

*Tree of Life and Awesome mystery/Through your death we are reborn
Though you die in all of history/Still you rise with every morn.
Still you rise with every morn. Amen.*

My beloved is like a gazelle
or a young stag.
Look, there he stands
behind our wall,
gazing in at the windows,
looking through the lattice.
My beloved speaks and says to me:
“Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away;

Welcome to the Season of Creation. During the month of September, we will arise and come away to meet our beloved in the Spirituality of Nature, where earth is the Body of God or as I wrote many years ago, “an ecosystem of grace and reciprocity. Breathing in we receive God, breathing out, we extend compassion to all living beings.” So let us breathe in and receive the love of God. And breathe out to extend that love to everything that lives.

The Season of Creation lies approximately six months apart from the Season of Lent, and like spring and autumn they mirror one another as times when we reflect on and practice change. During Lent, while the world around us warms toward spring, we reflect upon the cold and dead places within ourselves. During the Season of Creation, as the world takes its first steps toward the dormancy of autumn and winter, we reflect upon our relationship to the life and death of the world God gave us and how we can heal its and our, wounds, because those wounds are one. Both seasons call us to lay aside habitual thought patterns to give God room to surprise us.

All good spiritual journeys begin with a leave-taking, whether we physically leave the land of our birth and the teachings of our families, or resolve to engage our familiar surroundings in new ways. Jesus left home without going very far in the outside world, but he utterly reimaged what it meant to live in that world. Moses was doing the daily work of herding his father-in-

law's flocks beyond the wilderness when he met the God who changed his life in a bush that burned without being consumed. Buddha left home in search of a way to end suffering, only to learn it was not a matter of will or action, but one of waking up. Or consider this famous spiritual story: 'There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.' The older son stayed home. Neither son was happy with his choice.

The parable of these two brothers has a lot to teach us in this time of ecological upheaval. Two brothers receive their inheritances. They come from the same land, have the same father, but one squanders it all while the other doesn't believe he has anything and festers under a cloud of self-pity and negative thoughts. Or as Jesus says in today's gospel, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things, what we might call disordered desires, come from within, and they defile a person." The other is also true: goodness, too, emanates from within, but it is a within where God makes a home.

Most of the time, we associate this teaching with eating, or washing hands, because the Pharisees ask Jesus, "Why do some of your disciples eat with defiled hands?"

They are doing so, not to offend, but to question. Not to reject, but to understand. Jesus isn't going after handwashing; he's going after hypocrisy. Cleanliness is a good thing, but it ceases to be good when you use it to pretend that you are better than you are, or when you are

washing your hands of something you'd rather not think about, or when you use your spotless living room to demonstrate your superiority over our brothers and sisters who live outside. God gave us this earth, clean, beautiful, fertile, creative. That is the inheritance which we all receive at birth. We can't receive it at death, because God can never die. Which is to say, inheritance is about life, not death, and because this is so, our way of thinking about it might just be unhelpful.

It is impossible to be happy when we put our faith in manufactured things and hopes which will only grow old and decay. To put your faith in the finite is to see yourself as finite, to hold on to what is passing rather than share the bounty of now. Or as James says in today's Epistle: "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change."

As our inheritance, the Earth teaches us both about Change, which includes the appearance of death, and Eternity, which lies beyond death. God may have no variation or shadow, but God is forever changing, because love changes. The earth also changes, but also not in variation and shadows, but in her life-transforming cycle of seasons. Change need not lead to destruction unless we choose to destroy. And that is what many of us are choosing, whether we know it or not.

Like the younger son in the parable, we're turning the earth's beauty into pollution. We're drilling beneath her skin to fuel our disordered desire for speed and escape. For some unfathomable reason, our most intelligent philosophers decided that although the earth was the source of all life, she herself could not possibly be alive, and because it was an inanimate planet, we could extract what we wanted without any consequence but the pride of making progress against death.

I'm not saying this to make you feel badly. We've all been touched by the worldliness fairy. We've been trained since birth to consume God's gifts. This is what I mean by thought patterns so habitual we rarely question them. They come with the territory. We mistake them "for the way things are." We mistake them for "the real world" when they are anything but real. If we believe our planet is inanimate, how can we possibly be blamed for digging it up?

Many years ago, the son of a friend of mine did an Outward Bound wilderness retreat. As you may know, the capstone of Outward Bound is the Solo, which at the time he made it, meant spending 72 hours alone in a wild place, fasting and reflecting on one's thoughts and actions, a modern vision quest. Today, the solos can be shorter, but the intent is still the same: to distance oneself from the buzz of contemporary life to discover life's underlying reality which always appears first in a vision.

My friend's son found the experience profound. It was with both regret and resignation that he went back to the "real" world.

I was surprised by the strength of my reaction. "Don't you get it?" I wanted to ask him. "The wilderness is real and this, whatever it is, is not."

I wish it might be so simple, but like the two sons in the Parable of the Brothers, none of us gets it quite right. Nature is not something outside our experience which dispenses truth when we sit in it; it is our relationship with nature that leads to awakening. On the other hand, righteousness and good behavior without joy is neither righteous nor good. As James K.A. Smith wrote of Augustine, "We are made for joy. Joy is another name for the rest we find when we give ourselves over to the One who, for the joy that was set before him, gave himself for us. We find joy when we look for the satisfaction of our hungers in the Triune god who will never leave

us or forsake us, when we find our enjoyment in an immortal God whose love is unending. That is rightly ordered love.”¹

The one who squanders everything in loose living comes to himself and realizes he has made a big mistake. His dreams failed him and he crept home. He'd had it with the so called “real” world, which revealed itself as feeding the pigs, and he wanted to return as a servant to the paradise he once had scorned.

And his father welcomes him home as one returning from the dead.

Meanwhile, the older brother who had been doing the “right thing” but in the wrong spirit, could not forgive his younger brother for having had all the fun.

It is the greatest delusion of all that loose living is fun. It's nerve wracking and mostly hung-over. It pretends to be fun in the same way that heroin pretends to be fun. Self-gratification, as the father in the parable knew, is the love of things that cannot last: youth, speed, overindulgence. It leads to a terror of death, which is why the father welcomed his errant son home, not from the far country, but from the land of the dead.

Love is all about being alive. Love is stronger than death. Love the earth and feel the love of God.

My beloved is like a gazelle
or a young stag.

Look, there he stands
behind our wall,
gazing in at the windows,
looking through the lattice.

It is not what goes into us that harms us. It's what we do with it that matters. Amen.

¹ On the Road with St. Augustine: A Real World Spirituality for Restless Hearts, p. 77