

Second Sunday in Creation: Land Sunday

READINGS

Genesis 3.14-19, 4.8-16

The Lord God said to the serpent,
'Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life.

¹⁵ I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.'

¹⁶To the woman he said,

'I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.'

¹⁷And to the man* he said,

'Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree

about which I commanded you, "You shall not eat of it", cursed is the ground because of you;

in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; ¹⁸

thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;

and you shall eat the plants of the field.

¹⁹ By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground,

for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.'

4.⁸ Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Let us go out to the field.*' And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. ⁹Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' He said, 'I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?' ¹⁰And the Lord said, 'What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! ¹¹And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. ¹²When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.' ¹³Cain said to the Lord, 'My punishment is greater than I can bear! ¹⁴Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me.'¹⁵Then the Lord said to him, 'Not so!* Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance.' And the Lord put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him. ¹⁶Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord, and settled in the land of Nod,* east of Eden.

Psalms 139.7-12

Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there;

if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

⁹ If I take the wings of the morning

and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,

and your right hand shall hold me fast.

¹¹ If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night',

¹² even the darkness is not dark to you;

the night is as bright as the day,

for darkness is as light to you.

Matthew 12.38-40

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him,

'Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.'³⁹But he

answered them, 'An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign

of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰For just as Jonah was for three

days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so

for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth.

Romans 5.12-17

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned—¹³sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. ¹⁴Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.

¹⁵But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. ¹⁶And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgement following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. ¹⁷If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

BIBLE STUDY



EARTH BEARS THE CURSE

Beginning

The theme of this study is the way that Earth experiences the curses of destruction. As creatures of Earth, whatever happens to Earth also happens to us. This study helps us become more conscious of how and why Earth is suffering these experiences.

Begin by sharing the experience of when you visited a place on Earth where you felt the pain of desolation.

Perhaps it was the aftermath of a nuclear fallout or a polluted river! Perhaps it was a fertile field reduced to salt! Perhaps it was disappearance of frogs from your garden. Share your experience. Did it feel as if a curse had fallen on that place?

Background

We have all heard the story of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. They both ate from the tree of knowledge. What do you think eating from that tree meant?

The tree is specifically called the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The Hebrew expression ‘good and evil’ seems to mean something like ‘everything’. It does not refer to the capacity to discern between right and wrong. To ‘know good and evil’ about something means to know everything about that subject.

This meaning seems to be confirmed when the snake promises that if Adam and Eve eat from this tree their eyes will be opened and they will be like God, knowing everything. The temptation is to equal God in wisdom

and knowledge and so have the power that comes with that knowledge.

The sin was not the desire for knowledge, but the act of disobeying God and lusting after total knowledge, the dream of total control and domination. By eating from the tree our first parents did learn many things about reality, but they did not gain total power over their world. Instead something else happened.

Exploring the Text

Read Genesis 3 verses 14-16

God threatened that if anyone ate from the tree of knowledge he or she would surely die. The Hebrew expression translated ‘surely die’ often means ‘put to death.’ There was a death sentence on anyone who ate from that tree.

Adam and Eve, however, are not put to death. Instead, their sin moves God to make a series of pronouncements that transform part of creation. The first pronouncement is a dual curse on the snake: ‘cursed are you among all animals’ and ‘I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers’.

Prior to this curse, all the animals in Earth’s family were apparently in harmony. Now there is conflict between snakes and the progeny of the woman, human beings. The role played by the snake in tempting humans to grab power leads to its curse.

The woman for her part is not explicitly cursed, but is destined to experience the equivalent: pain in childbirth and subservience to her husband.

Discuss: Do you think these texts simply reflect the worldview of the ancient writer about snakes and the role of women or something more? Should we accept these expressions of reality as inevitable or be working to overcome them and return to the harmony of Eden or to anticipate a different future?

Read Genesis 3 verses 17-18

The third pronouncement of God begins by focusing on the sin of the first man. He too has eaten from the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge. As a result, we might expect that he, like the snake, would also be cursed. Instead, something surprising happens.

The ground of Earth is cursed—not the man!

This seems extraordinary. The ground has done nothing to deserve this action; land is not the culprit but the innocent victim. From the perspective of Earth this seems unjust.

Admittedly, the curse on Earth has repercussions for the man, but Earth suffers innocently. The man will find the task of working with the ground more arduous, ‘thorns and thistles will appear and humans will eat from the ‘plants of the field’ rather than fruit from the trees of the garden. The land, however, suffers because of what humans have done. Earth bears the curse.

Discuss: Earth bears the curse for human beings. Does this suggest that Earth is like a caring parent who bears this burden out of love for her children? Does that still happen today? Share your experiences.

Conscious of the Crisis

There are numerous reports of how parts of Earth have been ‘cursed’ by human sins against creation. Nuclear pollution of rivers in Siberia! Vast holes in the ozone layer!

In an article entitled ‘Restoring Madagascar’, Virginia Morell reported how rapid forest clearance, irresponsible land clearance and greedy mining techniques has led to vast amounts of topsoil being lost every year. Morell reports that ‘from space astronauts could see Madagascar’s red earth bleeding into the sea’ (*National Geographic*, Feb. 1999, p.63)

Discuss: We could argue that destroying forests is a continuation of the primal sin of our parents. Like them, we have used our human knowledge to exploit rather than serve. Is Earth bleeding because of a curse, like the curse provoked by Adam?



Exploring the Text

Read Genesis 3 verse 19

The close of God’s pronouncement emphasises that human beings are mortal and will return to the dust from which they came. At first this might seem like a negative picture. A closer consideration of the image suggests just the opposite.

After his disasters Job responded with the words,

Naked I came from my mother’s womb
And naked I shall return there. (Job 1.21)

By ‘there’ Job means Earth as his mother, not his human mother. In chapter three he dreams about being in Earth, returning ‘there’ to a home of peace and rest. (3.17-19)

A similar image is reflected here. After all the toil and turmoil of life, Earth receives the human being back into her body. The ground that gave birth to the human being receives the human again, the dust welcomes the dust once more. Death is portrayed as coming home to Earth.

Discuss: Is this image still meaningful for us today? Does returning to Earth in death mean the same as returning to Christ who also fills Earth with his risen presence?

Read Genesis 3 verses 22-24

God expels Adam and Eve from the garden to prevent an ongoing conflict. The first couple are taken from a forest habitat and placed in an open field habitat. Breaking the rules of life in the forest meant migration to an agricultural domain.

Significantly, however, the role of human beings on Earth remains the same. In Genesis 2.15, discussed in the Bible study for Forest Sunday, the man was commissioned to ‘serve and preserve’ the forest. Now this human being is told that his task remains to ‘till/serve the ground’, that is, the land that produces plants for food.

Human beings are designated by God to serve the ground or womb from which they came. Perhaps we could say they are expected to care for their ‘mother’. This stands in opposition to the assumed power over creation envisaged by eating from the tree of knowledge.

Read Genesis 4 verses 8-14

Eve gives birth to Cain who is expected to follow the commission and ‘till/serve’ the ground. After his offering is rejected by God, he invites his brother Abel out into the field, the place he is supposed to tend and grow food. By murdering his brother, he violates this place, the very ground from which humans are taken.

The intimate relationship between the ground and human beings is reflected in the verses that follow (4.10-12). The ground now becomes the agency that mediates the cry for justice. Abel’s blood cries out ‘from the ground’, which ‘opened its mouth to receive that blood’. Earth, like a sympathetic parent, embraces the blood of her child.

Cain, however, has to face the curse. This time it is Cain who gets the cursed. Cain protests in the striking words:

Today you have driven me from the face of the ground and I am driven from your face. (4.14)

Significantly, Cain recognises that to be driven from the face of the ground, the sources of his origin and livelihood, means also to be hidden from the face of God. The two belong together. Here God is not in some distant heaven, but with humans as they care for Earth. It is this plea that leads God to provide a mark to protect Cain wherever he wanders.

Discuss: Do you think Earth continues to mediate cries for justice because of what humans have done on Earth and to Earth? What cries for justice might we hear?

Read Ps. 139.7-12

Cain complains that he is forced to flee from the presence of God by leaving the face of the ground. The Psalmist cries in response:

Where can I go from your spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence? (Ps. 139.7)

The Spirit of God that gives life to all creation fills all of creation. So no matter where the Psalmist may think of fleeing, God's presence is there. God fills the sky and the sea, the land and the distant dawn. God's light is present in the deepest dark.

And as we noted in the study for Forest Sunday, this is the Spirit that moved deep in the womb of Earth to create the psalmist as an embryo (Ps 139. 13-15).

Discuss: Does the Psalmist's experience of God's spirit in all of creation, including Earth, suggest that we should also try to experience God's presence in the creation around us? Share your experiences of God's presence in creation.

Connecting with Christ

The first Christ connection is evident in the reading from Romans 5.12-17 where Paul argues that the sin of the first man brings death. All humanity participates in this death because we all sin. Christ, however, brings the free gift of life to overcome death, the power that alienates us from God. All humanity participates in this life through faith in Christ. The question we ask here is whether the curse on creation in Genesis 3 is included in the death that Christ overcomes. (Compare Gal. 3.1014) Does Christ free creation from the curse?

The passion narrative of Christ is also associated with the very ground of Earth. Jesus announces that the Son of

Man will reside for three days and three nights in 'the heart of the earth' (Matthew 12.38-40). That journey deep into Earth will culminate in his resurrection. In a sense, Jesus return home to Earth is like a return to his mother (as in Gen. 3.19), to be born again from Earth in the resurrection?

Discuss: Clearly Earth bears the curse that our first parents provoked. With that curse came death before God. Does Christ ultimately bear the curse that Earth has carried for us for so long? Does that mean that Earth—including the land, the soil and the ground—are given new life through Christ?



Closing with Praise

Participants may wish to close by singing three verses of the following song using the melody of 'Morning Has Broken'.

Hear This Earth Mourning

*Hear this Earth mourning deep in pollution,
Hear this Earth mourning, death in her lungs:
"How I keep longing for that first morning,
When all creation broke forth in songs".*

*Hear the trees falling deep in the forest, Hear
the trees calling, tortured by chain: Where
are the song birds, thousands of voices,
Rising in one symphonic refrain".*

*Hear the blood crying, crying for justice;
Hear the blood crying, deep in the ground:
"Massacres, murders, species forgotten!
Where is the healing? Where is it found"?"*

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Prayer

Christ, you who have returned from the depths of Earth and you know the pain of the curse on the cross, make us sensitive to the curses on creation and fill us with your risen power to become your partners in healing creation. Amen