

The Second Sunday of Creation: Land Sunday

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Land Sunday – Gen 3 14-19 & 4 8-16, Ps 139 7-12, Rom 5 12-17, Mt 12 38-40

My Mum has very, very green thumbs. When we were small, she transformed our garden from a sandy waste into a lush jungle. And she didn't stop at our garden. When neighbours moved out anywhere up or down our street, before the next people arrived, she and a friend would duck in and plant things in those gardens too. So as I grew up, I watched our street slowly turn green. Mum's every spare moment was spent in the garden, shadowed by a Labrador, several bantams waiting for her to lift the next pot and reveal the slaters beneath, and Andrew, our bluetongue lizard, ready for Mum to hand over each juicy snail she found.

Once Mum fell seriously ill – a very bad reaction to a cholera shot. Nothing seemed to help, and it wasn't certain she'd survive. After days of anxiety, she whispered to Dad that if she could only get her hands back in the soil; she was sure it'd help her get better. Moments later, Dad was back with a bucketful of dirt. Her hands went straight into it, and almost immediately her recovery began. Soil bacteria have amazing healing properties – even for depressive illness.¹ We come from the soil, we living things. Soil and us, we have a symbiotic relationship.

Today, Land Sunday, we focus on that connection; particularly how we're looking after our relationship with the ground; looking after the health of the soils we depend on. Today's two episodes from the early chapters of Genesis address our relationship with the land. They're not very pleasant reading.

We came in at the moment where Adam and Eve were banished from the garden because they'd betrayed God's trust. Then we moved on to the story of a cold-blooded murder; Cain killed his brother Abel. These are early episodes in a series of catastrophes described in Gen 3–11 which Christian tradition knows as 'the fall'; terrible choices which lock humanity out of paradise and alienate us from each other and from God.

We normally focus on the way 'the fall' alienated humanity from God. But today is Land Sunday, so we're also reminded to look at the impact of 'the fall' both on Earth herself, and on our relationship with the soil. Significant when you think, only last week, we named soil our Mother; Earth, the Mother of all living things.

In the first episode we heard today – the expulsion from paradise – something odd happened. As well as suffering the consequences of our folly – one of which was the curse of patriarchy – God declared that the ground was cursed because of what we'd done. It's like that story of The Portrait of Dorian Grey. The effects of the shocking things a man did were only visible in his portrait – something outside him, which he hid from others. That's very like what we see in today's world. Here in Australia, where land is still being clear-felled, the soil soon degrades or disappears in dust storms. It's lost its living protection from erosion. But the perpetrators are nowhere in sight; we're off stage left doing the same thing somewhere else. It's clearly happening, but today yet another government is gutting the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act. But more on that another day.

The second episode we read in Genesis today saw Cain murder his brother Abel. Cain is earlier identified as a tiller of the land; a settled farmer growing crops. Abel is a keeper of sheep; a nomadic shepherd. I can't think of a time or a country where these two ways of life have not been in conflict, and nomads / subsistence farmers are always the

losers. Right now in the Amazon, the Arctic, Mongolia, Indonesia the Philippines, and PNG, they're still being evicted and murdered by people who replace their way of life with the settled agriculture our insatiable cities demand.

The American biblical scholar, Ched Myers, believes these stories in Genesis preserve the perspective of ancient indigenous peoples towards the 'curse' of aggressive, colonising civilisations.² Today's chapters were probably written by exiled Israelites trying to tell the story and the lesson of their abuse – in code, of course – first the extortion they endured from their own kings, and now from Babylon who had carried them off into slavery. These chapters describe the early days in 'the longest war in history, in which relentlessly expanding civilizations conquer and exploit the Earth and all who live symbiotically with her. It continues to our day.' Myers p. 90. And of course, it's happening here too; the insatiable demands of our so-called civilization continue systematically to ruin traditional ways of life.

So what's a faithful response? Our collect prayer reminded me of a poem by W.H. Auden; 'In memory of W.B. Yeats'. Auden wrote, Earth receive an honoured guest, William Yeats is laid to rest. Our prayer of the day says something like that about us. We are sojourners passing through Creation. May we be gracious guests and mindful stewards ... of your good world.

I confess I haven't lived my waking life thinking 'I'm a guest on Earth'; but I am. And when I do stop to think about it, it means that ideas I take for granted – like property ownership or citizenship – these ideas suddenly lose their solidity. They're not real things; just agreed figments of our communal imagination. No I'm a guest; a steward; not an owner. Guests and stewards have obligations. And as we were reminded last week our first vocation is as servants and protectors of what is God's.

I believe the faithful response that today's scriptures call from us is a change of perspective. A change of perspective can change things dramatically. The land provides us guests and stewards with our life. Our deluded notions of ownership and entitlement underpin the destructiveness of our 'advanced civilisation'. They're an affront to the hospitality of Earth, and to God who made us to be her servants and protectors. Let's turn from the curses; enmity, pain, endless toil and patriarchy.

This week, let's focus our prayers on a simple change in perspective; I'm a guest, a steward; not an owner. Let's remember the stories which tell how God is always calling us back from the dangers of jealousy and arrogance. Let's go home today, stick our fingers in some soil, and remember that it's God's gift of life. Amen.

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<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0306452207001510>

2 In N.C. Habel, D. Rhoads, & H.P. Santmire (Eds.), *The Season of Creation: A Preaching Commentary* p.88