

You Are Dust

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Columbus, OH
March 9, 2025

On this first Sunday of Lent, I want to preach about this journey of descent as we follow the Jesus-path to new life and restoration.

I begin with the ancient creation myth in Genesis, which does not intend to answer the question of how things came into being. Rather, the purpose is to explore what it means to be human.

It begins with the affirmation: *life is good*.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep while the spirit or wind of God swept over the face of the waters.

According to this myth, God created something each day: light, the sky, dry land and vegetation, the sun and the moon, creatures of the sea, the air and the land, and finally, humankind. And the story concludes:

God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good.

We do not take these words literally. But we can take them as true, giving us some great and necessary truths. If we want to know about the beginning of the universe, how it developed, how long it took to get to our present day, let us listen to science. But if we want to know something that can resonate with our soul, something science cannot tell us, let us listen to the ancient scriptures, the poets and sages. For these words answer a question that science cannot answer. It concerns meaning and purpose, a matter of life and death to our soul and our spirit. The question is: Why is there something and not nothing?

Science tells us that we began with an explosion of incredibly tightly packed particles. And we're left to wonder about the inexplicability of the creation, as if it were an accident, that creation itself is purposeless, without any essential meaning, beginning billions of years ago with a great, big bang, spewing particles ever outwards, and ending billions of years from now, perhaps, in a great contraction, inwards and inwards.

But answering the burning existential question, the ancient myth says: God created the heavens and the earth. This is why there is something and not nothing. Our temporal reality is grounded in an uncreated, eternal reality that we call God. So, then, reality consists of both God and the world. And the ancient text affirms that this marvel we call life, this God-created reality is very good. It is amazing and wondrous that instead of nothing, there is something. There is life.

But the Bible is not naive to the negativities of life. No sooner does it tell us that God rested on the seventh day than we hear the story of the first man and first woman responding to temptation,

breaking from God. We learn that life is not harmonious. We live in this contradictory world of good and evil, joy and suffering, life and death. It says,

By the sweat of your face you will eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken. You are dust, and to dust you shall return.

We see that it is not possible, even for God, to create a finite world without suffering and death. Created life comes with death—our death and the death of those we love. Created life comes with suffering. It comes with injustices, prejudices, violence and indifference we inflict upon each other.

Furthermore, part of the human dilemma is not just that we will die, but we *know* that we will die. We know that our loved ones will die. And we all live with that anguish. Paul Tillich referred to our existential anxiety as “finitude aware of itself.”

And so in the commendation after the funeral service in the Book of Common Worship, it reads:

You only are immortal, the creator and maker of all. We are mortal, formed of the earth, and to the earth shall we return. This you ordained when you created us, saying, “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.” All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.

The Jesus-path offers us a way to healing from being broken by this life, broken by death and separation, broken by suffering, broken by our anxiety of our perishing, broken by the anguish of loss. The Jesus-path offers us a way to sing, “Alleluia, alleluia” again. Even at the grave.

For Jesus, himself, knew betrayal, suffering and death. He was betrayed, denied and abandoned by his disciples. He was rejected by his own people. And he died on the cross. By the way, Jesus was crucified for standing up to the empire, not to atone for the sins of humanity. He was killed because he included the immigrants, stood up for the outsiders, and challenged a system that exploited the poor while lining the pockets of the rich. And he was executed by a method reserved for rebels and revolutionaries; he died on a cross. In the midst of his dying he cried, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” As we also may feel God-forsaken in the death of those who we love. This is what death can feel like to us. It is not unfaithful to feel this way. Our faith does not deny death; it does not deny the terribleness of death; it denies the *finality* of death. “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.” All of us go down to the dust.

And so the pursuit of wisdom depends upon becoming human, as Jesus was human. That is, we are all heading toward death. It depends upon letting go of arrogance and upon embracing our finitude. To pursue wisdom is to become human, the root of the word, “humility.” It is to acknowledge that we emerge out of the mud, which is what the Hebrew word, *adam*, means. “Mud creature.”

This healing path offered to us by the scriptures starts with this acceptance. Jesus said many times, “Those who lose their lives will find them.” It is in the losing that we are able to truly discover life, to truly experience the goodness, the marvel of life. Facing death can bring us to

the fullness of life marked with the presence of God. Without death there can be no resurrection. Do you want to be raised up? Truly awakened? Resurrected? You first must die. Your world must crumble. Things must fall apart. As the Buddhist say, “No mud, no lotus.” Paul said the old self must die—you must let go of it—before the new self can emerge.

Etty Hillesum was a young Jewish woman who suffered and died in a concentration camp at the hands of the Nazis in World War 2. She wrote this in her notebook:

There is a deep well inside me. And in it dwells God. Sometimes I am there, too... And that is all we can manage these days and all that really matters: that we safeguard that little piece of You, God, in ourselves.

The philosopher Whitehead described God as “the suffering companion who understands.” In our darkness, our anxiety—God-forsaken in the reality that we are dust—we encounter in ourselves the suffering companion that understands.

This presence, in that deep well inside of each of us, is a mystery, beyond our understanding. And yet, we can trust in this mystery, rest in it. And it is all that matters. This presence deep within us restores us to the miracle and the goodness of life itself, and allows us to sing “Alleluia, alleluia” even at the grave.

For we come to understand, as the apostle Paul understood, that nothing can separate us from this presence. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. In life, in death, in life beyond death.

Thanks be to God.