



## CATHEDRAL *of the* INCARNATION

*People of Hope and the Climate Crisis*

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 13, 2019

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When I was young, I loved archaeological mysteries. From the moment I figured out that some fantastical stories about lost empires and forgotten peoples were not make-believe but quite real, I devoured every bit of information I could find about times past. I was an equal opportunity explorer - I was as interested in the first underwater expeditions to the site of the Titanic as I was in the remains of mammoths found near the city limits of my hometown. But I had a special place in my heart for biblical archaeology. We may not have been religious in my household, but the stories I heard with my friends in Vacation Bible School were far more impressive when you know that Babylon was indeed a place and that there is a ruin of an ancient city at Jericho.

As a kid, I always envisioned the Garden of Eden as being like these other sites, a lost place waiting to be found. In my imagination, I thought that perhaps somewhere there was a ruin, an old tree stump, a tumbled wall that still bore the marks of the angel's flaming sword. I think those visions were probably more informed by Indiana Jones than reality! Of course, by the time I was a young adult, I thought of Eden more as a metaphor for the origins of humanity. I thought if there was any "real Eden" to be found, we should cast our vision to East Africa and the resting place of the oldest human remains.

It wasn't until I engaged the serious study of Scripture that I began to understand Eden in an entirely different light. I learned enough Hebrew to hear the poetry of the original language, to learn that Genesis is actually a poem – a song, if you will - about how the world came to be and how the people of God fit within it. It was jarring for me to discover that the geography, the spatial reasoning of Genesis, was not actually meant to build a map of Eden's location. There is enough geography to make it knowable, complete with the names of places that would have oriented each successive generation who heard this song to their heritage. But the geography is also unknowable, cosmic, making space for people from different places and different times to find themselves standing on the same banks of the rivers that flow from God's

dwelling place. This song - heard and sung for thousands of years - invites us to listen to the truth: Eden is neither a lost place nor a metaphor. Eden is real, but we will never find it on a map. *We can never go to Eden because we never left.*

I know this interpretation begs a hundred questions: *didn't God drive Adam and Eve from Eden, as in they moved from one place to another? How can human beings be in Eden and have lost it at the same time?* That is the question, is it not? How can we have remained in Eden all this time and yet not know it? This particular interpretation of Genesis – taken from the work of Jewish theologian Martin Buber - acknowledges that premodern stories connect less with our reason and more with our existential realities. Every people, every culture has a story they tell about their origins - how the world came to be, and what their people's orientation is in this world. The story of our heritage begins with loss - a loss so profound, so full of irony that the first people who experienced this loss are blind to its consequences, and they pass down this blindness to their children and their children's children. Our people wander lost in the Eden of our beginnings, driven forward on a path apart from God and the goodness planned for people in Creation. The world we occupy is far from the paradise we imagine, but the truth is most - if not all of us here - have never considered or treated it as such.

If you think this understanding is too far from our tradition, perhaps we should cast our nets closer to home. St. Thomas Aquinas, the great Catholic theologian, tells us that faith is cultivated by grace through contact with God's Incarnation in Christ. God's Incarnation, in Aquinas' view, does not just include the historical person Jesus or the Scriptures that record his words and teaching - it also consists of Creation, which is a gift God has given us to bring us to faith. Now, for Christians, God is not nature, and nature is not God. But our faith allows us to see that all of Creation breathes with the same breath that fills our bodies. And if grace removes our blindness, nature becomes one of the primary ways to encounter the Incarnation, a pure gift of God's immanent presence complementing our Scriptures, our Bread and Wine, our fellow believers in Christ.

And yet, we do not treat Creation as we would treat Christ. Or perhaps we do treat Creation as we would treat Christ, as we have always treated Christ, even unknowingly. We resent God's Creation. We fear it. We hoard it. We control it. We romanticize it. We worship it. We speak of it as a thing, among other things, insensible, unresponsive, reduced to whatever we need it to be, whatever serves our interest, whatever reflects back to us what we want to see. Lip service aside, we don't treat it holy – as a gift from God meant to care for us and us for it. It discourages me that I don't hear more in the Church about the spiritual significance of the created world and our place in it. This connection with Creation is part of our faith, a necessary part of our spiritual formation and growth in Christ. And yet, if I mention the term "climate crisis" - which is the natural consequence of our spiritual blindness - it conjures an immediate

and visceral reaction. For some, it will be a deep suspicion that this is just another example of how many well-meaning people of faith stamp Jesus onto whatever political cause they like, ignoring all else. For others, this concept of Creation will feel too shocking, the notion of inherited spiritual blindness too challenging to accept for those of us who have attempted to be faithful in our lives.

But we must explore this together. We must speak about our fear and our distrust in a space of faith. We cannot afford to ignore this topic any longer, no matter how difficult the conversation may be. As the climate becomes more volatile, as the warnings become more despairing, I become increasingly convinced that we need people of Christian faith whose eyes open to the Eden beneath our feet and who can witness boldly to the gift of God's Creation. We have a story to tell. The story of our people begins in loss, but it moves toward hope. And when it comes to our climate, we need people of hope, people who can affirm with their lives the following three tenets drawn from the song of Creation. First, we need people who affirm that God's Creation was made for us. Often, I hear people embracing the notion of the Anthropocene era, the geological age where human activity is the primary influence on the planet. Very often, these arguments end up relying on the premise that we must prioritize people over the environment because our survival depends on it. But can we survive without a life-giving planet? When Paul wrote the contentious congregation at Corinth, he reminded them the body of Christ has one Spirit but many members:

"The eye cannot say to the hand," says Paul, "'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect" (I Corinthians 12:21-23).

We think of these words as referring only to relationships in the Church, but Paul speaks of the Church as the Incarnation of Christ. If we take St. Thomas Aquinas seriously, Christ's Incarnation includes not just the Church and Scripture but Creation as well. As Christians, we need to affirm that human beings are important, but all of Creation must be honored as part of Christ's body, a gift from God meant to take care of us and bring us to faith.

Second, we need people who affirm that human beings were made for God's Creation. I'm struck by how often people who advocate for environmental causes find a place for people to correct the climate crisis but often offer no concrete ways people can live at peace with the natural world. Human beings have degraded God's Creation, but the story we share is that God made us a part of this world...and more than be a part of it, but to care for it, cultivate it, delight in it. Humans do not just hold power to destroy; by God's grace, they carry the ability to

respond, to heal, to love. We need people who recognize the Incarnation of God in Creation, just as they do in their neighbor. We need people who allow their relationship to nature reflect what Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22). If it sounds impossible to find ways to interact with the natural world - to allow it to care for us and us to care for it in ways that honor God - that's because we haven't tried this approach yet!

Finally, we need people who affirm God's Creation is for everyone. Every few months, I read another article about Elon Musk and his SpaceX venture to Mars. Usually, in the same breath, a writer will say that this yet-to-be-realized colony may be the future of humanity. But when I read these words, I always think of the same thing: the waitlist for the \$500,000 tickets to space. I realize that if there is a one-way trip off our world, I most likely will not be on it. And that's okay...I'm an ordinary person of ordinary means. My deep fear rises when I realize that my son or his children, who will also be ordinary people of ordinary means, will most likely not be on that flight either. There is an almost subliminal message in every conversation about our environment - whether it be about our drinking water or our food or the air that we breathe - that assumes that a life-giving climate in the future will only be for those who can afford it. And I cannot accept that. It runs counter to my faith and runs counter to what I know to be the value of my son's life, and your children's lives, and your grandchildren's lives. Our faith teaches us that God's Creation is for everyone, and we need witnesses to the generosity of our Creator, who provides for all, regardless of how much they can pay.

When it comes to the climate crisis, it is clear that we must act, or we risk our own lives and the lives of those we love. But if we want to be sustained in addressing the challenges ahead, we must learn to sing the song we learned on the banks of the rivers that flow from God's dwelling place. Our heritage is one of loss and blindness, of wandering unknowingly, heedlessly in the very place God gave to us for our nourishment and delight. But our story does not end in loss, but rather in hope, and in the work of addressing the climate crisis, we need people of hope. Our loss was a cosmic, spiritual loss with consequences for our planet. But we also know that our cosmic, spiritual hope can have a genuine and life-giving impact on our world. When our eyes are open to the Eden beneath our feet, we can look to that river that flows from God's dwelling place and see it flowing under the branches of the Tree of Life, whose leaves contain the healing of the nations (Revelation 22:2-3).