When the wildfires came to my house, I remembered the garden of Eden

Here in Oregon, the consequences of our actions are burning all around us.

by Deborah Wilhelm in the October 21, 2020 issue

A wildfire in Oregon (Photo © DaveAlan / E+ / Getty)

Lush. That's the word for Oregon, my Oregon, the Oregon of my childhood memories, where my ancestors came to farm and mill wheat into flour, to keep shop and raise children in the small towns of the Willamette Valley. Lush, Edenic forests. Lush ferns in shaded glens. Lush blackberries, with vines ready to scratch an unsuspecting berry picker, with fruit to stain her fingers and tongue a juicy purple. Lush rivers and creeks and ponds. Lush rain drifting or drizzling or sheeting or even bucketing down from the heavens to cover the familiar earth. A garden, with every shade of green ever named and a good many not.

We're famous for rain here, and we have a self-deprecating humor about all things wet. Oregonians don't tan; they rust, you'll hear. Or Last year, thousands of Oregonians saw a UFO: the sun. We allow tourists to think that real Oregonians don't

carry umbrellas. Good luck using moss to find your way out of a forest here, we say, because moss doesn’t grow on the north sides of trees—it grows on all sides of the trees. Also on roofs, mailboxes, fences, and bicycles left too long in the yard.

Lush. That’s not the word for the Oregon I live in now, where fire devours the lush and spits out the leftovers.

It came from nowhere, people are saying. My husband and I were sitting on the front porch enjoying a glass of wine before dinner, savoring the view of the nearby hills. We stepped inside to cook, and by the time the dishes were done a few hours later the entire panorama had vanished, smoke already obscuring the landscape. We closed our windows and put towels at the bottoms of doors.

As the dark midnight arrived, a wind came from the east—a dry, cruel wind that found a small blaze and whipped it overnight into a town-eating terror. The fire doubled, then tripled, fed by trees and grasses and topography and, soon, buildings. Our phones started siren-ing with alerts. Then they went silent, which was worse. With no cell service and no internet, we found ourselves cut off.

The fire grew unabated, with almost no one to fight it. Nearly every firefighter, local or distant, was already fighting one of the hundreds of other fires devouring the West. The few who were available worked to save lives and protect structures. Evacuees filled motels. They crowded into the extra bedrooms or onto the sofas of family and friends. They camped out in their cars in the high school parking lot. They received food, clothing, and supplies from an army of volunteers who worked outside—because how do you open an evacuation shelter during a pandemic?

Like the fire itself, speculation kindled and grew unchecked. Coordinated arsons, some people whispered. Bad forest management, others. Climate change. Take your pick: the truth seems to come in pieces, all jumbled up with enough excuses, guesses, lies, and blame to go around.

Our cell service returned, and we were told to prepare to evacuate. We packed our cars in the middle of the smoke-filled night: water, important papers, medicines, dog food, a few clothes, a very few mementos. Though we hadn’t yet received the “go” order, we drove off the next afternoon, leaving behind the house that we’d quit our jobs to build with our own hands three years earlier. Looking into our rearview mirrors, we wondered what would be left.

When the first people left the garden of Eden, what did they take?

So many people in so many places are fleeing so many crises of every kind. At this point it doesn't seem unreasonable to ask whether God is punishing us. That's the real question for people of faith, the "why" of unfathomable disasters everywhere. Depending on your theology, you may have a sneaking suspicion that the answer is yes and the punisher is a distant, capricious, calculating creator. I wonder, though, whether that way of answering the question makes God a scapegoat for something a little closer to home.

"Where were you when I created the earth?" God demands of the long-suffering Job. Job has no answer, because he was nowhere, no one, doing nothing, just potential and cosmic not-yet-ness, back when the lavish life of Earth began: the green growing things, the crawling and flying things, the eating-each-other things, and us—the thinking, speaking, imaginative things. We humans are recent participants in an ancient process.

We are guests on a lifegiving, hospitable sphere that we didn't make and we don't own, on loan from the Creator and the future. Our actions have consequences—the Hebrew scriptures underscore this—to a thousand generations. And we have been selfish.

If, as the New Testament says, creation is groaning in labor, perhaps we're being birthed out of our garden. But into where? If we have learned nothing else from the Eden story, surely we have learned that our words and actions have meaning, that they create our lives and the lives of those who come after. So punishment isn't what's happening here. Instead, it is the predictable consequences of our choices, both communal and personal.

The first people never went back to their Eden, but my husband and I returned home to ours. The neighborhood was unburned but, like much of the valley, thoroughly smoked. Breathing, that sign of life and spirit, has become work. As I write, more than two weeks after the fire began, our area is still on "be ready" evacuation alert, our go bags still packed. Other people, meanwhile, aren't yet allowed to return. The fire burns, and we all wait in an anxious limbo, breathing in the distressing daily sameness of smoke and ash.

Terry Tempest Williams, describing a wildfire in a recent podcast, notes that the ash settling around her isn't just wood but also "fur . . . feathers . . . everything." I look

out my window at a black-red sun nearly hidden in a pomegranate sky and press pause. Because the ash that's been falling for weeks on my hair, on the cedar trees along the driveway, on the tomatoes still valiantly trying to ripen in the garden, truly is everything. This ash is firs and pines and oaks and maples, frogs and squirrels and deer; it's propane tanks and drywall and car tires and fiberglass, cookie sheets and galoshes and laptops and love letters and bags of flour that will never be made into bread.

And the ash is people. Bone and sinew. Skin. Hearts.

It's the ash of lives and dreams. It's the ash of what used to be the innocence of newness on the Earth and can now truthfully only be called what it is: sin. It's the sin of thinking that here, in this gray and rainy paradise, we can keep living the way we've always lived—that anyone, anywhere, can keep living a life that sees only the moment and the small self.

We humans have ourselves become the raging fire, devouring the lush and spitting out the leftovers. What first looked like a seasonal disruption that came from nowhere now looks like regular life—and it comes from us. It's like all of our other fires: lies, violence, suspicion, greed, racism, sexism, all the isms.

It's easy to see our personal wrongdoings, our personal sins, but it can be harder to see the communal ones. The consequences, however, are burning all around us. And these fires aren't for an unlucky few; they're for everyone. For me and my children, but also for you, your children, your grandchildren, your thousand generations, for all of our generations forever. Unless, in true metanoia, we look past our own small selves and toward God—and act accordingly, now that we know better.