



Natural Resources

Genesis 2:4b-8,15

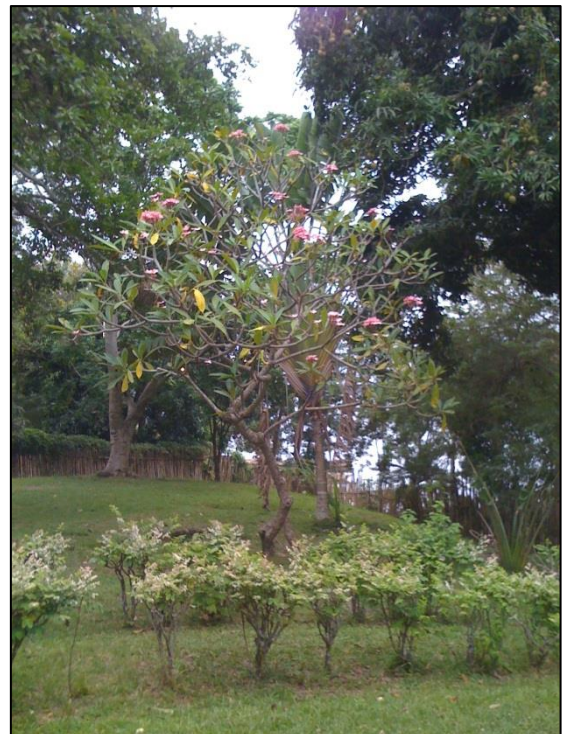
You may wish to prepare a small preparatory prayer space with a picture, a sculpture, an icon, a basket of fresh fruit and vegetables, or another arrangement of some sort that offers a visual reminder of earth's living bounty.

A translation of today's passage is provided. Study participants should also feel free to read and compare their own translations of the passage for the group.

The translation provided uses the proper name for God used in the Hebrew of this story: "Yahweh God." You may wish to follow the ancient Jewish tradition, followed by most English translations of the Bible, and substitute the term, "the LORD," for the Hebrew "Yahweh."

Begin with a prayer of your own choosing or with the following:

*O giver of life,
God of lavish mercy and care,
thank you for the life you give us this day!
For air to breathe,
for water to drink,
for the bounties of the earth,
our sustaining food,
for the labor we and others provide
to bring it to tables
of gathering,
of families, friends, and communities,
for our small part
in the ongoing cycles of life,
the rhythms and seasons of the earth
that sustain us
and make life flourish.
Open our hearts
to receive your wisdom
as we ponder the ancient words and wisdom
of Scripture.
May your living word
make us living, breathing creatures.
May it speak to us
fresh and life-giving truths today,
this day!*



*In the name of Jesus,
the bread and water of life everlasting,
Amen.*

Read the following translation of Genesis 2:4b-8, 15 and share, if anyone wishes, other translations of the same verses. The translation offered here is a bit literal:

On the day Yahweh God made earth and heaven, no field plant or herb of the field had yet spring up because Yahweh God didn't make it rain on the earth and there wasn't a human to serve the ground. But a mist came up from the earth and "gave a drink" to the entire surface of the ground. Yahweh God formed the human from the dust of the ground and blew into its nose the breath of living things. So the human became a living, breathing creature. Now, Yahweh God planted a garden in Eden, to the east, and put the human he formed there....

So Yahweh God took the human and settled it in the Garden of Eden to serve it and protect it.

Discussion (part I)

As a group or in small groups, discuss the following questions about the details of the story

Describe the state of the earth "on the day Yahweh God made" it.

Why was it that way?

What does the earth need for plants and herbs to spring up?

What's the first creature God makes?

What brings the human to life in this story?

Why does God put the human in the garden of Eden? What's the human's purpose, it's "vocation" in the garden?

Read or summarize the following commentary:

Scholars have long recognized that this is a second story of the creation of the world, following the first story that begins in Genesis 1:1 and ends in the first half of Genesis 2:4, with the summary phrase: "these are the generations of the heavens and the earth when God created them."

Our story has a number of different details than the first story. For example, the first story describes creation as a seven-day process, culminating in God's "rest" or "ceasing" from work on the seventh day, an exemplary divine precursor to the requirement that Israel observe seventh-day sabbath. Our story speaks of the creation of "earth and heavens" as something that happens in a single day (v 4b) and sees the sexual differentiation of the human into male and female as the climax. The first story refers to God as *'elohim*, a generic Hebrew word that means "gods" or "God." Our story refers to



God by the proper name *YHWH 'elohim*, "Yahweh God" or "the LORD God," following an ancient Jewish tradition that substitutes *'adonay* ("my lord") for the proper name of God that's actually written in the text. The first story portrays the creative process as a progressive ordering of primordial waters, the narrative moving from original watery chaos to the emergence of dry land and living creatures. Our story begins with universal desert — "there was not yet any field plant in the earth, no field herb had yet sprouted" (v 5) — and moves toward watered oasis. There are two reasons the earth is universal desert: "Yahweh God had not caused it to rain on the earth, and there was no human being to serve/work/till the ground." We'll come back to this later.

In the first story, human beings are created as the last of the world's living beings, after all the birds and fish and land animals. From the very beginning, they are sexually differentiated: "God created the human being (*ha'adam*) in God's own image, in the image of God, male and female, God created them" (1:27). In our story, the first living thing Yahweh God creates is "the human" (*ha'adam*, v 7). The Hebrew word here is masculine in form, but it's the same generic word for "human being" used in Genesis 1:26-27 — "God created the human being (*ha'adam*) . male and female, God created them." In other words, at the beginning of today's story we don't yet have a specific gender identity for *ha'adam*. It's only after Yahweh determines that "it's not good for the human to be alone" that God creates all the other animals to find "a helper, a corresponding opposite" for the human (v 18). The unsuccessful search that follows yields no "corresponding opposite" for the human but does result in the creation of all the living creatures of the field and birds of the sky (v 19). The human names all the creatures, and Yahweh finally realizes that the only suitable "helper," the only "corresponding opposite" for a human is another human. So Yahweh puts it into a deep sleep and splits it into, taking one of its sides and "building" a woman out of it. Now, for the first time in the story, we have a gender-specific term for a human being: "woman" (*ishshah*). When Yahweh takes the new creature to the left-over human" (*ha'adam*), the human names it "woman" (*ishshah*), using for the first time in the story a gender-specific term for itself: "this one was taken from "man" (*ish*, v 23). While the first creation story presents the creation of "the human" (*ha'adam*) as "male and female" from the very beginning (1:27) and, furthermore, says they were created last among the living creatures, our story says "the human" was

the first living thing created and was split into male and female only after none of the animals subsequently created was found to be a suitable “corresponding opposite.”

The two stories of creation are different in their details, their timelines, and their intent. It’s hard to know which is the older story, but there’s little doubt we have two different versions of the creation of the world now put side by side in the book of Genesis, which, of course, is an interesting thing in itself.

It seems that from the very beginning of the Bible, we’re being told that there may be more than one legitimate way to think about God’s activity in the world and that our reflections about God are best done in community, with a variety of perspectives represented and a diversity of voices heard. The biblical message apparently is this: it’s not just OK, it’s theologically valuable that we have multiple takes on the same important issue.

Our story today starts with earth as a lifeless desert, because Yahweh God had not yet caused it to rain and because there was no human to work the ground. The infinitive in this last clause is typically translated, “to till” (from the root, *‘abad*), a perfectly reasonable and appropriate way to translate it into English. The basic meaning of the word, however, has to do with working or serving. It’s often used to describe the relationship of slave to master. The slave is bound to service. The idea here apparently is that the earth’s flourishing depends on the work, the service of human beings and that human beings, therefore, are rightly “obligated” to do “earth work,” to provide the service it needs to teem with life. At a very fundamental level, according to this story’s view of the world, the identity and purpose of human beings is deeply ecological: we are created to “serve” the earth so life may flourish in it.

God immediately begins to address the problem of universal desert by creating the human (*‘adam*) from the dust of the humus, the ground (*‘adamah*, v 7). The pun in Hebrew — *‘adam* from the *‘adamah* — underlines the deep, essential connection of human beings to the earth. We are, quite literally, “grounded” in the earth and in our responsibility to serve it.

Once the human is shaped and brought to life as a “living, breathing being” (*nefesh hayah*), when Yahweh blows the breath of life into its nostrils (v 7b), God plants an oasis in Eden and puts the human there (v 8) to “serve/till” and “guard/keep” it (v 15). The word “serve” or “till” in v 15 is the same word (*‘abad*) we discussed earlier. The second word “guard” or “keep” (*shamar*) relates to protecting, preserving, safeguarding something. It’s what guards do for the people and things in their charge. It’s what shepherds do for their flocks. It’s what God does for the people God has promised to rescue and protect. It’s what the people do with God’s commands to live with justice and mutual support. The human is created and given the vocation to “serve” the earth, to “protect,” “safeguard,” and “preserve” it that life may flourish.

There is one final point to be made about this story of the human being and the “garden of Eden.” In the chapter beyond our story today, the humans, now split into male and female, defy the command of Yahweh and eat fruit from the tree of knowing right and wrong — in other words, they seek and gain the power of moral discernment. (Why this is a thing God apparently doesn’t want to happen is a question for another day!) They now know the difference between right and wrong. Wisdom, of course, comes through the lived experiences of life. It is one of life’s tragic ironies that the longer we

live and the wiser we get, the closer we come to the grave. The illusions of invincibility that seem to govern the sometimes reckless behavior of youth normally fade as the years progress. The price of wisdom is not just our mortality. It is our growing awareness of death's rapid approach. The original human couple in this story pay a heavy price for their desire to become wise and moral, to know the difference between right and wrong. They are expelled from the garden of Eden, cut off from the tree of immortal life, and promised a life of hard work that will often be difficult and painful. But, in leaving utopia and forging a life in the real world of suffering and joy, of death and love and new birth, they spread God's solution to the universal desert that existed at the beginning of creation. They are sent into the barren earth "to serve the ground" from which they were taken (3:23). Newly wise, they are commissioned to serve the earth and make the desert bloom. Expelled from Eden, humans by their labor make the earth teem with life. The story thus comes full circle back to its beginning. Human beings are created to serve the earth, to make it flourish.

Discussion (part 2)

As a group or in small groups first, then in the whole group, discuss the following questions:

In the view of this story, what is the purpose of being human?

How are people supposed to relate to the earth?

Is this a helpful way to think about our identity and purpose as human beings today? Or is this a time-bound view that might have made sense in the ancient world but doesn't make sense today?

The person who wrote this story lived in an agrarian society. Farming was the chief occupation of most people. What, if anything, about the view of human vocation in this story translates to our situation today?

What might it mean for us to think of our primary purpose and mission in life as "serving" and "protecting" the earth? What are some things we might do? What are some things we might do differently?

How might our work of service and protection for the earth prove beneficial? What's in it for us?

The Ikengo Agricultural Center in the Democratic Republic of Congo

The Congo River basin contains one of the two remaining major rainforests in the world. Unfortunately, widespread impoverishment -- the lingering consequences of civil war, weak governmental regulation and authority, and the exportation of this valuable resource have led to growing deforestation in this area, vital to the world's breathable air supply. It's clear that an important part of reversing this dangerous trend is to increase the food security and general economic condition of poor and vulnerable people — unfortunately, the majority — in Congo.

To address this social and environmental crisis, the Community of Disciples of Christ in Congo (CDCC) has established the Ikengo Agricultural Center, a working farm dedicated to exploring sustainable agricultural and animal husbandry techniques that can be duplicated elsewhere. The objectives of the center are to nourish and sustain the Congolese people, to employ Congolese people through agricultural work, and to build sustainable economic infrastructure necessary to support the Congolese people. The focus of the center is breeding livestock (pigs, ducks, and chickens) and growing crops for food and market. The center needs money for seeds, for food refrigeration (a particular issue in the hot climate of equatorial Africa), and veterinary services. You and your congregation can contribute online at <https://donate.globalministries.org/onlinegiving>.



What can you and your congregation do to support this work?

Close with a prayer of your choosing or with the following:

*God of flourishing life,
bless our best intentions,
bless our labor
and our money,
that our small gifts
may multiply your healing work
in the world.*

*We are grateful for the bounty of the fertile earth
you have generously provided us,
and we are grateful that you graciously invite us
to take a generous share
for our own sustenance, joy, and delight.*

Thank you for your generous care!

*Bless the small portion we give
to better the lot
of the hard-working poor.*

*We ask particular blessing
and protection
this day*

for our sisters and brothers in Congo.

We thank you for their faithful, diligent labor,

as we also thank you for our productive and faithful labor.

*We thank you
that you have given us the strength and ingenuity
to thrive.*

*Give us also the heart to be humble
and to love.*

*We ask that our work together
to serve the earth
will assist*

*the flourishing of all life,
that through our work and witness,
you will fulfill
the dream you have for the world.*

*We offer our work, our service to the earth
in the name of Jesus,
the bread of life,
the hope of the world,
Amen.*

**For the complete bible study series please visit
www.globalministries.org/congo-initiative/biblestudies.html.**