

18 Feb 2018

“DUST AND GRASS”

Genesis 2.4-9

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Just as we felt seasons shift on Friday with 60 degree warmth giving way to last night heavy snow, so also we can today sense a shift in feeling-tone from our uproariously festive Fat Sunday last week to entering soberly reflective Lent today.

For every matter there's a time and season under heaven, right? Among the seasons of the Christian calendar, Lent has been perhaps most distorted. I mean, I wish I had a potato chip for every child who gave up potato chips for Lent when I was a boy. The invitation into the six-week journey of Lent has too often been silly abstinence from odd tidbits of affluence, morbid introspection, or misguided sacrifice. Then again, it's easy to criticize and hard to thread the needle just right.

What is Lent all about? It is a 40 day opportunity to engage God more deeply way by way of prayer, repentance and contemplation before we get to Easter. What does it mean to die to self in order that God might come more fully alive in our lives? How can we pull back on our self-agenda to make more room for the God agenda, to repeat our recent theme? How do we find and see by the light of eternity here and now as we walk alongside Jesus' in the shadow of the cross?

These are the questions of Lent. Our Genesis story, bringing its second account of our creation, tells how “the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.” It is the basis of the Ash Wednesday ashes imposed on foreheads that we saw.

We Protestants puzzle at this or refuse to consider it. As for me, I go with Walter Brueggemann who says remembering our mortality doesn't diminish or malign our humanness in any way. Rather the purpose is to remind our death-denying society of how fragile our lives are. Here the church sends up a flare that few want to see and many would shut out. And we mostly get away with that until, say, we are shaken as a 10 year old boy dies of the flu. And then we say, ‘oh yeah, that's right, we are all mortal.’ The church wants to be ahead in that game.

Genesis chapter two describes God's incredibly creative acts at the dawn of time. In that moment, as God fashioned the heavens and the earth, creation was without so much as a blade of grass. That could not continue. So God formed humankind from the dust of the ground with the joy of a child shaping sandcastles on the beach. God breathed into our sandy nostrils the breath of life. And we became living beings. In this way, we received our lives out of the power of God.

We learn a lot about ourselves in the fleeting remarks in Genesis. We are all subject to the limits of our humble material origins. We depend in body and spirit upon God's free and gracious gift of breath. And, as my groaning in travail frame reminds me in my sixth decade whenever I rise after sitting too long, we are all subject to physical decay and destruction. You. Me. Even Tom Brady. My word

for this is slippage. And I use it a lot. And every time I do, Cecile laughs with me.

As they depart that primeval garden paradise, God tells the man and the woman, “Remember, you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Does that sound like a curse? It is not. Our tenuousness upon this earth as humans is not a form of punishment. God speaks those words as consoling advice for coping, even as a way of helping to protect themselves, in a rugged and ruthless world outside of Eden.

God hoped to spare us unnecessary pain knowing already how we forget our station in life. I remember in 8th grade shop class a small group of guys sniffing lacquer thinner in the corner of that work room. That pained me. I didn’t know what to do. I should have said to them, “Guys, guys, remember that you are dust. And to dust you shall return.” But at age 14 we feel immortal. Things seem like they will last forever and the future looks inexhaustible as we brim with energy.

“For all flesh is grass,” I Peter chimes in, “and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” The epistle is not denigrating being human. Rather here again, the text sketches out for us the parameters within which we can live, move, and have our being.

It is the way of the world to get us yearning after no limits. How many marketing campaigns trumpet and dangle that theme: no limits! How many ad campaigns have boldly promised you that you’ll go where no one has gone before: no limits! Just for starters, I can cite the electric company, Lexus, Universal Studios, Nike, , Bally sportswear, BMW, and the city of Houston, TX. Once we buy into that no-limits-encumber-me mindset, our commercial empire can sell us about anything.

Maybe we forget our limits as mortals because we are invited to do so regularly, almost compulsively. Maybe our forgetting here is culturally induced for reasons that have nothing to do with our best interests. Maybe the society that suggests we can be like gods, only if we try hard enough and buy the right products, has a stake in that. Reminding us of our limits is a biblically countercultural message.

I don’t mean to single out advertising or the marketing of modern corporations. Frankly, they’re very good at what they do. I mention then to identify a pernicious pattern. We are taught that to be fulfilled, to find our worth, we must achieve, perform, and accomplish superhuman things. That is the key to our immortality.

Society is eager to teach us that as individuals, our possibilities are limitless. Of course, as much as we want to believe that is possible, and as hard as we try to accomplish it, we never get there. That leads us to the next “no limits” campaign, which will certainly work, because now I now have the right product and service.

Here the human spirit is kept constantly inflamed with desire that won’t be satisfied. The world loves us living in this frenzy because it makes us easy marks.

Beyond the selling of goods, I am talking also about the selling of ideas, identity, of meaning itself. All of this comes about because we live within an agitated grip.

Christianity also holds up limitless possibility and the prospect of eternal destiny, but in a different way. Alone unto ourselves, guess what, we're grass. The grass withers, the flower fades. But as our life is taken up into the life of God, all things are possible. I served a church once that served up a youth initiative with that phrase, "all things are possible." I wanted to tear my hair out. That's not what the Bible says, "all things are possible." Jesus said, "*for God*, all things are possible."

The season of Lent and the Christian church exist to counter our massive forgetting of this truth. They shake us out of our numbness by articulating our essential humanness. We are all animated dust whose lives are wholly dependent upon God's power. Lent places our mortality squarely before us to prepare us for the Easter tale of how God would make us deathproof not through our power but his.

There is no message I need to hear more in the waking sleep of my daily routine. For I too easily assume that I shall always walk this earth. I too easily convince myself that I can wholly shape my destiny according to my choices and personal sphere of influence. I too easily deceive myself that if I am fast enough or strong enough or smart enough, I can and will make it on my own. Can anyone tell me the name of the play where the middle-aged couple is planning their future, looking toward their retirement. The husband absent-mindedly observes aloud, "You know, if something should ever happen to one of us, I plan to move to Paris." But that's you and me. We're vulnerable to such lies. They grip us and wear us down.

Remember, humility is not the same thing as humiliation. God allows us to be humbled but does not seek our humiliation. Isn't there something attractive about someone who is secure enough to laugh at himself even in the face of slippage? Don't we feel a gravitational pull toward those who refuse to worship themselves?

That is why I chose that brief, simple middle hymn to launch our Lenten journey:

'Tis the gift to be simple,
'tis the gift to be free,
'tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,
and when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'twill be in the valley of love and delight.

Ultimately, life is not ours to win. Life—which is at once God's creation and gift—is God's to win. Maybe that can humble what winning we do but also embolden us in our inevitable losses. The good news is God has already won the victory over death, and delivered that unto us as a promise we can receive and enjoy. As we find ourselves in the place just right, it will be a valley of love and delight. Amen.