shelves are melting. Bees, which we all need in order to have both gardens and food, are now on the endangered species list. Trees, which the globe needs for clean air, are being chopped down at terrifying rates, while our oceans die from too much pollution and too many plastic bags. Even the Great Barrier Reef which has been around for ages is dying. The earth is crying out in alarming ways, but so far we are neither listening nor responding enough. We are still so focused on short term profit and personal convenience, so tribal in the way we think of using and preserving natural resources, that we are unwilling to acknowledge the devastating long term consequences of our actions, and the urgent need to change our ways now. The new administration of our nation shows no inclination to change this pattern; if anything, it shows a desire to permit more destruction.

So why is this our problem as Christians, and not just a political problem? That's a fair question because, I am sorry to say, Christians have not always recognized that it is our problem. Over the centuries, some branches of Christianity have allied themselves with destructive forces, citing *Genesis* chapter one, which says that God gave "dominion" over the earth to human beings and told them to "subdue" it, or *Revelation* chapter 22, which says that in the end of time, God will provide a "new earth." But our Reformed tradition has consistently understood our responsibility for the Earth quite differently. We have always understood Creation care as a fundamentally theological matter.

This is partly because we understand *Genesis* and *Revelation* differently. For example, the phrase “to have dominion over” in *Genesis* chapter one, we believe would be better translated “have responsibility for,” not just because that is closer to the Hebrew’s meaning, but also because that translation would then be more consistent with the other Creation story provided in Chapter Two, which comes from a slightly different tradition. The first story emphasizes the sovereign power of God, the fact that human beings were made “in the image of God,” and the fact that men and women were made equal at the same time. In other words, it focuses primarily on the relationship between God and the first human beings. But the second story emphasizes the relationship between Adam and the rest of Creation. You see, in the second Creation story, the order of creation and the charge Adam is given with regards to it are different. In the first story, God makes the whole of creation in five days; then on the sixth day, God makes human beings. In the second story, God makes the earth and the heavens, but before there is anything alive on earth, before there are even plants, God makes Adam from the dust. Then the second thing God does is make a garden for Adam, which is lush because it is fed by four rivers, and is filled with good vegetarian food for Adam. God gives life to his dust creature and then God gives him a job. “‘Till and keep’ the garden,” God says.

For years people assumed that this must mean God made human beings to be farmers. But recently Patrician Tull, who was actually a guest speaker this week at one of our sister churches in Baltimore Presbytery for Earth Day, noted that the word we translate “till” is not translated that way in any other biblical context. In every other context that word is translated “serve” as in “servants serve their master” or “we serve the Lord our God” or “the younger should serve the elder.” The second word “keep” is most often used in the context of keeping God’s covenant or keeping the Sabbath; therefore Tull argues the phrase should be translated “serve and preserve.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, Adam wasn’t charged with using the earth for his own purposes or hoarding its resources. He was charged with being the caretaker of God’s garden.

After Adam gets lonely doing this, God then makes animals and birds and whales and other creatures to keep him company. Adam names them, but he does not to kill them. Then when he is still lonely, notwithstanding all the furry friends he has named, God makes Adam a partner in Eve. But all the while God is adding more and more to Creation, God never changes the charge to Adam. Creation is company for the lonely man Adam, but it is also his responsibility. “Serve and preserve what I have made,” God says. “Take comfort from creation, but care for it too.”

We have failed to fulfill this calling. This is not only shameful, it is also ironic because as priest and physicist, John Polkinghorne, has observed, human beings “tend to think that if we had been in charge of creation, we would have done better. We would have kept the flowers and the sunsets and got rid of diseases and disasters.”<sup>2</sup> But despite all that bravado, we can’t even take care of the one we have. Our choices have multiplied the numbers of diseases and disasters. Our

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<sup>1</sup> See Barnes, Rebecca, “*Eco-justice: A Christian Vocation*” in HORIZONS: ECO-JUSTICE TENDING THE GIFT OF CREATION, Nov. /Dec. 2015, 6; see also Tull, Patricia, *Inhabiting Eden* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 26.

<sup>2</sup> Polkinghorne, John, “*A Scientist Looks at Creation*” in THE LIVING PULPIT, April-June 2000, 7.

choices have created conditions which threaten our ability to enjoy both the flowers and the beautiful sunsets. This must stop.

Our denomination has long championed the importance of Creation care. We have affirmed policies and have taken public stances when we have felt our nation is heading in the wrong direction. The stances are not born of partisan politics; they are grounded in the Bible and Reformed theology. So far this year, the Office of Public Witness in Washington, D.C., has responded directly to what it believes are environmental public policy changes by the current administration which will further endanger humanity and the earth. For example, in response to changes in our nation's policies regarding climate change and coal mining, the office published a response on March 30<sup>th</sup>. Note that the response affirms that Creation care is a human justice issue as well as an eco-justice issue:

Our concern as Presbyterians lies not only in our mandate to protect God's creation, but in the knowledge that the ruins wrought by climate change will fall disproportionately on the backs of the poor, indigenous, and citizens of the Global South... As people of faith who believe in a God of creation who commands good and proper stewardship of this gift, we must speak with one voice that this world is worth protecting. We affirm that climate change is real and impacted by the actions of human beings. We can protect the environment and affirm the dignity of work as we come together to produce solutions which enhance all aspects of created life. But environmental justice must be a priority or we will not have a future to work towards.....

The challenge we face is daunting. The temptation to despair is real. Only God can give us the power to change. Our Reformed tradition reminds us that it is God who created the earth and saw that it was good. God who sustains the earth and seeks to hold its processes together, God who judges sin and greed, and God who reveals in Jesus Christ that love and justice are the essence of God's power. God is the inexhaustible source of energy for personal, social, and ecological transformation. Although we are complicit in the evils we face, we can repent of our own sinful misuse and abuse of the Earth as we confess our sins. As recipients of God's endless mercy, this redemptive energy frees and empowers us to be good stewards of God's creation.<sup>3</sup>

Do you know what this last line is talking about? It's talking about the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ, the very same grace we celebrated last week is our source of hope and transformation. When Jesus rose from the dead he began a new creation by breaking the rules of the old one. We can follow his example by working to serve and preserve the new creation, by breaking the patterns of bad behavior which poisoned the old one. We cannot assume any government will do this for us. We must lead the charge ourselves because both our faith and our

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<sup>3</sup> *The Executive Order on Climate Threatens God's Creation*, Official Blog of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of Public Witness, Mar. 30, 2017, retrieved Apr. 19, 2017 from <http://officeofpublicwitness.blogspot.com/2017/03/the-executive-order-on-climate-threatens-god's-creation>.

future depend upon it.

They say in the Holy Land that the land is like a fifth gospel. It has the power to proclaim the good news; it also proclaims the reality of human sinfulness. In my experience, the gardens of the Holy Land do both of these things. *John* says that in the end of time, the garden of God's new creation will proclaim the transforming grace and healing love of our Lord, Jesus Christ only. John's vision of this new earth is not a new planet for us all, however; it is this earth, made new by God's grace. The Resurrection began the process of making this dream come true. But we have a long way to go. As followers of the risen Christ, therefore, let us do the work for which we were made. Let us serve and preserve our Master's garden, so that we and all of God's creatures may one day dwell in peace with him there. Amen