AT_HOMENESS AND HOMESICKNESS August 8, 1982
(Second in a series on Creation)

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"And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put man whom he had formed." Genesis 2:8

"We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now." Romans 8: 22

Sometimes it seems as if we were still there. We go out to our cabin and sit by the lake in the cool of the day, the same hour that God was wont to take his daily constitutional. The surface of the water is calm and smooth, broken only by the occasional leap of a fish. The woodlands are full of the soft sounds of birds settling in for the night. The sun is low and mild in the sky. Encouraged by our silent and unobtrusive presence various small creatures come hopping around us, going about their business with what seems to us to be a wholly natural delight.

So for a moment we feel at home in the world. In the harmony of the ecosystem we have our place. Eden is spread before us as familiar as the palms of our hands.

For a moment. Very soon other moments come. In time we go inside, we turn on the radio and we hear about the suffering in Lebanon, about more layoffs on the Iron Range. We know that this is not Eden. Rather it is the land to which Cain went to dwell, the land of Nod, which means the place of wandering. We are strangers and exiles on earth, "poor, wayfaring strangers," yearning for "that fair land" which we feel is our true home.

Our basic human experience of the world is two-sided. It is the experience of splendor, but also of horror, of goodness, but also of evil. At the same time it is the experience of belonging and also the experience of alienation, of feeling at home and of feeling homesick.

The two-sidedness is not just a matter of our changing moods. To be sure, the quality of our personal experience will tend to give emphasis to one side or the other. During my first year in theological school I used to study occasionally with an Episcopal student. Once he startled me by referring to "this vale of tears." That seemed like a strange expression for a young man to be using, strange in its old-fashioned sound, strange in its dolefulness. The expression even struck me as heretical. If one believes that God created the world and called it "very good", one should not refer to that world as a "vale of tears."

It wasn't long after my graduation that the alumni newsletter reported the death of that young man. I recalled then his telling me of a serious illness he underwent shortly before entering the seminary. In the light of his untimely death I saw with more understanding why he was prompted to use that dolorous, old expression, "vale of tears."

Yet none of us would want to say that this expression tells the whole story of that young man's life. Though I did not know him very well, I am sure that there was more to his life than that.

On the other hand, I doubt that any of us would wish to characterize life in general as "a bed of roses." For some people in some moments life may appear that way. Happy-go-lucky people with a lot of what used to be called "animal spirits" may give the impression that so far as they are concerned the world is one big garden of lollipops. But the impression is deceiving. Such people are covering up. We should be suspicious, indeed, of anyone who appears to be completely at home in the world. One ought never to be totally at home in the land of Nod.

The two-sided slant on creation goes deeper than moods, deeper than the balance of good and bad fortune that may become the lot of any individual. It goes deeper too than the question of pleasure and pain. It is rather the profound awareness that though we are in God's world, we are in some radical way cut off from God. As the first Confession of Faith used in this church put it, we are "by nature children of wrath." Such language may offend us today. But it points to the condition of which I speak.

Now the Bible, in its picture of creation and of ourselves, starts out from this two-sided vision. It starts there because that is how the unknown writers believed the situation looked to God. But the Bible starts there too because that is how human beings searching for God experience their world. They belong to it, yet they feel alienated from it, they are at home, yet they are homesick.

As we think of the biblical teaching about creation it is immensely important that we take to heart that value judgment that God puts on the whole enterprise.

"And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good."

The Bible affirms the fundamental goodness of creation. True Christianity affirms this too. God's creation is essentially good and that means creation in its goleness, not just some rarified "spiritual" aspect, but the whole works. The material creation is essentially good.

This affirmation sets Christianity off from those ancient religious movements that tend to see the material world as something basically evil, or an illusion, or something from which it is the business of religion to help us escape. Christianity confronted these religious tendencies as soon as it began to spread beyond the Holy Land. There was danger that such ideas might infiltrate the church to the degree that a biblical belief in the goodness of creation was compromised. For example, there were people who declared themselves followers of Jesus but who denied that Jesus had a physical body. It would have been degrading they felt, for Christ to have had a body. It followed, of course, that he could not have suffered and died as a real human being. If we wonder why the early Christians fell so quickly into theological debate, why they suffered splits, why it seemed necessary to them after a while to draw up creeds saying what they believed, the answer is partly here. Those first Christians came up against religious teachings that contradicted their faith in the goodness of God's creation.

Some people would say that despite the victories won at church councils, Christianity was seriously infiltrated by alien ideas anyway. They would say that Christianity became so other-worldy as to deny the value of life here and now. They would point to attitudes about sex as an indication that the church did not take seriously the Bible's affirmation of the essential goodness of the material world. I think there is truth in such observations, though sometimes they are exaggerated and based on misunderstanding.

But there is little doubt that when they have thought about the matter, most Christians have shared God's value judgment on creation. Last Sunday I read here the section on creation that is found in the Westminister Confession of Faith. This confession carried a lot of clout with most congregationalists for more than two hundred years. Now this confession is well-known for its Calvanist perspective, a perspective that supposedly is very grim and harsh in its judgments of human nature. Yet the Westminister Confession declares that God created all things visible and invisible "and all very good." It goes on to say that God made humanity, male and female, "with reasonable and immortal souls, endued with knowledge, righteousness and true holiness...having the law of God written on the their hearts." "They were happy" so the statement tells us, "in their communion

with God, and had dominion over the creatures."

Now it is true that the Westminister Confession views humanity as having taken a fall from that happy state of affairs. As a consequence we sinners became "wholly defiled in all the faculties and parts of soul and body." We'll get to that by and by. (I mean we'll get to that in the pulpit; in other respects we're already there.) But the point for now is that this confession of faith so important in our heritage affirms the essential goodness of that world created by the good God. It affirms the goodness of human nature. It affirms with the Bible that we are made for this world, that we are meant to be at home here and to get along with one another and our fellow creatures.

To put the matter very simply: Eden is our natural state. And all of us have some experience of Eden. The garden of Eden is not a lost land in past history only. Eden is deep inside of us. Eden is where we live when our basic goodness comes out and when we relish wholeheartedly the glory of the world around us.

But as we noted, most of the time we seem to live in the land of Nod. No sooner does the Bible tell us that God concluded that creation was very good than things begin to go wrong. Within a few chapters, God gets so disgusted that the Creator is on the verge of destroying the whole creation. Only Noah and his crew squeak through.

The Bible sees the problem as centering in humanity, that creature whose dominion ranges from anarchy to tyranny. Yet somehow the other creatures too share in what is wrong. "All creation has been groaning in travail," writes Paul. We are not told why or how, but Paul implies that even the other creatures are somehow alienated from their creator. For them too, creation is not what it ought to be.

Sometimes it is in relationships with other creatures that the sense of homesickness comes through to us most poignantly. A few evenings ago in the early twilight I began to jog up the road, feeling much like God taking his turn through Eden in the cool of the day. Ahead of me I saw two parked motorcycles and on the other side of the road two youths in black jackets surrounded by a crowd of ... children. Drawing near I saw the reason for this gathering. A dog, apparently hit by one of the motorcycles, lay on the opposite shoulder.

I was one of those moments when I wished I had followed through on my original ambition and become a veterinarian. But it probably was too late for any expert remedies. I helped a small boy lift the dog into the car of a white-haired woman who came by just then to claim him. But the breathing stopped just before then; there was no beat in the furry chest. The woman wanted him anyway.

After she drove off, there didn't seem to be anything to do but to resume running up the road. Half a mile later the motorcyclists passed and gave a friendly honk. But the world was colder and darker than when I began.

Here is our two-sided experience of creation. We long for Eden, perhaps we even visit there from time to time, but we are residents of Nod. We are at home in the world, yet we are estranged.

The Bible illumines this two-sided experience of ours. It gives it beautiful expression. But the Bible does more than that. It summons us to leave off wandering aimlessly in that land east of Eden and to take a journey with God toward a new heaven and a new earth.

What can this mean? We cannot say in detail, for as Paul reminds us, we are

dealing here with hope and hope takes us beyond where we can see. Later I shall try to say more about the new creation. For the present let me just say this: The hope has to do with a man who, in one sense, was more homesick than any of us. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Yet in another sense this man was more at home in creation than any of us. In him Eden was restored. He became what God intended humanity to be. More than Adam he was "happy in his communion with God." And he brought that communion to others as he restored to them their own true selves.

Our hope in creation has to do with that man. Indeed, it is among the oldest insights of our heritage that it was that man which God had in mind when the Word declared, "Let there be light."

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