

*Soil People: From Genesis to Revelation*

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Genesis 1:26

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

Genesis 2:15

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

Revelation 21:1-2

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God,

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Beloved, it is so good to be with you today.

Perhaps like some of you, amidst the daily stressors of school, or work, family or partners, paying the bills and trying to balance friendships, exercise, and community activities, there are larger existential questions that provide a constant, yet unnerving companion to your daily life.

For example, with the wealth gap continuing to grow, one must wonder if we'll find economic stopgap measures to create more equity, or perhaps a new way of relating to money, work, and commerce altogether?

Or in a world so deeply divided by race and religion, does living peaceably with justice for all lay on our horizon, or are we so woefully disjointed that seeing our neighbors as kin is a dream, and we're destined to perpetuate patterns of violence, segregation, and the misallocation of resources?

Each of these challenges provides the Christian with a major ethical quandary requiring prayer, community support, and bold action. Whether economic inequality, racial and religious divisions, or the pandemic, each challenge necessitates a reimagining of our faith; a digging deep into the tradition, and a building up of how we can *be Christians in our place and at this time*.

For me, the story of our time that keeps me up at night - the one which challenges my foundational beliefs about sin, repentance, and discipleship - is the climate crisis.

The destruction of ecosystems.

Land swallowed up by the sea in Jakarta, Miami, and Dhaka.

Creatures near and far - left fleeing their homelands, for refuge.

Rivers polluted. Forests slashed to the ground. Air poisoned.

Only two countries – Morocco and the Gambia – are on track to meet the 1.5 celsius target decided upon at the Paris Agreement. The largest emitters, including the United States, China, Russia and Saudi Arabia, are putting the world on course for 4 degrees celsius above pre-industrial levels. The news is so disheartening that a growing number of jurisdictions are considering establishing ecocide - yes, you heard me correctly, ecocide - as a crime to correct the shortcomings of the Paris agreement in order to prevent mass famine, displacement and extinction.

Community after community devastated by instability and a resource arms-race that will dwarf that of the nuclear variety just decades ago.

Talk to a climate scientist, or a local environmentalist, and the picture is not only bleak but apocalyptic. The images on the evening news - the video footage of California burning and Texas frozen - they point to both human and environmental failures on a massive scale. And we're left asking:

What if we don't cut emissions? What if temperatures & sea levels continue to rise, storms wipe out entire cities, and billions enter an era of water & food insecurity unbeknownst to the world at this scale in human history? What if massive violence erupts across nations as the fight for resources only furthers the gap between the haves and the have nots? What if we fail?

A world plunged into economic, political, and environmental chaos some anticipate will make the past year feel like a blip on the radar. This is the challenge we face, one that some have perpetuated, and many have inherited.

For those who've either built or inherited economic systems that reward non-regenerative extraction, relationships with water, creatures, land, and resources have all too often been abusive, and have degraded a planet that is now fighting for survival. It's certainly the case that modern conceptions of economic value, property

values, and the extraction of value from land for productivity's sake has a central role in understanding how we got here. And yet, it isn't in any small way an understatement to say the ethereal pursuit of a bodiless heaven - a theological and exegetical lens through which our entire ecclesial, political and economic lives have been imagined - has contributed to inundating our planet with suffering. This is not to mention all of God's beloved children who are unjustly experiencing the loss of crops, the increased spread of disease, forced migration, and an uncertain future because of the actions of some at the expense of many.

Friends, surely this isn't the story we find in the scriptures. No, in fact, so much of the way we relate to our farms, and farmers, to rivers and lakes, to tomatoes and wheat, and to birds and bugs, moves in the opposite direction of the voice of the God who calls us out of sin and into new life.

What does this all mean for the Christian life? What does proper relationship with the non-human creation look like? And lastly, how can a right, and proper, and imaginative reading of the scriptures lead Christians into a life of practices, habitats, and rituals reflective of a love of God and God's creation?

And so friends, today, let's rediscover that story together: to find ourselves and our neighbor, our God and our beloved creation, caught up in a story that reminds us that a life - a Christian life - is measured in the beholder's emptying of everything for the sake of the world.

In Genesis chapters 1 and 2, we read that God creates abundantly, and creates a world that is beautiful. "And it was good!" we read, over and over, after each day. "And it was good!"

Before humans show up on the scene, creation is called good. Without humans to give them worth, before they name them, or use them as resources, the streams, beavers, and soils - clay, chalky, silty, and loamy - all are called good just as they are. Just as we are.

When God created human beings - that 6th day of the creation story - human beings came after the creatures of the ground. They shared that day with the other creatures of the land. Humans find themselves with a beautiful place among other creatures as 'good' and beloved by God. While we are unique, and given distinction from the non-human creation, human beings cannot escape their intimate connectedness to the rest of the creation.

“Let us make humankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground,” Genesis chapter 1 verse 26.

The Hebrew word for *humankind*, or what others translate as ‘man’, *Adam*, is where we get the English word *Adam* from.

And this is where things get interesting: it’s believed that this word, *Adam*, is derived from Hebrew noun *Adamah*, the Hebrew word for ground, or earth, or soil.

Thus, we are ‘*Adam*’ from the ‘*Adamah*’. In the Hebrew, human beings are quite literally, ‘soil people.’

Soil people, friends! How beautiful and how timely to recover such an image!

Returning to Genesis for a moment, “So that they may *rule over* the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” Some of you may be familiar with the phrase “to have dominion over” as found in other translations.

To have dominion: Is that license to do whatever we want? Is that the firm foundation Christians have laid in order to strip the creation of its resources to meet the dietary and energy needs of the ‘superior species’?

Well, perhaps it is, and God help us if that’s the case, though I believe that to be inaccurate reading of the scriptures.

If that was the case, we’d be guilty of forgetting Genesis chapter 2 verse 15, a passage which reads, “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.” Other translations say of the man, “...he was to work it and take care of it.”

In the Hebrew, humans were put in the garden to *avad* and *shamar* the land. *Avad* in Hebrew is used all over the Old Testament. The famous passage from Joshua chapter 24 verse 15, a familiar one to many reads, “But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

Though it has several possible translations, including ‘to work’ or ‘to worship’, *avad* in this context likely means ‘to serve.’ Thus, in Joshua, “But as for me and my house, we will *Avad* the Lord.” Returning to Genesis chapter 2 verse 15, “he was to *avad* - to serve it - it being the creation and.... *Shamar* it...” What’s *shamar*?

*Shamar* is a Hebrew word found here in Genesis, and several other books in the Old Testament, but is most commonly found - 6 times in fact - in Psalm 121 referring to God's protection, provision, and active guard over God's people. This meaning is the same meaning found back in the first chapter of Genesis. Take note how unpacking these words in the Hebrew reveal to us a great deal about the human-creation relationship.

*Avad* is to serve. *Shamar* is to fiercely protect from harm. From the beginning in the garden, the human call to care for creation is to *avad* and *shamar* - to serve and to protect from all harm. Unequivocally. Full stop.

As the story of scripture unfolds, as you know, we read of purity codes, the proper treatment of animals, what can be eaten and what cannot, even how to plant crops. The bible isn't exactly *Silent Spring*, nor is it trying to be, but a careful reading invites you and I into this exciting story that starts in Genesis, casts a wide arc from the prophets to Jesus to the apostles all the way to the book of Revelation where we pick up the story.

From Revelation chapter 21, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God."

Though it's tempting - and there are a handful of verses that may suggest so - to believe that God's plan for creation revolves around starting over - for some of you images of hellfire and the earth being set ablaze may come to mind - that isn't what we read here in verse 5, nor does it align with God's character through to the rest of scripture.

The word *new* referencing the *new heaven and new earth* is, in the Greek, the word *Kainos* (*Kai-nas*), a word meaning "renew". Thus, John of Patmos, the likely author of the book of Revelation, reveals to us, "Then I saw a renewed heaven and a renewed Earth."

A renewed heaven and a renewed earth; a creation made good by God in the earliest of days, tainted by sin, restored by the salvific work of Jesus Christ, and renewed in the Kingdom.

What does God's restoration look like? Well, I imagine it looks like the New Jerusalem here on earth, it looks like God's realm and ours joining once and for all as a renewed heaven and earth. It looks like wholeness, shalom, and God's grace-filled and just reign.

This story of wholeness, newness, and restoration ushered into the world to free us all death and despair and destruction.... Let me assure you that this story and us finding

ourselves within it is at the very heart of being a hopeful people fully equipped to face the climate crisis head on. This is hope in the face of despair; even when it's not easy.

A friend of mine who's a transportation planner in Washington state tells me that most days, she doesn't *feel* hope. She says, "I just try to do my best in the hope that I can be a force of defiant good, no matter how small a task I am participating in." A force of defiant good. Why? Perhaps because in a world dead-set on destroying itself, our hope has to be gritty. It has to be a deep, abiding, and stubborn hope.

I want to do my best to convince you that the hope needed in this moment must draw from a deep well - that well being the story of God's redemption that each of us must find our place in - and also by *literally knowing our place*.

Do you know your neighborhood? What watershed do you live in? Does everyone on your block have access to healthy, affordable food? Do you?

I'm not under any belief that we're going to stabilize our climate alone, nor do I expect any of you to go out and be climate scientists, or urban planners, or clean energy engineers. But I do know this: each of you is a beloved child of God called to live into the story of God's restoration, and that restoration means dying to oneself. For Christ, and in turn, for neighbor, for enemy, and for creation, so that all might thrive.

Be joyful, friends, *though you have considered all the facts. Be joyful and know your watershed, plant trees, nurture pollinator pathways, and love your neighbor.*

Beloved, with Jesus Christ as your model and the Holy Spirit, I invite you to practice resurrection each and every day. Love this world so deeply it gets dirt under your nails and scuffs up your knees. Love this world so much you delight in the taste of fresh vegetables, plant flowers that have no economic value, and even learn to go without so that others might *have*.

If we cannot learn to find beauty in taking public transit, living closer together, sharing our resources, and advancing mutual aid so that others might thrive, our neighbors, human and non-creation, will suffer, and so will we.

If, on the other hand, we can find wisdom in our elders and the saints, practices from those who've stewarded land and water, and re-envisioned a relationship to the world rooted in reciprocity, love, and respect, we might just have a chance.

Practice new life, friends, and practice resurrection for you and I are soil people.

Before I leave you, a blessing:

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you : wherever God may send you;  
may God guide you through the wilderness : protect you through the storm;  
may God bring you home rejoicing : at the wonders God has shown you;  
may God bring you home rejoicing : once again into our doors.

Amen.