

LENT 4
"GROUNDED: FINDING GOD IN THE WORLD"

"Roots: Our Connection with Those Who Came Before"

by

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Texts: Exodus 20:12 and Leviticus 19:3
Ephesians 3:14-21

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We have been marveling, this first part of Lent, in the simple, yet profound experience of appreciating God's creation. We can know God more closely when we observe and care for the earth. This holds true whether we are delighting in the dirt beneath our feet, looking out over some compelling body of water, or breathing deeply as we take in a red and pink sky at sunrise. When we realize we depend on and are part of God's creation, we find ourselves more grounded.

This second half of Lent, we turn our attention to an equally grounding realization. We can know God more closely, too, when we appreciate that we are part of community. God is not far off, but close to us in creation, but also in community. Diana Butler Bass, the author who inspired our series on Grounded, calls this second understanding "human geography." *(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.)*

We begin with the subject of roots...our connection with our ancestors. One way to draw near to God is to better understand where we came from, and to whom we are related, physically through family trees, recorded histories and even DNA reports, but also spiritually through scripture, church history and congregational histories. Understanding that you are rooted is akin to being grounded! God has surely been part of our histories, part of human history. The author of the Letter to the Ephesians suggests that "every family in heaven and on earth takes its name from God... that we can be strengthened in our inner being with power through God's Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith, as we are being rooted and grounded in love.

We've become enamored with a new song in our household, one of Fiona's dance songs. It's titled NO ROOTS, by Alice Merton. This is a song with a great beat and catchy lyrics:

I like digging holes and hiding things inside them. When I'll grow old I won't forget to find them. Cause I've got memories and travel like gypsies in the night...

The song's chorus is the best part: *I've got no roots, but my home was never on the ground – I've got no roots, but my home was never on the ground – I've got no roots – I've got no roots.*

Did you ever feel that way...like you had no roots? That nothing was tying you down? That you were floating...free? For some, this might describe a feeling of liberation. Others, though, might find such a notion disconcerting, if not frightening.

I got a visceral sense of roots when my family visited Scotland on my last sabbatical. We rented a car and toured all over the country, staying in different hotels and bed and breakfasts. But we splurged for just one night and stayed in a real castle, southwest of Edinburgh, where the Ramsays supposedly originated.

Dalhousie Castle is the historic seat of the Ramsay clan, spelled with an A, somewhere along the line my ancestors changed the last vowel to an E – not sure why. We were startled to walk into the castle and find the place decked out in the Ramsay plaid! And there on the wall was this elaborate portrayal of the official Ramsay lineage.

My ancestors likely lived outside the castle in some humble abode – probably were not blood relatives to the nobles inside the castle. I guess the deal was that everyone who worked for the castle owners took their last name. If my ancestors were noble, they probably wouldn't have felt the need to leave for the new world.

But staying at the castle was really cool. Dalhousie has an unbelievable falconry program and we took a morning to immerse ourselves. Even Fiona got into the act. She got to hold one of the falconer's favorites...the owl, Fugley.

Not far from Dalhousie Castle, really just over a hill, was a chapel said to be built by the Knights Templar. Rosslyn Chapel was made famous by author Dan Brown in his best selling novel, *The Da Vinci Code*. The chapel was built, and is still owned, by the same catholic family. They were neighbors with the Ramsays, who were and are Protestant, specifically Presbyterian. Reading through the history of Rosslyn chapel I found a story that would interest few other people besides me!

It seems in the late 1600s there was an untimely death in the catholic family who owned the chapel and it is recorded that a certain Rev. Ramsey performed the funeral in the chapel. The Rev. was nearly defrocked by his presbytery. since he had no business doing a service in a catholic chapel for a catholic family! There were scant more details, but I am proud to imagine that my namesake was good enough friends with the family, that they asked him to perform the ceremony – and he agreed to do it, even at great professional risk, because he cared enough about his neighbors and he was determined to do what was right and compassionate in the eyes of God!

Tending to our roots ensures healthy growth in our own lives. Knowing the stories of our ancestors can make a difference in how we act, the choices we make, and how we understand our own lives...

Every year, 14 million people sign into the global website Ancestry.com to search out their familial past, a number that doubled between 2009 and 2012. And Ancestry.com is far from the only online genealogy community; there are thousands of such websites...attracting both amateur and professional researchers.

Of course, this is not entirely new—one can think of Alex Haley's 1976 novel *Roots* and the award-winning miniseries of the same name tracing the family saga of Kunta Kinte, the final episode of which can still claim fame as the third most highly-rated American television show ever broadcast...

There are vast peerage records for English noble families; lineages of kings and queens from nations around the world; and the line of popes of the Catholic Church stretching back to the apostle Peter. We human beings are keepers of family lists stretching back through time. And when the lists are lost, destroyed, or damaged, we go looking for them.

Why do we do this? Keep those lists? Search for them? Spend time, energy, and money tracing who we really are?

Some will cynically point out that records are kept for economic reasons, to support patriarchy, maintain racial purity, or prove political legitimacy. True enough. Genealogy is used for all those purposes. But how do we account for our surprise when we gaze at an old photograph and see our own face? Our squeal when we find the name of our first ancestor to make her way to a new nation in the digitized forms like old passenger lists or immigration records?

Or our smile when, by fluke or luck, we find the citizenship papers of a great-great-grandparent in a library? Those holy moments point to something else...moments when our hearts seem to stop, when we sense a connection through time and fall silent in the mystery of the past and grasp a little more who we are in the present.

...ultimately, the quest to connect with the past is a spiritual quest. For so many contemporary people, history, memory, family connections have been largely severed...we have forgotten who we are and whence we came. We have become nomads in time. The "chain of memory," as one French writer insists, has broken, shattering our sense of the belonging into thousands of individual and disconnected shards. All this contributes to the troubling problem of finding our place in the wider story of the world. How can we grasp the meaning and purpose of our own lives in such a context?

The book of Genesis opens with a natural genealogy, referring to creation as “the generations of the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 2:4). The first chapters reveal a primitive history of the earth: God created light, separating day and night; next came water and sky, from water and sky, land; land brought forth vegetation; in the skies appeared the sun, moon, and stars; the waters brought forth living creatures; the earth, mammals; and finally God created humankind.

The first human genealogy in the Bible is in Genesis, chapter 5...it lists the descendants of Adam...for 32 verses! Tracing Adam’s family to Noah, at the time of the flood. There are two dozen such genealogies in the Old Testament, some very lengthy, some much shorter; and there are two major genealogies in the New Testament, one in Matthew and the other in Luke, both listing the ancestors who came before Jesus, although the two go about it very differently, listing different names.

While these lists of names, sometimes called “the begats,” may seem boring to us, in their original context they held much more importance. Political and priestly legitimacy was secured through kinship. These records, no doubt, established lines for passing on possessions and property, along with role, rank and authority. They also register the handing down of religious practices or wisdom, that is tradition.

Perhaps the biblical genealogies are not really about who was the father of whom, but part of the larger story of how sin and evil are transmitted through the human race from Adam onward and how God’s promises are secured through righteous heroes and rulers. The begats tell stories of belonging, of our sacred location in God.

Look at Jesus’ genealogy which begins the Gospel of Matthew. It presents Jesus as king of the Jews, but it includes some startling names. They certainly weren’t all saints! From Jacob, the son who stole his older brother’s birthright...to Tamar, the woman who tricked Judah, her father-in-law, into getting her pregnant...to King Uzziah, who tried to usurp the priesthood and was subsequently struck with leprosy!

We get a good sense that Jesus’ ancestry is the human story of faith and faithlessness, of good deeds and wicked ones, of saintly actions and dubious intentions, of marital fidelity, and well, not! In other words, Jesus may be a king in the royal line of David, but his family is pretty much the same as everyone else’s! Matthew puts it out there – Jesus, son of Joseph, has a family genogram that could keep a therapist occupied for years. When ancient Christian thinkers insisted that Jesus was not only fully God, but also fully human, they were not kidding!

Other biblical genealogies are the same, full of stories of relatives you would rather forget. But they also underscore one of the great spiritual insights of human experience: pettiness, sin, evil, and suffering are somehow passed through generations, but the graciousness of God's blessings overcomes what seems an insurmountable and inherited curse. God's mercy flows, apparently, through the actions and despite the choices of our ancestors: "I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Deuteronomy 5:9-10)

We learn from scripture that our inheritance, indeed, the inheritance of all human beings, is not primarily sin, but blessing, as the ramifications of goodness last many thousand times longer than those of evil. We live and move and have our being in a great web of belonging whose connective tissue is grace and blessing.

Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal priest and writer, suggests: We can conceive of our life in God like a luminous web, in which the whole is far more than the parts. In this universe, there is no such thing as an individual apart from his or her relationships. Every interaction...changes the face of history.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa shares a similar sentiment – "The first law of our being is that we are set in a delicate network of interdependence with our fellow human beings and with the rest of God's creation." God, we are realizing, is not a far-off Weaver of the web...who assembled creation and left it to run on its own. No, God is part of the web, entangled right here with us.

Marcus Garvey said, "A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots.

Many people wonder about their roots. And tracing our roots leads to a conclusion that we do not often consider: every family tree intersects with other family trees. Our roots are intertwined. We are all eventually and inevitably related to each other. We belong to each other. Perhaps we are called to find connections we did not know, to pass stories down from generation to generation, to strengthen our memories of those who have gone before. Discovering where we come from gives us a sense of where we belong.

Will we seek out ways to honor the ancestors we remember, our more distant ancestors, and those who might only be our spiritual ancestors? And above all, can we live fully aware that we are all of the same family...God's family?

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