

Living Lent | February 22, Ash Wednesday

Dirtiness is of God

And to the man he said, 'Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, "You shall not eat of it," cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.' The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all who live. And the Lord God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.

Genesis 3: 17-21 (NRSV)

Encouragement for the Lenten Journey:

In my tradition, we begin Lent today by making the sign of the cross on our foreheads in ash, with the words, "you are dust and to dust you shall return." It sounds a bit ominous. These words remind us of our start and our end; birth to death – ashes, dirt, dust.

It communicates our smallness, a sober reminder to be humble; we are finite beings. These aren't often seen as words of comfort and assurance, yet I think they can be that too.

Lent reminds us of our brokenness and sinfulness, which is uncomfortable. Sin often equates to being bad, failure, and condemnation. In some traditions, sin is the starting place for everything - a kind of spiritual contamination we are forever tainted by. But sin is not where we really start. These words reference the Garden of Eden. Adam's name can mean, "from the dirt." God made humankind out of the dirt of Eden – dirt infused with the breath of life. These words come as God laments Adam and Eve's choice. God is displeased, and we tend to hear these words in this light.

What if God's isn't primarily angry, but heartbroken? What if these words are not a sentencing only, but also a form of promise as God points to the ground at their feet? "Remember, you were created out of that dirt – before you were you, you were mine in form only as I imagined you – made out of dirt – a perfect possibility. A lot will happen from this point on, but in the end, you will return to that perfect form, that nothingness where you belong only to me, that perfect possibility I created you to be."

The story we choose to tell is often one of exile and banishment alone. The story of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is about reconciliation; we were not cast out and left to ourselves. We created this distance between us and God; Jesus crosses it and comes to us. We believe we are untouchable; Jesus reaches out in embrace. We think we're dirty; Jesus makes us clean. We feel broken; God responds with reconciliation. Today we remember we started out as God's dirt, and we will end that way. The next 40 days will show Jesus demonstrating we remain God's dirt in between too. We find our beginning and our end in God through the reconciling actions of our Lord. Reconciliation may be simply about learning that we are God's. Full stop.

Here is a mark of ashes, of our dirtiness, yes, and also a reminder that our dirtiness itself is of God.

Contributor and Contributing Body of Christ

The Very Reverend Tom Purdy is the Rector at Christ Church, Frederica. Christ Church, Frederica is the oldest church in Glynn County with roots dating to 1732, making it also one of the oldest congregations in Georgia. A thriving Episcopal parish that treasures their heritage and brings the gospel to bear on the modern world, Father Purdy has led the congregation at Christ Church since May of 2013, with a vision to help people deepen their relationship with God and Christ and to equip people for their unique calling. Under that leadership, the congregation of Christ Church continues to extend missional support to the Children of Morningstar and many other ministries throughout Glynn County and beyond.

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Brunswick, GA 31521

Brunswick Counseling Center
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Brunswick, GA 31525

Perry Counseling Center
402 Courtney Hodges Blvd, Ste 201
Perry, GA 31069

Morningstar Residential Campus
1 Youth Estate Drive
Brunswick, GA 31525

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Morning Star CFS | 1 Youth Estate Drive, Brunswick, GA 31525, Brunswick, GA 31525

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