

Ash Wednesday
March 2, 2022
Church of the Ascension
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Some years ago, my friend and fellow priest Nurya invited me to come plant wheat on her farm, called Plainsong, in Michigan just outside of Grand Rapids. It was the second year she'd organized a wheat planting, where a small community would press wheat berries into the soil in hopes that what grew could be harvested and then milled into flour for communion bread.

When I'd first heard Nurya speak about Plainsong's wheat and communion bread program, I immediately thought of the offering prayer spoken over the bread and wine before for communion: "Blessed are you, Lord God of all Creation, through your goodness we have this to bread to offer: *fruit of the earth* and work of human hands, it will become for us the bread of life."

It was a moment of epiphany for me: The blessing is a reminder that the bread we eat does not begin in the hands of a baker or even in the hands of a farmer who sows and then harvests grain. The bread of life we eat begins in the soil. The dirt. The dust.

According to the creation myths of Genesis, dirt is where all life on earth begins. God separates the Land from the Sea and beckons the earth to put forth vegetation that bears seed as plants and fruit trees. Later, the Creator calls from the land "cattle and creeping things and wild animals of every kind." Likewise, and finally, humankind is called forth. There are two myths of creation told in Genesis, and it's in the second one where God most explicitly calls a human from the soil. God fashions Adam, whose name in Hebrew means "from dirt."

It's not just that Hebrew, however, that acknowledges our etymological and spiritual connection to the soil. The Latin root of *human*, *humus*, also means *soil*, *dirt*, *ground*.

Soil is the common heritage of plants and animals in all their variety. Soil is the common heritage of humankind in all its variety.

But soil is not just where life begins. Earthly life ends in the soil too.

There is an artist in my neighborhood, her name is Molly Costello, and she sells pins that proclaim, “We are *all* temporarily not dirt.”

I have one of those pins and I’ll be wearing it throughout Lent because I love its grounded take on our connectedness to one another, to all of creation in all its variety. That we all will return to the dirt is indeed what unites us. Unity, our common heritage as God’s children, our common heritage as God’s creation, is exactly what I could use a little more of these days.

In hospitals, cleanliness is indeed godliness. Sanitation protocols are rigid and necessary for the health and safety of staff and patients. In other words, everything possible is done to protect against “dirt.” Hand sanitizers outside every room. Clearly marked receptacles for the disposal of anything that has touched or pierced a patient. Sinks and soaps, and yes, masks for everyone now. All to keep the dirt away.

And yet, Ash Wednesday is one of the busiest days of the year in a hospital. Nurses, doctors, and hospital staff all line up to see the chaplains when they arrive on their floors with ashes. “From dust you came, to dust you shall return,” the chaplains intone, again and again, marking the very people who tend to earthly bodies every day. The very people who know well that all earthly bodies will return to the earth eventually.

Even the patients, from the mildly ill to those who already know their days are well limited, request ashes. When I did my chaplaincy internship at Rush in 2020, on a normal day, more patients declined my offer of a visit than accepted it. On Ash Wednesday, nearly everyone whose door I knocked on invited me in.

Every year as we mark the beginning of our journey toward Easter, I find myself wondering why so many ask to be marked on their foreheads with such an

outward symbol, a cross of ashes. Why seek the reminder of our inevitable return to dust?

The phenomenon has a particularly interesting contour in a hospital setting, when death already draws so much nearer. It's particularly salient in a hospice unit, where I was assigned to distribute ashes in 2020. There, death doesn't just draw near. In some rooms, it is already passing over.

It seems so counterintuitive to mark the dying with a reminder of their death, when it is but hours away, already present in the rattle of their lungs as they take their last breaths. And yet, their families often request it. I recall marking a young woman whose family had specifically requested my presence. I remember how cool this woman's skin felt against my thumb. I also remember the papery, thin skin of her grandmother. The foreheads of her middle-aged uncles and aunts, her youthful sisters and cousins, and even the hospice nurse caring for them. As I marked them all one by one, I, too, bore the sign on my own forehead. A sign, in dirt, that we are all in the process of returning to our humble origins. And that we are in this together.

Yes, this dust, this dirt is a sign of death. But this dirt is a sign of life, *and of life shared*.

We are called to the dirt, to the soil, because we come from it. The soil where we plant seeds of life is the same soil where we bury our dead. The soil is a beginning and it is an end, and when we tend to it closely, we can know that painful yet beautiful paradox ever more intimately.

Paul's epistle to the Corinthians captures that paradox of life, of life in Christ: "We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything."

The cross of ashes is a paradox: a sign of our death, and yet a sign of our life. Our life that was, our life now, and the life that is to come.

There's a reason that planting seeds is such a beloved and well-worn metaphor for the beginnings of something new and I think it has less to do with the seeds than it does with the dirt. When we return a seed to its source, having been produced by the plant which grew in the soil, we make an act of hope, an act of faith in new life. When we return a seed to the soil, we say that the future is something we want, and we want it to be beautiful, good, and life-giving. We want it to produce food and flowers and even more seeds. Even more life.

Pressing a wheat berry into the dirt is a commitment to its care, to the practice of coaxing forth the plant coiled tightly within. It says, I am willing to water and to weed, to find the right amount of sunlight and shade. It says, I believe in the value of that work and what that work will produce—life-giving bread—though it will take time.

So let us begin our journey toward Easter together. Let us enter this 40-day period of fasting, almsgiving, and prayer united at our very core in our identity as creatures of God, fashioned like Adam from the dirt.

And as we are reminded of our humble beginnings, let us allow our lives to be like kernels of wheat, kernels of promise and possibility, returned to the soil to be watered and warmed these 40 days into something new. For who knows what might spring forth?