

We Are from the Dirt
Genesis 2: 4b-15
First United Church of Christ, Northfield, MN
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May God still speak through these words of scripture and sermon.

If you look at the first page in the Bible— feel free to look in this moment if you have one nearby – you will find the first creation story where God is cosmically distant creating heaven and earth and all therein and pronouncing it good. The repeated affirmation of creation’s goodness is heartening. God created the land and sea and pronounced it good, God created the animals and plants and pronounced it good, God created human beings and pronounced them good. One more important thing to note, these human beings are created in God’s own image— meaning they carry with them some expectation of carrying that divine spark forward with them in their actions. But this story portrays God far removed from the creation that is produced.

In the second chapter of Genesis, we enter into a realm that is clearly story. In sharp contrast to the quite general descriptions of the world at the beginning of God’s creation in chapter 1 (the formless void, the great darkness, the vast cosmic ocean, and the great wind of God), in the first sentence of this story we find a specific description of a large barren plain. Think Mars. On this plain, no plant or field shrub grows because God has to yet bring rain to it, besides, there is no person available to till the ground. The only sign of life is a mysterious mist or dew that waters the face of the ground.

From that unpromising desert God forms an *adam*. The Hebrew verb used to mean “form” here portrays God as an artist, since this word is usually employed to describe the life and work of a potter. Picture God with dirty hands and knees, clay caked under the divine fingernails, toiling over the potter’s wheel, carefully shaping bits of moist earth into the *adam*. I imagine God lovingly taking the earth in God’s hands, like a child building a sandcastle near the ocean. Feeling the grit and grime and shaping something born of a wild dream state. This image of God is one who gets down and dirty, who is not off in the distance flinging a world into being, setting it in motion and stepping back. No, give me this sandbox playing, wheel spinning, pot making God any day.

The word *adam* means human being and we should not identify God’s first creation as a male figure. The Storytellers Companion to the Bible suggests a better reading be “earth creature” or you may call this clay figure Dusty.¹

God, the potter then does an amazing thing with this clay creature. God animates Dusty with the “breath of life.” With that distinctive gift of the holy, God makes a living being out of

¹ Michael Williams, editor, [The Story Teller’s Companion to the Bible: Genesis](#), Abingdon Press, 1991.

useless clay. Turning from Dusty, God then forms a garden and puts Dusty right in the middle of the garden.

Then from the same ground as Dusty, God made every tree, each growing plant “pleasant to the sight and good for food.” And among those trees are set the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And God says to Dusty- “This is for you, all of it. This is for you to take care of, to nurture and receive all its gifts. All you have to do is eat from the plant life and take care of the grounds.” Sounds good doesn’t it? So what happened?

We still ask this question. Life is supposed to be easy, good, simple. God shaped us, God breathed into us, God created a world for us to live in, gave it to us to tend and steward and till and care. What happened?

Well one response is, when you are dealing with mud creatures, even ones created in God’s own image, you can guarantee things will be messy. With mud creatures things are at their messiest when we forget where we came from and for what we were created.

No one story tells the whole story. As a way to stay curious, this is why the Bible is full of stories. The ancient teachers, the rabbis who read this creation story told another story in a collection called the midrash and it goes like this:

“In the beginning was God, there was nothing in the universe but God. God was all there was. And this was satisfactory for a time, God decided to create something so that God would not be so alone. So God contracted and got smaller to make room for all that God had yet to create.

And after creating the heavens and the earth and all living things God took the clay of the earth and formed a number of pots of different shapes and sizes and within each pot God placed divine light, a spark of God’s own self.

After some time the pots developed cracks and fissures and several of them chipped and broke open and God discovered that the pots were flawed. They were not the perfect containers for God’s light as God had originally intended. And God saddened by this misfortune asked the leaders and peoples of the different human communities to try to put the pieces of the pots back together. The work of the world ever since has been to pick up the shards of the broken pieces of the world and help God finish the world. God told the rabbis that the repair of creation was the primary task for them and their people. And so it is today.”

When we are feeling hopeless and surrounded by broken shards of the world we can take comfort that divine light still dwells within us and we have a job to do. We have each other as partners in this repair of creation. We have God as a partner in this mending of creation. God has not given up on us. Neither should we give up on each other. The world is not finished yet, it is a work in progress and God believes in us and seeks us out as partners in this work.

Our original calling, as descendants of Dusty, is to remember where we are from and for what purpose we are here. Our unity is rooted in being shaped and formed from the same mud. God also gave each and every one of us the same purpose- to take care of what God has created. We were made for relationship- not just human being to human being but to all of the earth.

This sounds easy but think about the last head-scratching encounter you had with someone that made you question what planet they were from. And you know, in your head when you start to ask that kind of question, that you likely have stopped listening and if you have stopped listening, you have stopped relating.

The pandemic has kept us apart. We have been masked in more ways than one. The disconnect is real. We have to re-learn how to be in relationship. Being reminded of our “common ground” could help. If we look and see the Dusty in each person maybe, we will remember that we belong to God and to each other. And if we stay curious maybe, just maybe, we will hear echoes of God’s purpose for us- take care, take care, take care. May it be so. Amen.