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The Journey I: Grounded in Love

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This Lent the sermon series companions the devotions created by and for Westminster based upon the book by Jill Duffield, *Lent in Plain Sight: A Devotion Through Ten Objects*. Today we consider the most basic substance encountered by everyone – dirt.

I offer you a bit of context before I read our Gospel lesson.

If we were to play Scrabble in Hebrew you could experience the way this language builds meaning, one letter at a time.

When Hebrew words are read aloud their root consonants repeat and most often the writers of Hebrew scriptures compose sentences to emphasize these layered meanings.

The drumbeat of gutturals in the subconscious echo with an understanding beyond mere words.

The Hebrew word *dam*, meaning, “blood,” becomes “dirt” by adding a few letters, becoming *adamah*. Both are the substance of our being, the essence of who we are. Blood and dirt: *dam* and *adamah*.

Dam and *adamah* are related to *adam*, the first earthling, a genderless human one.¹

As an aside Adam was not a male until Eve entered the story.

With that little vocabulary lesson, imagine hearing Genesis 2:5–8 in Hebrew: “the Lord God formed a

¹ http://hebrewscholar.com/Hebrew_Adam.html

human from the dust of the ground and breathed into the nostrils the breath of life; and the human became a living being.”

Just a few verses later, in the Garden of Eden, Adam learns the consequences of his actions with Eve: “you (shall) return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3:19)

When Cain killed his brother Abel in the field, God spoke to him “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.” (Genesis 4:8-10)

Stories of dirt, and dust, and sand, and all the myriad ways to name the ground we walk upon permeate scriptures along with our bodily relationship to the earth.

Abraham is promised, from his seed, descendants as numerous as dust or sand.

When mourning a loved one’s death, Israelites heaped ashes and dirt on their heads, showing humility before God and their awareness of the fragility of life.

The “promised land” consumes Israelites for generations. Exile from land is part of Matthew’s genealogy.

Even though the dialogue we will read of Jesus’ encounters was likely in Aramaic, swirling in their minds is this knowledge to honor the ground upon which we

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walk, its relationship to the fiber of our being, the life we are given, and the community in which we live.

Before I read our Gospel lesson, please pray with me,

Dear God, settle us now, quiet any voice but yours, and startle us through the ordinary dirt so we may know your extraordinary truth. Across time and space, stir our hearts with your spirit that we are as one in hearing your word and turn our lives in harmony to live as your son taught. Amen.

Listen as I read from John 8:2–11

Early in the morning Jesus came again to the temple. All the people came to him and Jesus sat down and began to teach them.

The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery;

and making her stand before all of them, they said to him,

“Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?”

They said this to test Jesus, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground.

When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them,

“Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”

And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground.

When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.

Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

She said, “No one, sir.”

And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you.

Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

After so many movies of space flights, my mind’s eye immediately conjured the tension in Mission Control as I read Friday morning’s *WSJ* describe the Perseverance’s landing on Mars:

Following a harrowing plunge through the salmon pink skies and blue clouds of Mars – what NASA engineers call ‘seven minutes of terror’ – the lander...settled safely onto the smallest most rugged landing zone.²

Harrowing....A harrow is a spiked implement that is drawn over plowed land to break up clods, tear up weeds, and level the ground.

This bit of terminology from farming gives us our figurative use of the word harrowing. When we speak

² Robert Lee Hotz, “NASA Lands Rover Safely on Mars,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 19, 2021, A3.

of a harrowing experience, we mean one that...that disturbs our peace, and challenges our sense of security.³

How appropriate to describe the landing as a harrowing experience, to name the disrupting experience and foreshadow their mission.

Since the inception of the space program, whether to the moon or the multiple landings on Mars, NASA's equipment has dug in the dirt with harrows or similar implements in the quest to find evidence of past life and to know if such soil could hold our lives.

Dr Adam Steltzner of NASA reflects on the diverse armada of equipment created in collaboration with other countries, "when we do such investments," he said, "we do them for humanity, and we do them as a gesture of our humanity."⁴

Whether the dirt on Mars, the moon, or from your back yard, our lives rise from dirt, and after we fall, it holds the evidence of our existence.

The creation story from Genesis reminds us that God created us from dirt and blood. God's love breathed us into life. God's spirit renews the earth. And God's grace redeems our lives.

³ Marilyn McEntyre, *Where the Eye Aights: Phrases for the Forty Days of Lent*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2021).

⁴ Dennis Overby, "Perseverance's Pictures From Mars Show NASA Rover's New Home," *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/19/science/mars-nasa-landing-pictures.html?campaign_id=2&emc=edit_th_20210220&instance_id=27319&nl=todaysheadlines®i_id=47214561&segment_id=52026&user_id=56f4634ce93a338814548fb0f80ecfa6

Getting closer to the essence of our creation and our creator steadies and corrects our way of life.

Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees and this woman is such an example.

To test Jesus and justify their judgment, a woman is presented as having violated their law.

Hebrew custom compelled them to stone her. Roman law did not demand such a brutal death. What would Jesus say?

As he was being judged, Jesus stooped to draw in the dirt with his finger. Scholars have debated over the centuries what Jesus might have traced.

What does it matter? Maybe he was not writing anything but merely reminding them how fleeting life is...too soon they will all be dust.

Who are they to judge? Life and death belong to God.

Jesus only asks, "have you walked a perfect life?" Rather than berate them, he returns a second time to the dirt, and in doing so, an elder drops his stone, accepts the gift of Jesus' compassion and walks away, followed by the others, who dropped their stones, and also with a chance to begin again.

We can only wonder if they decided to live more graciously towards others.

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To the woman, Jesus also shows compassion by not focusing on the past; she is not her mistakes. He invites her to begin again. Walk a new way.

To those who heard this story in the first century, I wonder if they connected God's breathing life into dirt and Jesus breathing new life into those broken and hurting lives.

From the most basic, God creates and, God recreates.

Lent is about spending time reflecting on how we walk with Jesus. We ask ourselves, what has caused us to drift?

Scripture uses the Greek word *metanoia*, succinctly translated as "repentance."

Recognizing how we have strayed is only part of this repentance. It is also possessing the capacity to receive grace; forgive ourselves, and others, and most of all, to begin again and live as Jesus taught.

Lent invites us to literally change our hearts and minds and change our way of walking on this earth to become closer to Jesus.

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, AL was created to honor enslaved and free black people who were lynched in the United States.

The site includes 800 six-foot monuments to represent the 800 counties across the US where the lynchings occurred and the engraved names of the people who

perished in that county. Over 4,400 people are known to have been lynched.

In addition, jars of dirt are displayed from each site where these murders occurred, representing the disparate locations.

Bryan Stevenson, one of the forces behind the memorial, shared the story of an African American woman who participated in this project.

At one of the lynching sites, she was on her hands and knees digging dirt, and placing it in a jar when a white man in a truck slowed down to look at her. He drove past, turned around and stopped, and asked her what she was doing.

Stifling her fear, she said “something got a hold of me. And I turned to that man and I said, ‘I’m digging soil because this is where a black man was lynched in 1931, and I’m going to honor his life.’”

He asked if he could help.

Rather than take the trowel she offered, he got down on his knees and dug with his hands.

As he worked, she noticed his shoulders start to shake and tears streaming down his face, and asked if he was okay.

He said he feared his grandparents may have participated in the very lynching she was memorializing.

Together they put the dirt in the jar.

They took pictures of each other, holding the jar, capturing a moment of unexpected understanding, hope, and reconciliation.⁵

We cannot imagine God breathing life into dirt, but God did.

No one imagined an empty tomb on Easter, it was.

God has the capacity to create life and through Jesus we have the promise of eternal life.

Just like the woman before Jesus, and the Pharisees and scribes, and just like the man digging dirt for the memorial, we are not our mistakes, we get to begin again and again, now, today, in this life.

When the harrowing experiences of life,
when the ground speaks to us of our sins,
and reminds us of just how few days we have,
may we be broken up,
brought to the ground,
and made fertile by grace to bear new life.

Lent reminds us we can choose to walk a new way with Jesus so that at the end of our days, when we hand back our bodies, we can know we have become what God wanted us to be.

May it be so my friends, Amen.

⁵ "Fresh Air: Just Mercy' Attorney Asks U.S. To Reckon With Its Racist Past And Present," January 20, 2020, *NPR*, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/796234496>

Poem read at the Bridge service:

“Ode to Dirt” by Sharon Olds

Dear dirt, I am sorry I slighted you,
I thought that you were only the background
for the leading characters—the plants
and animals and human animals.

It’s as if I had loved only the stars
and not the sky which gave them space
in which to shine. Subtle, various,
sensitive, you are the skin of our terrain,
you’re our democracy. When I understood
I had never honored you as a living
equal, I was ashamed of myself,
as if I had not recognized
a character who looked so different from me,
but now I can see us all, made of the
same basic materials—
cousins of that first exploding from nothing—
in our intricate equation together. O dirt,
help us find ways to serve your life,
you who have brought us forth, and fed us,
and who at the end will take us in
and rotate with us, and wobble, and orbit.



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