

YOU ARE DUST

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Lamington Presbyterian Church

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Genesis 3:13-19; Romans 8:31-39

“...you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Genesis 3:19b

What are little girls are made of? You know the answer: sugar and spice and everything nice. And little boys? Snakes and snails and puppy dogs' tails.

That's what the nursery rhyme says, anyway. But what are we *made of*, really?

The scientists have their definition. It has to do with constituent elements: mostly water and hydrogen; and with anatomical structures: bone, muscle, blood vessels, nerves.

The Bible has its own definition of what we're made of. It's not in conflict with the scientific one, but it approaches the question from a different angle. This biblical definition speaks to spiritual realities:

“You are dust, and to dust you shall return,” says Genesis 3:19.

You are dust — not the most uplifting thought. Dust is what gathers on coffee-tables, and at the corners of rooms. We're constantly at war with dust. It's got to be wiped off, swept away, carted out to the curb.

In biblical times, dust was part of everyday life — maybe even more so than

today. Most houses, back then, had floors of hard-packed dirt. When you ventured out of the house, you stepped into the street — likewise made of hard-packed dirt. In that hot, dry climate, dust particles were everywhere — riding on the wind, part and parcel of the air itself.

You are dust. “With a gloomy message like that,” some would say, “it’s no wonder the church has a public-relations problem!” How can you feel good about yourself when someone tells you “You are dust”?

It was this sort of discomfort cartoonist Doug Marlette was getting at, when he drew someone talking to the preacher, the Rev. Will B. Dunn:

"Let me get this straight -- the word 'sinners' is spiritually incorrect!"
"You got it! 'People of Foibles' is more sensitive, supporting, and nurturing."
"I see... People of Foibles, repent!"
""Repent' is too harsh. How about 'reflect'?...or 'reconsider'?... or 'Take a look at'?..." ""Check it out'?"

I can see it now..."People of Foibles, check it out!"

But there's more to the biblical image of dust -- much more. Remember where the dust comes from. It comes from the very earth itself...

When God had finished creating the heavens and the earth, Genesis tells us....when God was done crafting the stars and the planets, the waters and the dry

land, there was only one thing left to create: a person, someone to care for the planet, to rule it and enjoy it — to be a companion for a lonely God.

As African-American poet, James Weldon Johnson, tells it:

**Up from the bed of the river
God scooped the clay;
And by the bank of the river
He kneeled him down;
And there the Great God Almighty
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,
Who rounded the earth in the middle of his hand;
This Great God,
Like a mammy bending over her baby,
Kneeled down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay
Till He shaped it in his own image;
Then into it He blew the breath of life,
And man became a living soul.**

You and I may be dust, in the biblical view -- but we are dust whom God has leaned over, and toiled over, and loved into life. We are dust to whom God has spoken, by words of faithful prophets. We are dust to whom God has sent a son and redeemer, Jesus our Lord.

Ours is what you might call a "down-to-earth" story.

As for Lent, it is what you might call the church's down-to-earth season. This is no time for fooling around with exalted ideas of ourselves — of dreaming

and fantasizing about what we could, one day, become: with the aid of health foods, or exercise, or self-improvement videos, or anything else that may tempt us into thinking we can have it all, or do it all.

Lent is a time for honesty; for simplicity; for acknowledging who we really are — sinners — for confessing who God is, and why it's so important for us to return, from time to time, to our maker, to seek to dwell intentionally in God's presence. Lent is a time for admitting that — as important as it may be to heed the wisdom of the world — that wisdom will not save us. There is only one who can do that: the one who bends to scoop up a handful of dust, and breathe into it the breath of life.

Over and against this down-to-earth thinking, the Bible gives us another insight about who we are in God's eyes. It's an insight that helps us make sense of this when-worlds-collide phenomenon of Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day coinciding. It's an insight captured in our second reading for this evening, from Romans chapter 8.

Yes, we do have to take account of this reality we call sin. But we, as Christians, understand sin in the context of God's love for us.

Talking to a persecuted people, the beleaguered community of believers in

Rome, Paul reassures them with the invincible reality of God's love. He does so by imagining a courtroom setting: "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect?"

You can't have a criminal conviction without a prosecutor: and who's going to be our prosecutor in the divine courtroom? *Only Christ* — but remember who Christ is. Christ is the one who gave his life for us!

Because of that fact, Paul is bold to proclaim "that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord!"

In Christ, the ancient story of "you are dust" is re-written. No longer is it the tragedy it once was. Now it's a comedy, an adventure — even, dare we say, a love story.

Because of Christ, you and I can face with courage the realization that we are dust. We do so not to grovel in insecurity (as some outside the church imagine we do) — but to simply and accurately acknowledge our condition, as the first step on the road to freedom.

The ashes, you see, are not about defeatism and despair. They are about hope. Their message is not a lesson in abject humility, but a proclamation of salvation. Once we knew only dust: the pain, the heartache, the limitations of this

human life of ours. Now we know the one who is the resurrection and the life.

That, my friends, is the starting-point of our journey through Lent. May you travel, throughout these forty days, in the company of good friends who will keep the fast with you. Most of all, may you travel in the presence of our savior, Jesus Christ, growing closer to him day by day.

Let us pray.

God of mercy, grace and love:

This Lent, may we learn to fast from judging others; instead may we feast on the Christ dwelling in them.

May we fast from emphasis on differences; may we feast on the unity of all life.

May we fast from words that pollute; may we feast on phrases that purify.

May we fast from discontent; may we feast on gratitude.

May we fast from anger; may we feast on patience.

May we fast from worry; may we feast on trust.

May we fast from complaining; may we feast on appreciation.

May we fast from hostility; may we feast on nonviolence.

May we fast from problems that overwhelm; may feast on prayer that undergirds.

May we fast from apparent darkness; may we feast on the inevitable victory of light.

Gentle God, in both our fasting and our feasting,

gift us with your presence,

so we can be a gift to others in carrying out your work. Amen.