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Theological Observer

Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday is the story of a marriage. It is the account of an unlikely union. Humanity and the soil are the improbable partners. The tale of these Ash Wednesday nuptials stretches back to Genesis 2-8. The earth is the silent but crucial character in these opening chapters. The key to each of these stories, and therefore the key to Ash Wednesday, is the dirt.

It is dirt out of which God creates Adam, who emerges from it, is lifted up by the creative hand of the Lord, and is enlivened by the divine breath. The Lord makes humanity the masters of that earth of which they are a part. Standing upon the ground, they tread upon it as kings and lords. They tower over the earth while still attached to it. They relate to the dirt as a husband, as the one who plants seed, as the one who gives work and care and waits for the soil to give birth, to respond with the fruits that keep humanity alive. It is a curious balance, this dance of fertility which the Lord establishes. On the one hand, Adam and Eve are exalted, distinct, reaching toward the heavens, bearing the image of the Lord who made them. Yet they are still made of dirt and attached to it. They must stoop to it for sustenance, even in that pristine paradise. They must push seeds into the dirt and tend and water and love the ground so that it may become pregnant and fruitful and bear food for them. The two, made of the same stuff, must be one, united in the bountiful union of seed and fruit and harvest.

Sin warps this strange and wonderful mixture of betrothal and mastery. Adam and Eve sin, but it is the earth that is cursed. "Cursed is the ground because of you" (Gen 3:17). Adam and the earth are one flesh and the dirt, the flesh of Adam, receives the divine word of judgment. Thorns and thistles replace the garden. The earth is transformed from humanity's wife to humanity's enemy. Sin demolishes the beautiful joining of opposites. Adam, man of mud, who stood high above the earth yet was tied to it in a relationship of planting and giving birth, now knows that the earth will devour him. Not only seed will be thrust into the earth—human beings themselves will be planted. The sentence is pronounced: humanity will return to the dust. The earth will greedily consume him who came from her. The dirt becomes master. The balance is lost. The vertical blessing bestowed by God upon Adam is transformed into a horizontal return. The marriagebed of the soil, the womb of the earth where Adam thrust his seed, becomes the deathbed, the tomb.

The story of the two brothers that follows the story of the fall also pushes the ground to the forefront. The unspoken subject of the narrative is the marriage of humanity and the earth, still intact but twisted, an angry, sullen romance. Cain is a farmer, one who embraces the soil for his livelihood. God

snubs his offspring, his harvest. Cain, toiling in the sin-cursed ground, gives to the Lord what his seed has produced, and the Lord turns his face away. So Cain returns to that ground and plants a horrifying, different kind of seed. He spills upon the earth the blood of his brother. It is from the ground, recipient of Cain's violence, that the blood cries out. Though Cain has struck Abel, the ground is also a victim. The ground is now filled, not with seed, not even with the drops of toiling sweat which fallen humanity must shed to get food, but with the warm stuff of life, discharged in murderous hate. God punishes Cain by divorcing him from that very ground from which he was made, of which he was still a part, from which he had labored to gain nourishment. Cain, married to the earth as one who planted seed and tended crops and received its fertile response, must now wander on the earth and never be joined to it as husband and giver.

The story of humanity's conjugal connection to the dirt continues in the account of the flood. People become so evil that God repents of ever making them. And while his anger is focused on those he made in his own image, that anger once more is unleashed upon the ground from which they came and to which they are still joined. God strikes man by striking the earth with the waters of death. To destroy mankind God must wipe clean the earth itself. Mankind and the soil are one flesh. It is the earth which must accept the judgment of God for man's sin. The two partners go down together, drowning in the waters of the Lord's wrath.

This narrative of the union of man and the earth is played out liturgically on Ash Wednesday. It is a quick, repetitive moment of ritual: ashes, the motion of a cross, and a few words. Yet by it we are placed directly into the foundational narrative of humanity. This imposition of ashes is not pedagogical. On the first day of Lent, we are not "told" about creation or taught the doctrinal import of the fall or the story of Cain. In fact, the appointed readings for the day ignore the opening chapters of the Jewish Bible. What Ash Wednesday does is place us in the story. We become actors in the narrative. The story happens to us in a visceral, tactile way.

At that moment, all our modern pretensions are cast off. We lose our pretend advancement and our clean, digital disconnection from things dirty and primeval. We are thrust once more to the soil. We do not sit in the pew learning ancient Palestinian stories. We are physically marked with ashes. Words are spoken over our bodies. We are addressed personally and individually. We become Adam and Eve and Cain and the recipients of the flood and what is true about us, about our bodies, our relationship to our maker, is tossed out into the open.

In those few seconds we live out the primordial series of events that defines us even now. We remember our creation from the dirt, that our bodies

are real and tangible, and we remember with it that the Lord breathed his Spirit into us and that we are formed by his hand. Even more we remember the awful mortality that comes at the end. We will return to the dust. We die. We sin. We are Adam and Eve. We are married to the earth. We cannot escape the ground upon which we walk. That earth gives birth to us, we plant our seed in her, are fed by her. And she will greedily consume our flesh someday soon. No matter how far we have supposedly progressed, we are dirt.

With the mark on our foreheads, we stand in the place of Cain. The ground cries out on account of the evil we have done. The blood of our brothers and sisters cries out for vengeance. We all murder Abel, we all have spilled his blood on the ground through neglect, hatred, envy. We rage and fulminate in our hearts. And by it, we are divorced from creation. We live out the sentence of Cain. Not rooted in one spot, we wander aimlessly, unable to connect to one another, unable to find God in that which he has made. We are forever on pilgrimage and we never arrive.

The last piece of Old Testament story that Ash Wednesday thrusts us into as participants is the most drastic: the flood. There is, of course, no water in the Ash Wednesday ceremony, just muddy splotches on wrinkled foreheads. But the flood is there in all its destructive and saving fury. It appears in the shape of that protective Cainite mark placed upon us: a cross. It is here where we stand on the earth and feel the awful deluge of God's anger over our disobedience, that the imagination of our hearts is only evil all the time. On Ash Wednesday we stand on the earth that God thrashed and pummeled with water: it is the same earth in which the cross of Jesus Christ was planted. The ground from which Adam was formed, the ground which was cursed by sin, the ground which drank the blood of Cain's brother, the ground which soaked up the furious deluge, is now the ground that bears the weight of the Son of God, is splashed with his divine blood and waits to receive his lifeless body.

On Ash Wednesday we are marked with that cross, and it is a cross of Baptism. That we are marked with the cross of Christ in our baptism and that we are so marked on the day of ashes and death and sin and shame is no accident. For that cruciform sign of death and the words of burial that accompany it are only washed away by the waters of Baptism, which is in turn nothing else than the cross of Christ. We are baptized into his death. With the baptismal floodwaters, we go down into that earth with Christ. The waters bury us in the ground with him. It is there finally that death loses its grip on us. Christ is the seed planted in the earth that the greedy grave cannot digest. Christ is planted as seed and the earth must do what God intended it to do before the fall, before the curse, before Abel's blood stained it. It must give birth to life. It must feed God's children. It must give birth to the tree of life, with healing fruit for humanity.

In this Ash Wednesday moment, balance is again restored between humanity and the earth from which we spring. Creation and fall and burial and murder and wrath are wrapped in that sign of our baptism. The burial and resurrection of Christ become the restoration of the connection between the earth and humanity. It marks the soil's return into the scheme of God's giving to humanity. The earth once more serves humanity as mother, as giver of life, as it disgorges Christ. As Mary did at his birth, the earth gives birth to Christ and hands him over to us. Ash Wednesday marks the reconciliation of creation and humanity. In the death and resurrection of Christ, in our baptism, once more we are bound together in fruitfulness to the earth, receiving her harvest for our life.

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A Pro-Life Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father,

Through your Son Jesus Christ, you created the heavens and the earth, marvelously making us in your own image. You breathed into man's nostrils the Spirit of life, and the man became a living being. From Adam's side you fashioned Eve, and from the blessed union of man and wife you would fill the earth with us, their sons and daughters.

But then, in our desire to become gods, we ate the fruit of disobedience that leads to death. Justly barred from the tree of life, we fell into jealousy, anger, lust, and murder.

Yet you have had mercy on us children of Cain. When your Son took our flesh and made his home in Mary's womb, you sanctified human life once more. By the birth of your Son, you made possible our baptismal rebirth. By the death of your Son, you redeemed the world from sin and death. And by the resurrection and ascension of your Son, you made for us a path back home to paradise and to the tree of life eternal.

This day, O Lord, we pray for the churches of this city, and for all who serve as their shepherds.

We come in repentance, knowing, like Peter, that we are unworthy to stand in your presence. For the times that we, like the priests and the Levites, have walked past the suffering, and turned a deaf ear to the cries of the hurting, forgive us.

Give to us this day the Spirit of Christ, that we may speak boldly on behalf of the unborn, and that we may speak tenderly to those in need of forgiveness

and hope. Set before our eyes the vision of Jesus, who took the little children into his arms. Set before our eyes Christ crucified, whose innocent blood is the payment for our guilt.

Through our preaching, humble the proud and lift up the broken-hearted. Bring the wicked to repentance, and enlighten souls darkened by ignorance. Open the ears of those who are deaf to the cries of the unborn. Give sight to eyes that are blind to the horror that is abortion. Give cleansing to hearts stained by what has become our national sin.

Indeed, end our sad divisions. Call us to remember that Christ has come for all nations, and for every race and tribe. United in repentance for our sin, unite us now in the redemption won by Christ for all God's children.

If we confess Christ before the people, Christ will confess us before his Father. And if the people hear the words of a prophet, they too will receive a prophet's reward.

Therefore, bless the churches of Indiana. Strengthen them that they may support faithful pastors and uphold the arms of true prophets. Bless our churches that they may become beacons of hope and havens of mercy for mothers and children. And to all of us, grant us the forgiveness and life which is already ours . . . in Christ Jesus, our Lord of Life, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Peter J. Scaer

This prayer was delivered prior to the annual Allen County Right to Life March in Fort Wayne, Indiana, on January 29, 2011. The Editors