

Genesis 1 and 2
A Time to Grow: Lent 1
February 18, 2024
Rev. Kelley L. Becker

Have you spent any time imagining how, if you were in charge of creating things like planets, creatures, and humans, how you would do that and what these creations would be like? Personally, I would not have gone with a big bang. That seems way too haphazard and risky. I guess I'm more of a hands-on, hovering over every detail person. And I know I don't have the patience to leave things to evolution. My preference would be for me to create the things and then for the things to stay the way I created them.

None of this acquiring legs later or walking upright on two legs after millions of years of walking on all four.

And do we really need mosquitos and ticks and fleas?

If it were up to me, things would be different. There wouldn't be dogs with smushed faces and nasal cavities that make breathing difficult, even though I can see they are cute.

There wouldn't be devastating hurricanes and wildfires that burn for weeks.

As I made my mental list this week of the improvements I would make, I realized most of them were not undoing the natural order of things but undoing the damage human beings have done. Dogs do not naturally have squashed faces. We've bred them that way. Hurricanes and wildfires have not always been as devastating or prevalent as they are today. Our over-dependence on fossil fuels has caused global warming, which has resulted in stronger, more frequent storms and areas of extreme drought ripe for wildfires. The world is a beautiful place, but we don't have to be scientists to know we are a long way from Eden.

The story Rev. Hubbard read this morning about the first humans and their home in the Garden of Eden is not meant to be a science or history lesson. It is a story and is one of many stories told to explain how the world and all of us came to be. There are as many creation stories as there are cultures and traditions.

For example, in the Cherokee tradition...The creation story goes like this:

The earth is a great island of solid rock floating in a sea of water, suspended at each of the four cardinal points by a cord hanging down from the sky vault. When the world grows old and worn out, the people will die, and the cords will break, letting the earth sink down into the ocean, and all will be water again.

Before the island came to be, when all was water, the animals were above [in *Gälûñ'läti*], beyond the arch, but it was very crowded, and they wanted more room. They wondered what was below the water, and at last [*Dâyuni'si*,] "Beaver's Grandchild," the little Water-beetle, offered to go and see if it could learn. It darted in

every direction over the water's surface but could find no firm place to rest. Then it dived to the bottom and came up with some soft mud, which grew and spread on every side until it became the island that we call the earth. It was afterward fastened to the sky with four cords, but no one remembers who did this.

The story goes on to tell of how creatures were made and how light and darkness came to be. My favorite part of the story is how the world was populated with humans: The story says that men came after the animals and plants. At first, there was only a brother and sister until he struck her with a fish and told her to multiply, and so it was. In seven days, a child was born to her, and thereafter, every seven days, another, and they increased very fast until there was danger that the world could not keep them. Then, it was made that a woman should have only one child in a year, and it has been so ever since.

In Mayan culture, [Tepeu], the maker, and [Gucumatz], the feathered spirit, created the world with their thoughts. They created beings to look after their creation. First, they made animals of the sky and land but needed a being that could properly communicate, so they made man. They made him out of clay, but he crumbled apart. Then, they tried making him out of wood, but he was empty-headed and hearted. Finally, they made men out of corn, and these men were empathetic and intelligent.

None of the creation myths available to us, including the ones in Genesis, are factually accurate, but there is truth in all of them. The truth is, there is an order to things. There is a natural order, a harmonious circle of life, that, when left alone, continues to create and bring life. Our text today reminds us that human beings are the reason there is disorder.

The story of the first two human beings, whose names mean "earth" and "life," living in harmony in the Garden is the picture of order. There is abundance. Every part of the natural world was doing what it was supposed to do. Seeds were sprouting, bees were pollinating, plants were growing, and the humans were harvesting (eating) what was being grown. It was perfect.

They could eat anything they wanted to eat...except what was being grown on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which, if you believe a lot of artists, looked a lot like apples. Perfection slipped away from them the moment they ate from that tree. The way in which God ordered things was changed...there was disorder.

Theologically, disorder is what the Christian tradition calls sin. That moment when the first humans messed up the natural order of things is what people mean when they talk about "original sin." Adam and Eve ate from the tree despite God's warning that it would lead to death, in other words, away from life. That's what sin does. It is death-dealing and not life-giving. After the bite is taken, the story goes on to talk about the consequences of their actions. There would be a new order to things, and the new

order would be painful and tiring and would always end in death..."from dust, you have come, and to dust, you will return."

I don't know how it happened, but at some point in history, human beings realized that we are messy: we cause disorder. The stories of human interaction with gods from many traditions have addressed this. Something goes wrong in the world, and it must be because God or a god or gods are punishing us for something. We turn away from God; there is a drought. We neglect the ones who are vulnerable, and there is war. We know, I hope we know, that is not how God works, but that doesn't mean we don't share some responsibility for the disorder around us.

The meme circulated, "Well, well, well, if it isn't the consequences of my own actions," sums it up nicely.

As I said, we are a long way from the perfectly ordered world in the Garden of Eden. Imagine what that garden would have looked like. I bet those garden rows were straight. I bet the weeding was all done. The soil was like central IL soil...dark and rich. All the plants received just the right amount of light and the perfect amount of water. God's garden probably didn't need a scarecrow. There was so much food that the rabbits and birds could eat all they wanted. Life was everywhere.

Gardening is a good metaphor for life. For a garden to thrive, there must be order. A bountiful garden doesn't happen by just throwing some seeds in the air, like glitter, and hoping for the best. There has to be a plan. Skilled gardeners map out what they will plant. They take into account the time it takes for certain plants to mature, and they plan accordingly. Plants that mature early are replaced by heat-loving plants for later in the growing season. Gardeners consider every detail: sunlight, drainage, soil composition, pests, and, of course, the weather. Proper order of all these things assures the garden will thrive not just now but season after season.

As we do, we have tried to circumvent this natural order of things and have distanced ourselves from the actual source of life. The way we care for and fuel our bodies are examples of this. In her book, *A Time to Grow*, Kara Eidson writes, "An abundance of scientific research informs us that the shortcuts we try to take are bad for us: high caffeine consumption may keep us alert but is an unhealthy alternative to good sleep. We try to cheat on calorie intake by drinking artificial sweeteners, while study after study tells us of the detrimental health impacts of such sweeteners. We take a multivitamin in the morning and think that is a satisfactory substitute for our nutritional needs."¹

Eidson goes on to say she wonders if there is something we should have learned from the generations before us who did not, who could not, distance themselves from the real stuff of life. Families ate what they grew. It was a rare treat to eat produce that

¹ Eidson, Kara, *A Time to Grow: Lent Lessons from the Garden to the Table*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY), 2022, 18.

was not grown in the region in which the family lived. That's why we all have heard stories of our midwestern parents or grandparents who got an orange in their Christmas stockings.

Now, though, we want what we want when we want it. We want fresh produce year-round, not just when it's in season and not just what grows near us. I want lemon in my water every time, all the time. Most of us aren't interested in canning what we grow (if we grow) in the growing season. I would guess most of us don't even know how to can. And speaking for myself, I don't want to learn. The kitchen is not my happy place. When it comes to our food, most of us have distanced ourselves from the gardens and farms it came from; we pretty much ignore the seasons and the region we live in and depend on the grocery store to ensure we can get what we want every week. Our food just appears! Along with the carbon footprint caused by all of that global shipping.

Eidson puts it bluntly when she writes, "We have disrupted the order of the natural world by shipping produce halfway around the globe."² We have distanced ourselves from the Source of Life in more than one way.

Talking about the garden as a metaphor for life reminds us that every creature and human we share this planet with needs fuel for life. That is precisely why the food chain is so vulnerable; we all depend on it. So much of the suffering around natural and man-made disasters is magnified because of food supply and distribution. One of the things I love about the World Central Kitchen organization that supplies food in the wake of disasters is that the Chef who started it is committed to using food and recipes that are native to the region. He isn't hauling in Velveeta and Ramen packets to our neighbors in Palestine, whom we cannot forget are at risk of starving right now because humanitarian aid, including food, can't get to them. War always creates a humanitarian disaster. War is death-dealing, not life-giving. It is disorder of the worse kind. Always.

We are called to bring order to the world, and it starts right here in our community. It starts right here in this Church and in our homes. I've been announcing the last few weeks that there is a group among us who are working to start a community garden. You will remember that in the fall, we brainstormed about how to use our land to help our neighbors. We are paying a lot of money to maintain this property. That only makes sense if we use the property to bring order to the disorder of the world. A community garden is one of the ideas that was floated.

The goal for the garden is to grow produce that we can give away through Love in a Pantry and that we can sell to support the Love in a Pantry ministry year-round. In the last few years, we have given away hundreds of pounds of shelf-stable food, and we are making a difference for our neighbors. Families don't have to choose whether to

² Eidson, 18.

buy food for breakfast, or the poster board their child needs for a project. A member shared with me this week that she overheard a conversation between a mom and her son as they stood by the pantry closet outside. The little boy was delighted to see that all the ingredients for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich were right there in front of him. Now we have the chance to do even more!

We want to provide our neighbors with good, fresh food, which most of us eat every single day. Not that we don't love some Kraft mac and cheese sometimes. We do. We really do. A community garden is the perfect way to live into our call to help restore order to the world and to be good stewards of our property. There is talk of chickens and pretty colorful eggs, too. We should give them cute names, too. How cool would that be? And the best part is that this is truly something we can all do together!

There will be planning and planting and weeding and watering and harvesting and stocking the pantry and helping us get the word out to our neighbors. If you aren't able to physically work in the garden, we need you to tell your friends and family about what we are doing and invite them to help. We truly want this to be a community garden that is full of all kinds of life and not just plant life. We hope it will be a place people gather not just to work, but to get to know each other. From seed to shalom, we will grow together! I hope you will make this new project a priority for you. It is time to grow, friends. Let's make something beautiful!
Amen.