

Land Sunday (13 Aug 17)

Genesis 3:14-19, 4:8-16; Psalm 139:7-10; Romans 5:12-17; Matthew 12:38-40

As good as vacation was—and I'll say more in a minute—I lament not being here with you last week.

Partly that's just because I never like to miss. What we do here together is so important and so meaningful and so worthwhile that it's hard to be away from your lives and our community and the growth of big bluestem in the prairie. I particularly missed being gone for the start of this Season of Creation. I would've loved to have been here for Larry Henning's forest reflections and trust that you were well served by the Spirit's work through his good words.

Had I been here, I would've probably done some explaining for you like this: the Season of Creation was developed by a Lutheran theologian in Australia intending to fill a gap with the usual lectionary, which can leave us thinking much too much about people. It's not even theological at that point; it's anthropological, not God-centered but people-centered. We close ourselves inside these doors, thinking about Jesus as fully human but not as fully creature of earth. We ignore that God's work is almost infinitely more vast than us. As Psalm 8 declares, when we look up at the unfathomable cosmic distances it's awesome that God could be mindful of us and relate to us and care for us, but God does! We need that promise, need it in the context of our small spot amid a creation that delights God and is delighted by God. It's so faithfully vital for us, so vitally part of this faith. Without this locale and cosmic setting, our faith wouldn't begin to be what it is. God wouldn't be who God is. It's not an add on, not just that we pause from other things to think about creation and nature

and the environment for four weeks out of the year.

And yet, amid my excitement about celebrating these weeks of the Season of Creation and finding them so core to what we should be always understanding, still this week comes as a shock. Instead of setting out to explore the gift of land, of the amazing diversity of how it encounters us, how it is formed and re-formed, instead of the delights and the blooming desert in Isaiah or the quaking earth of Elijah or the fertile soils of the Promised Land or even the stuff that inches out to be separate from the waters in the beginning and is seen as good, instead I come back from vacation to a curse and a struggle. A double whammy from the book of Genesis. Gee, thanks Genesis.

It's not just me being thrown into this on my return from vacation. The whole story could feel that way. Life had barely begun in the Garden of Eden. We would've preferred more time to lounge around in paradise before the problems, but that's not the function of the story. I would contend it's less of an origin story and more intended to portray the current state of things. It's not trying to cast blame back to some prototypical Adam and Eve, but is simply addressing the realities we already know to be true, the struggles we regularly exist amid, voicing that things just won't go right in our relationships. As it's set up for us on this Land Sunday, the main focus is what our relationship to land ought to be, but also where that's gone wrong.

The question about curse, then, traveled with me on vacation through all kinds of lands. For the most obvious, I was last at Badlands National Park. With a name almost verbatim declaring curse, there's wide and long agreement on the badness of these lands. For hundreds of years the native Lakota referred to them as *makoshika*: land of bad spirits, or bad land. French trappers concurred with the name

les mauvais terres. Park service publications say these names “invoke visions of a harsh and inhospitable landscape, where dangers lurk down every canyon.” While they do warn of rattlesnake bites (which I won’t overemphasize as connection to the serpent in Genesis), the broader set of safety concerns amid the Badlands listed includes thirst and sunburn and stubbed toes and slippery-when-wet slopes and getting lost.

None of that seems awful enough, though, to account for the curse in Genesis. Those lands aren’t bad just because they offer extremes of dehydration or risk of fall; these difficulties in the Badlands paradoxically highlight their endurance. We go to the difficult-to-traverse Badlands specifically to traverse them, to wander the trails, to strain our muscles and bruise our knees. Our nation hasn’t thrown them to the trashheap but has especially set them aside, saving and conserving them as a nationally celebrated location, drawing a million visitors per year.

But our relationship to these lands is also in portrayed by my favorite historical phrase about Bryce Canyon National Park from its original white settler: “it’s a helluva place to lose a cow.” Our stock phrase is that it’s a good place to visit, but we wouldn’t want to live there. We are stuck with some view of land, then, as its utility or profitability to us. If farming can’t easily happen in the Badlands, that is precisely what makes them “bad.”

This tension is still sharper in Utah, with over a million acres of land set aside as wilderness, a term defined in law as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” (Again, we’ll leave aside for today the connections to Genesis’ curse of that sexist language that doesn’t say anything about how long women might stay in wilderness.) We’d have to admit that the wild lands of Utah and

elsewhere, though rich in beauty and sometimes fragile in ecological value, are mostly set aside because they weren’t viewed as useful to us otherwise. Basically, they didn’t have farms on them.

We could pause to say this has been an exceptionally long trend. This is mostly how the Bible parses land, as well: that there’s desert that isn’t a place for people but is a haunt of jackals and ostriches (*eg, Isaiah 34:13*). On the other side is good land, even *Promised Land*, with orchards and fields. We’ve simply gone on to transpose that sense into our setting. Here in “God’s country,” with the rich loams of the Midwest as garden to feed us, we figure we must be amid promise and not curse.

More ambivalently, Utah’s land is not farmed or dwelt in, not humanized, so it can be set aside as wilderness...right until it can’t. Then we fight over land’s meaning. I’ve been reading Edward Abbey describing Glen Canyon as the most beautiful ever* with all the animals that called it home, until we decided we could have our use for it, which was to destroy it under a reservoir and the beautiful canyon was dammed and damned. And we cherish Arches National Park and Canyonlands, observes Terry Tempest Williams**, until we find that there is natural gas we could mine under the park, and then we’re eager to get rid of the wilderness designation and make use of the place.

The point is to question cursedness. Instead of anything inherently making locations bad lands—the topography or soil quality—it’s about our relationship and when we try to claim away from it instead of preserving and caring for it as it is. Amid the struggle—these thorns and briars, we lose sight of the land as good and focus only on what we can get out of it. It’s not just western abuses, but how our corporate

* *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, p64

** *The Hour of Land: A Personal Topography of America’s National Parks*, p253-299

farming practices are extractive industries pulling life from the soil. That's not God cursing the land. It's us.

And then we finally pull our own life from the soil, extracting ourselves from the ground where we, too, were meant to be planted. That is such a fascinating detail in the account of Cain and Abel. Even when he's dead and gone, Abel's blood can cry out from the ground. Something of his life remains there in place. But Cain is displaced. Genesis is compressing generations of human development (or, as we usually call it, progress), where the lifestyle of the nomadic herdsmen goes away and the farmer comes to dominate, but then the farmer leaves the land and—in the last verse—moves away. The ultimate point in the reading is that he's gone to the city, from rural and land-connected to urban and separated from God. Again, this is the pattern we still see. Ultimately in cultural conversation, it's not a struggle between Wisconsin agriculture and Utah wilderness. Both are derided in the popular term "flyover country." They're diminished, as if only the cities are the place of culture, the place for humans, while the land—all land—is oddly separate and remote and problematic. That is the final characteristic of the curse: not only are our relationships with each other broken down, between genders, in families. The ground cries out as our very relationship with it is lived out as a struggle, as something to be overcome, as we see it not as garden gift but as curse, as something to get away from.

For the good of life, we need to realize our humanity with and in the humus, connected and dependent, as earthlings. But instead we're quite literally uprooted. This has implications for our sense of place, for governmental policy, for the food we eat, and on and on. That's huge and dire and I've said terribly little of good news.

Even though the readings leave us here, we know this isn't the end. If we speak of curse without getting to redemption and reconciliation, our Christian message is incomplete. For brief forecasts of that blessing beyond condemnation, we might take it as actually good that "to dust you shall return," that you aren't forever estranged but in your end are reconciled with the earth and recycled and recreated. Maybe in the words of Jesus' burial we see a godly replanting, that life is meant to be in and of earth for good, even then of God putting us back in our place, that God kills the curse and redeems death.

Finally, then, is the place of God in Genesis. I want you to notice that although all kinds of relationships—with neighbor and with creation—are seen as struggle, as broken down, as accursed, that is not a description of relationship with God. The relationship with God is not described here as cursed. Though Cain may stray and find himself in a place where the relationship is strained, and God's presence feels further, God will not cut you off. Jesus comes to make his blessings flow as far as the curse is found. (*Hymn of the Day: Joy to the World*)