

Jesus in Genesis: Far as the Curse is Found

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Genesis 3:17-24

As most of you know I grew up in Canada and, although it wasn't that much further north than Grand Rapids, the winters were significantly colder than they are here. Colder and longer. From November through March, the air was frigid, the trees were bare, and the ground was hard. I was a paper boy back in the day and I remember the grind of delivering papers those cold months. March wasn't the coldest, but it was the worst. By the time March rolled around you were so done with winter. I'd trudge up Hudson Drive with my paper bag over my shoulder crossing front lawns that were frozen hard, the clods of earth were like concrete under your boots. By March, those lawns were mangled. The plows had torn up the turf at the edges. Sand and salt littered the parts of the lawn closest to the road. The grass was brown and twisted. It was hard to believe that they would ever be green again. By March, winter was starting to grind you down. By April I was so sick of winter that if the weatherman would forecast April snow, which happened a lot, it would be enough to put me in a foul mood for the rest of the day.

But spring always came. By the end of May, the lawns which had been so mangled, somehow became thick and green. By the end of May, everywhere you turned things were growing. I have a specific memory from when I was about 8; a memory of lying down in the grass of my backyard on a warm May day just to feel the life of the grass, the smell of it, the green of it. It felt like the earth was so fertile that if I stayed still I would be able to see the grass grow. The sense of life and growth was so strong, I felt sure that if I were to plant a steel pipe in the ground, it couldn't help but grow into a lamppost. It was a good feeling. I felt alive, content.

Can you relate to these experiences? I think most of you can. Even if you've never been a paper boy in a Canadian winter, even if you've never lain down in the grass to watch it grow, I think you know how a long winter drags you down and a warm spring day lifts your spirits. I think you all know how the seasons and the weather have the power to affect our moods, our spirits. And that's what I want us to see first of all this morning. There is a connection between our Spirit, our inner life and the natural world. The natural world and our inner spiritual life are linked and when you read the first three chapters of Genesis you can see this is absolutely the way God intended it. God made us to have a relationship with the natural world.

It's a two-way relationship. It flows from us to creation. In Genesis 2:15 God puts human beings in the garden and tells us to work the garden and take care of it. We care for creation and bless it, and work it. God wants us to care for creation, but also to use our own creativity to develop it, to create culture. In the relationship, that's us flowing towards creation, blessing creation. But creation also flows towards us. The natural world gives food and fruitfulness and beauty. The natural world gives us food and joy and delight. This relationship is created by God. God wants us to be in this relationship, and in the beginning, as Genesis 1 and 2 describe it, this relationship is a source of nothing but blessing and joy and fruitfulness.

Even though human sin has damaged this relationship, and we'll talk more about that in a second, we can still feel the original goodness of that relationship as God created it. We still feel that positive dimension of the relationship in our hearts. When we look up in awe at a night sky full of stars. When we say 'Wow' at the edge of the Grand Canyon. When a scientist experiences a thrill of delight as she closely studies the intricacies of creation. Or when an 8-year-old boy lies in the grass on a warm spring day and feels the joy of spring, we are still feeling in our souls the relationship with creation as it ought to be.

But of course, things are not the way they are supposed to be. In our passage it all goes wrong. Human sin distorts this good relationship. Thorns infest the ground. "Cursed be the ground because of you!" Now our relationship with creation is complicated and strained. Now we often experience creation as a threat, and that affects our spirits. When you feel irritated by a cold snowy day in April, when a child feels afraid of the dark, when another cloudy day puts you in a funk, we are feeling the tension in the relationship; we are feeling the weight of the curse. It was supposed to be good and life-giving, but now it's broken. And we are waiting, waiting, waiting for that relationship to be restored.

Advent is, of course, the season of waiting, and we are waiting for all sorts of things. We are waiting for Christ to return so that we can see him face to face. We are waiting for Christ to fully restore relationships between people; we ready for the swords to be beaten into plowshares and the spears into pruning hooks. But part of our waiting is for the Lord to fix the relationship between us and the natural world. And it's not just us. Both parties in the relationship are waiting. We are waiting for the day when we won't experience the natural world as a threat. But creation is waiting too! That's what Paul says in Romans 8. "The whole creation waits in eager anticipation for the sons and daughters of God to be revealed, for the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected in order that the creation itself may be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glory and freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth, right up to the present time..."

Human beings and creation, we are like a couple of old friends. We used to be so close. We used to get along great, we brought each other so much joy, but we messed it up and now it's tense and awkward. It used to be free and easy, but now, to use the word Kristy used in her excellent sermon of last week, there's enmity. It's our fault. We humans messed it up, but both parties in this relationship miss the way it used to be, and even though we've been trying to fix things we can't seem to get it right. We need help. We need a mediator.

From the very beginning, from the moment the curse fell on the ground, God has been working to restore the relationship between us and the natural world. There are places throughout scripture where you can see that this is part of God's plan. It shows up as early as Genesis 9. You remember that after the great natural disaster of the flood, an event that was obviously a huge stress point in the relationship between people and creation, God made a covenant with Noah. Do you remember that? Noah made a sacrifice and God sent the sign of the rainbow. The promise wasn't just between God and people, in verse 16 God says, "whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the covenant between God and all the living creatures of every kind upon the earth." God is stabilizing the relationship between us and creation; he's making restorative promises.

Later, in the book of Exodus, just before they enter the promised land, God gives the law to Israel. Many of those laws, the sacrifices for instance, are about restoring and maintaining the relationship between Israel and God. Many of those laws, you shall not steal, you shall not kill, are about restoring the relationship between us and other people. But many of the laws are about caring for the natural world, laws about when to give rest to your fields, laws against abusing animals. In the giving of the law God shows that he's working on the relationship between us and the natural world.

The prophets. The prophets call us back to proper relationship with God. Leave your idols! Don't forget the Lord. The prophets call us to proper relationship with each other, do justice! Love kindness! But the prophets also say wonderful things about creation being restored. The desert will burst into bloom! The harvest will be abundant. Wine will flow from the hills. Isaiah 35: "The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground a bubbling spring. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow."

Which brings us to Jesus. The one who is the center of all our advent songs, all our advent prayers, all our advent waiting. We know that Jesus came to restore the relationship between us and God. All praise to him for that. We know that Jesus came to teach us to love each other; to love our neighbors as ourselves. In his ministry, is there anything that Jesus did that shows he was also concerned about our relationship with the natural world? Yes. His miracles do that. We are used to thinking of Jesus' miracles as an expression of his power. We think he did them to show that he was the son of God, and that's right. That's a big part of what the miracles did. But there is more to them than that. When Jesus performs a healing miracle, he's pointing to a day when the blind will see and the lame will leap like a deer; the day when the curse shall be lifted from our natural bodies. When Jesus rescues the disciples from a storm on the sea of Galilee, when he says to the waters, "peace be still!" he's showing us that he came to bring peace to the relationship between us and the natural world. When Jesus multiplies bread in the feeding of the 5000, or when he creates an abundance of wine at the wedding miracle at Cana, he's showing us that he can change the scarcity of the curse, you will have to toil for your food, back to the abundance of the garden. And when Jesus wears the crown of thorns upon the cross he shows that he is taking the curse of creation upon himself and he's come to make his blessings known far as the curse is found.

C.S. Lewis makes this point really well. He says that the miracle of Jesus turning water into wine isn't breaking the laws of nature, it's Jesus speeding nature up. God turns water into wine all the time, says Lewis. Water falls on the vines, God makes the vines bear grapes, and then the grapes become wine! At Cana, Jesus just takes the toil out of the process. He speeds it up. He's making nature super-fruitful. Here's a quote: We only see half of God's purpose, "if [the miracle] only convinces us that Christ is God: it will have its full effect if, whenever we see a vineyard or drink a glass of wine, we remember that here works He who sat at the wedding party in Cana." In the wearing of the crown of thorns, in the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, in the turning water into wine, Jesus is revealing himself as the one who brought creation into being in the first place, and the one who will come and make all things new.

I want to say one more thing. When God announces the curse on creation, the curse is summed up by two things. Thorns and dust: We've talked about the thorns, but part of the curse on creation is that we will return to the dust. That reminds us that the place where we feel the broken relationship between us and the natural world most intimately and clearly is in our relationship with our own body. That's a complicated relationship too. Sometimes it's good, and sometimes it's not.

The older you get, the more it's not. When I was young I remember the thrill of my body's strength. I remember feeling like I could run all day. I remember the keenness of my senses. But now as a person past middle age, what I notice most about my body is the inevitable decline. Hearing. Sight. I haven't been able to play basketball in more than a year. One of my absolute favorite things to do was to play soccer on a field of pure green grass. I doubt my knee will allow me ever to do that again. Even as I say that I know there are many people sitting here right now who are saying, "just you wait buster! It gets worse."

What is that? It's the voice of the dust. It's me experiencing the brokenness of my relationship with creation in my own body. It's the dust rising up and slowly and inevitably asserting itself in my life. And yours. For many this decline causes despair and hopelessness. But we are advent people! Our hope doesn't die that easily. We have seen the light of the world come to a dark and dusty stable. And when that baby grew he didn't just turn water into wine and calm the seas, he kicked open the door off the grave. He didn't just wear the crown of thorns, he rose from the dust and broke the power of the Genesis curse. So we may limp, and our joints may ache; we may groan when we get out of a chair, and we may need to ask you to repeat yourself in the narthex but we still sing Joy to the World with heart and soul. Because our Lord has come. ©Rev. Peter Jonker