

SERIOUS ABOUT DIRT

Right from the beginning, God is very serious about dirt!

In listening to our two readings for this morning, you can hear that for yourself. One comes from the beginning of the Bible, the other from close to the end. What they have in common is their celebration of dirt.

The first of these two readings is one of a pair of creation stories that we find in the Book of Genesis--that of the tale of "the garden in Eden" (2.8). In its written form here, it is more than 3,000 years old, dating to about 1000 B.C.E. Who knows how long before then that it circulated as part of oral tradition?

For our purposes this morning, the key sentence in this old story is this: "Then 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" (2.7). Humanity is taken from the dirt.

A surprising sidelight to the Bible's details over the course of chapters two and three (which are the whole of the Eden story) is the fact that, while we recognize it as that concerning Adam and Eve, Genesis itself never names the male partner. Read through the verses again for yourself.

The given name "Adam" never appears once. One is required to read all the way to the 20th verse of the next chapter, until Eve is named ("The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living"), but Adam is not identified by name at all. In fact, more than twenty times over the course of these two chapters, he is referred to simply as "the man." Yep, you heard that right--Adam is the man!

How, then, is his name derived? If you check the italicized footnotes on the page, you will find that his name has to do with a certain word-playing on the part of the Hebrew language, where "man" (or "the man") is said to be taken from the "ground," which in Hebrew is the word *adamah*. The being whose origin is to be found in *adamah* would, of course, then, be *adam*--i.e., the one whose lineage is located in dirt.

Hear that key verse again now: "Then the Lord God formed man [*adam*] from the dust of the ground [*adamah*], and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man [*adam*] became a living being" (2.7). So now you know. It is Eve, the mother of all living, and Adam.

So, my good friends at St. John's, let us get our heads around the fact that, according to this old story, we are just dirt! That's right! But the truly great news is that God has a passion for dirt like us!

We have here, then, fabulous mythological language that demonstrates the truth of that: Humanity is but a mud pie, held together with God's spit, animated by God's breath. And what a marvelous mud pie we are!

All this is complemented perfectly by the second of this morning's two readings, this one dating to more than a millennium later. Inspecting it closely, it is clear that God's penchant for dirt hasn't changed at all over the intervening centuries. Our attention once again is brought back to soil, this time in the form of the briefest of parables.

The kingdom of God itself, Jesus says, is like someone who "scatters seed on the ground" (Mk 4.26), with "the earth produc[ing] of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head" (Mk 4.28). At both places, it is the same Greek noun that is used, denoting--as before in Genesis--soil, earth, ground. Humanity is that clump of earth that produces of itself. Shades of *adamah* and *adam*.

Here, we are told, dirt is incredible in terms of its generative potential, with the ability, as if by magic, to evoke from and coax out of even the hardest kernels the shoots of green which signifies new life. Dirt does that. No wonder that God--the God of life, the God of new life--is so preoccupied with it, and loves it so much. We may be just dirt, but we are the most amazing dirt!

This morning is the first Sunday in a new season of the church year, as together we begin the six weeks of Lent, an annual countdown of forty weekdays that carry us to Easter.

In many ways, Lent, too, is about dirt--starting it, as we did on Ash Wednesday of this past week, by a purposeful remembrance and surrendering of our faults and our failures, our low and inferior things (which are precisely how we think of dirt). It is no surprise that traditionally observing Lent has meant experiencing it as a sober season of repentance and forgiveness, of self-denial and self-sacrifice. At a deep spiritual or psychological level, these practices are conducive to a clearing away of the extraneous and distracting and, as it were, a preparing of the base soil to be receptive to and actively work on new seed.

This is an excellent time to state what is at stake here over this Lenten passage. If we are serious about individually discovering new and deeper life, if we are genuinely inclined to experiencing something of resurrection in very personal terms, then we can do no better than to begin by poking around in our own "groundy" nature.

That's not to say that we should focus on our own darkness in an effort of distressing or depressing ourselves; or that we should wallow in old mistakes, or stew over old grievances. No, if we get stuck there, we never will find our way past these potholes and arrive at a fuller, more abundant life. Proper Lenten observance is not about ground as "dirty" or as "soiling" (very unfortunate negative connotations!), but about ground as incredibly rich and fertile potential.

Probing around in our own dirt reconnects us to the fundamental stuff of which we are made. It is a return to our ground-based beginnings, the only place where a new beginning can be found. It is a remembering of God's original dream for us, in fashioning us at all--that mere dirt, remarkably, should somehow become aware of itself and of its Maker and of its greater responsibility in and for the world.

It's so very true: We may be just mud pies, but what marvelous mud pies we are! We may be just dirt, but we are the most amazing dirt! We may be just ground, but we are ground come alive, and become conscious--standing up, walking, talking, understanding, creating, and, under the grace of God, evolving and self-determining. The course of human history evidences what a struggle that has been, too.

In any case, it is among the greatest of mysteries: From the start, dirt is impregnated with Spirit. When St. Paul speaks of "this treasure in clay jars" (2 Cor 4.7), he is thinking of just this mystery. (Stating it perhaps clearer, the previous translation of the Revised Standard Version speaks of "a treasure in earthen vessels.")

It's not too grandiose to suggest that we--mere "dust of the ground," remember--mean something exceedingly significant to the universe itself. I wonder what?

Not bad for dirt, huh? Not bad at all.