

DUST

*A Sermon by
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In the faculty room of the high school where I used to work, a large round table near the coffee pot was the scene for intense religious activity. It was the ominous goodie table, perhaps laden with bagels and cookies provided by parents; miniature Snicker bars from Halloween; half a chocolate cake from a teacher's home party brought in to "get it out of the house."

The liturgy usually went like this:

First, *confession* of personal weakness as the table comes into view: "Oh no...just when I thought it was safe to come in here."

Then *temptation* rears its head: "I'm just going to take this tiny little corner with no frosting on it..." Then, grabbing the whole slice of cake: "I'm eating it, okay? Life is short."

Finally *penance* is assigned: "I'm not going to eat lunch today and I'll probably skip dinner, too. January first and it's diet city."

To well-fed Americans, food has become an occasion for sin; we say we are "being bad" by consuming a slice of caramel cheesecake, describing it as so good it's *sinful*. This concern with health is commendable, of course, but giving into unhealthy

food may be one of the few times that we use the term “sin” outside of church. Of course, according to Scripture, it is through food that sin entered the world when Eve just couldn’t stick to her eating plan!

The thing is, sin can be juicy.

In his book on evil, Terry Eagleton writes: “Evil starts to look alluring when goodness begins to look boring. We can blame this on the puritanical middle classes who defined ‘virtue’ as thrift, prudence, meekness, abstinence and industriousness.” I suggest that few of us would have a juice box with Mr. Rogers if we could have a beer with Keith Richards.

Sin, temptation, wilderness – these things are in the forefront today, beginning with our gospel, a showdown in the desert between Jesus and Satan.

Luke says that the Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted. Does God do this? Could this be why we pray "lead us not into temptation"? Maybe we end up there because we learn lessons in the wilderness (or the desert) that we cannot learn elsewhere.

We may think of the wilderness or the desert as beautiful and this can be true but as one person says that it’s not really wilderness unless there’s something there that can eat you.

Sometimes we go to the desert; sometimes the desert comes to us.

We go to the desert when we get serious about our health and decide to devote some of our time to going to the gym, walking around the lake, joining Weight Watchers, finally stopping smoking. The desert comes to us when we are rushed to the emergency room with symptoms of a heart attack or a routine medical test changes our lives.

We go to the desert when we take the risk to speak honestly to our partner about problems in the relationship; the desert comes to us when a partner announces without warning that they're leaving.

We go to the desert when we look honestly at our finances for retirement. The desert comes to us when we lose our job unexpectedly or the market tanks, taking a good share of our savings with it.

The desert also comes to us when we second-guess our life choices, debate with ourselves what we should have done and didn't, and compare our lives to those around us, almost always coming up short in some sense. Maybe some of you feel as I do when I conclude that at this point in my life, I should have more to show for it, for all the work, the pain, the spent energy. Maybe we should have done more, earned more, made better decisions about jobs and relationships. When I go there, I can descend into a spiral of self-doubt that is unhelpful at best and despairing at worst.

One of our greatest theologians Henri Nouwen, talks about the ultimate temptation. He says, "The greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity, or power, but self rejection. Self rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the Beloved."

I have come to see the cycle I get into as sinful because it feeds an anxiety that destroys trust in God and in myself, and in this second-guessing of my decisions, I am basically turning down cold the blessings right in front of me in the present moment. Yet the popular culture in which we live calls us worthless or at least in need of massive repair every time we engage it.

So it's not always that easy to discern what voice to listen to: the one calling you Beloved just the way you are, or the one that calls you do more, act more, risk more, give more, regret more. So how do you discern illusion

from reality? That's the task of Jesus as he struggles with his identity in the desert, figuring out what it means to be Jesus.

Satan tempts Jesus by sewing seeds of distrust, uncertainty, self-doubt: you might go hungry if you don't act now – turn the stones into bread; what if you are left powerless and can't do all those good things you want to do – take the power now; if you believe so much in God, he'll come to rescue you if you throw yourself off this building.... Won't he? Or is there something this God is not telling you? Satan can caress each doubt, tease each insecurity into full flame.

It's the same thing in Eden. Says the Lutheran David Lose: "Satan distorts the commandment of God and plays upon the insecurity of Adam and Eve in order to call into question's God's intentions." --- 'God hasn't told you everything about the forbidden fruit. You ate it and you didn't die. So what else has God not told you? ...'"

Insecurity shakes us also on a collective level. We are inundated by trauma through the media, not only the difficult events of our own lives but in hearing each hour about profound suffering in all parts of the world. And after awhile, we start waiting for it: news of the next school shooting, the next earthquake, the next act of terror. And so the tendency can be to do something that will guarantee our safety: build a wall and keep people out; arm ourselves and protect our families and our property; don't trust anyone who is in any way different. The biggest can be separating illusion from reality.

The ultimate illusion is that we are in control of our own lives and are therefore responsible for everything that happens in them. I have learned this many times.

I have had two very difficult events in my own life in the past 12 years: a divorce and a serious illness. It was easier to go through the illness than it was to go through the divorce. The reason is that I experienced the divorce as a personal failure, as something I should have averted, been smarter about. I kept trying to control the outcome and I couldn't. It was much later that I saw it was for the best.

But the illness just appeared and I just went with it since no one was available to blame, and I had no control at all. And while it was horrible I was carried through it with grace. I, the most anxious human on the planet, had my anxiety muted, my trust magnified and was given the strength to walk through it a day at a time. Incidentally, I know that the best advice I ever received was given then: "Always look for the angel in the room." And there always is one: a nurse, a friend, a book, a memory, there, in the wilderness.

In a way it's all about dust.. We are all made of stardust, a poetic and scientifically accurate statement. God create the heavens first, and when stars exploded and burned up, that dust fell to earth, and God created all earthly life including human beings out of the dust of the ground, that originated far away. (*Physics.com* confirms that 60% of our bodies are water and hydrogen and 40% are stardust).

Last Wednesday ashes were placed on our foreheads with the reminder that we are dust and to dust we shall return. Those ashes are usually made by burning what is left of the palms from Palm Sunday. They also represent the dust of the stars from which we are made. A reminder of our mortality yes, but also, a reminder of our interconnectedness with all of creation, out to the stars.

Let me close with a meditation on dust, Ash Wednesday and Lent by
the poet Jan Richardson:

“All those days
you felt like dust,
like dirt,
as if all you had to do
was turn your face
toward the wind
and be scattered
to the four corners’

or swept away
by the smallest breath
as insubstantial—

did you not know what the Holy One
can do with dust?

This is the day
We freely say
We are scorched

This is the hour
We are marked
By what has made us
Through the burning

This is the moment w
We ask for the blessing
That lives within the

The ancient ashes
That makes its home
Inside the soil of
This sacred earth

So let us be marked
Not for sorrow
And let us be marked

Not for shame.
Let us be marked
Not for false humility
or for thinking
we are less than we are

But for claiming
What God can do
Within the dust,
Within the dirt,
Within the stuff
Of which the world is made
And the stars that blaze in our bones
And the galaxies that spiral
Inside the smudge
We bear.”

We are on the journey now to Easter when new fire will be lit and new life born again out of the ashes and transformed by the Creator in a process that is ongoing and eternal, even after death. Remember “what the Holy One can do with dust.”

At the eight o’clock service today, I looked at the columbarium, as I always do when I’m here, and realized that I recognized all of the names. And there was a special force to the statement” “Remember what the Holy One can do with dust.”

Amen.

References:

1. *Gratitude to the Rev. Dr. Mariann Budde for the idea of the wilderness visiting us.*
2. *Terry Eagleton, “On Evil,” 2011.*

3. *Jam Richardson, poem cited on “The Painted Prayer book,” Internet blog.*