**Genesis 2:4b-9** *God’s Green Space*

Holy Ground All Around—week one

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

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In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, 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; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— then the Lord God formed the first human from the dust of the ground,[\*](javascript:void(0);) and breathed into their nostrils the breath of life; and the human became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there God put the human whom God had formed. 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.

For the Word of God in scripture,

for the Word of God among us,

for the Word of God within us:

**Thanks be to God.**

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In the chapel right now, the children are hearing a version of the first Creation account—the one that starts “In the beginning, God created,” and goes on to sketch out the emergence of the whole cosmos as a seven-day event that would become the pattern for our seven-day week, climaxing with the Sabbath as a day of rest to celebrate the goodness of creation.

What *we* just read was the second Creation account, which comes right after the first. In this version, things happen in a slightly different order, and the focus is on humanity—how we came to be, and what God told us to do, which is in the verses that follow today’s reading, where, we’re told, God put the human in the garden to serve and keep it—not, as many translations read, to *till* it and keep it, but to *serve* it and keep it.

So, to recap today’s reading: God made the world, then God made human beings, then immediately, God planted a garden right in the middle of everything, with trees to delight the eye and nourish the body. There, in the center of it all, was the tree of life, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

When the Elyton Land Company set about creating the city of Birmingham, they, too, built it around a garden—or a park. You can see it on the original plan, labeled, simply, “Park.” That’s the park we’ll visit today, (if it’s not actually pouring!) and it was pivotal to the planning of the city.

Parks might seem like fluff—a nice, little add-on to an urban center, but the founding of Birmingham was a business venture, and having dedicated green space was part of the business model. Parks were a draw, because they created a focal point to highlight prominent businesses or public buildings or premier private homes. Parks also created public gathering spaces for municipal events and for boosting the city. In fact, for a number of years what we know as Linn Park was anchored by a huge, Mineral Exhibition Center for promoting the natural resources that made the local steel industry thrive.

God, of course, didn’t need to attract new residents to the world—that was totally DIY. But in setting that garden at the center of it all, God was signaling what God intended human life to be like—life lived in harmony with the rest of creation and with other human beings. Life in which all of our needs—our need for beauty, our need for food, our need for abundance, our need for ethical discernment--would all be honored.

The pandemic quarantine made us all the more aware of our need for nature, and science has long affirmed this need, like a recent study, which found that “people who live near natural areas with a greater diversity of bird species were demonstrably happier.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

In addition to mental health, green spaces contribute significantly to physical health by filtering the air, absorbing rainwater runoff, and cooling the temperatures. But those mental and physical benefits aren’t distributed equally. The World Resources Institute points, as an example, to “San Francisco, [where] tree canopy varies widely depending on the relative wealth of different communities. The [upscale neighborhoods] enjoy a leafy 30% canopy cover, while …lower-income and immigrant communities …have [as little as] 5% tree canopy cover.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Thirty percent tree cover versus five percent tree cover. That’s San Francisco, but if you drove the neighborhoods of Birmingham, I suspect you’d find the same pattern.

God, however, created the green spaces of this earth not for just one group, but for “the human being”—*all* of us. It’s we human beings who have turned it into contested space, and Linn Park is a prime example of that.

The different names this park has had over the years speak to the intentions and aspirations of city leaders: “Park” first became “Central Park,” since it was meant to be the center of the city; then was quickly changed to “Capitol Park” as part of a failed campaign to draw the State capitol here. Then, in 1918 it was renamed “Woodrow Wilson Park,” partly out of gratitude for Wilson’s opposition to the use of Federal troops to counter Jim Crow laws. In 1988 it was renamed again, this time, in honor of Charles Linn, an industrialist and banker who had worked for the beautification of Birmingham in the early 20th Century. Linn also happened to have been a former Confederate officer.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The names, the monuments that have been put up there, the ceremonies honoring Confederate Memorial Day, and the fact that the first recorded lynching in Jefferson County took place at Linn Park, back in 1883, send a pretty clear message of whom this park was intended for and whose story it was meant to tell. As that story has lost ground, the park, itself, has fallen into neglect. Over these four Sundays, we’ll visit four parks. We’ve called these visits Holy Ground All Around because we know that, no matter who claims it, the whole earth belongs to God, and therefore, is holy. We’ve subtitled it Eco-*Justice* Adventures because, while we will be seeing plenty of green, we’ll also be paying attention to how these spaces have impacted the people around them.

We’ll see a lot of beauty, but I have to tell you: today won’t really be one of those days. Yes, when we go to Linn Park, we’ll see trees, we’ll see some grass—patchy grass; but we’ll also see empty fountains, dirty sidewalks, and people who have nowhere else to go.

Pay attention to the blight we’ll see today, and compare it to what we’ll see as we go from Linn Park to Kelly Ingram Park to Red Mountain Park to Railroad Park. Ask yourselves along the way: who named and claimed this park? Whose space does it seem to be? How does it function for the people around it? And, finally, what is the story it’s telling? Because Linn Park has told lots of stories.

When God created that first green space, it was filled with trees for beauty—interestingly, that’s the first purpose that’s named: “pleasant to the sight”; and for sustenance; and for life; and for the knowledge of good and evil. *That* metaphorical tree humans were forbidden to eat, because the knowledge of good and evil isn’t ours to control—it’s God’s. Yet, eat it, we did, and we’ll see signs both of how our knowledge has been used for good and twisted for evil as we journey through these parks.

And yet, what we’ll see is still holy ground—all of it, because it is God’s ground. As God’s ground, the seeds of goodness remain. We, whom God created to serve and keep this earth have within our hands the power to choose what seeds we cultivate. And, in choosing the good, we can help reclaim the holiness of this earth. Even at Linn Park, blighted though it is, the struggle to change the narrative from evil to good is alive and well. In that struggle lies the hope for a future that will look very different from the past. And so, we go from here with eyes open not just to what is, but to what could be.

The first Creation story repeats the refrain: It is good, it is good, it is good. Indeed it was, and, with intentionality and hard work, indeed it can be again—not just for some, but for the delight, the nourishment, the life, and the good of everyone. Thanks be to God.

1. [**https://www.audubon.org/news/more-birds-bring-more-happiness-according-science**](https://www.audubon.org/news/more-birds-bring-more-happiness-according-science)**,** January 25, 2021 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [**https://www.wri.org/insights/green-space-underestimated-tool-create-more-equal-cities**](https://www.wri.org/insights/green-space-underestimated-tool-create-more-equal-cities)

   September 29, 2020 By Delfina Grinspan [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.bhamwiki.com/w/Linn\_Park [↑](#footnote-ref-3)