

The Green God

Texts: Genesis 2:4-9, 15-17; Rev. 22:1-5

1/24/10

Introduction

What can you learn from a handful of dirt? Back in the early 90's Pike Family Nurseries ran one of most successful advertising campaigns ever with their "Come Play In the Dirt Again" jingle. It was so popular that people called radio stations asking them to play the song.

What can the dirt do for us? Ninety-nine percent of the human body is composed of six chemicals all of which are found in a handful of dirt. (You might be a good grade of "topsoil" but dirt none the less.) Stretching the point a bit, science is our attempt to understand the dirt – to know what we are, what the rest of nature is, and what we might do with what we have. Study the dirt and you can learn a lot.

But the Pike jingle didn't invite people into the lab to study the chemical composition of dirt. It invited people to dig in it for while and remember something they might have forgotten.

And what have we forgotten? Let me suggest that the dirt that tells us "what" we are might be a clue as to "why" we are. That familiar Apostles' Creed we recite most every week doesn't have much to say about "what" we are. But it makes the boldest claim as to "why" we are:

I believe in God...Maker of heaven and earth.

- 1. Now the creed doesn't make its claim based on nothing. It follows the Bible which makes its claim not in an essay, but in a story. To open the first book of the Bible is to be invited back into the primal mist – not so we might know *everything*, but so we might understand *something*.**

God appears to be the greenest of gods. God makes a world and in that world plants a garden. And God makes a person, and places him in that garden to work it and take care of it.

This dirt-person, the Hebrew word “adam”, is of the soil, from the Hebrew word “adamah”. And the first order of business for “adam” is not to know “what”. It is to know “why”.

The bible is making an amazing claim here. There is a creator, there is a creature, and wisdom is knowing which one you are and which one you aren't. Get this right and much goes right. Get this wrong and much goes tragically wrong.

To believe in a Creator God is to believe that dirt has a purpose. And our purpose, nature's purpose, is obscured unless we discover that we are creatures given a purpose by a Creator.

Adam is invited to dig in the garden, make some things bloom, and understand why he is here. The invitation of creation is not to make up your life as you go along. You have place, you have a role, and you have a home in God's creation.

Do you understand? Are you at home? Or are you a stranger on an indifferent and hostile planet until you are dirt once again? What keeps us up at night is not a lack of knowledge about what we are. But we cry out to know “why” we are. Why am I here? What shall I do with my life? To whom shall I turn for the love and reassurance that says “you belong” when I'm no longer sure?

There is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art a sculpture by Rodin called *The Hand of God*. It is a hand, strong and sensitive, fashioning a man and woman out of a lump of formless clay- bringing order from chaos.

There is another sculpture of Rodin in the Philadelphia Museum called *The Hand of the Devil*. It too is a strong and sensitive hand, like that of an artist. But it is only idly working the clay, destroying any shape, form, or meaning that begins to appear.

To believe in the Creator of heaven and earth, in the maker of unseen and seen creation, is to find your purpose by seeking God's. There is of course another option. Faith says knowing “what” is no substitute for knowing “why”.

2. The green God plants a garden. He makes a creature to care for it, to explore its potential, to taste its fruit, to enjoy God's abundance. But along with purpose, God gives "adam" two other gifts: permission and prohibition.

Back to the simple story. The creator says work and care for the ground. Help it produce. Enjoy the place. Eat what you want from whatever tree you want. Just one thing. Don't eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. If you do it can kill you.

There is abundant permission – freedom – in the garden. And there is a small amount of prohibition – limitation – in the garden. And already we feel the tension. There's the drama. We know the how the story goes because it is our story.

"Eat this, not that, trust me." "But I want *that!*" Welcome to my life and your life. The issue is not the quality of the fruit on the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. It's whether we creatures are willing to trust the wisdom of the Creator.

To confess God the maker of heaven and earth is to recognize that God sets boundaries on our freedom. And to deny those boundaries is to exchange freedom for a form of slavery.

God has given us dirt diggers incredible freedom. There is moral freedom. There are far more "you shalls" in the bible than "you shall nots". We have incredible technological freedom to extend life, unleash atomic power, communicate at a speed and distance with one another thought to be impossible not long ago. We have environmental freedom to dig in the garden and harvest its oil, gas, and coal, turn its trees into paper, export its fruit to the far corners of the globe.

But there are a few "no's". Harvest the garden selfishly and short-sightedly and we poison the planet and its creatures. Forget to consult the Creator in your moral decisions and you wound other people that God also loves. Believe that technology is an unquestioned good and you flirt with cloning people, create weapons of incredible destructive power, and substitute virtual relationships for the flesh and blood kind.

God, the Maker of heaven and earth, puts some limits on what we can do in his garden so we don't turn life into a wasteland. Will we be creatures and trust the limits? Or will we live egotistically enough to believe that there is no need to take any advice other than our own?

3. Believe in the Creator, and we find our purpose. Confess the Creator and discover that there is permission and prohibition. Trust the Maker of Heaven and Earth, and we will also find that there's a promise hidden in the dirt.

I don't have to tell you that the garden of God has become a bit of a mess. We creatures have found it hard to trust in the Creator. It's a beautiful world, but you don't have to be an ecologist to recognize that we've abused it in some devastating ways. The moral failure of our age can be reduced to "what's in it for me?" When it comes to technology, if we can we will; we don't bother with whether we should.

But spend some time meditating in God's garden and you may remember a promise. "*In the beginning was the Word...*" And at the end there will be the Word. If we turn to the end of the story in the book of Revelation there is a city. It is the greenest of cities. It sounds suspiciously like the garden in the beginning:

On each side of the river stood the Tree of Life, bearing 12 crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

It's all there. And in the midst of this garden-city there is the throne of God and of the Lamb. The story ends with the crucified and risen Christ as Lord of the Garden.

To confess God the Maker of heaven and earth is to confess all that is – people and poverty, eagles and earthquakes, gravity and grapes – will all bow to Jesus the Christ. He is why Creation exists. He is where creation is heading. He is the healer of the garden. Paul the Apostle writes of him:

For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. (Col. 1:16)

Right now you and I live in between the garden that was and the garden city that will be. We are like people who know the beginning and end of the novel, but not exactly how it goes in the messy middle. So do we trust the writer, author, creator heal the mess – even when we don't understand the plot? Or do we decide that this is a novel we'll have to write by ourselves. Is it our Father's world, or does it belong to somebody else?

The way you answer the question can change the way you look at a tree, or your marriage, or your computer, or life, or death – forever. The creed promises that in the end all will be well in the garden. If we believe the promise we can play our part in the drama.

Conclusion

So what can the dirt do for us? The atheist is content to know its properties. The agnostic is willing to wonder who put it there. But faith looks and asks a deeper question: Why the dirt?

We should dig in the dirt a while until we remember what we might have forgotten. The answer is tied up with the Maker of heaven and earth.