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Dust and Ashes
Genesis 2: 7-9, 15-25

I

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” These are the traditional words of Ash Wednesday that mark the beginning of the season of Lent. It is so grim and unusual to speak of death so directly, but that may be the strange allure of Ash Wednesday. It is an annual occasion to speak of things difficult to talk about, a structured and ritualized encounter with our impermanence. It is a simple liturgy of confession. “Create in me a clean heart, O God,” prays Psalm 51. “Wash me thoroughly of my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.” Even liberal protestants offended by the church’s fixation on sin line up every year to say “Lord, have mercy on us” and to prepare for a season of self-reflection and self-denial. There are some people who rarely come to church on Sunday but never miss Ash Wednesday. How odd.

The imagery of dust and ashes is especially potent for us now because dust and ashes fill our screens. No, it’s not the first time we have seen dust and ashes on screen. The images come especially close to the memory of those lost in the dust and ashes of 9/11. The images this week from Kiev and Karkhev reminded me of our country’s invasion of Iraq. I stayed up late as a young person watching 24 hour coverage of the immense blasting of Baghdad. And we’ve all seen all too much dust and ashes in the major battles of Afghanistan and Iraq. Certainly our country’s wars in the Middle East are not the only significant conflicts around the world. There is ongoing violence in Somalia, in Mexico, in Yemen. Some have wondered

if we are so concerned with the conflict in Ukraine because it's in the global north and because those involved are not primarily black and brown but white people. It's certainly true that there are many conflicts around the world that have not captured our attention. I suppose this one is especially significant to us because it's big, because it's potentially nuclear, because it's in Europe and reminds us of World War II. And for all of those reasons it does not feel distant to us. Though it's further away from us than many conflicts around the world, this feels uncomfortably close to home. A war that we are currently not fighting is more frightening to us than the wars our country actually fought for twenty years. We have a stake in this conflict because it threatens to involve us. It could well change us. What's different about this war? We see ourselves in the dust and ashes on our screens.

II

But can we also see ourselves in the text? If we turn to the text we find depth and warmth and grace in the same dust and ashes touching our face now. Wilda Gafney translates the text in this way. "The Sovereign God crafted the human form from the dust of the humus and breathed into its nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living soul." One has to imagine the hand of God as a gardener reaching into the richest soil of the earth. Think of the bottom of the compost heap - dark and wet and crumbling in the palm of your hand. There even the worms speak of nourishment and of life. The humus is the organic compound of Creation by which God has shaped each of us and our life together. And as a word it is the root of other words like humanity or humility. To be human or to humble ourselves, is to return to the soil and to trust that God is using and tending the soil.

To me that is what it means to share in confession. One of our Lenten practices is to confess our sin. That does not mean to abase ourselves, or to neglect our self-esteem, or to dwell ruminatively on our shortcomings. It's easy to see

where people get that idea. Psalm 51 puts it starkly, “Indeed I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.” Some people say it’s hard for them to go to church because church is a place where they experience shame or where they feel guilt. But one can feel guilty without making confession. And shame does not lead to prayer. To make confession is to take the dust and ashes and put them in the soil where we can trust that God is tending, renewing, and giving life. To make confession is to remember our humanity by receiving the breath of God that comes to us as a gift. Confession is not about feeling bad. It’s about letting go. It’s not about receiving punishment. It’s about accepting grace.

III

Perhaps like me you have many thoughts and feelings about the dust and ashes blanketing Ukraine and Russia. I’m certainly afraid. I’m certainly outraged. I also feel soiled, and not in the good Godly sense of life in the compost. I feel dirty because I know that somehow I am also putting dust and ashes into the world too. I know my country isn’t pure. I know I’m a prisoner to the privileges of my community. I feel conflicted that this is the conflict that keeps me up at night because this is the only recent conflict in the world likely to come and find me here.

When the dust and ashes fall, they will fall to the soil. And collect with the humus from which the Sovereign God, our Cosmic Gardener, is making and remaking Creation. They will fall to the soil where God first created human kind. They will fall to the earth, where Jesus was once entombed. And from which Jesus has risen. When we speak of death in terms of dust and ashes we acknowledge the limitations of our condition - but we do not speak of dust and ashes as our destiny. No, our destiny is in the rich soil. It’s in the black steaming earth alive with the promise of God’s goodness and God’s grace.

Even as the dust and ashes darken the skies, even as we see it on our screens, we look also to the promises of God's hands in the earth. And we are bold to humble ourselves to join with God in tending the soil.

We pray, in confession - God, we have fallen short of your faithfulness and love. But a new and right spirit in me.

We pray, in solidarity with our neighbors - God, save the people of Ukraine and Russia; deliver every refugee fleeing home; and turn back every soldier apparently hoodwinked or coerced into an unjust fight.

We pray, in outrage at evil - God, humble the proud men that seek power; cut down to the root the trees bearing bad fruit; soften the hardened hearts or hurl them like stones into the sea.

Into these disquieting images of dust and ashes asks the central question of our faith. Can we also see ourselves in God's word risen from the humus. The text which is God's sacred story of love for creation, the scripture that reveals God's care for humankind; the ancient scrolls that promise God's faithfulness; the old old story that renews God's covenant in every generation.