

Remember You Are Dust (Gen 2:4–24)

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I was reading on the internet this week some comments from a Christian fundamentalist pastor objecting to the idea of evolution. “*Humans are created in the image of God,*” he said, and “*when we reject that reality and say that man ‘evolved from monkeys,’ all this truth is lost.*” And I thought, “*Oh mate! You should read the Bible. Our predicament’s worse than you think. We share a common ancestor with a mud hut—we’re dust.*” If there’s a knocking-humans-off-their-perch competition between Darwin and the Bible, I think the Bible wins. And, as an aside, it’s perfectly possible for creatures of clay, like us, to be images of God. So don’t get hung up on evolution. God can make images however God sees fit.

But this pastor does exemplify a Christian version of a very widespread mindset, which can be found within and without the church. We think that we humans are somehow *radically distinct* from the rest of creation. Consider the way we speak. We talk about “nature” and “the natural world.” And we contrast that with “culture”—the stuff that *we* do. Birdsong is nature, opera is culture; forests and rivers are nature, cities and roads are culture; wasp nests are nature, houses are culture; crows using twigs and stones as tools is nature, humans using hammers and saws is culture. “Nature” in other words is the stuff that’s “*not us.*” Or consider animals. Many of us love animals. But when we speak of animals we’re not speaking of ourselves—we mean dogs and birds and fish and lions—“*them,*” not “*us.*” We see ourselves as somehow “other.” Genesis 2 is a kick in the crotch for that mindset. It’s an invitation to rethink what it means to be a creature; what it means to be just as much a part of nature as everything else in the world. Remember, you are dust.

“Then the LORD God formed a human from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living being.”

Let’s think about that. The Hebrew word here for “human” is *’ādām* (Adam) and the word for “dust” or “soil” is *’ādāmā*. It’s a lovely play on words. It’s like

saying God formed Rocky from the rock or Dusty from the dust or, more precisely, Human from the humus.

To speak of humans as made from the ground is to make a provocative point about the kinds of creature that we are. We are made of *the same stuff* as the earth itself. We are sons of the soil and daughters of the dust. We are biologically grounded in and connected to our environment. As such, the earth is essential to our very human identity. Not merely in the sense that it's necessary for our existence but also that it's literally *integral* to us and we, in turn, are one with it. In this vein, Ragan Sutterfield comments: "Your body, each cell of your skin, each synapse of your brain, every wriggling sperm or quaking egg, the pigment of your retina was made of sunlight and earth, converted into proteins and sugars, made useful by plants and animal rumens and the microbes that team inside us all." Thus, "through attention to the earth itself, we may discover the lost art of being human—Creatures born from clay, spirit-filled soil." Remember, you are dust.

Yet at the same time God breathes into this earthling, and on receiving this breath he becomes a living being or soul (*nepeš ḥayyâ*). This is to see divine activity not simply in the processes that form bodies but also in the process by which non-living matter becomes, mysteriously, alive (even if we see these processes as two aspects of the same events). There's something *astonishing* and *awe-inspiring* about life, something more mysterious than the mundane definitions given at school in biology classes, helpful as they are. For Scripture, life is a divine gift, indeed it is the divine breath itself in creation.

Now we need to be a little careful here. Many believe that this episode in Genesis 2 distinguishes humans from other animals, making us unique. However, being "formed of the ground" is something that in Genesis is true of *all* animals. Look at verse 19: "*so out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air.*" Oh! *Hmmm*. So we are not simply one with the soil but also one with birds and beasts. We are animals—among other animals. "But wait!" I hear you object, "*God breathes into us!* Surely only we are 'living souls,'

animated by God.” Well, I hate to be the party pooper, but in Genesis having the “breath of life” and being a “living being/soul” (*nepeš ḥayyâ*) is true not only of humans but of all living creatures. Consider 1:30, which speaks of “all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that crawl along the ground—everything that has the breath of life (*nepeš ḥayyâ*) in it.” And Psalm 104 tells us that the life-breath of *all* animals is as much breathed into them by God as is the case with Adam here (104:29–30). So having God’s animating breath in us is something we share in common with wombats and whales and worms. Remember, you are dust.

What sets humans apart from other animals in Genesis 2 is the *task* to which God calls them. “*And the LORD took the human and put him in the Garden of Eden to till and keep it . . .*” (2:15). God has bespoke tasks for other creatures, but the focus here is on the human vocation of gardening and farming and cultivating. We could even say that *we are one way in which God enables the earth to look after itself*. We are soil tending the soil. All this requires a mindset shift away from seeing ourselves as “outside of” and somehow “distinct from” the web of creation. And that’s important, because when we think of ourselves as “wholly other” we can forget that when we harm the earth, we wound ourselves.

In the story, God wants a creature to work the land and to that end God plants a garden, in Eden, perhaps as a place for the humans to learn (2:8–9). Oh! Did you notice that? God’s into gardening. Turns out that God has green fingers. And into this garden the earthling is placed. After that God seems to be in the habit of walking in the garden, in the cool of the day, communing with the plants and animals and with humanity as they in turn care for the land (3:8).

Humans are to work the ground but also to “keep it”—that is, to guard it and protect it. There’s *nothing* here to fund the idea that humans can do whatever the hell they want with the rest of the natural world. Such behaviour is contrary to the sacred calling of “tilling and keeping.” And I use the words “sacred calling” very deliberately. For, as various scholars have observed, the story of Eden is full

of allusions to the idea of temples, allusions the original audiences would notice. Let me just mention one of many: the words “work and keep” (*lě‘ābdâ ûlēšāmērâ*) only appear elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible used of priests, who “serve and keep” the temple. The point the story is making is this: the garden is a temple—a dwelling place for God; we humans are priests serving God; tending the ground is our worship. And in the process, we get to enjoy the fruit of the earth for ourselves: “*You may freely eat from every tree of the garden*” (2:16). So not only is God a gardener, good gardening turns out to be a form of praise, and in turn it is a blessing, to us and to the earth and its other inhabitants.

All of which raises the question: Does the way that our human civilizations inhabit this earth today look like worship and responsible care for God’s temple of creation? Or does it all too often look like . . . rebellion? Like an attempt to throw off the constraints of being creatures and live “life beyond limits”? In the short term that can be thrilling and seem to offer much promise; in the medium and long term such forbidden fruit turns out to have been forbidden for a reason. Eating it is short-sighted stupidity that in the end wounds our mother earth and, in turn, all her children, ourselves included.

So pondering how we should live upon the earth in ecologically sensitive and environmentally attuned ways is not simply a matter of “the latest fad” or “crazy ass hippy nonsense.” It’s about living *truly human* lives before the Creator. *Remember, you are dust.* In the end, it boils down to this: Are we seeking to be worshippers or are we blasphemers?

It’s a sobering question, as it should be, and answering it can leave us feeling hopeless, for our human societies so often seem *completely addicted* to patterns of destructive behaviour. Our collective stupidity is staggering, and seeing that can cause us to sink into despondency. And despondency can paralyze our efforts to work for positive change. It’s a lose-lose scenario. Which brings me in closing to the gospel, for while we Christians must wrestle with the same challenges and tragedies as everyone else, we do so within a horizon of hope.

The Christian tradition tells us that the Word, the second person of the Holy Trinity, “became flesh.” In light of the Genesis story, think what that means: Christ became a being of dust, an earth creature, as we are. He got tired, hungry, thirsty, and faced temptations, as we do. He was mortal, as we are. Theologian Denis Edwards expands on this: “Like us, Jesus is part of evolutionary history, dependent on the hydrogen that formed in the beginning of the universe, on the carbon and other elements synthesized in the stars, and of the long history of evolutionary emergence on Earth. . . . In Jesus of Nazareth, God becomes a vital part of all the interconnected systems and physical processes of our planet, part of the evolutionary history of life on Earth, part of the story of the expanding and evolving universe. God embraces all this in order to bring it to completion.” And that “completion” is what the gospel is about: *in Jesus’ resurrection God takes Christ’s broken body of dust and transforms it into a risen body of glory*—the same body, but now elevated by God to a new-creation level of existence. And it’s *here*, in *this* story, that Christians find a foundation for hope, even as we continue to struggle with the truly harsh and harrowing aspects of our lives together: for *Jesus’ resurrection is a promise of new creation for all whom he represents*. That’s us—human beings. *We* will be raised with him. But it’s more. Christ, as a dust creature, represents all the creatures made from the ground—meaning the other animals. His resurrection is a promise for *them* too. Indeed, Christ stands before God on behalf of the soil itself. His resurrection gives us hope that the ultimate destiny of *all* creation is found in God. Knowing that helps us to face the soul-crushing realities of our current environmental crises and to work for change and healing without the paralyzing loss of hope.

So I have only one message for you today. *Remember, you are dust . . . but you are dust with a destiny. Amen.*