

# Stewardship: Tending God's Garden

This series of resources will explore the biblical roots of stewardship. It can be used alone or with others. Used with others, read the reflection aloud, pausing between paragraphs. Invite each member of the group to take a turn reading, or prepare readers in advance. Pause to reflect with the questions provided. If you are studying with others, discuss the questions; if you are using the resource alone, share your thoughts with another in the coming week.

## Opening Ritual and Prayer

**Light a candle. Open the Bible to Genesis chapter two and set it beside the candle.**



**Leader:** Let us trace on our bodies, the sign of the Cross:

**All:** (in unison) In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**Leader:** Creator God, we assemble in your garden today.

**All:** Help us to better care for it in all that we do.

**Leader:** God of the universe, we thank you for the goodness of creation.

**All:** We thank you, God, for trusting us to care for this precious gift with you.

**Leader:** God, you who planted us, help us to always take root in you.

**All:** Amen.

## Read aloud Genesis 2:4b-25

The African American poet James Weldon Johnson in his poem *God's Trombones* tells us that God was lonely, so he created humans to help him care for the universe. The same opinion is shared by the storyteller of Genesis chapter two. God had planted a garden and he needed some helpers to care for it. These men and women were to be stewards of God's garden.

## **"And the Lord God planted a garden . . ."**

In the second chapter of Genesis, God is imaged first as a gardener, then as a potter, and then as a bellows. God plants a garden. The mist that went up from the garden earth was useless since there was no one to channel it into fertilizing streams. So the world was desolate and barren with no one to help God care for it. God needed a helper, so he created two of them a male and a female human. God the potter fashioned the human from the *adamah*, the clay. The noun *adam* is best understood as all of humankind. This image reveals a God who focuses closely on the object to be created and like an experienced potter takes painstaking care to shape something useful and beautiful. At the same time, the product of the potter's work remains very much bound to the earth and bears essential marks of the environment from which it is derived. God imaged as a bellows breathes life into what has been formed out of the clay. This "breath of life" is not the air in general but God's own living breath. God shares this divine "breath of life" with the humans and with the animals. When the author says that God breathed into *adam's* nostrils the breath of life, he is not only saying that humans enjoy life as a gift from God, but that human beings enjoy a share in God's own life. Once created, human beings will also have a share in the care and stewardship of God's garden.

**For reflection and discussion:** What might you change in your life or actions as a result of pondering the understanding that we (and all humans) enjoy a share in God's own life? How might this deepen your understanding of being a steward of all you are?

### **The Garden**

Interestingly, the Greek word for garden is *paradeosis* from which we get the English word paradise. The garden lies *in* Eden. Eden is not a particular geographical area. Rather it is a situation or context in which humans live with God. People will discover in this context that



they depend on God in order to live fully.

The garden is a symbol of God's generosity in providing for the first human beings whom he had made. In Hebrew, the name Eden means both "luxuriant" and "pleasure," and would have conjured up for the original readers images of bliss and contentment.

The garden in Eden, paradise, is not a historically verifiable geographical place, but rather a situation: the ideal situation intended by God. It is painted in vivid colors with rivers flowing through it, symbolizing an abundance of life-giving water. The Garden of Eden is a symbol for an ideal situation where God and humans peacefully coexist.

## The Trees

There is more to this ideal situation. There is a "tree of life." This "tree of life" is common enough in the lands of the Bible. An ancient temple in Egypt has a relief of the Pharaoh reaching out to pluck from a tree the *ankh*, the Egyptian symbol for eternal life. An ancient epic from Mesopotamia tells how its hero searched for eternal life and was given it in the form of a plant. But a serpent stole the plant from him. No doubt the Biblical author borrowed the idea from these myths.



The "tree of life" represents the truth that in the ideal situation intended by God, humankind was to be free from death, at least from death as a penalty, death as something to be feared.

Within the ideal situation was another situation, another possibility. This is symbolized in the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil." "To know" or "to have knowledge" in Hebrew is never simply an intellectual operation. It always involves the actual experience and possession of what is known. A common example is the phrase, "to know a woman." "Knowing a

woman" involves not simply recognizing or understanding a woman, but the intimacy of sexual intercourse.

As for "good and evil," the name is a symbol for "knowing everything possible." Thus, "to know good and evil" is "the power to experience everything possible." Thus, "the tree" in the ideal situation provides a possibility for humans to make their own choices, to experience on their own terms whatever exists. That is a prerogative in the biblical world reserved only to God.

However, God tells the humans that they are not to pick and choose what to do and what not to do on their own terms, but to trust God. God will keep the human beings in the ideal situation if they will choose and decide according to the lines indicated by God. Of course, such a willingness to accept God's direction presumes an understanding that God loves and wishes only what is true and good for those to whom he gives directions. In the next chapter of Genesis, humans choose to reach beyond their own limitations and attempt to become God—knowing everything—by eating the fruit of the tree.

**For reflection and discussion:** How have you experienced God's presence when you have trusted God in the past? In what ways do you need to grow in trust of God and God's ways now and in the future?

### Tilling and Keeping the Garden

The Lord God placed the humans in the Garden to "till it and keep it" (Genesis 2:15). This commission from God shows that from the very beginning work was an essential part of the human condition. While enjoying the fertile garden as God's gift, the humans could develop their own capacities and unfold the rich potentialities of God's beautiful world. God's command "to till the earth and keep it" points to our responsibility as the stewards of the world, which is God's gift. We must indeed develop the world, and we must also use



all the discoveries of science and technology in doing so. We cannot, however, use the world just for our own profit and convenience. We must "keep" the earth, and prudently conserve its riches, avoiding exploitation and waste, which are simply a desecration of what God has placed at our disposal.

## **Stewardship: Tending Our Own Gardens**

In a sense the metaphor of the "garden" is symbolic of the way we choose to live our own lives. Bishop Robert Morneau, Auxiliary Bishop of the Diocese of Green Bay, Wisconsin, suggests that good stewards need to examine themselves on how well they are tending the following gardens in which we live:

- |                                 |                        |
|---------------------------------|------------------------|
| • the garden of our body        | (physical garden)      |
| • the garden of family—friends  | (social garden)        |
| • the garden of the globe       | (ecological garden)    |
| • the garden of choices         | (moral garden)         |
| • the garden of our emotions    | (psychological garden) |
| • the garden of the city/nation | (political garden)     |
| • the garden of the "chip"      | (technological garden) |
| • the garden of history         | (historical garden)    |
| • the garden of mind            | (intellectual garden)  |
| • the garden of the arts        | (cultural garden)      |
| • the garden of money           | (economic garden)      |
| • the garden of our soul        | (spiritual garden)     |

Obviously, these gardens overlap and intersect. But each of them calls for a certain amount of tending and care. This is what stewardship is all about. Each person must decide on how he or she will allocate the limited time and resources they have in attempting to be good stewards of these many gardens in which we are planted.

But stewardship is not just an affair of the individual. Garden tending happens in community, in families, in the public square, and in the church sanctuary. The

people of God, the church, both individually and corporately, are called to cooperate with God and together become master gardeners who together prepare and fertilize the soil, plant the seed, cultivate and weed around the plants, water them, deal with insects and predators, and reap the harvest.

**For reflection and discussion:** How has God planted you in the garden of life? Which one(s) of the garden(s) of your life need tending? Is there anything you need to weed out of the gardens of your life?

### Closing Prayer

**Leader:** God, you have formed us and breathed into us your very presence.

**All:** Help us to always remember that our origin is from you.

**Leader:** Thank you, God, for the garden you have entrusted to us.

**All:** Help us to be good stewards of your precious gift.

**All:** Amen.