

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
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Seasons of Creation #2: Land
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If we as an American nation were to create a written, non-partisan snapshot of the life of our country today and hand it to someone who, let's imagine, doesn't know our history, or if we were to place this honest account of who we are today into a time capsule, to be opened hundreds of years in the future, and ask that reader to create our backstory, the influences, the choices, the consequences that brought us to where we are today – that would be similar to the process of how the story of the Garden of Eden was written. The stories of the creation and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, which we have labelled in recent history as “the fall”, can be seen as an ancient warning tale. This story was produced by Israelite sages, working with and editing older ancient and Near Eastern sources, most likely during the exilic period, which means the time the Israelites were held in captivity by the Assyrians in the city of Babylon. In the aftermath of their failed monarchy, they were attempting to understand their historic experiences of royal exploitation, civil war, erosion of the wilderness traditions, and their eventual conquest and dispossession. They had entered into a stage of fruitful self-reflection on the origin of human oppression and violence that had brought their people – and all other tribal people—nearly to extinction. Something had gone fundamentally wrong with the human journey, of which Israel's national trauma was but a symptom.

The Israelites, no longer a united nation, found themselves separated from their homeland, exiled from what they perceived to have been their perfect state, a living situation within and around the temple of Jerusalem, so they needed to talk about why that exile had happened. They sensed a separation from God, since they experienced the fullness of God's presence in the temple, which was now 900 miles from them, and they needed to reflect upon what went wrong with their relationship with God. Was God angry at them? Was it something they did to bring God's wrath upon them? Or was this exile somehow due to their forgetting their tribal ways, of failing to continue to live in concert and partnership with the land, by building a civilization which brought people away from the land, which upset the natural balance between humankind and the creation? They wanted to create a backstory that would explain their sense of disconnection from their homeland and from God, that would explain the systems of domination rampant in their world, and to explain the killing on both sides.

Jonah, who is referred to in our gospel, faces a similar situation in Ninevah, which is also a city of the Assyrians, which was to Jonah a symbol of overwhelming and ruthless imperial power, a people who took pride in their power and their reputation of their capital city being known as a “city of blood.”

The story of the Garden of Eden is the attempt by the Israelites to explain what influences, decisions, and consequences brought them to the current state of exile, with the intention of understanding what change was required of them to live again in right relationship with each other, with God, and with all of creation.

Eve picked the apple from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. We have often been taught to interpret this act as disobedience to God, for God had forbidden Adam to eat this fruit, and although, according to the story line, Eve was not yet created when this edict was given, we assume Eve somehow knew this intuitively or that Adam had shared this with her. The fact remains that Eve chose to have knowledge, to have her eyes opened to an increased sense of awareness of the world around her. She chose to move out of the safe and idyllic container made for her by God, where there was no work, but also no challenge, no real engagement, no real purpose, where life would have been fine, pleasant, but perhaps a little boring. Instead she decided to “go for the ring on the carousel”, to live into the gusto of what life could be, to encounter the good and the bad, the joy and the pain, the place of birth and death, the place of right and wrong decisions, all whose consequences carry forward.

This life she chose sounds a lot like the life Jesus challenges us to live. Can you hear his voice saying to you, “Stay awake! Be alert! Be ready for the Kingdom of God, which is near, around and within you. Fully engage the world and bring my kingdom about. It is not going to be easy, but it will be good.” Although Jesus reminds us of the need for solitude, Jesus rarely implies we should be passive about life, but rather implores us to fully engage in it. We know from our own experiences that when we do, when our eyes are opened, this new awareness brings us into a new state of vulnerability, (that’s the hard part that comes with opening our eyes to the knowledge of good and evil) which Adam and Eve understood in our creation story, and brings us also the opportunity to accept responsibilities for our mistakes along the way and change.

Richard Rohr, a contemporary theologian, speaks of this “alive” place that Eve found herself in upon eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and which we too can find ourselves in, as being alive in the movement of the Spirit. He says, “When the Spirit is alive in people, they wake up from their mechanical thinking and enter the realm of co-creative power. As in Ezekiel’s vision, the water flows from ankles to knees to waist to neck as the New Earth is hydrated. Like Pinocchio, we move from wooden to real.”

Because of the choice that Eve made, and the choices that Israel made, life had perhaps become fuller, but also definitely harder. For the knowledge to see good and evil meant constantly struggling with people who would have different points of view regarding what constituted each polarity. There would be division amongst the people, which would lead to some wanting to influence or control others to their point of view. One can imagine Israel, with their codification of God’s laws into the 10 Commandments, as a way to set in stone this delineation of what is good, so their children’s children will learn, and ultimately their world can be restored to the place of original contentment and containment by God or of God.

Jonah too attempted to codify or put into a container the people worthy of God’s mercy, love, and compassion, deciding for himself that the Ninevites would not be in that box. He didn’t want God to save these most unlikely people, for they were evil, by all accounts of the world’s standards. Jonah, like so many of us, didn’t have the self-reflective stance of the Israelites when

writing their backstory, to include the possibility that he too may have erred, he too may be in need of God's love, mercy, and compassion, and if it's there for him, it's there for everyone.

Exile features heavily in our stories today, whether it is within Jonah, the interior exile he lived in without acknowledging his own need for God's mercy, love, and compassion, or with the people of the nation of Israel who wrote the story of the Garden of Eden. We have Adam and Eve exiled from the Garden, Jonah exiled into a foreign land, Jesus predicting his exile into the darkness of the tomb, separated from human life. These places can feel dark and lonely and we can be aware of our separation from that which gives us life.

Today we celebrate our second Season of Creation, the Land. Although we can think of the abundance of the land, we can also be reminded of our exile from the right relationship with the Land, which can be traced to the time when we began to take more from the land than we needed or was right to take.

Wendell Barry is quoted as saying, "we all live by robbing nature, but our standing of living demands that the robbery shall continue". Our excessiveness of need has shifted that relationship God set up for us from caretaker of Creation to owner or exploiter, when we began to ask our earth to over-produce crops which would be shipped to the other side of the world for a self-generated appetite for food not locally produced, when we strip the animals of their natural habitat when we deplete the rainforests, when we extract and deplete the fossil fuels, when factory farming releases vast and dangerous quantities of carbon dioxide and methane into our atmosphere, when our intensive agriculture produces fragmented and inhospitable environments for wild animal and plant species, we realize something has gone terribly wrong.

Just like the Israelites, we realize we are in a place of exile from what is right. When we enter into the awareness of this alienation, when we speak with facts around the change in our climate, we can be propelled into the next season of creation, our next season of spirituality: wilderness. Although that sounds like something to avoid, it's actually a time when we acknowledge our yearning to restore our world to wholeness, when we engage in gathering facts and resources to know how to make a better and more equitable balance between the needs of humankind and the needs of the created world. When trying to move a global community into a place of knowledge of the good and evil we have done, or may continue to do, into a global community which yearns for the good, we can understand why people are so divided about the reality and the need for change. Change happens at different rates for each of us. It's a big job to get us all into exile and beyond. However, Adam and Eve were two people who each ate the apple, each gained the knowledge of good and evil. Maybe there's hope embedded in that story that tells us that there will be a time when all people will be on the same page about righting our relationship with God's creation.

This place of exile can be uncomfortable, which could be why Al Gore named his report on global warming as "An Inconvenient Truth". We often want to avoid going into this place, yet I believe it is God's mercy, love, and compassion that opens our eyes, that propels us into exile, into this place of noticing, and sitting in the darkness of self-reflective behavior for a bit, not

just blaming others, as Jonah did, but like the Israelites, of feeling the alienation between what we are doing and the job God gave us to do, care for the earth and for all the living creatures set under our care.

As we find ourselves in exile, as a people of God, or in our individual souls, we are invited to look at what container we have placed ourselves in and ask ourselves the questions: “Do we stay there because although it’s a bit dark, and we see only dimly, that it feels safe or comfortable or without challenge?” For often in our containers, the light is low, and we may not be able to see the false parts we have become, the inaccurate assumptions of others we carry forward, the wrongs to others and to our land we have done, and we chose to settle for this life, not fully lived. It’s not a bad way to live; it’s easier, in fact; but when I’ve lived in that place, I’ve always known there’s something richer within it or beyond it, that will take work to get to.

Because Jesus stayed in the tomb, contained with the earth, with the massive round stone rolled across its entrance, Jesus sanctified, made holy, saturated with the presence of God, the darkened container he was put in, and therefore sanctified all the darkened containers we put ourselves into. But the point of the story of Jesus is that he didn’t stay there. And his resurrection invites and implores us not to stay there either.

God’s mercy, love, and compassion draw us into these places of alienation and disconnect. We resist going there often, sometimes by saying, “We’ve always done it that way” as a reason not to move into that place of uncertainty, where the old begins to fade away before we can see the new. Or sometimes we resist the draw into exile because it’s easier to fortify the sides of our containers with bolstered arguments or fiery threats.

But the pattern of faithful living, that paschal mystery we often speak of, moves us into a place of exile, of self-reflection, of noticing the places of disconnect between what God has asked of us and what we are doing, to the land, or in our lives, or in our relationship with God, for they are all connected, of acknowledging what we have done or left undone that has caused harm. But then the Spirit turns us again toward God, when God’s mercy, love, and compassion can strip from us all that we have falsely created, to return us to what God has created within and around us.

If we listen closely enough, in these times of exile, which our own lives may be in now, or our country may be in right now, we can hear God’s voice saying, “Come and see, I am bringing you to a new way of experiencing me. Come and see.”

Amen.