

Earth as Beloved Community

by Ched Myers

Reflecting biblically and theologically on “Earth as Beloved Community”—the theme of the Alliance of Baptists’ [upcoming gathering](#) April 26-29 in Dayton, Ohio—can help us recover how to be church. We contemporary North Americans have been socialized to see and value land solely in terms of private possession, economic exploitation and commodification. But unlike our cosmology of modernity, the Bible *never* understands land as “real estate.” Instead, we can identify four major characteristics of land in scripture: as mother of life; as abundant sustainer of living beings; as altar for worship of the Creator; and as home place.

Mother: In the second Genesis creation account we are told that the human being (Heb. *'adam*) is formed from the “topsoil” (Heb. *'adamah*, Gen. 2:7)—a wordplay that is tellingly preserved in the English “human/humus.” Scripture is unembarrassed and straightforward: we are birthed from the earth (as are all flora and fauna: Gen. 2:9, 19). This spiritual and material understanding has been embraced both by old indigenous cultures and the new biological sciences, but ignored by Christians for too long.

Sustainer: In this same creation tale, the Earth (*'eret*, Gen. 2:6), is called a “garden” (*gan*, Gen. 2:8), used elsewhere to describe fertile terrain (Deut. 11:10; Isa. 51:3; Jer. 31:12). This garden (in the Greek O.T., *paradeisos*) provides everything human beings find “delightful” (Gen. 2:9). Hebrew Bible scholar Richard Lowery writes that the adjective *tov* “expresses God’s intense pleasure at creation’s every detail.” This divine assessment appears as an emphatic and ecstatic refrain in the first Creation account (Gen. 1: 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). The Earth embodies a “rich and lavish overflow of goodness, abundant and life giving at its very core,” says Lowery. This contrasts sharply with Enlightenment notions of “natural scarcity,” or the presumption that the Earth has no intrinsic value until humans re-engineer it into something “useful.” Yet such abundance is contingent upon human beings remaining obedient to our vocation to “serve and preserve” Creation (Gen. 2:15). To neglect stewardship and “take too much” of the divine gift is to reckon with disaster (see, for example, Num. 11:31-35; Lev. 26)—a hard word to our own historical moment.

Altar: The land is also the primary locus for worship in the earliest traditions of scripture. Torah’s first account of an encounter with God outside Eden occurs upon Abram’s defection from empire to the marginal desert lands of Canaan (Gen. 12:6f). He arrives at an oak, which is described in Hebrew as *'elon moreh*—a teaching or oracle-giving tree. It is here that God first tells Abram of his future in this land—and here that Abram builds the Bible’s first altar (see also Gen. 18:1ff; Judg. 6:11; and I Kgs. 19:4). Of particular significance is the often overlooked “11th commandment”:

You need make for me only an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your offerings of well-being If you make for me an altar of stone, do not build it of hewn stones; for if you use a chisel upon it you profane it. (Exodus 20:24-25)

Because no work of human hands (much less technology) can improve on Creation, nature is the *most* appropriate setting for worship of YHWH. When the people forget this, “listening stones” bear witness *against* them (see Josh. 24:27).

Home: Genesis 3 narrates how humans abandon their symbiotic relationship with the “garden” (Gen. 3:23f) for the re-engineered landscapes of the city (Gen. 4:17), and eventually of empire (Gen. 11:1ff). The subsequent covenantal narrative articulates a dialectical relationship between the homelessness brought about by human alienation from the land, and attempts by God to bring the people back home to it. When in exodus, dispossessed people are promised land; when in exile, they are promised a return (Isa. 40; 65:19-25). In short, the biblical narrative begins with a myth about a garden-home lost, and concludes with a myth of that garden-home’s *restoration*, not destruction (Rev. 22:1-2).

Such Earth-based communion hardly bespeaks of a biblical hostility to nature, as is so often claimed by our tradition’s critics. Indeed these four characteristics weave throughout both Testaments. I hope you’ll join us in Dayton as we work to remember these ancient lessons about belonging, communion and responsibility, so that we might act courageously in the teeth of our historic ecological crisis.

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