



Seeking God

TEXT
Genesis 3:8–24

February 10, 2016 — Ash Wednesday — Sermon by Rev. Hallie Hottle

Ash Wednesday has been one of my favorite days on the Christian calendar since I was young. I can remember how my parents dragged me to that service, my grandmother quietly dragging them. And I can remember that first time my pastor wiped ashes on my head, and said those weird words, that *I am dust, and to dust I shall return*. I remember being puzzled, but intrigued, wanting to know more about this dustiness.

I remember hearing this story — not the “God spoke and the heavens were made” story, but the other, more intimate and earthy account of creation; the story of how God breathed into the dust, and it became human.

And I remember standing in the hallway mirror of my family’s home after that first service, staring at the ashes on my head, and wondering what it all meant.

You are dust, and to dust you shall return.

I was made to go to that service every year. Some years I went still intrigued and willing. Sometimes I was way too cool and was dragged against

my will. And all of this seemed very strange. How weird was it that we talked about, even quietly celebrated that our lives were small, finite things, marred in brokenness and ash? How weird was it that we hold this up, our dustiness, and remind ourselves of it every single year?

And I maintain even now that this day is strange. But this existence we have in these earthen bodies is very strange. It’s been this way since the beginning.

The creation story I liked most then and now is the second one — the one that begins with God blowing into the dirt, and planting a tree in a garden. Breath and dirt together, a human is created; and quickly it is realized that it is not good for the human to be alone, so flesh of flesh and bone of bone, another is created, and all is well with these two together. All is well until a crafty serpent encourages the humans to rebel and do the thing they shouldn’t: to eat from the tree to become like God.

And after this rebellion, God is walking through the garden, *seeking* the earth creatures who are hiding in embarrassment. They are found

pointing at one another, quick to blame, afraid of their sin being seen.

So God responds, cursing them all. Eve will have pain while bearing children, and the serpent will slither and always be at odds with the humans, and Adam will have to work for food and care. Life will be harder now, away from the garden, east of Eden, because the creatures had wanted to be like God.

And it’s the last lines of God’s curse where we get the words we repeat today, “You are dust, and to dust you will return.”

But the story doesn’t end here. It continues with a few more lines, becoming even more strange, saying, “And Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living. And the Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and Eve and clothed them.”

The curse from God ends with a name of life, and this scene of clothing.

God made garments and clothed the humans. God’s earth creatures, loved and wrong, beautiful, but broken, were now *cursed and clothed*.

You are dust, and to dust you shall return.

From the beginning, we have rebelled against our mortality. We fought the idea that we are finite and small. We have eaten from the tree, climbed the tree, cut the tree down. And on this day, we're supposed to stand here and look at it and realize with honesty all we are and all we are not; stare into that mirror that was easier to look into as a child, and see who we really are; and acknowledge that, no matter what we see, we are loved; that we might be hurt, but we are also held; that we might think we are hiding, but have been found. We might feel it has all been cursed, but we are clothed by the mercy of God.

And this is hard.

It is a hard thing. And so we practice it every year.

Every year we come into these ashes, sometimes distracted, sometimes willing, sometimes begging. But we come every year, because confronting our fragility and brokenness and belovedness is hard, and so it takes practice.

This day of ashes, this season of Lent, is a *practice*. And we practice it again and again because we never know when these earthen bodies we are bound to will be shaken and rattled, and be forced to confront our frailty and our failings without warning. And not *if*, but *when* this happens — when we find ourselves exposed and afraid — we will need to have practiced how to keep walking ahead. We need to practice being found.

It comes in any form: the death of friend or family; the loss of a job or something you thought was sure; an injury or break in body that reveals we are not as invincible as we often believe; a misstep in sobriety previously thought mastered; doors closed; hearts hurt.

Right now, for me, it is a diagnosis for my mom, a diagnosis attached to a prognosis we did not want to hear, but that came tumbling towards us anyway.

These things, these moments, they pinch time together so that our baptism and our burial become very close. Ash to ash, dust to dust, these things shake us, even though we know they will happen. Even the saints in our midst do not escape this world without the pain. And we cannot predict it or plan it — and so we practice for it.

We know, from those first earth creatures who walked that garden with God, that bad stuff will happen. And some of it will be our fault. And a lot of it is not, but is just the result of being in these frail bodies in this fragile world. And when they do, when we are found scared and separated from one another and from God, we must have practice in how to keep going. We must remember that God comes seeking us, and the story doesn't end at the curse.

The story doesn't end even with the clothing. It continued until the day our seeking God could no longer stand being far away from us. And so God entered into this mess with us,

away from the garden, into the broken pieces; continuing to seek us, even when we are hiding; seeking us, all the way to the cross, all the way to the grave and forever after; to assure us that there is nothing we can do, in life or in death, to separate ourselves from the love of God — but also having the full knowledge that sometimes, that many times in this life, we will feel separated.

And so we come to the ashes, and to the table. And we practice being found again, and again, in preparation for the days we won't know if we can.

Friends, if you're feeling separated today, if you've started to wonder if God is still seeking, I assure you, God is. And I invite you to go to your mirror tonight, with these ashes on your face, and see that God is already holding you. And if you need some friends to walk this part of the journey with, let us know, and we'll find them for you.

And if you're feeling pretty OK today — if all is well in life at this moment — I invite you equally to these ashes, with a prayer of thanksgiving. Write something, draw something, do something tonight to begin this Lenten season with a reminder to yourself that it might not always be so good, but that God will always be so present. Remind yourself. And use these ashes and this table to remember.

And if you're still just thinking this is all really weird, well, you're right. This is

weird, and life is weird, and I invite you to come too, practicing what we don't fully understand for the days we can't fully know. The ashes might not make sense now, but we practice, because someday they might.

Friends, I am grateful for all those years I was dragged with mild confusion and intrigue to the ashes. For in this year when I am already painfully aware of my mortality, they serve as a reminder, a familiar practice to help me know that God is in the broken things. Let's acknowledge what is broken together, already knowing that God is here too, as we begin this Lenten journey.

Let us pray: Seeking God, come and find us. And help us to know we have been found. Amen.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.