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Meditation

Genesis 2:4b: In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, ⁵when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up— for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; ⁶but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— ⁷then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. ⁸And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Genesis 3:¹⁷And to the man he said, 'Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, "You shall not eat of it", cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; ¹⁸ thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. ¹⁹ By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.'

Mark 1:15 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

A few weeks ago, I was a part of a panel that gathered to speak before a room full of theologians and physicians who were coming together to “Reimagine Medicine.” These theologians and physicians had seen that faith communities often play a big role in patients’ health and care during times of illness, and so they wanted to hear from some local pastors as they began their conversations together.

Conversation went at an easy pace for a time...we pastors talked at length and proudly about all the skills we as caregivers and listening types and pray-ers could offer...the doctors rightfully pushed back with evidence of the own compassion inherent in their care and competence. This back-and-forth exchange of stereotypes continued for a time until one palliative care physician broke in. “I regularly take under my care patients who are Christians,” he said. “And I never stop being amazed at how many of them reach the final days or weeks of their life and turn out to be surprised that they themselves are going to die. And I just want to know, who is teaching them this?”

Well, you know it’s a powerful question when it renders every minister in the room mute. The truth is that most of us are not very good at talking about death. On Easter and at funerals and on All Saints’ Day, perhaps, when death is the enemy that is conquered, has lost its sting, is swallowed up by life forever and ever, Amen. But we are not so good at talking about death as the thing that each of us will one day suffer.

Which is why I am surprised that you are here tonight! That once a year, people of God stumble forward to have a pastor smear soot on their foreheads and say to them, “you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” That you have come willingly to wear a mark of your own mortality and opened your ears to hear that one day, you are going to die. You are much braver than I am!

Talk about death is as old as human life, of course. You probably know the story well—a man and a woman, both made out of dust...a beautiful garden...forbidden fruit...a momentary lapse in judgment and suddenly it is one-way tickets back to the dust for everyone.

In the Bible, it seems that sin and death are not easily separated. That has made for some problems in theology, like when it became too easy to draw a straight line between a man’s illness and the sin he must have committed to make him deserve to be sick. But the close relationship between sin and death has also helped us understand what sin feels like. It feels like being cut off from the living...alienated...estranged...powerless...dead.

When suddenly the man and woman in the garden could no longer walk beside the Lord on his evening strolls, when they looked at one another and for the first time questioned whether the other was trustworthy, when they realized they had enough power in their pinkie fingers to rupture whole relationships...that is when humanity learned about death.

And we, these many years later, when we see hurt in the eyes of someone we love and know we caused the pain, when school shootings and foreign wars make us wonder if there ever was a good garden or if there ever can be one again...when we are so disconnected from the dust of the earth that the planet becomes a product for our own consumption...when we are so separated from our neighbors in this community or our brothers and sisters across the world that there is phantom pain where the limbs in the body of Christ should be...when we feel the lifeblood between us and the Lord has ceased to flow... when we do the things we do not want to do and do not do the good we want...when we look at ourselves in the mirror and see the soot of our sinfulness, that is when we learn about death.

Many of you know of Reynolds Price, the writer and professor of English at Duke who died a couple years ago. When he was fifty, he had his life turned upside down—he was suddenly diagnosed with a ten-inch long cancerous tumor intertwined with his spinal cord. He had surgery and treatment, but was left a paraplegic living a life of constant and extraordinary pain. To his surprise, he had to battle not only the cancer, not only the way it changed his entire way of living, but the resistance of his friends that anything had to be different. “When we undergo traumas in middle life,” he said, “everyone is in league with us to deny that the old life has ended. They are trying to patch us back up and return us to who we are, when what we need to be told is, ‘You’re dead. Who are you going to be tomorrow?’”

This is the day when we acknowledge that we can not simply be patched up and returned to our old selves. This is the day that we smear on our foreheads the evidence of our death—physical and spiritual—and then look at one another and in the mirror, stare that death in the face, and say, “Who are you going to be tomorrow?”

Now part of that question has already been answered for us. Before there was ever ash on our foreheads, there was water there. The mark of baptism says we are first and finally beloved of God, children of Christ. But the ash and the purple paraments and the forty days and the penitence and the self-examination say to us that there is space for us to answer the question as well.

Who are you going to be tomorrow? As best I can figure, there are two ways to answer that question when you’re wearing the sign of death on your forehead. We can turn toward despair, determining that the powers of sin and death will reign forever, and consider each new day a step closer to the grave. Or we can turn toward Christ Jesus. We can show him all our wounds and dirt and the scorched and dead places of our lives and take a step toward the life he offers. “The kingdom of God has come near,” he says. “Repent, and believe the good news.”