

All That Glitters is Grace
Genesis 9: 8-17 | Mark 1: 9-15
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There is nothing quite like randomly receiving a physical letter in the mail. One of the few things I know to rival it is taking the time to write and send one yourself. In a world where communication has been reduced to rushed email responses or abbreviated, emoji-filled text messages, even a short, handwritten note conveys so much.

It's humbling to know that someone would take the time to sit down and think about you long enough to put it to paper. And, for many out there, like our dear Jeff Hall, such notes are a cultivation of gratitude, an expression of love, even a word of prayer. It is a spiritual practice, and for those of you still searching for a Lenten discipline, go get a pack of cards and write to those you love and miss. In these socially distant times, it is really is a life-giving point of connection.

But just remember—nothing ruins the sheer joy of finding a letter in the mail like carefully opening the envelope, pulling out a card and discovering it's covered in glitter. I mean, really. I would love to find the Hallmark executive who thought glittered cards were a good idea. Look, I'll give them this: it certainly takes those few minutes of joy reading your card and **stretches** it into days and days of sparkling reminders that Aunt Cyndi remembered your birthday.

Now I know what some of you might be thinking. But Ian—don't you have a history in children's ministry? Yes, I do, and glue and glitter were the bane of my existence.

But Ian—didn't you bring glitter ashes with you from your church in New York as a queer-affirming liturgical practice for our community? Yes, I did. *And* I brought along with it all my existential and theological uncertainties.

It's true, actually, that I brought glitter ashes to United Church with more than a little trepidation. The first year I even forgot to order them on time! After running to some craft supply store, I rushed into the kitchen and got Lori Carter (bless her!) to help me mix up glitter, ash, and oil about 10 minutes before the service began. The hilarity of that blessed mess is still one of my favorite memories at United Church. And it's a point of connection that Lori and I will always share. And that alone may have made the glitter ashes worth it.

But honestly, nothing can beat the look on Selah and Simon and Ava's faces. The sheer joy and anticipation of the kids lining up to receive an imposition of glittery ashes was enough for me to justify the practice in the years ahead.

But I did often wonder if it was a little too kitschy—a distraction from the introspection, penitence, and posture of confession we undertake in this season.

So I took my concerns to one of my dearest and queerest friends, our own Joey Honeycutt. As a hospice chaplain, Joey questioned whether the practice was just another way our culture evades reckoning with the reality of death. A concern that we've theologized over many, many times.

These are important questions, I think, not just about glitter ashes, but about *this* season of Lent in particular. It already feels like we've been in the wilderness for about a year now.

Do we really need to undertake practices of self-denial in 2021 when there's little more to give up? Do we lean in to face our mortality even as the specter of death seems to linger everywhere? Do we still posture ourselves humbly in acceptance of our finitude when everything in our lives already seems so clearly out of our control?

Yes. And . . .

We turn to face the ash and dust because they throw into sharp relief that which shimmers just beneath the surface of our lives.

For it is only God's grace that sustains us on this journey from dust to dust. And if we look close enough into the ashes that mark us, we can see it sparkling there.

Maybe that dogged and vexing persistence of the glitter has something to teach us after all.

You see, these ashes, they mark us for a mission. Affirmed in our divine belovedness, we follow Jesus into the baptism of water. Driven then by the Spirit, we follow Jesus into the baptism of fire. Covered then in ash, we follow Jesus into the wilderness. Ultimately, we emerge from this journey ready to proclaim liberative, life-affirming good news.

And listen clearly church—in this Lenten wilderness we do not learn to mimic death. Whatever practices we undertake in this season should never be instruments of harm or trauma—for ourselves or for those who undertake this journey alongside us.

We follow Jesus into the wilderness not to mimic death but to learn how to resist its temptations—to look deeply at what makes life truly worth living.

In this season we work to distinguish what is death-dealing from what is life-giving—even in our use of Scripture. Even in liturgical practices like these. Even in institutions like this one. We separate our fragile earthen vessels from the treasure of the gospel they hold.

This is what the Lenten journey is about. Together we look unflinchingly into the ash of our world to see what divine possibilities glitter within. We reckon deeply with the dust that bookends our existence to see more clearly the grace that animates us. The divine love that calls us into right-relationship with one another.

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And within our own hearts we come ready to separate that which is God's provision from that which is merely the privilege we carry.

Just a couple of weeks ago, Rev. LaShauna Austria came and spoke to many of us on the theme of "Liberation and the Land." As a black woman raised in rural Alamance County, LaShauna has returned to her roots and begun leading her community in conversations about agriculture and food systems.

Digging in the dirt alongside them, what she didn't expect to uncover were the roots of deep trauma in this community's relationship with the land. At the beginning of this journey, an elder came to LaShauna and said, "Look, why would we want to do anything on the land, the way our people have been treated historically?"

LaShauna didn't have an answer, but she turned compassionately toward the pain underneath that question, and she committed to working with her people to find an answer. That was just the one of many such conversations and Bible studies—these were difficult but sustained by prayer and loving relationship.

"We can see now," LaShauna said to our group, "that this is not what the land did to us. This is what people did to us. . . Going back to the land has been a liberating act of resistance because my people were not meant to thrive on the land and have been stripped of the goodness of God's creation. They were made to suffer and be made to believe that the land was not for them to thrive on. So for me going back is an act of liberation."

It is a beautiful story, and LaShauna's full reflections are available for anyone who may want to go back and listen.

But as I listened that evening, bearing witness to the pain of her community that she named, I began to interrogate the privilege through which I perceived the blessing of the land.

Of course the land is a gift from God, I would have said before hearing the story of LaShauna's community. Of course a return to the land is good for all of us and for the sustainability of our planet.

But as well intentioned as they may be, my environmental commitments cannot ignore the trauma of others.

If I am to claim that the liberation of LaShauna and her community is bound to my own, I must commit myself to good news which is truly good for all who hear it.

And in order for my heart to be a vessel for that kind of love, I will have to pursue a world where my own privilege and power are reduced to ash. Otherwise I might miss the grace glittering beneath a story like this one.

On this Lenten journey, we are marked for a mission—to proclaim and pursue the world that Christ told us was possible.

This Lent, may we proclaim and pursue a world where we trade in a healthcare system centered on profit for one rooted in healing.

May we proclaim and pursue a world where public safety isn't defined by violence and punishment but reconciliation and redemption.

May we proclaim and pursue a world where queer liberation isn't limited to marriage equality for white elites but for the protection and thriving of black trans women, homeless youth, and sex workers.

May we proclaim and pursue a world where the wealth of corporate shareholders isn't valued above the dignity of warehouse workers and janitors.

May we proclaim and pursue a world where global health disparities don't leave the wealthiest nations vaccinated while this pandemic endures for the poorest and most dispossessed.

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In Lent, we turn toward the suffering within us and the suffering around us. Not to reduce ourselves to an ash heap of guilt but to be attentive to the possibilities that flash into view as the light catches them.

“Here is a story to break your heart.” Mary Oliver writes. “Are you willing? . . . I tell you this to break your heart, by which I mean only that it break open and never close again to the rest of the world.”

Compassion friends, is omnidirectional—and abundant. The more I offer to you the more I have for myself, and vice versa.

This willingness to turn toward and sit with the pain of our world is at the root of Christ's ministry—and our calling.

It is true. We are marked for this mission by ash and dust—and by the grace that glitters within it. And believe me, based on personal experience, the glitter will stick around for much, much longer than the ashes.

So let's journey with Jesus into the refining fire of this wilderness journey. May all that is less than God's intention for this world be reduced to ash and dust, and may we remain attentive to the grace that glitters in the meantime. For Christ's Kin-dom shimmers among us, even now.

Oh, and on second thought, should you decide to mail off a card this Lent, make sure it has plenty of glitter. I think we could all use a little more sparkle in our lives. Amen.