

## *From Security to Generosity (Lent 1)*

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Luke 4:1-13

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*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"*

*Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written,*

*'Worship the Lord your God,  
and serve only him.'"*

*Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,*

*'He will command his angels concerning you,  
to protect you,'*

*and*

*'On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"*

*Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.  
(Luke 4:1-13)*

On Wednesday evening -- Ash Wednesday evening,  
I received a mark of ashes on my forehead  
in the shape of a cross, just like the one I'm wearing now.

As I received it, I was told these words, just these words:

"Mark, from dust you've come,  
and to dust you shall return."

Can you say those words with me?

*From dust you've come,  
and to dust you shall return.*

The thing is, on Wednesday evening, I knew those words were coming --  
I even said them to others --  
but, still, I couldn't help but think,  
What a rude thing for someone to say.  
I mean, in what setting would you want,  
even welcome, someone to say those words to you?

Not in the dentist chair.  
(Drill whirring)  
*Open wide.*  
***From dust you've come, and to dust you shall return!***

Not in an airplane.  
*Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking.*  
*We've encountered some turbulence, and, well,*  
***from dust you've come, and to dust you shall return.***

Not from your financial advisor.  
*I've examined your portfolio,*  
*and, as they say,*  
***From dust you've come, and to dust you shall return.***

And not even from a stranger you encounter on the Pumpkinvine Trail.  
(Wide-eyed)  
*Hello.*  
***From dust you've come, and to dust you shall return.***

Can you imagine?  
In any other context besides Ash Wednesday,  
those words, without anything else added to them,  
would absolutely freak. us. out.  
*From dust you've come, and to dust you shall return.*

And yet, it's good to hear those words,  
to wear them,  
to remember them,  
to own them.

That's because they remind us of truths that we work so hard to avoid.  
The truth about our humanity.  
The truth about our mortality.  
The truth about our vanity.

After we were born and opened our eyes for the first time,  
we began learning some things that are worth remembering.  
(Or, tragically, if you as a baby weren't provided the evidence to learn these things,  
let me tell you now what you deserved to have been taught then).  
That you are desired.

That you are a reason for joy.  
That a squeal, a smile, even a gas grimace that looks like a smile --  
    is met with delight.  
That any small sign of your growth will be celebrated.  
That you have to depend on others.  
That someone will come when you cry out in need.  
That the hunger you feel will be met  
    by the food that you will be given.  
That you can't clean yourself from the excrement you produce.  
That you should search for the face of your mother or father or sister or brother  
    because rest, security, and peace can be found in their embrace.  
That your existence is enough for you to be loved.  
And that life, your life, begins with blessing.

These are things of which we should remind ourselves  
    because we quickly learn to distrust them if we ever knew them.  
It's easy to know why that is.  
It's because we grow into a world that doesn't teach them.  
And so, even if we think that life began with blessing,  
    we spend our days working to enlarge our space,  
    to exert our influence, to make our own blessings  
        to ensure our security,  
        to provide for ourselves,  
        to prove our worth,  
        to earn love.

And we no longer trust that rest, that security, that peace  
    can be found in our mother's embrace.  
We no longer cry out to our father.  
We no longer depend on our sisters and our brothers.  
We no longer know that our existence is enough for us to be loved.

We work from goal to goal.  
    To get good grades.  
    To earn a degree.  
    To get a good job that will lead to a better job that will earn more money  
        and open still more doors.  
    Run faster. Jump higher. Throw farther. Lift more.

The older I get, the more I recognize this impulse in me and how I've acted on it.  
The older I get, the more I'm learning, little by little,  
    to take a step off the train that rides the fast track to success,  
        however we've defined it.

I'm learning, little by little, to follow my heart's true desire:  
    to know and follow Jesus,  
    and to occupy with joy the space that I have been given.

I'm learning, but, I forget it constantly.  
How about you?

*From dust you've come,  
and to dust you shall return.*

Deuteronomy chapter 6, verse 4 (NIV), says,  
"Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God,  
The LORD is one.  
Love the Lord your God with all your heart  
and with all your soul and with all your strength."

This verse introduces the Shema, Israel's confession of faith,  
the words that Jews were taught to pray twice a day.

When Jesus was led by Spirit in the wilderness  
he faced the temptations that he would face throughout his ministry.  
And to withstand each temptation,  
Jesus quoted verses that come shortly after the Shema.

Tempted to use his identity as God's Son for his own benefit,  
to satisfy himself, to fill his hunger,  
Jesus answered "It is written, One does not live by bread alone."

Tempted to compromise his faithfulness to God  
to gain worldly power and authority,  
Jesus answered, "It is written, Worship the Lord your God and serve only him."

I can't help but think that the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray  
was formed in the wilderness as he faced temptation.

Turn these stones into bread, said the tempter.  
"Give us this day our daily bread," Jesus taught us to pray.

All the authority and power over the nations will be yours, said the tempter.  
"Yours is the kingdom. And yours is the glory. And yours is the power,"  
Jesus taught us to pray.

Throw yourself off the temple so that everyone will see that God will deliver you,  
said the tempter.

"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,"  
Jesus taught us to pray.

This was a prayer prayed by One who knew the power,  
the pull, the tug of the temptations offered by the evil one,  
the one that Adam and Eve  
could not withstand in the garden:  
Enlarge your space, claim for yourself what is God's alone.

Seventeenth-century philosopher Blaise Pascal,  
spoke of the condition of being human as having an empty space  
inside of us, a God-shaped empty space.

This was not a mistake, he says;  
it wasn't a design flaw or manufacturing defect.  
It's the means by which we are tethered to God and others.

The restlessness that we feel, that longing, that desire,  
it can only be filled when we are at one with God.  
God has embedded within every human being the desire, the longing, the yearning  
to love, and to be loved,  
to know fully, to be fully known.  
This is the desire for communion.

There is a God-shaped space within us,  
from which all of our longings, our yearnings, our desires flow.

Those desires at their root are not sinful.  
The problem is when we either compulsively jam into that space  
actions and ideas that aren't meant to fit there,  
or we deny that this space even exists.

Our whole image becomes distorted, our purpose muddled,  
our desires, our longings, our yearnings unsatisfied.  
We become like a puzzle with mismatched pieces;  
we don't look anything like our Creator intended.

God led the children of Israel out of Egypt and toward the promised land.  
And along the journey, God provided for them  
as they had never been provided for before.  
Manna fell from the sky to feed them.  
Water came gushing from a rock.  
They were utterly helpless and entirely dependent,  
and God was providing for them like a mother nursing her baby.  
In the wilderness, they survived because of God's abundant goodness.

Of course, that's the way it's meant to be.  
Psalm 104, verses 24-28 (CEV),  
speaks this way about the abundance inherent in creation

*Lord, you have done so many things!  
You made them all so wisely!  
The earth is full of your creations!  
And then there's the sea, wide and deep,  
with its countless creatures—  
living things both small and large.  
There go the ships on it,  
and Leviathan, which you made, plays in it!  
All your creations wait for you  
to give them their food on time.*

*When you give it to them, they gather it up;  
when you open your hand, they are filled completely full!*

When Israel got to the very edge of the Jordan River,  
yearning to cross, enter, and possess the land that God had promised,  
God put laws into place for their own well-being,  
to remind them of the source of all good gifts,  
to remind them of God's abundance.

Moses says this: *After you have come into the land that is your inheritance from the Lord, after you possess it, after you settle in it, after you cultivate it – you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, and you shall put it in a basket and offer it to God. And, as they did so, they were told to recite their confession of faith, the story of their salvation from Egypt, God's mighty acts that created them, saved them, led them, and offered them the Promised Land. (See Deuteronomy 26:1-4)*

The first fruits are God's possession.  
Life begins with blessing.

On Wednesday, after I received the mark of ashes on my forehead,  
I went and sat at the first prayer station.

There, we were invited to put our hands in dirt,  
as a way of remembering the good soil  
from which God created us and all that is around us.

And just as soil is made fertile through death and decay,  
we also were invited to reflect  
on what needed to die in us  
so that there could be space for new growth.

Earlier that day, I had gone out to our community garden  
and chipped away some dirt clods  
from the frozen ground to use for this purpose.

I should have known that frozen dirt clods  
become formless mud globs once thawed.

And so, on Wednesday evening, with ashes on my forehead,  
I picked up a mud glob and began working it in my hand.

I squeezed it between my fingers, I rolled it into a ball, and then I just held it.

And I thought of God creating me and you, just like the first human,  
from the dirt of the ground.

I thought being formed and held in God's hands,  
just me, completely me, completely secure,  
like a baby,  
without pretense, without the projections that I put before others,  
without all the baggage I carry to provide evidence of my significance,  
my intelligence, my piety, my attractiveness, my worth.

Just me.

Just you.

Our existence is enough for us to be loved.

We need do nothing to prove ourselves before God.

We can give freely and generously because we have nothing to lose.

Earth to earth.

Ashes to ashes.

Dust to dust.

Life to life.

Love to love.

No, we don't need to go around with ashes on our head.

But may the Spirit communicate that message to the world  
through the lives we live.