

September 20, 2020  
Season of Creation—Year A—Week 2 (Land)  
Kyle Holton  
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Gen. 3:14-19; 4:8-16  
Psalm 139:7-12  
Romans 5:12-17  
Matthew 12:38-40

Let's start out with a question: *If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?*

Last week, Keri started our Season of Creation with a poem that is dear to me. Wendell Berry's *How to Be a Poet* has many personal connections to my life. It seems appropriate I begin with the same poem. There are a couple of rapid-fire commands before Berry claims there are no unsacred places. He says, "Shun electric wire. Stay away from screens. Stay away from anything that obscures the place it is in." This week's focus within our Season of Creation is Land. Today, I would ask you to consider Berry's injunction to "Stay away from anything that obscures the place it is in." I'm afraid I'm going to roam to many places today, so let me provide my end goal at the beginning my intention:

*How To Be A Poet*  
by Wendell Berry

Breathe with unconditional breath  
the unconditioned air.  
Shun electric wire.  
Communicate slowly. Live  
a three-dimensioned life;  
stay away from screens.  
Stay away from anything  
that obscures the place it is in.  
There are no unsacred places;  
there are only sacred places  
and desecrated places.

We must re-learn how to become pagans—animists who see the world as a landscape full of persons—both human and non-human. Every thing around us is embodied. From the electron to the four-legged animal to the rooted tree, every thing is an embodied landscape of personhood. All bodies are lands. All bodies are selves. Therefore, all lands are selves. Bodies cannot be owned, exploited, raped, dismembered. Bodies can only be held in relation to other bodies. Therefore, we cannot own anything, but only be held in relation to it. Our western cultural and economic heritage is a story of reaching for domination instead of partnership. With domination came objectification. We stopped looking at the world as a creation full of persons and only saw mindless machinery ready for our manipulation. We left Eden, an ecology of selves<sup>1</sup>, and entered a land empty of persons. In our loneliness, we have pillaged mother earth and all her creatures, including ourselves.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

Our main biblical text today is a whopper. The string of curses in Genesis. Let's recap. Tree of knowledge of good and evil—Serpent—Eve—Adam—Naked—Expulsion—Gender Domination—Enmity with Serpent—Thorns/Thistles. Followed by fratricide: Cain kills Abel—Cain is marked and wanders the earth for the rest of his days.

Now this origin myth is complex. I should note that this mythic narrative has been used to legitimate patriarchal society, to sanctify structural racism, to normalize enmity with the earth, and to so thoroughly denigrate humanity into total depravity that some theologians would feel required to argue that infants who died prematurely would go to hell without baptism. This myth is a doozy. And it seems to suggest like Quantum String Theory, a theory of everything. To be sure, the curse of Cain does not belong to the enslaved black bodies of American history. Rather, white Christian European settlers are the descendants of Cain and these are my ancestors and of many who hear my words today. After all, it was early American white settlers who murdered their native siblings. And many of us today bear the weight of a cursed culture that cannot commit to land, but must forever wander the world homeless. To be sure, the curse of Eve still sits in our patriarchal lands where male white supremacy is the inner logic of social hierarchy and power distribution. And to be sure, like the border lands of Eden full of thorn and thistle, our lands are dying and drying—full of fire, weed and desecrated soils. These are all worthy topics...worthy sermons to be said. But today, I'd like to ask a question my sixteen year-old self has asked for many years. How did Adam and Eve not realize they were naked? A friend of mine years ago was asked to read the passage in Genesis 3:7: *"Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked."* And when he approached the word "naked" he threw all of his Arkansan dialect into it, "and they knew that they were neked." The dramatic pause was enough to raise more than a few eyebrows, and it was quite some time before he was asked to read scripture again. Now I know it will take more than that to mortify this liberal crowd I speak to today. It did cross my mind that I could actually get away with preaching naked today without getting arrested. But I didn't want to scar my children, so here I am fully clothed asking, "What happened in their way of seeing? How did their perception change?" What does nakedness even mean if you've never worn clothes? Why does Eden disappear when Adam and Eve realize they are buck naked?

Of course, we are playing with myth here, so we must investigate this beyond the literal. There is a subtle shift in how Adam and Eve experience the world between pre- and post-naked awareness. This shift may tell us something about what it means to live in a “fallen” world. Before reaching for the fruit:

1. Eden is full of partners who are created from the same substrate:  
*adamah*
2. Humans are giving the task to name all creatures. This is an intimate act of communication.
3. Communion with God is interwoven in their existence again through relational experience.

After reaching for the fruit:

1. Patriarchy
2. Expulsion from Eden
3. Naked shame
4. Violence

This shift is initiated by a voice that despises our creaturely status and lusts for God-like control: “Eat. You will not die. You will be like God.” This desire consumed Adam and Eve. And from it, they—and we—consumed the world for ourselves. From this act, we have partitioned ourselves from the rest of creation. We have seen ourselves as naked. The story of civilization is a story of humans who see themselves as naked and work to clothe themselves. We reject our creaturely status and separate ourselves from an ecology of selves. And the result is disastrous. We obscure the place we are in and as Wendell Berry says, “That is why subduing the things of nature to human purposes is so dangerous and why it so often results in evil, in separation and desecration.”<sup>2</sup>

A year ago, my family and I found ourselves hiking on an old growth trail in Washington called “Grove of the Patriarchs.” Thanks to Keri’s suggestion, we had decided to briefly explore this area before we finished our travels in the Olympic National Park. On this day, the trail was fairly crowded with other fellow two-legged humans. As we entered the grove peopled with

---

<sup>2</sup> From Wendell Berry’s essay “Christianity and the Survival of Creation,” in *The Art of the Commonplace*, (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002), 310.

massive individuals called Hemlock, Red Cedar, and Douglas-fir, there was a silence that percolated into the crowd. It was my first time to be in the company of such ancient persons, and I was overwhelmed. The silence was pierced by a man's voice behind me who said, "Can you imagine the house you could build with one of these trees?" And just like that the magic, the communication, the Eden-like moment was lost, and I mourned and grumbled and wept for the rest of my hike.

Maybe now we can return to our initial question: *If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?* Do you see the hubris in the question? It assumes there are no persons outside of human personhood to experience the falling of a tree in a forest. And this hubris moves us to think that nothing exists except for our own perception. This is an unholy existential nakedness. We often use the language of dehumanization to refer to behavior and ways of perceiving that objectify other humans. Perhaps we should extend this notion. Our military-industrial economic way of life depersonalizes all persons. All bodies. All lands.

Let me close with one final idea. I've been mourning the untimely death of one of my academic heroes: the anarchist anthropologist David Graeber. He was a giant in anarchist community and a leader for egalitarian politics during the Occupy Movement. His seminal work that will stand the test of time will probably be "Debt." But one of my favorite essays was published in the "Baffler" a few years ago called, "What's the Point if We Can't Have Fun." The essay is a far-reaching exploration of consciousness beyond the human. He tells a tragic story that explains how a mechanistic mindset coopted a greedy-competitive Darwinian story against other scientific narratives of cooperation that came from anarchist Russian circles. In the essay, Graeber asks, Can electrons have some form of personhood? Of agency? His answer is yes. Why does this seem so crazy and unscientific to our modern ears? Graeber notes that if we see the world through a kind of Darwinian self-interest, then personhood is merely a mirage for a deeper inanimate violence. But if (and I quote) :

*If an electron is acting freely—if it, as Richard Feynman is supposed to have said, "does anything it likes"—it can only be acting freely as an end in itself. Which would mean that at the very foundations of physical reality, we*

*encounter freedom for its own sake—which also means we encounter the most rudimentary form of play.*<sup>3</sup>

It is no accident that Eden means “delight.” Perhaps when we strip our perception that obscures our place in the world. Perhaps when we get naked once more, we will come back into relationship with a world full of persons. Perhaps when we allow the naked landscape of our bodies to intimately communicate with the body of Creation, we will also learn to hear God again. Surely that will be a life best described as one of playful delight. In the meantime, a change in my perception won’t stop the fires—the human-made apocalypse at hand. But it would seem we will have to learn to mourn before we relearn how to delight in the world. After all when our relatives—those we are in relationship with—are sick, we sit at their bedside. We hold their hands. We tell them stories. We sing to them. We remind them of their beauty and place in our lives. Should we do the same for our Mother. Our neighbors who are more than human? Perhaps in our mourning, we will learn to hear their voices again and realize we never actually left Eden.

---

<sup>3</sup> David Graeber, “What’s the Point if We Can’t Have Fun,” *The Baffler*. January 2014, <https://thebaffler.com/salvos/whats-the-point-if-we-cant-have-fun>.