Whose Land Is It?

David Rensberger

Genesis 3:14–19; Psalm 104:14–15, 20–23, 27–30; Mark 4:26–29

Years ago, my family took my mother back to Northern Indiana to visit the places she had known as a child and record her memories on video. At one point, my daughter, then in her early twenties, asked me how Mennonite farmers had dealt with acquiring land that the US government had taken from native people by force of arms. I didn't really have an answer. Truthfully, I was a little afraid of what the answer might be.

I recalled this conversation in 2017 while preparing a sermon for Land Sunday during the Season of Creation at Atlanta Mennonite Fellowship (Decatur, GA). This new liturgical season, originating in Australia, is meant to encourage celebration of God as Creator, to recognize the biblical theme of humans worshiping alongside other creatures, and to invite ethical living on earth as creatures within the creation.[1] The season, which occurs in September, has three rotating series of four weekly themes. In Series A (2017, 2020, etc.), the themes are Forest, Land, Wilderness/Outback, and River.

Marking the Season of Creation in the United States raises fundamental questions about the earth. To whom does it belong? How is it that "earth" created by God became "land" under human control? Preaching on Land Sunday immediately after Forest Sunday, I realized that the sequence reflected my own experience and the experience of many Mennonites in the Americas. *Forest gives way to land:* great forests are divided up into plots of land and sold to pioneers, who cut down the forests and farm the land. In this way, "earth" itself—the ground, the soil that simply exists as part of creation—also becomes "land" available for private ownership and exploitation.

To make this understanding of land clearer, let me quote one of my favorite sayings on the subject. It comes from Ambrose Bierce, a journalist and literary critic of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who had an eloquent

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1 The original Australian Website is https://seasonofcreation.com/. An American Website has been created more recently: http://www.letallcreationpraise.org/united-states-ecumenical/.

but acid tongue and a deep skepticism about most social institutions and conventions (including religious ones). In his collection of satirical definitions titled *The Devil's Dictionary*, Bierce defined land as "a part of the earth's surface, considered as property. The theory that land is property subject to private ownership and control is the foundation of modern society, and is eminently worthy of the superstructure."[2] That is to say, if society is filled with selfishness and violence, we can trace these evils back to the idea of turning the planet, which is common to all that lives, into "land" as a personal enclave to be endlessly enhanced, defended, and exploited. Throughout this reflection, I use "land" in something like this sense, not meaning it as a technical or scientific definition but simply wanting to contrast the soil or ground as it exists in nature with the same soil put to human use. Forests, prairies, wetlands, and other ecosystems have all, in various times and places, been turned into "land."

My wife and I both grew up on very productive farmland in Elkhart County, Indiana. But where did this land come from? The state seal of Indiana tells an interesting story about that. It shows a man chopping down trees with an ax while a buffalo jumps over a fallen trunk and flees the scene.[3] It quite literally portrays the conversion of forest to land. Hoosiers have always been clear about this. Late nineteenth-century historian William Hayden English, discussing an earlier version of the seal, wrote that it was meant "to forcibly express the idea that a wild and savage condition is to be superseded by a higher and better civilization. The wilderness and its dangerous denizens of reptiles, Indians and wild beasts, are to disappear before the ax and rifle of the ever-advancing western pioneer, with his . . . restless and aggressive civilization."[4] The process of transforming earth and forest into land was certainly "restless and aggressive"; whether the result was always "higher and better" may be debated. At any rate, the naked, dehumanizing racism that placed "Indians" in a category between reptiles and wild beasts is a grotesque reminder of how this history was written and learned in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Where do Mennonites fit into this "restless and aggressive" process? In 2015, students and faculty from the Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary went on a nine–day journey following the "Trail of Death" along which the

2 Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary* (New York: Neale, 1911; repr. New York: Dover, 1958), 74, http://www.thedevilsdictionary.com/?l=#LAND_.

3 See Pamela J. Bennett and Alan January, "Indiana's State Seal—An Overview," Indiana Historical Bureau, State of Indiana (January 21, 2005), http://www.in.gov/history/2804.htm.

4 *Conquest of the Country Northwest of the River Ohio 1778-1783; and life of Gen. George Rogers Clark*, 2 vols (Indianapolis, IN: Bowen-Merrill, 1896), vol. 2, 774, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=yale.39002002554062&view=1up&seq=192. See also Bennett and January, "Indiana's State Seal—An Overview."

Potawatomi people of Northern Indiana were exiled from their homeland in the fall of 1838.[5] This tragedy took place just a few months before Mennonite settlers began arriving in the area. Around the time my father died in 1990, somebody looking through old papers found a land grant for property in Elkhart County signed by Martin Van Buren, who was President in 1838. This document brings the Trail of Death unbearably close to home for me. Mennonites came to America seeking freedom from persecution. Already famous in Europe for farming unfarmable land, they were willingly given land in what was then the West, and they willingly accepted it. By participating in this restless and aggressive act of civilizing, even the "quiet in the land," who had renounced violence as disciples of Jesus, could not help being tainted by what was done to provide a safe haven for them.

How can this history be redeemed? Can land become earth again? Can wrongs committed so long ago, now so thoroughly woven into culture and law, be repented, redeemed, or undone? Luke Gascho, writing in *The Mennonite*, offers some pointers. He relates his own history of working land taken unjustly from Ojibwe and Potawatomi peoples and his determination to take part in the work of undoing these wrongs. Gascho lives on part of the very land that one of my ancestors, Bolser Hess, laid claim to once its inhabitants had been brutally expelled. Unlike me, Gascho continues to be directly engaged with that soil, tilling his extensive garden and, until recently, serving as executive director of Goshen (Indiana) College's Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center. In this engagement, he has found a balance between the labor he puts in and the soil's own productivity; and he has looked to the biblical affirmation that Christ is the Creator as well as the Reconciler and Sustainer of all the created world (Col 1:15–21).[6] By these means, Gascho is pointing the way toward living with and within the creation, not against it.

The Season of Creation's Scripture texts offer another spiritual resource for this way of living. One of these texts for Land Sunday is Genesis 3:14–19. We tend to think of the events in that story as a curse on humanity following the fall; but the Bible doesn't actually speak of a "fall," and it is the snake and the ground who are literally cursed, not the humans. Yet why should the ground be cursed? Nothing that happened there was the fault of the earth! The "curse" means only that things the ground once easily gave to human beings now have to be wrenched from it by force. As with the forest of Indiana, created ground in

5 The course has continued to be offered in subsequent years: "Trail of Death: A Pilgrimage of Remembrance, Lament and Transformation," Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, https://www.ambs.edu/academics/trail-of-death. See also http://www.potawatomi-tda.org/ptodhist.htm.

6 Luke Gascho, "Tilling Soil on Stolen Land," *The Mennonite*, May 2019, 10–12, https://themennonite.org/feature/tilling-soil-stolen-land/.

Genesis is transformed into agricultural land that must be worked. This is called a curse for the ground, but in the Genesis text only humans feel the effects. As one who has dug thistles out of cow pastures, I've experienced those effects myself (and maybe done a little cursing of my own). Yet thorns and thistles are a blessing for creatures that eat wild berries and seeds. The viewpoint in Genesis 3 is strongly human-centered: something must have gone wrong with the earth, because food no longer drops into our hands as it did in Paradise.

At the very beginning of the story of human relationships with the earth and with God, we find failure and bad consequences, a fracturing of the connection people have with the earth and other creatures. Elsewhere in the Bible, though, different perspectives emerge.[7] Psalm 104, for instance, has a considerably more benign view of the land and how people relate to its productivity than we find in Genesis 3. It is not sweating humans but God who causes plants to grow, in order "to bring forth food from the earth."[8] Wine and oil and bread, things that bring gladness and sustenance, come from the Creator's beneficence. People, like all other creatures, "look to [God] to give them their food in due season." At sunrise, "People go out to their work and to their labor until the evening"; at night, the animals go "seeking their food from God." Labor to gain sustenance is a requirement, as in Genesis, for both humans and animals. Yet, it is not seen as a curse but rather as part of the natural order overseen by God. Lions must hunt and humans must till the soil, but it is all part of seeking food from God. Creation relies on the Creator; for all their labor, humans do not become self-sustaining but remain dependent on God.

This mixed view of labor and sustenance shows up again in Jesus's parable of the Growing Seed in Mark 4. The farmer must go out and sow when it's planting time and must grab the sickle and get going again at harvest time. But in between, farmers have little control. They may weed or do pest control, irrigate or fertilize, but they can't control the weather, and they can't actually *make* the crop grow. Through this parable, Jesus taught his disciples that while they participated in God's Reign, they were not responsible for its success. We plant seeds, and we go into action when they bear fruit. But we can't control the direction or rate or quantity of growth. Like farmers, we must simply rely on God, with all the vulnerability that that entails.

Where can we find hope, both for the earth-become-land and for ourselves? One kind of hope for the earth can be recognized, rather grimly, in the fact that earth can get along just fine without us, but we can't get along without it. The damage we have inflicted on the environment over the past couple of centuries is coming home to roost, in flood and landslide, fire and famine. Ultimately, the

7 For my sermon, while I retained Genesis 3, I chose passages from Psalm 104 and the Gospel of Mark in place of the original Season of Creation selections.

8 Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

accounts must be balanced, whatever the consequences for human beings. Any hope for us cannot possibly lie in greater human control over earth. Instead, we must learn from those scriptures and other sources how to move from a stance of restlessness and aggression, autonomy and control, to a stance of creaturely vulnerability and reliance on God.

For one thing, we can listen to cultures, including America's First Nations, who have retained a better understanding of how to live in cooperation with earth rather than as its despot. From the scriptures we can learn to balance Genesis 1:28 with Psalms 104 and 148 and other texts. We must also remember that the Bible itself is rooted in "Indigenous" agrarian societies, not in post-Enlightenment Western culture. This listening to Indigenous peoples, both American and biblical, will be a humble and a humbling process, an act of repentance. Part of this path of hope is to accept our dependency, to be willingly vulnerable within the creation and before the Creator. If we can learn again to live within creation as the humans do in Psalm 104, rather than trying to live against our creatureliness like the humans in Genesis 3, we can hope to regain the balance of work and dependence that long characterized human life. Looking back to earlier, pre-Industrial Age Western societies might also help in this transformation.

All this runs right against the grain of the modern West, with our obsessive quest for control and efficiency, and our conviction that we alone knows what is best and true. Listening to people outside our own circle of certainty; accepting the reality of our identity as creatures rather than as creation's lords; being willing to waste time in inefficient practices like prayer and art—all this and more boils down to a colossal act of cultural and spiritual repentance.

To put it in terms of mission: we must take up a mission *to ourselves*. It is time to preach the gospel to ourselves, the gospel of the Christ who is "gentle and humble in heart" (Matt 11:29), the antithesis of the "restless and aggressive civilization" that we have cherished. This is the genius of the Anabaptist Reformation, to recognize that it is not enough to reshape the rituals and creeds that tie Christianity to a society that fails to embody the intentions of Jesus and his apostles. Rather, a church embedded in a "restless and aggressive civilization," land-rich but earth-impoverishing, needs to hear its own gospel all over again. Besides this mission to ourselves, could our repentance make us humble enough to accept a mission from the Potawatomi, the Hmong, the Hausa? What might they have to teach us about living as creatures among other cherished creatures of the one Creator?

Such a radical reformation begins in spiritual "re-formation," in rereading Scripture, relearning prayer, reacquainting ourselves with our own connections with God, God's children, and all God's creatures. But it must continue in new patterns of action. Gascho lays out a couple of examples of such patterns for people who still benefit from the transmutation of stolen earth into tilled

land. One of these is the work of the Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery Coalition. This group, operating in the Anabaptist spirit of love for neighbors and restoring relationships through active nonviolence, focuses on undoing the philosophical and legal framework by which European Christendom granted itself the specious right to conquer Indigenous peoples and dispossess them of their homelands.[9]

Secondly, Gascho is one of the leaders of the Mennonite Creation Care Network (MCCN). MCCN encourages the church to rediscover the Christian basis for taking care of creation, with its network of ties among creatures and the Creator; to confess what we have done wrong, both to the earth and to our human neighbors; and to put our repentance into action by restoring the planet.[10]

No one who becomes aware of these wrongs can hope to put them right all alone. An overly individualistic view of confession, repentance, and conversion has historically kept Christianity caught up in massive societal and *structural* sins. Each of us must work personally to reduce our negative impact on the earth, in the ways that we live and work, shop and drive. But movements and organizations such as those just mentioned can take us beyond individual action to participation in wider communities of redemption. As Episcopalian spiritual director Robert Morris writes, "The story is not about us; we are about the larger story of God's love for all of creation."[11]

Exactly how and why Mennonites, as much as any other settlers, took part in the transformation of created earth to owned land is for historians to answer. Yet we can see enough of that history—often in our own family stories—to realize our need to hold ourselves open to its reality and to seek a way toward its redemption. In order to do that, we must ask with real humility, "Whose land is it? To whom does the earth belong?"

9 See Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery: A Movement of the Anabaptist People of Faith, https://dofdmenno.org/about/.

10 See Mennonite Creation Care Network, https://mennocreationcare.org/about/.

11 Robert Morris, "Faithfulness, Grace, and Growth," in *The Upper Room Disciplines 2020* (Nashville: Upper Room, 2019), 249.