
Part II: Daily Emphases and Bible Studies





Day 1: For the Healing of the World

Genesis 2:4–10, 15

⁴ These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created. In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, ⁵ when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; ⁶ but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— ⁷ then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. ⁸ And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹ Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. ¹⁰ A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. [...] ¹⁵ The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

When I was a boy on the farm, my father would take me into the dry fields and walk slowly across the ground prepared for sowing—before the rains came. He would kneel, take a handful of earth, hold it in his palms for some time and let it run slowly through his fingers back to the ground. In that moment, he seemed to connect with the very soul of the soil as he said, “Good earth. This is good earth.”

You are invited to re-read this text from Genesis with this same kind of feel for the earth. Imagine walking back into the dry fields where God began creating and ask the question, How am I connected with the earth in this story?

Dry fields

The story takes us back to the very beginning, “when God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1). Genesis 2:5 goes on to describe the dry fields:

when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground.

Why are these four mentioned? All are needed for the dry fields at the beginning of creation to become the green planet we call home. It indicates that humans are created for the benefit of earth rather than earth for the benefit of humans.

The earth connection: One of the first connections we need to make is with the ground. The Hebrew word for ground, *adamah*, is similar to the word *adam*. The word *adam* refers, of course, to the first man. But *adam* can also refer to a human being. So the first *adam* comes from the *adamah*, the stuff of earth. Humans come from the ground of the dry fields. This connection suggests a special kinship between humans and the ground/earth.

A living being

God then takes some dust from the ground and forms a human being. The dust from the dry fields is the very basic stuff of earth. Humans are made from the stuff of earth that all life shares. They are part of the fragile web of life, myriad fragments of animated dust called earth.

In light of this mystery, how do you view the very ground on which you walk? How should we feel about matter, the very stuff of all life? What is the intimate connection or kinship between humans and other created life?

According to this account, the first human being is formed by God. God does not make humans appear instantly. The Hebrew word for form refers to what potters do when they meticulously mold clay into a shape they imagine. Here God is pictured as a potter molding the dust of the *adamah* into an *adam*.

The breath connection: After God the potter molds the first human, God breathes life into the human’s nostrils. A more common word for breath, wind or spirit (*ruach*), is found in Genesis 1:2 where the spirit of God moves over the face of the waters. In the Genesis 2 story, however, the Hebrew word means personal breath (*neshamah*). We breathe the personal breath of God—which is life itself.

What happens when God imparts personal breath to this earthy human being? Something extraordinary? Some-

thing unusual? Yes and No! This human being is one of the wonderful works that our Creator made from clay in the beginning. But what results is a living being, an expression that refers to any of the living creatures of this planet. Humans are but one living organism in an ecosystem of innumerable living organisms. From the beginning we have been made part of the web of organic life.

A green garden

God the potter becomes a gardener. Somewhere among the dry fields that existed at the beginning, God planted a garden. The story says that this garden is located in a place called Eden, in the East. If the storyteller were an Israelite, then this would probably mean East of Palestine. The Hebrew word for East can also be translated as ancient past. All we know is that in the beginning God planted a garden. More importantly, this garden was created as a home for humans and other living creatures. What are the implications of saying that the garden God planted was a home for humans? If so, how should we treat it?

God the gardener caused a variety of trees to grow in the garden. Perhaps then this is not really a garden, but more like a forest. In this forest are four kinds of trees: trees that make earth beautiful; trees that provide food; the tree of life in the middle of the garden; and the tree of knowing good and evil.

In the story that follows, the first humans eat from the tree of knowing good and evil and are prevented from eating from the tree of life. God says that had they eaten from the tree of life at that time, they would have lived forever (Gen 3:22). In commenting on this story, Luther says that Adam and Eve were created as mortals; had they not sinned, but eaten from the tree of life, they would have fallen asleep among the roses when they died, and awoken to eternal life.

How are we connected with the tree of life in the center of the garden? Does it still stand at the center of earth, or must we wait until the new earth appears when the tree of life will again provide fruit and healing? (see the Bible study on Rev 22:1-2)

A deep river

Verses 10–14 are often ignored because they describe an ancient geography that seems to make little sense to us today. The important feature of this part of the story, is the river. It begins in Eden, God's sacred forest garden where the tree of life grows, and flows out of Eden in four directions. This river not only waters the garden of Eden, it also waters the garden of earth outside Eden. We live by the water from this river.

A healing connection: If the fountains and rivers of earth flow out from Eden, then they are more than mere water. Their source is Eden. They flow from God's own garden, God's life-giving presence. This implies that they are also life-giving waters with healing powers. In other words, they are sacramental.

If the rivers of earth are viewed as living waters flowing from God, perhaps these should be considered waters for healing, as many indigenous peoples do. Namaan is healed by washing in the Jordan river (2 Kings 5:8–14). The blind man is healed by washing in the waters of Siloam (Jn 9:1–7).

What is the significance of water in your culture? When we pollute the waters, what are we really doing?

Honoring earth

What is the role that humans are expected to play in the garden? The Hebrew text of Genesis 2:15 says that humans are chosen to *'abad* the ground of earth. This Hebrew word can mean three things: to

till/tend the ground, to serve someone, or to honor someone as in worship. Perhaps all these meanings are intended.

Genesis 2:5 announces that at the beginning there was no one to 'abad the ground. Here the meaning is probably "till." In verse 15, however, the word is coupled with *shamar* to "keep" or "protect," and implies that the first humans were responsible for protecting and nurturing God's garden. The first humans were to honor earth by serving and protecting it.

What do you think it means for us today to honor earth? How have we dishonored earth? How is the task of assisting in the healing of creation a continuation of our intended role as humans created to serve and protect earth?

References

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According to Genesis 1:26–28, God created humans in God's image. Their role is described as "having dominion" over living creatures of land, sea and air, and "subduing" the earth. The verb "have dominion" (*rada*) means "to rule" or "dominate." It is a very forceful term. When a king rules, according to Psalm 72:8–11, his enemies lick the dust at his feet. When Joshua "subdued" (*kabash*) the land of Canaan, he conquered, killed and destroyed. These two verbs "have dominion" and "subdue" have meanings opposite to the two verbs "till/serve" and "keep/protect" which are used in Genesis 2:25 to describe the role of humans.

Which of these texts should have priority, and help to interpret the other? Given your understanding of our roles revealed through Jesus Christ, which of these would seem to be more consistent with the gospel? (note Mk 10:41–45)

It is significant that the mandate to dominate in Genesis 1 provided the basis for humans, especially in the Western world, to exploit the earth's resources and harness nature by using violence.

Norman Habel

For further discussion

In the past, many interpreters have assumed the role of humans outlined in Genesis 1:26–28 to be primary and the role outlined in Genesis 2:15 to be secondary. What do you think?

Is dominating justified in the light of the Genesis 2 text discussed above? How can we counter the assumption of many rulers, companies and landholders that humans have a right to use the earth for their interests and ignore its rights? Does the earth have rights?



Revelation 22:1–5

¹ Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ² through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³ Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; ⁴ they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵ And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

What are the names of the rivers in your life? What is the geography through which God's healing river flows for you? Where can we glimpse God's holy city, New Jerusalem, in the world today? In what ways have you experienced God's river of life and the healing leaves of the tree of life in your own life and in the life of the world?

"There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, ..." (Ps 46:4). Two rivers come together at Winnipeg: the Red and the Assiniboine Rivers. When participants from all around the world gather at Winnipeg's two rivers, they also gather around God's great "river of life" flowing through all the rivers of their lives. Revelation 22 invites us to explore God's river and tree of life as imagery of hope and healing. In this study, we will explore its healing power for our lives and communities today.

Revelation 22 in context

The New Jerusalem vision of Revelation 21–22 is one of the most wonderful and hope-filled visions in all of Scripture. It comes at the end of the book's apocalyptic journey—a journey that has taken us to the throne of God (Rev 4–5), a journey into the heart of the universe and the heart of imperial power, a journey of radical hope and transformation. Written at a time when Rome was at the height of its power, Revelation invokes familiar apocalyptic imagery and patterns from the Old Testament, as a way of critiquing Roman imperial injustice ("Babylon") and offers an alternative vision for our future in God's city of well-being.

When looking at texts from Revelation, we should resist efforts to try to "figure out" Revelation's symbols as if they were timetables for the end of the world or codes to be deciphered. Rather, Revelation is best experienced like a work of poetry or music. Its language is evocative. Enter with John into

the apocalyptic journey, a journey that comes to completion in the vision of a renewed earth in Revelation 21–22. Tour the holy city with John, as the angel leads us through its open gates and welcoming street. This text offers an anticipatory vision of our future with God, in a wondrous city or *polis* of healing and life for the world.

A tour of God's wondrous city

The tour of the city began in Revelation 21:9, revealing the city's beauty and radiance. Revelation 22:1–6, the final section of this city vision, features paradise-like images of nature and healing—a sort of re-creation of the garden of Eden in the center of this huge urban landscape. Here God, nature and human beings are reconciled.¹

The landscape of God's city contrasts sharply with that of the evil city of Babylon/Rome (Rev 17–18), a political economy that was characterized by violence, unfettered commerce and injustice. In order to participate in the New Jerusalem, God's people are called to "come out" of Babylon (Rev 18:4) so that they may "enter into the city by the gates" (Rev 22:14).

As the angel leads John on a tour of this wondrous city, what specific features do you notice in this vision that speak to you? Read the text and imagine yourself walking into this city through its open gates, exploring the landscape that the angel unfolds before you.

River

First, notice the river of the "water of life" flowing through the middle of the city, giving life to everything it touches. Water, freely given by God, abounds in this paradise-like landscape. Revelation's

river of life recalls the rivers of Eden and all the other biblical rivers.

Read Ezekiel 47, the specific river on which this vision is most closely modeled. Ezekiel's lavish vision is of an ever-deepening river, flowing out from the new temple. Notice the source from which Revelation's life-giving river originates, as compared to Ezekiel 47. Since Revelation has stated that there is "no temple" in the holy city (Rev 21:22), the river of life flows out not from the temple but from "throne of God and of the lamb."

Throne

This image of the "throne," which recurs twice in this passage (Rev 22:1, 3), is a central image for Revelation. God is called the "One who sits on the throne," an implicit political critique of the Roman emperor who also sits enthroned and demands people's worship and allegiance. Only God—not the empire—is worthy of worship. John's apocalyptic journey began in chapters 4–5 with an invitation to go up into heaven in order to view God's throne and to see the slain lamb, Jesus, standing before the throne.

But where is the "throne of God and of the lamb" located in Revelation 22? The text suggests that God's throne will move down from heaven, where it was in chapter 4, and will be located in the midst of the city that descends out of heaven (see Rev 21:2). Thus, the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21–22 can be read as a wonderfully earth-centered vision of our future, a vision of hope for the world. Contrary to the escapism or "heavenism" that dominates some fundamentalist interpretations today, the picture of Revelation suggests that our future dwelling will be with God in a radiant, thriving cityscape. This text can inspire us to trust God in the midst of our world and its crises. After Revelation 21:2 "heaven" is not mentioned again in Revelation.

Tree of life

Enter more deeply into the picture, continuing the city tour. What else do you see? Notice the tree of life growing on both banks of the river. Look up into the tree's branches and see the succulent fruit growing all year long. The tree's abundant fruit overcomes the threat of poverty and hunger that haunted many of John's readers in the first century, as also today. Fruit of the tree fulfills the promise to the church in Ephesus that we will "eat of the fruit of the tree of life which is in the paradise of God" (Rev 2:7). In contrast to the economy of Babylon/Rome which was characterized by famine and hunger (Rev 18:8), God's holy city provides enough food for all.

How does this speak to issues of hunger in your community?

Revelation's tree of life also hearkens back to Genesis 2–3, the story of the Garden of Eden. The curse of Genesis 3:24 and the expulsion of the garden are now overcome. In Revelation we all are granted a share in the tree of life (Rev 22:14, 19).

The tree of life is a biblical image that is also common to many other religions, including

the menorah of Judaism, the tree pattern on an Islamic prayer carpet, the kadamba tree of Krishna in Hinduism, the bodhi tree in Buddhism... and the Lakota tree of life at the center of the world.²

Revelation's nation-healing tree of life can invite us into inter-religious dialogue with people of other faiths.

Is there a tree of life in your own cultural tradition? In that of other faiths around you? How does it relate to this biblical image?

The leaves of the tree for the healing of the nations

Look more closely at the leaves on the tree of life. These leaves are medicine (*therapeia*), in contrast to the toxic drugs and sorcery (*pharmakeia*) of evil Babylon/Rome (Rev 18:23). Revelation's tree and its healing leaves are modeled on Ezekiel 47:12, but note the way Revelation deliberately expands Ezekiel's vision to make it even more inclusive and wonderful. The tree is now the tree of life, and Ezekiel's "leaves for healing" have become "leaves for the healing of the nations." New Jerusalem is a multicultural city whose citizenship and healing extends to all nations.

The theme for the Assembly is based on Revelation's image of the tree of life with its leaves for the healing of the world. Whether a literal image of the actual medicinal properties of trees, or metaphorical imagery of spiritual healing, this text proclaims healing for our world and for each one of us. Notice that healing in this text does not come directly from God or the Lamb but through the created world—through the leaves of the tree of life.

Healing in this text is for the "nations." God's holy city includes not only one ethnic group but all the "nations" who walk

by the city's light in Revelation 21:24 and bring their glory into the city in Revelation 21:26. The repetition of "nations" in Revelation 21–22 offers a positive image of globalization that can help us address issues of globalization in our world today.

God's servants shall reign

The tour of the city concludes with references to God's servants who offer service and worship (*latreousin*) before the throne (Rev 22:3). Most amazingly of all, God's servants shall "reign" forever and ever (Rev 22:5). Think how empowering this promise of reigning must have been for powerless people at the time it was written, and how empowering it can be for the marginalized and powerless people in our world today. At a time when Rome claimed to reign over the entire world, Revelation boldly proclaimed that it is God who reigns—not the Roman Empire, nor any other empire—and that God's servants will also reign with God. Note, however, that there is no object of the verb "reign" in Revelation 22:5. God's servants do not reign over anyone else. What then does our reigning with God and Christ mean? The concluding verse of this text invites us to explore ways we can understand our reign not as domination over anyone or anything but as sharing in healing the world.

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Notes

¹ Dieter Georgi, "Die Visionen vom himmlischen Jerusalem in Apokalypse 21 und 22," in Dieter Luhrmann and Georg Strecker (eds.), *Kirche: Festschrift für Günther Bornkamm* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1980), p. 369.

² Gail Ramshaw, *God Beyond Gender* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 118. See also Larry Rasmussen, *Earth Community Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), pp. 195–207; Tom Christiansen, *An African Tree of Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990).



Luke 7:18b–23

So John summoned two of his disciples¹⁹ and sent them to the Lord to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”²⁰ When the men had come to him, they said, “John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” “²¹ Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind.²² And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.²³ And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

This is the burning question to which John the Baptist requests an answer from Jesus. We might have expected it in the beginning when little was known and even less seen or heard. But at this stage? How can John not know? Has he not heard? Did he not listen to what Jesus’ disciples just reported? Are the reports dubious? Are not the compelling words and wondrous deeds convincing evidence?

Do Jesus’ healings prove the validity of his claims about salvation and liberation? Does the question arise from John’s dawning conviction or from his growing doubt?

John does not himself appear before Jesus. The communication between the two happens indirectly; they do not meet face-to-face. The disciples of John serve as his go-betweens, and in Jesus’ presence, the question of John is faithfully repeated word for word. As readers we cannot possibly miss it:

“Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?”

Does John simply ask a question to which he already knows the answer? Is it all for the benefit of his disciples?

The question reveals a state of longing and waiting as well as of expectation. Someone is to come, whose presence they ought to recognize. Which signs should they look for? How can they be certain? The very fact that the question is being asked like this, and at this stage, reveals the ambiguities of any presupposition. Their fragile interpretive efforts in-

How and where do these tensions between expectation and reality arise for you?

dicating their desire to make what is there correspond to what they want to be there. Will expectation and experience ever meet? If multiple interpretations are possible, if taking offence may seem to be as reasonable as believing, what is there to help make the right decision?

“Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?”

John’s question is not evaded; this is not a trap set by clever opponents. The answer is awkward in the sense that it does not add anything to what John and his disciples already seem to know. Before Jesus himself speaks, the author comments to us as readers, giving us some background information. We are told that Jesus had just cured many people. Surprisingly, the rather awkward list of specific ailments does not correspond to any of the individual healing stories, nor does it reflect the examples given by Jesus.

It does give the impression of a large-scale healing activity on the part of Jesus. He may have been an especially successful miracle worker, but he was not the only one around. Diviners and miracle workers, wonder workers with a wide variety of specialties, were a well-known feature throughout the ancient world. Some of them did remarkably well. When Christians told the stories about Jesus’ healings, they followed a well established, common pattern. The presence of others, even competing wonder workers and exorcists is recognized in the Gospels, not least by Luke. He reports in Acts on several incidents, such as Simon (Acts 8:9–13) and Bar-Jesus (Acts 13:4–12) and the less successful sons of Sceva (Acts 19:11–15). In Luke 11:19 other exorcists are mentioned within the framework of a discussion about the exorcisms of Jesus.

The debate in Luke 11:14–23 confirms that even Jesus’ opponents are amazed

by his wondrous performance. No one questions the fact of his healings. The conflict concerns the power involved: is it Beelzebul or the “the finger of God”? Jesus argues eloquently that it is ridiculous to assume that Beelzebul would fight and thereby weaken himself. When Jesus overpowers evil, it is a sign that the kingdom of God has come.

Luke goes further than the other evangelists in rendering healing stories as exorcisms. This reflects that at the time diseases were often—and medical science today would say mistakenly—explained as possessions, as evil intrusions into the person. As exorcism the healing stories take on a symbolic dimension of liberation from bondage; they become incidents of an almost cosmic struggle with the evil one. Luke therefore tends to see miracles as forceful demonstrations of divine power and might. When Jesus calls his first disciples in Luke 5:1–11, they do not leave everything behind and follow him just because of his compelling words. A miracle precedes their calling: they are already awed by the enormous catch of fish he has wondrously provided.

Modern people, informed by science, tend to be troubled by the fact that miracles and healing took place. Their question is incompatible with and not addressed by the biblical stories. However, the stories do address another troublesome concern: what if miracles do not happen? Only some are healed, most are not. We may try to solve this by making a distinction between “healing” and “cure,” claiming that healing may take place even when the person is not cured. The point is not to be healthy, but to be whole.

Does this distinction between “healing” and “cure” help clarify the issue, or obscure it? The New Testament passages on which we draw tend to mingle, rather than distinguish the terms. Is a different approach possible?

How are diseases explained in your culture?

Jesus does not flaunt miracles and healing at every possible occasion. He restrains himself, especially when miracles he is invited to perform miracles in order to prove himself. It is no use asking for signs (Lk 11:16f; 11:29–32). In the beginning when tempted by the devil, Jesus refuses to submit to the tempting promises of immediate satisfaction by putting God to test (Lk 4:1–12). When he is mocked and taunted on the cross, and challenged to prove himself as Messiah by saving himself (“he who has saved others”), he does not step down. He chooses the stony road where suffering and pain are inevitable. He submits to the mysterious will of God that says life is gained only by being given up. Ultimately, healing can happen only through what seems to be its contradiction.

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

What is uniquely Christian is not faith in Jesus the wonder maker but faith in Jesus, the wounded healer, the crucified Messiah. There were no expectations of a crucified Messiah, nor any indications of messianic miracles. John the Baptist had every good reason to ask as he did.

On what grounds should John have been convinced about Jesus? Is the answer given in Luke 7:21–23 more persuasive than what John had already heard?

Jesus does not respond by establishing his credentials in referring to appropriate Messianic titles and labels. He only proves himself by re-telling the same story. His words recall the prophet Isaiah’s promises as they echo his reading in the synagogue in Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry (Lk 4:16–21). He

reiterates the claim that in his mighty words and deeds these promises and “the year of God’s favor” are being fulfilled for their ears and eyes. They have seen it happening. Go and tell! This, of course, they had been doing already.

In the end, therefore, the challenge of the answer is the concluding beatitude: blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me. In the end, no further evidence is—nor can be—provided. In the end, it is matter of choice. In the end, it is a matter of taking offense or not. In the

end, it is a matter of recognition and of faith.

As the gospel continues beyond this brief passage, Jesus commends John to the crowds. John is not reproached, but praised. However, “the people of this generation”—of any generation—are lamented. They are never content. They are like displeased children. There is always something wrong.

Go and tell that he has come!

Turid Karlsen Seim

What will it take to satisfy the disciples? What does it take to satisfy us? Will we always keep looking for who or what will more adequately meet our expectations? How are we tempted to change Jesus to fit our expectations?