

People often conflate the two creation stories in Genesis, but they come from different times and they do not harmonize with each other. They are certainly *not* accounts of the origin of the universe, as if ancient Near Eastern narrators knew more about science than modern physicists. Today's story, the garden of Eden story, is actually older than the seven-day creation story in which God creates by speaking. That one comes about during the Exile, when the rabbis are trying to subvert the common Mesopotamian creation story to show that the Jews' God is actually in charge of everything. This one comes from the time of David, when Israel was an established and sovereign nation. There's no competing ideology to invalidate, as in the seven-day story. Rather, this story seeks to situate humanity in a web of relationships to the rest of creation, to one another, and to God. I hear it, this time around, as sort of a brisk, no-nonsense charge to the Israelites to be smart about being so smart.

This story begins with nothing but dry soil—no ocean, no rain, no streams—which God takes and forms into an *adam*, an “earth creature,” ungendered but filled with divine breath. (By the way, this is an excellent argument for non-binary-ness being a condition created by God, if you ever need one.) Then God makes the garden, ensures regular irrigation by creating four rivers, and puts the man into the garden to till it and keep it. It sounds like God wanted a garden, and thought of the *adam* as part of the maintenance protocol. Don't bother planting a garden if you're not going to put up a deer-resistance fence; don't bother planting a garden if you're not going to arrange for weeding, watering and pruning. Here, I'll make an *adam* to keep the garden.

BUT here's one sign that God expected more from the *adam* than just a life of gardening: God tells them that there's a tree in the garden whose fruit they cannot eat, the tree

of the knowledge of good and evil. Why would you put a tree like that in the garden, and why would you draw the *adam's* attention to it? It's as if God were *looking* for trouble.

Then there's the tender and humorous interlude during which God tries to come up with a helper for the *adam*, making animal after animal and letting them name each one as it comes up. I find it tender because God is clearly interested not in just another gardener, but in a close friend for the *adam*. You start to see God's solicitousness for their well-being and happiness. It's funny because God's improvising sort of ineptly. God makes a wallaby, runs it by the *adam* hopefully, and the *adam* says, "It looks like it should be called "wallaby," but I don't think it's a real friend." God tries a dung beetle, a whale, gets super-close with a dog, but can't seem to create just the right friend. And actually "friend" isn't all we're after here; God is trying for an *ezer*. *Ezer* means helper, and not like an assistant, but like someone who helps you the way a firefighter helps you when your house is burning, or the way God helps you when you're assailed by enemies. God wants the *adam* to have a life partner, a co-worker.

So as we all know, God eventually puts the *adam* to sleep and makes a helper from their very body, which, by the way, makes two human beings now, and to provide for the propagation of the species, God gives each of them gender and sex. This part of the story certainly came out of heteronormative expectations in a time when reproduction was really important, but I think the essence of it is a reminder that we human beings are all related. We are, ontologically, a family. As Quran 5:32 says '...if any one killed a person, it would be as if he killed the whole mankind...'

So, to recapitulate: God wants a garden and makes a gardener—a very special gardener enlivened by God's own divine breath. God tries to make a helper for this gardener, and the

word used for “living being,” which is the *adam*, and for “living creature,” meaning the animals, **is the same word.** It means “living soul,” so if we have souls, so do animals, which is something a lot of us knew already, but those animals don’t have the gardening responsibilities we have. And then God succeeds in making a helper and ensuring the propagation of the human species, and there they are in the garden of Eden, certainly a lush and peaceable kingdom, but with work to be done. And of course, that tree.

What is meant by “good and evil” in this text? For that matter, what is meant by “knowledge”? One Jewish commentator suggests that the knowledge referred to here is our life experience of “weal and woe,” or the tragedy embedded in human existence. With the best of intentions, we hurt one another. We set traps for our own selves with greed or hubris or just failure to reflect. We lose control of various kinds in illness and old age, and we cannot spare our loved ones from grief. Woe goes with weal, inseparably; it’s how a textured life is textured. When God places that tree in the garden and says, “Don’t eat that,” I can’t help but think that God is giving the human creature a choice: a bland and peaceable existence inside the garden, or a tumultuous but creative gardening job outside its walls. God says, “Don’t eat that,” meaning, “You could eat that, but it’ll change things in ways you can’t possibly anticipate.” And in making that choice **to eat it** possible, God is affirming that we’re actually capable of handling more than we think. I’ve noted God’s tenderness in this story, but I think there’s also a sort of tough-mindedness challenge in this story, saying, “I think you could be more than just gardeners, but it’s going to demand a lot of you.”

We’re created as kindred, all human beings are, and we’re kin to all animals but in a capacity that puts more responsibility on us than on the animals. We’re beloved by God, whose

spirit animates us. We're responsible to maintain the garden that is Earth, and we have what it takes to keep it a garden, despite all the stupid and greedy things we've also done to it. It's that last that is both hard to believe and encouraging. In the environmental crisis that we face, and the irreversible destruction that we've already brought about, *and* the toxicity and ineffectiveness of politics around the world, it's hard to believe that redemption can be wrestled out of our current mess. But it's encouraging to think that God made us with the power to do so.

At the end of this story, when the naked and ashamed Adam and Eve have made their fatal choice and God is expelling them from the garden, God says, in essence, "You can't go outside like that," and makes them some clothes. It's not a rescue from the mess they've made for themselves and have to clean up themselves, but it's a reminder that God's still in the game. We should not focus on the extent and depth of our environmental crisis so much that we forget or discount the gifts our environment still offers that might change human behavior. Last week Tom and I took a walk in the Brenton Arboretum, and it was a marvel, how refreshing and re-energizing it felt to listen to no sound except insects and birds, to watch clouds drifting across the sky, to be surrounded by prairie flowers and grasses and the modestly silent but magnificent trees that grow in Iowa. It's well-documented that children do better in school and misbehave less when they spend more time in natural settings and away from screens. And it's mind-boggling how easy it is to do, and how rarely we get out of the car or the house and do it.

There are absolutely urgent things to promote on a policy level, absolutely. We should keep after our representatives. I'm just remembering that God often works through what is humble and unnoticed and undervalued. God is always taking mustard seeds and producing

enormous weed infestations, or taking yeast and transforming a whole batch of loaves. That's how God gets it done. If we were to be creative about just getting ourselves and our neighbors outdoors more, if we were to glom onto trends like "forest bathing," which is a Japanese thing that means being in the forest and not doing anything purposeful, if we supported public natural spaces with our money just a little bit more, I wonder if there might be a seismic shift of consciousness that inclines toward an embrace of nature.

And nobody knows. We can't predict. I could be completely off the mark. But what our scripture tells us is that this garden, Earth, was made with the expectation that we would tend it, and we were made with the capacity to tend it. And we human beings are all made of the same dust and divine spirit, so we're all nourished by spending time in the garden. And God expects us to do our job, but is probably also going to give us the occasional partner or loincloth or serendipitous meeting that will just make our efforts more likely to succeed. That's all the reassurance we get, but God is betting on us.

"Answer me when I call to you,  
O my righteous God.  
Give me relief from my distress;  
be merciful to me and hear my prayer."

In our exasperation and anxiety do not let us lose hope;  
Help us to live our lives sacrificially and to trust in you when you call us.

Many are asking,  
"What is the point? The earth is finished.  
Who can save us now?"

"Let the light of your face shine upon us, O Lord.  
You have filled my heart with greater joy  
than when grain and new wine abound.  
I will lie down and sleep in peace,  
for you alone, O Lord,  
make me dwell in safety."