

Scene on Radio
Season 5 Episode 1: “In the Beginning”
Transcript

[Season 5 is supported by you, our listeners, and by the International Women’s Media Foundation.]

Sound: Turning pages

Amy Westervelt, Genesis 1:1: In the beginning...

John Biewen: In the beginning...

Amy Westervelt: God created the heavens and the earth.

Sound: Computer key click

ABC News, Sept 6 2020, Anchor: We begin tonight with a state of emergency in California, as historic heat fuels dangerous wildfires....

BBC News Australia, 3/21/21: Anchor: Parts of Australia have been hit by the worst flooding in a century...

Africa News, 11/30/19: Southern Africa is facing one of its deadliest droughts ever.

Sound: Click

Amy Westervelt/John Biewen, Genesis 1:12-20: And the earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed after their kind, and trees bearing fruit, with seed in them after their kind, and God saw that it was good. ... Then God said, 'Let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures'...

Sound: Click

CTV News anchor: In the next thirty years, rising sea levels could affect three times more people than previously thought ... there are 150 million people currently living in cities that could be underwater by 2050....

Sound: Click

Amy Westervelt/ John Biewen, Genesis 1:20,24: ... and let birds fly above the earth in the open expanse of the heavens.... And God made the beasts of the earth after their kind, and the cattle after their kind, and every thing that creeps on the ground....

Sound: Click

NPR, May 6, 2019, Ailsa Chang: According to the United Nations-backed report, up to one million species of plants and animals are at risk of extinction, many within decades.

And the authors warn that the loss of all that biodiversity could pose a threat to human well-being.

Sound: Click

[Music]

Amy Westervelt / John Biewen, Genesis 27-28: And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them; and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'

[Music]

Amy Westervelt: So, John, The Repair. That title for this season sounds kinda optimistic.

John Biewen: (Chuckles) I guess so. There's hope in it, anyway. I can't say I'm upbeat about the odds that we're gonna solve this mess we've made.

Amy Westervelt: Yeah. I wouldn't call myself optimistic in a straightforward sense, either.

John Biewen: You are Amy Westervelt. I'm thrilled to say you're my co-host for Season 5. Amy is a terrific journalist and podcaster. She hosts multiple shows about climate, including *Drilled*, which is a kind of true crime series about the climate crisis.

Amy Westervelt: And you're John Biewen, host and producer of Scene on Radio. This, I have to tell you, is probably my favorite podcast, so I'm really happy to be here. (Laughs)

John Biewen: Oh my god. That means a lot.

Amy Westervelt: It's true.

John Biewen: Well, delighted to be working with you on this. So, the idea behind the title is not to say the repair is happening in anything like the way it needs to. Yet. But more, I guess, to point to the question we're asking: What would it *take* to make the changes we would *need* to make. Right? Not only to avoid the worst calamities headed our way from the climate emergency, but, at the same time—by necessity—to fix the other profound and deeply intertwined injustices we've spent the past few years laying bare on this show.

Amy Westervelt: Yes. Over the last three seasons, you and your collaborators have told the story of a patriarchal, white supremacist society with deeply antidemocratic structures in place. A society built first and foremost for the extraction of wealth, by the relative few, at the expense of millions of exploited people and the natural world.

John Biewen: Yeah. So what might all of that have to do with our ecological crisis?

Amy Westervelt: Right. Other than everything.

John Biewen: Having taken on those big questions about who we are as a society, this one seemed like a natural to take on next. And besides, climate is humanity's most serious existential challenge, maybe ever. So, what would "repair" really mean?

Amy Westervelt: To answer *that* question, we need to get clear about what the problem really is. Where did we go wrong? Like, really. Not just in the technologies we created, the fuel we decided to burn in the last few centuries, but in our deepest cultural values. How, and where, and when, did we make such a profoundly wrong turn?

John Biewen: Crucially—you and I have been saying "we" a lot, as in where did "we" go wrong—who is this "we"?

[Music]

John Biewen: From the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, this is Scene on Radio, Season 5: The Repair. A series on the climate crisis that will take us across the world, to reckon with the cost of what we've wrought, and to learn what we can, from people in a variety of cultures, about potential solutions.

Amy Westervelt: But in this first episode, a very Scene on Radio kind of question, I think: How did we get this way? Human beings as a species, and in particular, those of us humans who really drove us off this cliff? One analysis found the U.S. and the European Union, which together have one-tenth of the global population, produced 70-percent of the excess greenhouse gases that created this crisis. How did the West become the kind of society that would unleash so much destruction -- on our home, on other living things, and ultimately on ourselves and our children? We're gonna try to tell that story in our first few episodes. John, you reported this first one. Take it away and we'll talk more in a little while.

John Biewen: OK.

David Pecusa: Um, I'd say we're about, what, six thousand feet here? It's high desert.

John Biewen: David Pecusa was 32 when I first met him in 2008, on the Hopi Reservation. Here David was drawing a line on the earth, for planting.

David Pecusa, outside (taking steps): One, two, three. So I can see that other marker I made with that can over there? So then I'll just keep my eye, keep focused on that can and I'll just mark it with my feet. (shuffling feet through soil)

John Biewen: I was visiting, with a co-producer, Camille Lacapa, to record for a public radio series about family farmers. David and his mother and father lived in the village of Bacavi on Third Mesa. They farm on small plots that lay on plateaus below the mesas.

David Pecusa: (footsteps stop) So, then I look back to see if I made a straight line to my other marker. So that looks good to me.

John Biewen: Hopi farmers raise corn and beans, and gather wild plants like spinach and berries, pretty much as their ancestors have in this place for thousands of years. The Hopi people say their ancestors migrated from other places in the southwest, and in Mexico, starting between two and three thousand years ago, and formed the Hopi nation in what's now also called northern Arizona.

David Pecusa: The sand, we have brown sand. Sage, yucca, Mormon tea, and most of the brush is like really low to the ground. I had a friend say it looks like Mars. (laughs)

John Biewen: David's father, Davis, was in his seventies when we met. Davis used an old Massey-Ferguson tractor to plant his crops. You can hear the father's machine in the background, planting corn a field away. David, the son, is more traditional than his father. On this day in early May, David's planting beans—by hand.

(Sound: Hoe scraping soil)

David Pecusa: I have a hoe, so I'm gonna scrape, scrape down till I reach the, where it's wet like this. And that's really good because it looks really moist, so you could see where the top part is all dry and then underneath it's still wet. (Sound: Hoe striking earth) Then I'll get my planting stick. It's just, it's like a flat hoe, two inch wide. Traditionally they used a greasewood stick. I'll just kind of break up the wet dirt. See how moist it is. And I'll go down maybe six inches or so, seven inches. Then I'll refill it about halfway. And I loosened it enough, down underneath it, that when the roots come out, they'll shoot straight down and it'll be easier to establish itself.

(Sound: seeds in container) These lima beans, these seeds are like real hardy. We tried commercial stuff, commercial seeds or things that aren't used to be planting in the

desert. They'll die because they don't know what to do. I'll put about six in there. What I do is, see this, the eye, I guess? I'll put it in down. So that way the roots will shoot down. And I plant them kind of far apart in the hole, that I'm not letting them touch. 'Cause in a couple days, when they absorb all the moisture they're gonna get really fat, and they say if they're touching it's gonna rot. The sprouts inside's gonna rot. Kinda pressing them into the soft dirt that I made 'em, like that. So this kind of planting will take a while. Then I learned that it just really, it makes you conscious of what you're doing. You're not just throwing seeds in. You're, it seems like, establishing a good relationship from the beginning. With each seed. (Laughs) (Sound: Hoeing)

John Biewen: The Hopi practice dry farming, using those hardy, desert-friendly seeds their ancestors passed down over centuries. They rely on whatever moisture the desert offers up in a given year: Snow running off the mesas in the spring, the hit-or-miss monsoons that roll across the desert in summertime. Most Hopi farmers, including the Pecusas, do not irrigate. They don't use synthetic fertilizers, not even manure. That would betray a lack of faith and gratitude to the spirits, some of whom are ancestors. As a farmer, David is part of something much bigger than simply growing food for his family. He tells me when he's working in the fields, he's got company.

David Pecusa: All through this, between that mesa and in this little corner, is just full of ruins. You'll find pot shards here and there. So people have been living here, or farming here, for a long time. Prehistoric people were farming through here. I always go with that kind of attitude that there's things that been here way older than me. And that they see my intentions, what I'm doing, and that I'm asking their permission and also to aid me in my work, and farming. (sound: wind gust) I can feel it. There's all these energies around, and your ancestors or the things of this land, and the whole reason why we plant. So, I'm just a tool, you know. I'm not the source of it happening, I'm just the one that's putting the seeds in and taking care of it. So I try to do it in a real respectful way.

[Music]

John Biewen: David and the way he talks about farming may seem strikingly out of step, through the lens of our 21st-century, technologized, extractive society. But in the sweep of human history, the Hopis are not the odd ones. Anthropologists say that for most of the last two or three hundred thousand years — that is, for most of human history — David's humble approach to creation was the norm. His sense that he has to serve nature, not the other way around? That was pretty much universal. Haven't most of us tried to imagine people in deep history, trying to make sense of the world, before science came along to explain the mechanics

of it all: The sun, the moon, the rain, the days and the seasons, what makes things grow. While the elements and other creatures felt like threats much of the time. Would it have occurred to those people, out there surviving in small, foraging bands, that they were somehow categorically separate from the rest of the world, let alone in charge of it? That it all had been created for their use? How and when did humans begin to think that way?

Voice: Woman reading Genesis Chapter 1 in Hebrew

John Biewen: We're back to where we opened this episode, with the Book of Genesis. Scholars now think people pieced the book together from the work of several Hebrew writers, roughly five or six hundred years BCE, Before the Common Era.

Bina Nir: My name is Bina Nir. My research....[fades under]

John Biewen: Bina Nir is a professor at the Academic College of Emek Yezre'el, in Israel. She's a former scientist who studies Western culture and its roots in religion. Nir is more comfortable in Hebrew so she did most of the interview in that language. She says the Hebrew thinkers who wrote the Genesis creation story made a fundamental break with every known culture of the time.

Bina Nir, Hebrew....

Voiceover: Because in the pre-Biblical world, in Greece too, but mainly in the Pagan world, people lived in harmony with nature, and the gods were part of nature and everything was in nature.

John Biewen: In other ancient religions, gods often possessed powers that humans didn't, but with limits. In many ways, nature ruled them, too. That describes Indigenous and pagan spiritual beliefs all over the world—in Asia, Africa, Europe, Australia, the Americas. Also the powerful empires, Greece and Rome. Their many gods had foibles, imperfections, and struggles. Then, along comes the all-powerful God of Genesis.

Voice, Genesis 1:1: In the beginning, God created heavens and the earth. And the earth was formless and void....

John Biewen: Bina calls this understanding of God revolutionary.

Bina Nir, Hebrew...

Voiceover: I think that we need to talk about this revolution on a few levels: One level is the perception of an abstract God. Second is God's separation from nature.

John Biewen: The God of Genesis seems to exist before the natural world and decides to create it. He's not part of it. Another revolutionary concept, Bina says, is what seems to be a clear hierarchy, at least in Genesis.

Bina Nir, Hebrew....

Voiceover: I think it's important to emphasize in this discussion that according to the Biblical perception, the world was created *for man*. That is the main idea.

Voice, Genesis 28: ...and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.

John Biewen: Let's just pause to notice the use of the male terms, at least in English – for God, "He," and for humanity, "man." The language is less clearly gendered in ancient Hebrew, and most Jewish theologians say God transcends gender. But elsewhere, Hebrew scripture refers to God as "Father" and as the "bridegroom," God's people being His bride. The New Testament, of course, describes God "the Father," and the Christian God takes human form as a man, Jesus.

Christian artists have rendered God as male almost without exception -- think of the iconic Sistine Chapel deity with the flowing beard. Whatever theologians may say about God's gender, the Abrahamic religions -- Judaism, Christianity, and Islam -- took root in overwhelmingly patriarchal cultures. Bina Nir argues the God of the Bible has a "masculine will" that lines up with a notion like "dominion."

Bina Nir, Hebrew....

Voiceover: If man invented God, it says something about the people who invented this masculine god.

John Biewen: What exactly it meant for humanity in ethical terms, that God had given humans dominion over the rest of creation, that was open to debate, as we'll see. But Bina Nir highlights one other profound conceptual shift the writers of Genesis introduced. In the story of Adam and Eve and that forbidden fruit, and then in the Cain and Abel story, where Cain kills his brother and faces none other than the Almighty...

Voice, Gen 4:9: And the Lord said to Cain, where is Abel your brother?...

John Biewen: ...we see humans doing things God clearly does not want them to do. People can do what they want.

Bina Nir, Hebrew....

Voiceover: The idea of free will was a revolution in the ancient world, where there was only inevitability, and destiny.

John Biewen: Destiny. Most ancient cultures held deterministic beliefs. Individual humans were at the mercy of the gods, essentially passengers, riding their destinies to a foregone conclusion. In Greek mythology, those three goddesses, the Moirai, decided each person's fate. Likewise in the Nordic religion of Odin and Thor and Freya – dramatized here in the TV series "Vikings," set in the 10th century.

Vikings TV show, Gunnhild: I have no desire to be queen.

Erik the Red: I know. But you know perfectly well you cannot decide your own fate. For it is already written.

John Biewen: Add up the innovations that Bina Nir finds in Genesis: A God that stands beyond the natural world and creates it out of nothing, then creates humans in God's image. Humanity gets dominion over all other living things, and freedom to shape our own destiny.

Bina Nir, Hebrew....

Voiceover: In a secular interpretation, I treat this text as a projection of human desires.

John Biewen (in interview): It's liberating, isn't it? It reminds me of the Enlightenment, in terms of a major shift in human thinking that has a kind of opening quality.

Bina Nir, Hebrew....

Voiceover: No doubt, this revolution is also a positive revolution. Without free will, science would not have developed. Without this concept we would not have achieved modernity. Curiosity, the feeling that life is not deterministic. It is only a pity that it went along with the ruling of nature.

John Biewen: If this is right, if those Jewish thinkers a few thousand years ago wrote stuff down that nudged humanity onto the path toward our current ecological crisis, that's only a piece of

the story. As Bina Nir points out, Judaism was never evangelical. Those ancient Hebrews had no interest in winning over converts to their ideas.

Bina Nir, Hebrew....

Voiceover: The Biblical narrative was, at first, in a very limited area. It was actually Christianity that spread it in a very meaningful way.

[Music]

John Biewen: Ah. So we can blame Christianity for driving the world into the ecological ditch. Or is that too simple, too?

[BREAK]

John Biewen: That shift in Genesis, the introduction of a God who gives humanity dominion over the rest of nature, did not by itself bring about a drastic change in the ways people behaved. For one thing, the Jewish Bible, the Old Testament to Christians, wasn't consistent on that point.

Kate Rigby: Because Genesis 1 is the beginning of the Bible, it kind of stands out. But if you look elsewhere in the Bible there are completely contradictory messages.

John Biewen: Kate Rigby is an Australian scholar who directs the Research Center for the Environmental Humanities at Bath Spa University in England. She says, for instance, God does not elevate humanity nearly so much in the Book of Job.

Kate Rigby: You know, Job's saying, Oh woe is me, why have these terrible things happened to me. And he gets this harangue (laughs), this voice, the voice from the wind, the storm. Yahweh speaks and sort of basically says, look. I make it to rain on the desert where no man dwells....

Voice, Job 38:25: Who has split open a channel for the flood, and a way for the thunderbolt, to bring rain on a land without people, on a desert without a person in it ... to make the seeds of grass to sprout?

Kate Rigby: And by the way, do you know about the lives of the ravens, and all the other creatures? He names a whole lot of wild creatures. He says, you don't understand their lives! I care about them.

John Biewen: The God of Job seems to be saying, it ain't all about you, Buddy. And Rigby says, whatever Genesis said about dominion, the most important early *Christian* thinkers did not take it to mean, "let's just go out and use nature wantonly for our benefit." Take Basil of Caesarea, sometimes called St. Basil the Great. He was Greek, an important theologian and Bishop in Asia Minor, today's Turkey, in the 4th century.

Kate Rigby: And I have to confess, I've grown very, very fond of Basil. (Laughs)

John Biewen: Kate has been studying theologians through Christian history who interpreted the creation story in Genesis. Such a reflection is called a Hexameron, referring to the six days of creation.

Kate Rigby: Basil was perhaps the most influential of these early hexameral writers.

John Biewen: Basil delivered his Hexameron as a series of sermons during the year 370, in the Basilica of Caesarea.

Kate Rigby: And the overall gist of these homilies is to exhort the congregation, to lift their gaze beyond the world of human making, and to marvel in the natural world that they did not make but that God called into being. And they're basically, they just are the

most breathless celebration of nature. He keeps on saying, he says things like, there are so many things I could talk about! What am I going to choose, what am I going to leave out! You know? And he says, oh, my discourse has run away with me. Night has fallen! (laughing) You know, and you're still sitting here. Oh, I've forgotten to talk about the birds! (Laughing) He just, this guy, he's an eco-freak, and he's just really trying to encourage his congregation to share his enthusiasm for nature.

John Biewen: Rigby says Basil's account of the Genesis creation story is incomplete. He parses it up to the sixth day, when God creates man and woman, and stops.

Kate Rigby: The homilies break off with the making of the first humans, but before the verses about humans having dominion. And, you know, it looks like he was really uncomfortable with that and he actually didn't want to go there. And so he didn't.

John Biewen: Basil was a leader in the East, where the Orthodox Church later took root. A major early thinker in the Western part of the Christian world? Augustine.

Kate Rigby: I've tended to have a fairly dim view of Augustine, mainly because he seems to have saddled Western Christianity, in particular, with an absolutely terrible attitude towards sexuality, that sexuality is somehow connected with the original sin. Absolutely

appalling stuff. But. Then I started reading more about his reflections on creation. And he's just so enamored of other critters and little things like worms and ants and annoying things like mosquitoes. He says, well, I don't know why God made these things, but are they not marvelous when you look at them in themselves? Are they not fabulous? So that's all quite endearing.

John Biewen: Augustine, like Basil, wrote extensively on Genesis and its meaning. In his analysis, Augustine does get all the way through the six days, but just doesn't have much to say about the whole "dominion" thing, Kate says. Seems that didn't rank high among his takeaways. Yes, she says, there were other early Christian thinkers who adopted the idea that God made the plants and non-human animals for people.

Kate Rigby: There's this idea that because the account is seen as culminating on the sixth day with the creation of humans, even in that period of late antiquity you do get this idea among some of the commentators that the rest of creation is to subserve human interests. So that you can find.

John Biewen: It's also true that Augustine, for all his appreciation of non-human animals, made a hard distinction between us and them: He said only humans are "rational creatures," not

“brutes,” and only humans have souls. That kind of thinking clearly justified domesticating and using animals for human benefit. [Music]

But, treating animals as livestock was not new to the post-Genesis world or to Christianity. And, think about it. For a solid millennium after Basil and Augustine’s time, all through the Middle Ages, the technologies that Christian societies used didn’t change much. As in the rest of the world. David Pecusa, the Hopi farmer? His kind of planting would have looked ordinary the world over. People did most everything by hand or with simple machines, or with the help of an ox or a horse. Humanity’s impact on the natural world stayed pretty gentle, certainly compared to what would come later. True, people had not yet invented powerful tools of extraction and pollution, but maybe in a culture concerned mostly with piety, they weren’t in a hurry to. The West had not yet constructed a culture of reckless exploitation. To finish building that violent machine, Europeans would need to bolt on a few more parts.

[Music]

Amy Westervelt: To be continued.

John Biewen: Yes. We’ve still gotta get to the part where we really went off the rails. Amy Westervelt is back. As in past seasons with my collaborators and co-hosts, you and I are gonna spend a little time unpacking a few ideas at the end of each episode.

Amy Westervelt: Right. So, Kate Rigby seems to be saying that, in Christianity—once Christianity sort of became the main force for spreading the story in the Book of Genesis—there was always some tension about the meaning of *dominion*. That pretty clear statement, in Genesis Chapter One, that God put humanity in charge of the rest of nature.

John Biewen: That's right. Did dominion mean that God was handing over the earth and the other creatures to humans, to serve our desires? To use it all as we wish, even destroy it, if that suits us?

Amy Westervelt: Or was God giving humanity a sacred *responsibility*, to act as *stewards* of the plants, the animals, and the earth?

John Biewen: That tension would persist, and it still does, really. But it would get more intense, and the stakes would get much higher centuries later, as we'll hear in the next episode.

Amy Westervelt: OK. But however you interpret it, the whole dominion thing does seem like a problem. I mean, declaring our species to be in charge of the world—or, really, claiming that a deity has put us in charge—that's an arrogant, anthropocentric no matter which way you look at it.

John Biewen: I see that. But I wonder if there's a less narcissistic way to look at it. Humans have shown, unfortunately, that we have tendencies and capabilities that put us in a unique category as a species, it seems to me. I mean, *could* whales or chimps do to the planet what we've done? So that's not necessarily about saying we're the best or the most important species. It could be about admitting we're uniquely dangerous, so we have a special responsibility.

Amy Westervelt: Because of our big brains, our opposable thumbs, our ability to invent toxic chemicals and powerful contraptions.

John Biewen: Right.

Amy Westervelt: That makes sense. Add to that our consciousness, which includes a sense of our own importance and ambition and ego and a wish to dominate, and you do get this sort of distinctive ability to transform the environment, and to completely wreck things for other creatures and for ourselves.

John Biewen: And I'll go ahead and say it: I'm not a religious person, not a Christian or Jewish believer. For me personally this is not about taking scripture as some kind of real-world guide,

or needing to find an interpretation of Genesis that I can defend. Though of course for a lot of people it could be about that.

Amy Westervelt: Yeah, I'm not particularly religious either. I grew up really Catholic. We went to church every Sunday, did catechism, that whole thing. My dad was a Mexican Catholic who had a Bible in all of our bathrooms. (Laughs) And I went to Catholic high school, too. But my parents didn't want to force my brother or me to join the church, and they sort of left it up to us. They gave us this big decision when we were seventeen, and neither one of us really went for it. (Laughs.) So I'm not religious at all today, but I did get a big dose of it in my youth. And on the nature front, I think Catholics are pretty obsessed with St. Francis of Assisi and this sort of stewardship approach. Like, there's this one statue that you see in every Catholic auntie's yard, that's like St. Francis with kind of Snow White vibes, with like birds in his hand and squirrels at his feet. You know? But, the Catholic church is also the church that cooked up indulgences for the rich, so ... yeah.

John Biewen: It's a mixed bag.

Amy Westervelt: Yeah.

John Biewen: I think my Catholic grandmother might have had that St. Francis, too.

Amy Westervelt: They all do. They all do.

John Biewen: But what we're trying to do is to understand what happened, historically, and how we got here. Including the question of how much to blame any one factor, such as the impulse to claim dominion over nature, on the Abrahamic religions. It seems you *could* argue for an interpretation of dominion, that Biblical idea, that just recognizes the peculiar power humans have to do damage.

Amy Westervelt: Right, and then an interpretation that's really about responsibility and stewardship because of that power, right? And that seems to be the way that some important Christian thinkers, like Basil, at least, saw things. For a time. But dominion feels to me like a ticking time bomb. Or, I don't know, pick your other terrible metaphor.

John Biewen: Well, I've come to think of it as a permission slip, written and tucked quietly into a book on the shelf, that somebody could pull out when they really wanted to use it.

Amy Westervelt: Oh I love that. It's like, 'Look, God said it was OK, this horribly destructive thing I'm about to do. It's fine! It's fine!'

John Biewen: Yeah. You know, looking at the chunk of history that we've covered so far, moving from the ancient world into the early Christian era, looking at it through the frame of this series, has me thinking in a different way about the Middle Ages. The long stretch that sometimes people *used* to call the Dark Ages.

Amy Westervelt: Right, that's so interesting. It was later, during the Renaissance, maybe starting in the 14th century, that Europeans started really dissing the Medieval period, especially that early part, from the 5th century to the year 1000 or so. They were drawing a contrast to their own time, and to ancient Greece and Rome, the so-called Classical era. Renaissance thinkers celebrated the Greeks and Romans for what they saw as their greater cultural achievements and rationality, compared to what followed in the Middle Ages.

John Biewen: And of course there's something to that. Personally, I am for reason and science and freedom of thought. I'd rather live in a society *not* ruled by religious dogma, which pretty much describes Medieval Europe. But life and history are complicated, and change always means trade-offs, doesn't it.

Amy Westervelt: Yeah. We can look at Medieval Europe as a place and time where people were sort of hunkered down, living steady lives, pursuing piety and conforming to the edicts of the church. In other words, *not* pushing the boundaries, not inventing lots of new stuff, not

revolutionizing much of anything or exploring and conquering new worlds, certainly not compared with what would come later.

John Biewen: They weren't pushing the changes that would lead us to where we are today, well on our way to recklessly and arrogantly destroying the only home we have. We'll be telling more of that story in the next couple of episodes.

Amy Westervelt: But before we leave this one, there's another important piece of the puzzle that I think we should talk more about: patriarchy. We've touched on it only a little so far. In your MEN series, in Season 3, you found that patriarchy was widespread in the world long before anyone started writing Genesis.

John Biewen: Yes. It apparently emerged about ten or twelve thousand years ago, along with the development of more complex, agriculture-based societies.

Amy Westervelt: Patriarchy is a system of domination and control. So if that's the underlying problem we're talking about here, human beings deciding that they have the right to contain and dominate and *use* other beings for their benefit, well, I mean, men were doing all the above to women in most so-called civilizations in the time frame we're talking about here.

John Biewen: Absolutely. There were exceptions, including among some Indigenous cultures in this hemisphere. By the way, in the Hopi tradition, the natural world, humanity included of course, was created by Mother Earth, not the abstract, male or male-ish God of the Bible. And, like the Cherokee people we heard about in Season 4, traditional Hopi governance is clan-based and matrilineal. David Pecusa, the Hopi farmer we heard in this episode, has talked to me about Hopi reverence for women and for the feminine.

Amy Westervelt: All of that shows in his very nurturing approach to farming. But to bring it back to that “we,” the Western culture that would eventually claim a very violent dominion over the earth and its “resources,” as we came to call them. That was and is a male-dominated culture.

John Biewen: Yeah.

Amy Westervelt: A culture that long ago decided to draw lines and to build hierarchies. The line between men and women, with rigid definitions of what that binary looked like, who and what men and women were, what their roles were, and who would control whom.

John Biewen: Yeah, maybe male dominance over women was the original sin, which would kind of set the pattern. “I’m a man and I have God-given dominion over ‘my’ woman.”

Amy Westervelt: It's not a huge stretch to say, Come to think of it, it seems I have God-given dominion over 'the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and every living thing ... on the earth.' And, along the way, dominion over other human beings who don't practice my religion or look like me. But we'll have more to say about that, won't we?

John Biewen: Yes, in Episode Two. Amy, you mentioned the term, "natural resources." Let's take a minute and talk about language.

Amy Westervelt: I know, right? It points to our deep cultural inheritance, in the English language and in Western thinking, and the fact that it's hard to talk about this stuff without perpetuating really skewed ways of thinking. When you're talking about "resources," you're *assuming* an exploitative relationship. The trees and the minerals and the animals exist for our use.

John Biewen: I keep finding myself getting ready to say phrases like, "humans and our relationship to nature." When in fact humans *are* nature. We're part of it, and the very notion that we're separate—now so deeply embedded in the way we talk—the very notion we're separate is key to how we went wrong as a culture. So I try to catch myself and say 'our relationship *with the rest of nature, or with other living creatures,*' phrases like that.

Amy Westervelt: Right. But even the word “nature,” and the meaning it’s taken on in Western culture, is a problem. But we’re gonna get to that a couple of episodes from now.

John Biewen: Amy Westervelt. Next time: More of the story of how we got this way, moving into the somewhat more recent past — from the Crusades to capitalism. Come on along.

Our story editor this season is Cheryl Devall. Music by Lili Haydn, Kim Carroll, Chris Westlake, Alex Weston, and Cora Miron. Music consulting by Joe Augustine of Narrative Music.

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