

Where are you from?

Sermon 103 | Greystone Baptist Church | June 13, 2021

Genesis 2:4b-22

The last fifteen months brought so many changes to our “normal” lives that it is hard to keep track of all the waves that seemed to come crashing in one after the other. First there was the toilet paper wave that invoked quarantine panic and left many of us worrying we might have to get creative. Then there was the yeast and flour shortage as folks decided to learn how to bake their own bread while they were stuck at home. As someone who has baked bread for nearly 20 years now, this wave was particularly troubling. Then there were labor shortages and interruptions to the supply chain as factories around the world responded to the global health crisis; and these interruptions in the labor force coupled with a growing number of people opting to update and renovate their homes has caused a lumber crisis as the price of wood and other construction materials skyrockets.

People have chosen some very interesting ways to deal with this pandemic, haven't we?

I am proud to say that thanks to my husband's affinity for keeping our attic shelf stocked with Costco-sized packages of toilet paper, and my long-standing habit of keeping my 25-lb. flour container pretty full... we did not need to participate in the pandemic panic buying waves that came along last year.

But I must admit to you that there is one trend that I have been caught up in for the last several months: houseplants. I've been into vegetable gardening for years and years. After moving to Raleigh, I've started thinking more about flowering plants, shrubs, and trees to add to the landscaping around my house. But it wasn't until the long COVID winter indoors, waiting for the last frost to come and go, that I realized there are plants that can thrive indoors!

There is philodendron and pothos, monstera and string of hearts, there is snake plant and aloe vera, peace lily and prayer plant. The list goes on and on and the more you research, the more you can learn about indirect light verses direct light, variegation and coloration... even about tap water verses distilled or rain water.

I always thought one's ability to produce a beautiful garden came down to luck and prayer. That's what it meant to have a green thumb right? Well it turns out, there's a bit more to it than that.

As children we learn that plants need three things to survive: water, soil, and sun. And that is true, but what we later learn (if we continue to seek out the information) is that each of those things comes in different varieties, because all the different kinds of plants we might try to grow and nurture come from different places. Each geographic location boasts its own unique composition of water, soil, and sun and the plants that are native to each location work in harmony with their natural environment. So, if a gardener (or pandemic house plant connoisseur) wants to nurture a beautiful display of healthy tropical plants, she will have to re-create a tropical environment: mimicking the amount of sunlight a plant

might receive beneath the rainforest canopy, periodically spritzing the leaves to help create a more humid environment, and maybe even purchasing a container of “worm castings” to offer a bit of that natural compost which would feed the plant in its native environment. It turns out, understanding where a plant comes from can make a huge difference in one’s success as a gardener.

Truth be told, plants are not unique in this regard. Aren’t we all shaped by our native environments?

Where are you from?

It’s a common question. One we ask one another all the time, often in the first moments when we’re getting to know someone new. “Hello. What’s your name? What do you do? Where are you from?”

Sometimes we can connect with people based on a common hometown or region. “I’m from this small town in eastern North Carolina, you wouldn’t know it but it’s outside of Wilmington.” “Oh yeah? What town?” “Sneads Ferry” “Oh! I’ve been there! There’s some beautiful land over there near the inlet...”

And immediately a connection is made. Strangers are now united because there is a sense of understanding. Understanding not only about the land but also about the culture. There are shared values and codes of conduct. There is a shared language and dialect. And there is a mutually accepted way of living, a culture, formed and informed by our places of origin.

This symbiotic relationship that all of us have with our places of origin is noted in the creation stories of Genesis. In today’s reading we meet God in the act of creation. Unlike the first creation account where each day is ordered with separation of land and sea, light and dark, swimming creatures and crawling creatures...In this second account, God seems to be lower, perhaps even within or below the ground. From below the waters spring forth offering water. The shrubs and flowering plants emerge and then God realizes there is no one to work the land. So God kneels down (or rises up from the ground) and breathes the breath of life into the nostrils of the first human, Adam.

The Hebrew word Adam is a pronoun derived from *adamah* meaning ground or earth, reminding us that humanity comes from the ground, the *adam* is shaped from *adamah*. Then God lowers God’s own self down to ground level, and breathes life into *adam*, freshly formed from the *adamah*.

Then God continues creating trees, gardens, edible and flowering plants. Plants to provide life sustaining food and plants to provide beauty. Once the created order is complete, God places *adam* in the garden to tend it. Translating the verb here is almost as lost on us as the connection between *adam* and *adamah*. In Hebrew the job or purpose that *adam* has in the garden is to “*abad*.” English translations struggle to make sense of this word offering a number of solutions in the different translations. The New Revised Standard Version says

adam is in the garden to “till it;” the New International says, “to work it,” Common English Bible says, “to farm it,” the New Jerusalem Bible (and other translations as well) say, “to cultivate” it. But all of these fall short of the fuller meaning of the Hebrew word, *abad*.

In contrast to the creation account in Genesis 1 where human beings are given dominion over the created order, here, the purpose is to *abad*, to serve, to work for, to lower one’s self as subject, to labor for the benefit of creation.

Adam came from the *adamah* for the purpose of *abad*. See how the poetic beauty of the text is lost in translation?

So where do we come from? Well, as C.S. Lewis reminds us in the *Chronicles of Narnia*, we, human beings, are Sons and Daughters of Adam and Eve. We come from Adam, *adam*, the one who God brought forth from *adamah*, the one whose vocation and purpose is to *abad*.

You know it is interesting, as familiar as these stories are (I’m talking about both Genesis and the *Chronicles of Narnia*), I have never heard somebody answer the question “Where are you from?” with an answer like “I come from the dust of the earth,” or “I am a child of Adam”. Instead we focus on our more recent roots and distance ourselves from that ancient heritage saying: “I’m from Charlotte, _____ (congregation to fill in the blank here with texts)...

And that information helps us to claim things about ourselves that we want others to know. They help us identify with the kind of neighborhood we grew up in, the kind of schools we went to, the kind of jobs our parents had, and as a byproduct people can begin to make assumptions about the kind of people we are, whether or not we have anything in common, and perhaps even whether or not they are willing to give us the benefit of the doubt.

You see, where we are from informs who we are, but it also shapes how we perceive others. We can only know as much as our experience allows, right?

It can be easy to approach our ideas about society and community a bit like a beginner gardening lesson. Soil + water + sunlight = a healthy and thriving plant. Many of us think that hard work + determination + prayer or faith = some measure of stability or success.

But what we fail to see is that we aren’t all made and shaped exactly the same way. We are unique. Made from the soils of our hometowns, our family experiences, our early childhood education opportunities and all the schooling that happened after that. We are shaped by the narratives that our parents and grandparents taught us about life and the ways of the world... these are the unique soil compositions within which we have learned to live, and grow, and thrive.

We have learned to play by certain rules (both explicit and implicit) and it is easy for us to expect that everyone else should do the same.

At least if they want to do things the right way... right?

The problem is, we are not always coming from the same place.

Some are from ___ and others from ____,
some from rural North Carolina and others from urban New England,
some were raised on European soil and others on Latin American soil,
some grew up hearing stories about how their white skin made them better than others
and some grew up knowing that no matter what *society* had to say, black was indeed
breathtakingly beautiful.

And now those who hedged their bets on the promise of their particular soils are using
their voices and saying things like "Black lives matter" which is being met with the other
phrase "All lives matter".

Which on the surface might sound like: "Aren't we all children of Adam, *adam* from
adamah?"

But which, in the context of history, is just another way of dismissing the voices of those
who just want somebody to listen and hear what they're saying when they cry out in
generations-old pain.

Where are you coming from? we ask.

But do we really want to know the answer?

Or are we afraid that our roots could not survive the kind of soil transformation that might
be required if we started to understand and welcome and truly accept folks who are
coming from all kinds of different places?

You know, I have had so much fun these last few months as I've learned more about plants
and what it takes to nurture them. I confess at first I was losing interest in hostas, ferns, and
hydrangeas... thinking those would be the only plants I could ever grow in this full shade
environment. But then I learned that with just a few adjustments in the colder months,
tropical plants can grow here too! Things with wildly exotic flowers like bromeliads and
plants with trailing pink variegated foliage! Colors and patterns I'd never seen before,
growing right here in my southern, Raleigh home. I just had to adjust the soil composition
when getting the pots situated. And yes, I walk around and mist the leaves every now and
then to re-create their natural, humid environment. It has required a little bit of change
and understanding... but there is nothing like the beauty of the plants I grew up with,
those native to this part of the world, sitting on my screened porch, right next to the del
mar bromeliad with it's pink stem and purple flowers jutting 18 inches or so out beyond
the top leaf.

When I see it all and think about where they all come from and how they're all living here together in this beautiful, adapted environment, it feels like a little glimpse of heaven... a small version of God's beloved community.

And it reminds me that when God situated all of creation, God started from the ground up. Breathing life and giving humankind, *adam*, the task of caretaking service. Service to the earth, and service to one another.

And that's just something we cannot do if we aren't willing to ask and willing to learn where somebody's coming from.