

LENT 1
“GROUNDED: FINDING GOD IN THE WORLD”

“Dirt: The Stuff of Which God Made Us”
by
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Texts: Genesis 2:4b-10, 15
Matthew 13:1-9

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This morning we begin a 7-part sermon series that will take us through the Season of Lent. We're calling it GROUNDED: Finding God in the World. It is based on the compelling book of the same name, by religious writer Diana Butler Bass. (In fact, I have used Diana's words verbatim, throughout the sermon, mixing them with my own reflections and illustrations. I have bolded the words that come directly from the book.)

“Ground” is an English word that refers to the surface of the earth. The verb “to ground” has multiple different meanings: To prohibit or prevent (such as grounding a plane in a storm or punishing one’s teenager!) To Ground can also mean “to give a firm theoretical or practical basis” or “to instruct someone thoroughly in a subject.”

In Christian theology, it was Paul Tillich, who proclaimed just after World War I that *God is the Ground of all Being* and *God is the very core and ground of all that is*. Shaken by the horrors of the war, Tillich struggled to find a firm theological foundation. Human life may be finite, he posited, destined for dirt and death; but the ground, and all that comes from it and is connected to it, is drenched with the divine. Tillich did not mean that God was literally soil – he stressed that God is not an object – but that God, the numinous presence at the center of all things, is what grounds us.

Now, more than ever, we are in danger of losing our spiritual bearings – of becoming disoriented in a complex world of social media, 24-hour news feeds, propaganda from every side, technological and political manipulation and so many choices about what to do, where to go, what to eat, how to believe, what cause to support.

This Lent, let us commit ourselves to the basic principle that God is the ground, the grounding, that which grounds us. And God is right here with us, right now...as Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” **We can be grounded when we realize that soil is holy, water gives life, the sky opens the imagination, our roots matter, home is a divine place and our lives are linked with our neighbors’ and with those around the globe.** Our very ordinary lives in this very mundane world are actually surrounded and infused with God’s presence!

Today our subject is soil...literally, dirt. We begin with a dog story:

Rowan eats dirt. And he digs holes. He would probably try to tunnel back to his native Ireland if given the chance. When Rowan is not eating dirt, he lies on it. Full belly on the ground, legs stretched out in front and to the back with every inch of his body pressing into the soil. Although he appears to be relaxed, he is on alert—fully aware of every sound, every movement around him. The dirt seems to make him more attentive, ready to chase the first squirrel that dares trespass into his yard.

He is a Glen of Imaal Terrier, a solid dog with short legs; scruffy and tough, he is what is known as an “earth dog.” Indeed, the word “terrier” is derived from the Latin word *terra*, meaning “earth.” As if to underscore the point, Rowan was born in mid-April, just two days before Earth Day. For him, Earth itself is his natal saint, the dirt his dwelling place. Rowan is the family pet of the Bass family.

I suspect all of us have a little Rowan in us. Maybe we have grown up and lead a much more refined lifestyle. Maybe you don't like getting dirty anymore, even scold your kids for playing outside in an outfit meant for, well, church!

Even if you are a person who would never sit down in the dirt, I bet you can look at a picture of someone walking barefoot on the beach and think to yourself, I wish that was me! What one of us doesn't immediately relax and breathe a sigh of relief, when we get to a beach, reach down and remove our shoes and take those first few steps in the sand? We could probably get that same sensation, at least a taste of it, in our own backyard, or garden, or at the park, by taking a moment to be quiet, removing our shoes and socks and feeling the ground beneath our feet.

Do you remember that old Bible story of Moses when he comes upon the burning bush? Moses is actually serving as a shepherd, keeping the flock of his father-in-law. And Moses had led the sheep beyond the wilderness – it must have been a quiet, peaceful place. The angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush...a burning bush that was not consumed. The LORD called Moses over and instructed him, “Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”

Now was it that particular place that was holy? ...just because of the burning bush?

What if all ground is holy? —all of it is God's!

At first hearing, it might be difficult for us contemporary people to imagine God having anything to do with dirt. That's because we are the offspring of an earlier revolution...the Industrial Revolution. A few hundred years ago our ancestors decreed that the earth and all therein were “resources” to be used for profit based on technical advances in labor, production and science. There were good and bad things that came of this revolution – but it changed forever the way we understood the dirt. The soil became a thing to be managed, exploited, farmed, mined and built upon.

But further back in time, generations ago, God and dirt were easy companions. The ground was created and sustained by a gracious God who walked about in a garden and whose son, Jesus, spun agricultural tales that told spiritual truths, like the Parable of the Sower. Farmers know such things intuitively – but we don't spend much time with farmers these days. We mostly don't know the people who grow our food – to our physical and spiritual detriment.

Last summer I set out to change that, when my family bought a share in a local farm, an organic farm, about 10 minutes from our house in Fawn Township. It's called Blackberry Meadows.

Jen and Greg, are my favorite farmers...OK, they're the only farmers I know, but I like them and appreciate their earthy work, which produces delicious, fresh, nutrient-dense vegetables and pork.

Farmers have a special appreciation for dirt, as evidenced by one old farmer who reflected, “The earth speaks to me. The soil, spirit, and us, it is all of a piece. We can know that, or we can ignore it. But it is real.”

We claim what the old farmer knew – and we said so on Ash Wednesday when we imposed ashes with the words, “you are dust and to dust you shall return.” Acknowledging where we came from and from whom is simply recalling the story of creation: *In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens...the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.*

We are essentially animated dirt. Soil and life joined. From living ground we were made, to living ground we will return. And notice that God took the man and put him in the garden – not just to till it, but also to keep it.

We have not done a good job, collectively, of keeping the garden. Worldwide, soil is being lost at an alarming rate. During the last 150 years, our planet has lost half its topsoil. In the last 40 years alone, about 1/3 of the world’s formerly productive soil has become unusable...and the crisis continues through unsustainable agriculture, erosion, pollution and development. But there is hope! Awareness is beginning to grow, across the globe. More and more people are making their way back to the ground, and recognizing the importance, even holiness of our soils.

There is life in our soil – a stunning, mind-boggling multiplicity of life. When we stand on the surface of the earth, we’re atop a vast underground kingdom of microorganisms, trillions of microorganisms in your own backyard, a great dark sea swarming with tiny creatures – bacteria, fungi, protozoa, nematodes, earthworms.

When we walk across our lawns, or through the park, we are walking across a vast ecosystem, a holy community of microorganisms. Through their breeding and dying such creatures vivify the world! Soil itself is alive. Although plagued with poor health, disregarded through bad practices and threatened even with death, might the possibility for resurrection be right under our feet? As we learn to take care of the soil, we are learning that the ground itself is a micro-universe upon which all carbon-based life depends...even us.

My family just watched the movie *The Martian*. It tells the futuristic story of an astronaut marooned on Mars with not nearly enough rations to survive until a rescue mission can save him. The only way he will have enough food to eat is if he can figure out a way to grow his own food. He finds in his supplies some whole potatoes and determines that he can use them as cuttings, if he can fashion a greenhouse and provide all the conditions needed for growing. He uses the dead Martian soil mixed with packets of his own waste retrieved from the storage chamber on his latrine. He had plenty of dirt, he just needed to amend it, take care of it, water it and warm it.

Jesus talks about the same thing in his parable. **A farmer sowed his seeds, some of which fell on bad soil, with rocks or not enough water, or thorns...and those seeds died. But other seed fell on good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding amazing harvests, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold. Think of the seed as God’s love and the soil is us.**

There are benefits to playing in dirt...even as you grow older. As we work the soil, take care of it, amend it, protect it, we welcome and honor God --- I’m talking about working not only dirt...but the soil of our hearts.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.