

## MOTHER EARTH & HER CHILDREN

Genesis 2: 4-9, 15-17

One of the most influential books I've read more recently is one some of you will have also read. It is entitled *Braiding Sweetgrass* and the author is Robin Wall Kimmerer. Kimmerer is a scientist, and specifically, a botanist. She is also indigenous. What makes Kimmerer's work so unique is how she has found indigenous knowledge of the land in many ways further advanced than western science of the land. Her book is all about the science of indigenous knowledge and her goal is to bring Indigenous knowledge and western science together. One of the big insights of her book is the re-imagining of the human relationship with the land. When humans listen to the land, work with it and care for it, the land is generous, it gives back, it becomes fruitful and multiplies. A relationship of giving and receiving, of reciprocity, of love, will heal not just the land but us humans too.

Sadly, though, her book also includes many stories of how the land has been used and abused by us humans, just like we have used and abused many of those indigenous to the land, beginning with the children. On this Orange Shirt Sunday it is all about the children. Young Phyllis Webstad, an indigenous girl, was forced to go to a residential school. Her grandmother gifted her with a bright orange shirt as a way for Phyllis to remember her family. As soon as Phyllis got to the school, however, her shirt was taken away and she was forced to wear the drab colours of a uniform, stripping her and all the children of anything to do with where they came from and who they were. And so, we wear orange shirts this day to support indigenous self-determination and the search for healing and reconciliation with all those wronged over many generations.

But we also know the children are harmed in many other ways. Young women and girls are exploited, they are kidnapped and they are murdered. And so, we also wear the moose hide pins which symbolize the recognition of the pandemic of violence against women in Canada, a violence indigenous women suffer disproportionately.

Kimmerer, however, is an indigenous person who also believes healing and reconciliation are possible. It's about people, but it also has to be about the land. For indigenous people the land is alive. It is part of the family, it is a person just like we are persons. It has a soul. It is our mother.

When I first read her book, I was envious of Kimmerer. I thought to myself: I wish our Christian and biblical traditions had such intimate understandings of our human relationship with the land. But you know, after reading many more books and after attending a biblical conference this past summer, I have come to see that the problem with my traditional understanding of the bible when it comes to creation and land is not the bible, but the way I have been taught to read and interpret the bible. Someone from a different culture and someone with a very different understanding about creation and the land, will also read the creation stories of the bible differently.

Last Sunday we re-read the first creation story in the bible. Today, let us explore the second one. Once again, at this conference I attended, there were both indigenous scholars and western biblical scholars influenced by indigenous voices. The insights that emerged for me were astonishing. Let us share a few of them.

1) First of all, did you know that the term: “mother earth” used in indigenous spirituality is not just an indigenous word? It is a biblical word too! When I first learned the creation story, the earth was thought of as passive, almost dead. God creates the humans and the trees and plants too, out of the ground, but the ground is just passive matter. But this is not the only way of reading this story at all! The word for earth, ground and soil in Hebrew is “*Adamah*.” *Adamah* is feminine and a more literal translation would be: mother earth. Can you believe it? Mother earth is a biblical term!

And why mother? Because out of mother earth all other life comes to be: humans and animals, trees and plants and all else. The earth is our mother and God partners with the earth to create all life.

And what’s God’s contribution to the concrete matter that is earth and that is physically us too? If the earth is our mother, God breathes the breath of life into us. God breathes spirit into us and we become spiritual beings just like we are physical beings. We are both spirit and matter in one.

The word for human here is “Adam”. Adam literally means: earth-creature. If the earth is Adam’s mother or *adamah*, Adam is mother earth’s child. Imagine if we thought of the earth as our true mother, or the mother of all our mothers. Wouldn’t that totally change the way we walked this earth and treated it? God is the Spirit breathing life into our spirits and the earth is the mother we walk on that nourishes us and of which we are a part in every material way. Isn’t this amazing?!

2) OK, then, this also leads to a second key understanding, and it has to do with our purpose as human beings. If the earth is our true material mother, our mother of mothers, what is our created purpose as human beings? In the first creation story we focussed on last week, it was all about us being created in the image and likeness of God, a God who is an artist, creating by inviting other life to come forth and creating reciprocity of relationships where love nourishes diversity and multiplicity of new life. In our story today, we’re told God forms us out of mother earth’s matter like clay and breathes into us the breath of life, God’s very Spirit. Our spirit comes out of God’s Spirit. Even as we are part of the earth materially, we are also part of God spiritually. Isn’t that awesome?!

But then, our passage also tells us why God creates us. In our reading as it is currently translated we read this: “The Lord God took the Adam and put them in the garden to till it and keep it.” The traditional interpretation, which is not bad, is that our purpose is to till and keep the land. But once again, from a traditional point of view, the land may appear passive and it is up to us humans to master it, shape it and make it bring forth food. But once again, biblical scholars influenced by more indigenous understandings of the land have re-read these passages and re-read the original Hebrew words, and they have seen that there are other ways to translate these ancient words. The original word translated as ‘till’ is ‘*abad*’. A more accurate translation would be to ‘serve’ the land. You don’t

serve something that's passive, inert or lifeless. You serve something or someone living. To serve is to respect and honour them.

And the original word for 'keeping' the land is '*shamar*.' *Shamar* is better translated as observing, protecting and even learning from the land. Imagine if beyond just tilling and keeping the land, we thought about our purpose as human beings in relationship to our mother of mothers as serving her, observing and learning what she has to teach us, and protecting what she has to give us. Wow! What a difference such a reading makes! We are put on this earth to learn from our mother earth as we are part of her... to learn about ourselves as much as other life... to serve and care, observe, learn from and then protect her too... And out of such care and service, we receive... and out of a loving reciprocity of giving and receiving, serving and caring, all of creation flourishes... That's the vision of God for Adam the earth creature within the garden God has placed them...

So what went wrong? What has gone wrong?

In the creation story, everything that is beautiful and good is also vulnerable. All life is invited to dance with God so that creation can come to be. All life is called forth into relationships of reciprocal love with God and other life which should lead to fruitful diversity and multiplicity of flourishing. But there is also freedom built into all this. Freedom means there is choice and that also means creation can say yes or it can say no. Both creation stories recognize that the earth-creature most vulnerable to making bad choices is Adam – the human one. How is it that our alienation from our mother earth and abuse of her begins?

We're told this: Even as Adam was to serve and care for mother earth, learn from her and partner with her in bringing forth life from her, Adam is also called by creator God to observe and learn this: "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." Up to this point, Adam knows nothing about evil. All is beautiful and good. But if Adam doesn't leave something behind, and if Adam becomes greedy and wants to control and consume all the earth and all that grows on it without leaving anything for others or for the health of the planet, evil will grow and death will come. Don't eat from every tree Adam! Leave this one alone.

As Kimmerer, among others, also argues, the earth needs space and time to replenish. You can't farm it, dig it and use it all up. And, you have to leave something for others too. In our indigenous land acknowledgements we often refer to the "dish with one spoon" understanding of land sharing. You take what you need for yourself and then pass the spoon along to someone else to get some nourishment too. Mother earth is one dish and we have to share the spoon and pass it around. The danger for Adam is that they will become greedy. Greed will bring forth evil, and ultimately death for the earth and many of its creatures. Doesn't this make so much more sense of the story of eating the forbidden fruit that comes in the next chapter?

Adam the earth creature has a great purpose in the creation. Adam is to care for mother earth out of which all life is created. God breathes spirit into all life. And to the humans in particular, God gives a

special purpose: to serve and observe, to learn from, care for, protect and cultivate with love the earth which is also part of Adam. Sadly, in our greed for wealth and narcissistic pleasure, we have taken and consumed more and more. We have eaten from every single tree and have left nothing for replenishment. We have sown the seeds of evil, corrupted ourselves and wounded our mother. God weeps.

But there is hope. For me, healing and reconciliation, learning and relationship building is not only about our broken relationship with indigenous people. It is also about healing and reconciliation with our mother of mothers: the earth. We have one life to live, as long as we have left to live it. We have a community here, a community we call spiritual, a community of earth creatures but also a community made possible out of the generosity of our mother earth.

We seek to cultivate spiritual values here, all bound by the core value that is love, that is our creator. May we feel the energy of conviction within us and may we energize each other, as we continue to learn together, share love with each other, and bear witness to how healing and reconciliation is happening among us.

And may we keep shining a light outwards for others to find their path too. As we remember the children on this day, and as we remember all the women wounded and abused by broken men, may we embrace the healing power of an indestructible love resurrecting new life in the midst of death...

Prayer: Thank you, mother earth, for being so generous with us even when we have failed you. Thank you indigenous earth creatures who offer a hand to the rest of us earth creatures because you believe healing and reconciliation are possible. May we take the hand of our indigenous neighbours and may we give thanks for the generosity of mother earth, as we walk forward in your light, O God... Amen.