

“Promises in Dust”  
Sermon by Oby Ballinger  
Rally Sunday

Edina Morningside Community Church; September 11, 2016

**Genesis 2:4b-7, 15-17; 3:1-8**

*In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when 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; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— then 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. The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.*

*...And the Lord God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”*

*...Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”*

*So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.*

We waited until the very last day, but Javen and I made it to the State Fair this past Monday. It's an annual tradition for us, made easier by the fact that we live just a mile south of the fairgrounds. I go for the livestock that reminds me of growing up on a farm, Javen goes for the seed art, and both of us go for the food. By Monday morning, well over a million people had been to the fairgrounds already. We saw the unmistakable signs of overpopulation in trash and traffic, while consuming four thousand calories apiece of miscellaneous deep-fried goodness. I remember waiting in line for a bucket of French fries on a grassy area next to the sidewalk. Well, it used to be grassy. Countless pairs of human feet had stood there before us, and that grass was trodden within an inch of its life. I'm sure it was thick and lush earlier in the summer, but by Monday it was trampled flat, and more brown than green. In truth, the lawn offered more dirt than plant underfoot. This is what happens when the equilibrium of people and planet gets out of whack. At such times of imbalance, the dust is revealed.

This is a time of year for dust. On the plants in our gardens at the end of the summer. In church and school classrooms—or pastor's offices—while we're preparing for the start of the new year. We'll have more dust to contend with than normal here at EMC this fall: the dust stirred up by trees being taken down to make room for heavy equipment, and the dust of construction as extensive work on the building commences this fall. My mind also goes back this time of year to the dust of harvesting in the fields near Rochester where I grew up. I see all the hay bales, and the dry plants being pulled into the combine head. I hear the metallic sound of soybeans hitting the side of the gravity wagons, then of grain augers, dryers and silo loaders. Consider the weeks and weeks of sunlight that farm crops represent, solar energy captured in green leaves, then dried brown and shaken loose in fine particles by machinery, until they catch the sun in the haze of an early evening. Yes, this is a time of year for dust.

We don't always think of it in these terms, but dust is a primordial substance. From the very, very beginning, there was dust. We hear in today's scripture how God worked in creation before there were any plants in the earth, "and no herb of the field had yet sprung up", because there had been no rain on the earth. Can you imagine what dust there must have been? Yet this was the dust of new possibilities, not the dust of neglect. God makes something remarkable from the earth. Highlighting the elemental connections between creature and creation, Scripture tells us that human beings are formed by the combination of soil and divine breath. I love this way of describing creation because it shows God getting down in the dirt, playing like a child at the beach, and what results is humanity itself. The name of that first creature, Adam, comes from "adamah", the Hebrew word for earth. We are created "adam" from "adamah", humans from humus.

God gives the first human beings both freedom and purpose. They are to till and keep the garden of earth. The Hebrew word here is "shamar", meaning guard, protect, and watch over. Humanity is to "shamar" the humus, the dust and dirt of the earth, with all the plants and animals who rely on it. God places just one limitation on those first human beings. Eat from, touch, climb, walk under and enjoy the fruits of every tree except one: the tree of knowledge of good and evil. This alone separates humans from divinity—only God has ultimate knowledge.

Well, you know what happens from here. Adam and Eve fail to resist their desire to conquer all knowledge (symbolized here by the snake) and both eat from the fruit of the tree, causing mistrust, blame, shame, suffering and death to become part of the human lot. If only they had had sense enough to recognize that nothing good would come from disobedience! But as someone else puts it, apparently "Adam and Eve were the first ones not to read Apple terms and conditions."<sup>1</sup>

Human beings have been dwelling on stories like this for millennia because they help us understand how things came to be the way they are in the world. We can imagine a world of perfection, an abundant garden of every good thing, and yet we look around and see nothing of the sort. What should be lush grass at the end of summer is trodden underfoot and turned to dust, not just at the fairgrounds but in a thousand other places of human experience. There's something in human beings that holds us back from perfect obedience. This story helps us recognize how even with the original blessing of God's creation comes a human ability to follow the lesser angels of our natures, and to do evil.

Fifteen years ago this morning, on a similarly splendid September day, hijackers commandeered four giant airplanes to wreak havoc on our country and on the whole world. It seemed unthinkable at the time, that such madness in nineteen people could unleash the global mayhem from which we are still recovering. I was in my first weeks of freshman year at Concordia College, and after seeing the images on television I actually went back to my dorm room, pulled the covers over my head, and went back to sleep. I hoped to awake and realize that it was all just a bad dream. But no such luck—the fruit of the tree had been touched and eaten, bringing violence and chaos into the world in ways we had never seen, and could not unsee.

What comes to mind today as I recall 9/11 are the images of people fleeing from lower Manhattan. They run through stalled traffic, and looming behind is a great cloud of smoke and dust kicked up over the entire city as the towers fall. Over how many graves in the days following did the faithful gather around and hear the words: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return". The original God-blessed dust from creation is now transformed into a byword for death.

Yet there is hope for us, in this and every time when we count the cost of humans going beyond our God-given limits. Because this story of Adam and Eve, and their fall into human sinfulness, comes at the very beginning of the Bible. The readings we'll use in worship over the next nine months will move

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<sup>1</sup> Gord Waldie, "[Narrative Lectionary Leanings: Paradise Lost??? Edition \(Genesis 2:4b-7, 15-17; 3:1-8\)](#)" blog post on RevGalBlogPals.org, posted September 6, 2016.

gradually through stories from the Old and New Testament, describing the countless creative ways God will work to redeem and save throughout Scripture. Because even though human beings fall short, God will not let our disobedience have the last word.

God made the earth and the heavens. God made the dust and God made us, humans from humus. And when we are all too aware of the dustiness of our spirits, or the choking clouds of dismay that human beings are capable of, remember that God can remake us. Indeed, God *does* remake us each day, as we remember our baptisms and recommit ourselves each day to lives of holy faithfulness. God will not let go of you, or me, or this broken but beautiful creation. Because even at the end of Adam and Eve's story, even when they are sent to live outside the garden, God takes care of them and gives them clothing, far better than the fig leaves they could come up with by themselves. God takes the dust of human failures and writes promises instead, as though it were the back window of a car that's been on a long road trip. In the dust, God writes these promises to us and to the entire world: "I love you. I'll keep you. You are mine forever."

Let us pray: *Thank you, Holy God, for loving us in the midst of our brokenness, and for being faithful to us when we are faithless. Guide our actions in this and every day, that we may be reflections in the world of the grace you show us. Amen.*