

(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.)

Grounded: Sky ~ The Very Breath of God

Amos 5:8 & John 3:16

March 24, 2019 ~ Rev. Jo Ramsey

When you hear the word grounded, your first reaction likely depends on your age. Some of us think immediately of being steady on our feet, connected and centered on what really matters. But the young people among us may not have such a positive reaction. For you, grounded conjures up images of punishment, the withdrawal of privileges or prized possessions, namely your phone.

For us, Grounded refers to a book by Diana Butler-Bass which serves as the basis for our Lenten Series this spring. In this context, grounded suggests how we can experience God through creation and community.

We started with dirt. On Ash Wednesday, we were reminded that we are dust and to dust we shall return. 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.**

The ground, and all that comes from it and is connected to it, is drenched with the divine. God is not literally soil, but God, the mysterious divine presence at the center of all things, is what grounds us.

Next, we considered water. **The Bible begins with God's spirit sweeping over the waters at creation and ends in Revelation with the river of God, which heals and washes away all sorrow. Water in the beginning, water at the end...and memorable stories of water** flowing through the stories of our faith. **Water is life; life is water. Living water is God; God is living water.**

Given that we've talked about dirt and water, Tom Wagner guessed that today's sermon might be about mud! Good thinking, Tom, but actually, this week, we look up and consider the sky.

When I think of sky, I can't help but remember our Sky VBS. Back in 2012, we imagined our faith journey as an airplane ride. We face sunny days and stormy nights. We endure turbulence and clouds which keep us from seeing our way. At times, we might be afraid or amazed. But, Sky taught us that no matter who you are, what you feel, what people do, or what happens, everything is possible with God! The sky's the limit!

Last weekend, James and I drove up to Watertown, NY for a funeral. One thing that makes Watertown unique is the sky. Watertown sits on a big, flat stretch of land between the coast of Lake Ontario and the Adirondack Mountains. The sky stretches on forever. Fiona and I found the same thing when we visited Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House on the Prairie. It's big sky country out there in South Dakota. Very different from our Western PA hills and hollows, mountains and valleys.

But no matter where you are, there's something amazing about looking up at the vast sky – day or night – and seeing it stretch on forever. Who has marveled at a super-moon or tried to count the stars? Who enjoys watching an approaching storm or finding pictures in the clouds? To look at the sky fills us with awe. Technically, we have “an emotional response to an experience that defies our existing frame of reference.” But however you define it, awe makes us feel small, it humbles us and makes us feel more connected. Studies show it's good for us. It puts things in perspective. It calms and re-centers us. It grounds us.

The sky is beyond our comprehension. Where does it begin? When does it end? It is both visible, the place which holds the stars and planets, clouds and colored light, and invisible, as atmosphere and wind. It is vast cosmos and big skies; it is sunlight warming our face and wind blowing our hair.

The sky is also multilayered: it consists of a five-layer atmosphere and then outer space. The atmosphere is the world's protective covering, keeping the planet safe from the icy terrors of the deeper heavens. The sky touches the earth, yet its outer edges are infinitely far from us. It is where we always are, what we always breathe, yet at the same time, it is a place we can never go without oxygen, special suits and flying machines. We breathe the sky in; we make wishes on stars whose names we do not know. The sky is the most intimate inner space and the most incomprehensible outer reaches of the universe.

The sky, both night and day, makes itself known by what we see. But the sky also holds things that are mysteriously unseen: dark matter and wind.

Dark matter emits no light, yet its invisible presence accounts for gravitational effects on bodies that are visible in the universe. Scientists believe at least 84% of the entire universe is composed of dark matter and dark energy combined, things that can be seen only by their effects.

In the lower reaches of the sky, wind functions in a similar way. It cannot be seen, but we can see what it does. We measure wind by its impact, not by seeing the actual wind. Dark matter in outer space, wind in the layers of the atmosphere—powerful, yet invisible to us...

Powerful, yet invisible, forces have been at work in the cosmos since before time began. The second verse of the Bible says darkness covered the surface of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. **The animating agent of creation was the air, in Hebrew *ruach*, a word signifying wind, spirit or breath. At each stage of creation, God breathes new life into the world, the spirit speaks all things into being. In the New Testament, this spirit is called *pneuma*. The word is used almost four hundred times to describe a sacred wind, divine breath, the Holy Spirit.**

The New Testament scripture we read this morning does not include the term *pneuma*, but it does describe another dimension of what we might call our “Christian cosmology.” God so loved the world—the cosmos--that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but may have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the cosmos to judge the cosmos, but that the cosmos might be saved through him. God so loved the universe

that he entered into it. **God dwells in the universe we also inhabit, that we might experience the kingdom of heaven here and now.** In Christ, the kingdom of heaven has come near.

But, ask a child where God lives and they likely will say heaven. **In fact, for hundreds of years, Christians believed we occupied a three-tiered universe, with heaven above, where God lives, the world below, where we live; and the underworld, where we fear we might go after death. The church mediated the space between heaven and earth, acting as a kind of holy elevator, wherein God sent down divine directions and, if we obeyed the directives, we could go up---eventually---to live in heaven forever and avoid the fires of hell.**

To some degree this vertical theology no longer rings true, but the Bible is rich with heavenly images of God. Our Call to Worship describes such a scene: God wraps himself with light, He pitches the sky as a tent. But saying God is in the heavens may be a bit more complicated than we thought.

In scripture, the word *heaven* is both a location in the larger cosmos and a spiritual geography that represents God's vision for humanity. **The kingdom of heaven for which we pray seeks to align earthly ethics with the divine order of God's dwelling. It is a vision of peace, blessing and abundance---the world as God intended it to be. Here on earth, we sometimes catch a glimpse of this heaven.**

If you think about it, heaven is not that far away. We walk on the ground, but the rest of our bodies move through the sky all the time – the troposphere, that first layer of atmosphere, starts at the earth surface. The sky begins at our feet. So, we actually live in the heavens now, in the space in which earth and sky meet. God's heavenly presence is the air we breathe.

Diane Butler-Bass suggests that if the dirt is the earth's body and water its lifeblood, then the sky is its lungs. And if the health of our air determines the health of our planet and the quality of our own health, we better start taking care of the sky. If anyone understands the importance of clean air, it's us Pittsburghers who have known the reality of unhealthy air. Understanding that the sky is sacred compels us to care for it as if our life depends on it...because well, it does!

To say that God is the air we breath or in the sky that surrounds us does not negate the mystery of God. For God is also at the horizon, just beyond what we can see. The horizon is an enigma. You can never quite reach it. It is always ahead of us, always behind us. Beyond the horizon, we find God, not above us, but at the edge of the visible world. **The sky reminds us that no matter how close God is, God is still a divine mystery.**

To be grounded in God, who is mystery, who is wind, who is heaven come near, is to know God's presence. That presence reaches to the stars, **wafts through our lives as spiritual breeze**, gives us life and breath and invites us always to new horizons. That presence is love, and that love is limitless, just like the sky!

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