

Creating Together: Divine Gardening

Back in January and February, in what now seems like another time, the Adult Education committee offered a series on gardening, which I began by asking "what is a garden?" I used photos of all kinds of scenes we might call gardens.

(The copy of this sermon online includes some photos.)



We agreed that gardens were necessarily a co-operative enterprise: that which is God-given—photosynthesis, insects to pollinate, soil to nourish, rain, wind, and sunshine—is augmented by human agents who remove weeds, add nutrients to the soil, create beauty through design and selection, increase yield by pruning and supporting. The garden is thus both gift and achievement.

We also noticed that gardens differ, not so much in their diversity—gardens by definition are diverse—but in the gardeners' need to control or manage the appearance of the garden. We could call it merely a matter of taste - French gardens vs. English gardens, highly artificial vs. more natural. Perhaps though we should pay attention to "beingness" of the garden as a whole.

Simply put, there are gardens that have been manicured into unnatural, geometric perfection and there are gardens that are permitted to change with the seasons, where plants can grow and die off and multiply according to their nature. The first kind demands admiration for the gardeners; the second invites meditation.



So as I reread the first chapters of *Genesis*, I considered how our thinking about that first garden might affect our image of our divine Gardener and thus also our ways of being in the world. That is what I would like to explore with you this morning.

Traditionally, we have read the *Creation* narrative through the lens of control. It is *God* who first makes order out of chaos. Then, having made the world through divine fiat, *God* makes the *Garden*, and plunks the first couple into it with instructions on what to eat and what not to eat. Actually, Adam gets those instructions, even before Eve is shaped from Adam's rib and presented to Adam as his "helpmeet."

In much of *Christian* history, that order of events was interpreted as an endorsement of an obvious hierarchy, with Eve subordinate to Adam, and both Adam and Eve subject to *God*. At the other end of the power structure, Adam and

Eve were instructed to “rule over” or “have dominion over” the entire world as given to them. Translations vary here, but I couldn’t find any that didn’t imply or directly state that humans are in control over the rest of the natural world.

Then comes the story of the forbidden fruit, and it’s all too easy to assume that if only this original hierarchy had been maintained, all would be well and we’d still be in the good Garden. Instead, after Eve and Adam’s mistaken effort to “be like gods,” humans have been in an undeclared war against the unruliness of the natural world, which grows so many weeds, lets so many nasty insects flourish, and has too many uninhabitable ecological zones. It’s a continuing struggle for control, and for safety as well. Because if only we could subdue our environment, we would be safe.

Out of that view of the lost Garden of Eden has arisen the image of God as the ultimate Controller. Newtonian physics, with its immutable laws of nature (gravity and so on), continued the narrative of an orderly, predictable, closed-in universe, set in motion by God, who had, in one week or thereabouts, created every thing that ever existed. In resistance to this developing scientific view of a distant, uninvolved God, devout Christians held to the image of God as an intensely personal Being, who was interested in every detail of our lives and answered our prayers, keeping us safe. From there, it seemed a short step to visualizing a nanny-

God (Maitland's phrase) who had a precise plan for our lives, which, if we obediently followed it, would make us joyful and prosperous; if we did not, we would have to settle for God's "second-best." The scope for guilt and self-doubt here is boundless.

Those first three chapters of *Genesis*, however, can be read otherwise. In fact, there is much in the text to point to human participation and creativity. Adam, for example, is invited to name all the living creatures, an act which can be seen as either affectionate or domineering. Adam and Eve are also not just passive recipients of a completed garden (if such a thing is possible). They are told to till the garden, to tend it; a Jewish translation speaks of "cultivating" and "caring" for the garden.

Eve is called a "companion" in some translations (an up-to-date version of "helpmeet" which, I have read, does not imply subordination but partnership). In the Jewish translation I checked, Eve is the "sustainer." One does not need to read a hierarchy of privilege and command into the division of humankind into female and male.

Most delightful of all, for me, is a brief glimpse of God behaving like a typical gardener, walking among the flowers in the cool of the evening. God is

fascinated with what has been made, or rather what has been making itself since any garden participates in its own processes. God shares the beauty and peace with the humans, who seem to have been unafraid, at ease, to judge by their unease and guilt after having eaten from the forbidden tree.

This is an individualized version of *Creation*, a wonderfully memorable story in which we can readily identify with Adam and Eve, and through which we can convey our conviction that our world was made by One around us had a Maker whose intentions were benevolent.

The more detailed scientific version we have today does not negate the intimacy of the *Genesis* version; instead, it foregrounds what the *Genesis* story only hints at—the unimaginable risk and contingency of the entire creative enterprise. The more that scientists discover, the more uncertain and even random it all seems.

Since I understand almost nothing about higher mathematics, quantum physics, astronomy, or any of the relevant sciences, I won't try to explain our infinitely vast universe (not to mention other possible universes) or the equally astonishing workings of the infinitesimally small particles, perpetually in motion, which compose the seemingly solid things we handle every day.

Instead I want to read three quotations from *A Joyful Theology* by British novelist and theologian Sara Maitland. It's a very readable summary of current scientific narratives about creation, and the theological conclusions we can reach from those narratives:

"The God who made this universe is, rather obviously, . . . a God who can, unlike us, think not just in millions, but in complex infinities. . . . a profoundly patient God, prepared to see galaxies form and die, chemical ooze hang around hopefully for millennia, information take millions of light years to arrive at a place where it can be useful, and so on. This is a God who is prepared to wait and see what will happen next. (Maitland, 52)

In this quantum world "that we know about, God is a gambler. There is risk at the heart; and God, braver than we tend to be, consents to that risk. God has built risk in, has created things this way." (Maitland, 58)

"We have a God who is extraordinarily generous. This God did not just create matter in order to . . . manage it, but created it as a gift to itself. In the random behaviour of sub-atomic particles, we see that God has really given the creation, not just lent it. . . . It is an interactive program.

Here is a God who prefers freedom and choice to determinism, safety, and control.

We see a God who is profoundly responsive, who will proceed with the eternal task of creation, incorporating into that mighty work every

possibility that the creation can come up with. We see a God who invites participation and cooperation.

We can also see a God who values difference, who does not want everything to be the same and to stay the same. . . . Any God who consents to the number of different forms of insect life that we have on this tiny planet clearly prefers variety to smooth administration. Any God who is a unity, and chooses to be that unity in three persons, is a God who likes difference. (Maitland, 59)

[end of quotations]

"We see a God who invites participation and cooperation" - "God, braver than we tend to be, consents to that risk."

Nowhere is that more evident than in another garden - the Garden of Gethsemane. We've heard that story recently in our Easter season, so I want to step back into that Garden through our reading from Philippians, which highlights both the unthinkable risk that God took, and God's intimate involvement with humanity, in all its diversity and stumbling idiocies. Jesus, "who being in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage [i.e., control it all through divine prerogative]; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. . . ." This was not a Big Bang moment but a big betrayal; incarnation becoming enmeshment in the worst that humanity had to offer.

Much could be said about this Philippian hymn as it is known, but I want to focus on its prologue and its epilogue; that's where we see most clearly that the mutual creativity, which God has built into the very nature of all that exists, functions also in the deepest suffering that we can know.

The prologue: "in your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus" - in other words, be open to fostering one another's wholeness, enter relationships fully, without seeking to manage outcomes. Just as our risk-taking, generous God submitted to the way things were on the ground: full participation in the ugliness of betrayal and the consequences of unchecked love of money and power; full participation in physical pain, not to mention humiliation; full participation in utter alone-ness.

The epilogue: "Therefore, my dear friends, . . . continue to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose."

I have never quite known what to make of this verse, and I can't remember any sermon that made sense of it for me. Which makes my current attempt to do so an example of outrageous hubris! Yet Maitland's description of the gambling

God, the loving, reckless God, offers me another angle from which to look at this contradictory—or paradoxical assertion.

"Continue to work out your salvation." Does that mean "you figure out what salvation might mean"? Or is it another way of saying, "you already know what salvation looks like, what it should be, but it's your job to carry it out in your way, to en flesh it, to engage in another monumental incarnation"? Either way, or both, this calls for complete involvement - but not alone.

Paul follows up his command to work out your salvation with the warm promise "for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose."

There we have it again - the intricate interworking of human initiative and divine gift and presence. Just as the entire complex, ever unfolding vast universe is interwoven, contingent, perpetually participating in its own creating, so we both "work out our salvation" as "God works in us." Who can separate out our creativity from God's creativity?

All of it is filled with risk, and far more choice than we might wish for. It does not take much perusal of human history to discover various ways in which people have attempted to establish what they imagined would be the Kingdom and

have yet created prisons instead. Repeatedly, humankind has erred through the desire to control and manage, to act with less generosity than God because they have been seduced by power or corrupted by money or they have misinterpreted what love means.

For love is not control; it is not management; it is chosen risk and profound miracle. The Gardens can teach us that—Eden and Gethsemane. Gardens have been, from the very beginning, the ultimate symbol of co-creation, mutual dependency, joyous interaction, and mystical union.

Yet we are mistaken if we think that gardens are somehow exempt from what we think of the ugly parts of existence: the struggle for survival when food and water are scarce; the death of one unity of multiple cells in order that many more unities might come forth; the greyness of dormancy and seeming uselessness; the violence of wind and the cutting down of branches and stalks in service of some greater good likely not evident to that which is cut or broken. The cycle of life and death and resurrection into something else that was scarcely imagined is as clear in the most protected garden as it is in the midden heaps of the world. All set in motion by the greatest of all Gamblers and the most risk-taking of all Gardeners.

The problem is that we struggle, in our participations in ongoing creations, to allow the same wild generosity that characterizes God. Amidst the veritable avalanche of gifts (try making an inventory of all the wild flowers of the world, and don't forget the ones growing in deserts and at high altitudes), God allows each to develop, to interact, to reach forth into strange and wonderful complexities. Because we too often fear uncertainties, we garden with a heavy hand, shaping, troweling, paving over, sorting, and generally controlling that which does not fit our expectations.

While God continues to take risks, loving us beyond measure, letting us go, permitting all kinds of testing of possibilities. After that astonishing hymn of praise to a God who gambled his very being, Paul reminds us that it is also our calling to gamble, to risk our very selves in our participation in not only the parts of creation that we can alter, encourage, build upon, transform, but also in the ongoing project of creating the kingdom of God, within ourselves and communally.

May we embrace our creativity in these perilous times and remain open to whatever loving possibilities come our way, knowing that we are not alone, that our risks are shared by the divine Gardener. Amen.

Sources:

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