

Isaiah 11: 1-9a
Advent2C
December 4, 2016
Lincoln Street UMC

“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” are words we use on Ash Wednesday to remind ourselves of our humanness. Made of the earth we are told. And to the earth we shall return.

From the very beginning of our holy texts we are reminded of how we are people of the soil. Genesis tells us of the first human, made by our Creator from the clay, the soil of the land.

His very name, Adam - or in Hebrew, *Adamah* - means soil, reminding us always of humanity's roots, from where we originate.

And then Eve is created - in Hebrew the word is *havah*, which means to become, to breathe or life.¹

And these two first humans - soil and life - their pairing together is what brings life to this planet.

But now this life is in peril. And our identity as people of the soil is in grave danger as topsoil is being lost from our planet at an alarming rate.

In the last 150 years, those who know how to calculate something like this tell us we have lost half our topsoil across the planet. American topsoil is reported as disappearing ten times faster than we can replenish it.

China and India are three and four times worse. According to one report I read, in “the last forty years alone, about one-third of the world's formerly productive soil has become unusable . . . while we continue to lose approximately twenty-five million acres a year to erosion.”²

¹ I give thanks to Diana Butler Bass in *Grounded* for her data and research that fills this sermon.

² *Ibid*, 45-46.

Clearly we are in a crisis.

More precious than even the almighty grail of oil, our soil is slipping through our grasp and blowing away as dust.

Industrialized farming has stripped our land of its strength and has separated us from our roots. Or rather, our roots no longer have the soil they need to dig down and deep.

These are harsh realities, uncomfortable truths, about the state of our land, our world. We are soil people quickly losing ground. Looked at too closely and the picture is terrifying.

But we are also Advent people. We are a people who not only celebrate that God was born on earth in the form of Jesus. But we trust that God is still at work, unveiling and drawing out from us the Eden that is trying to be born even today. Even today as we mourn the loss of species and habitats.

An Eden trying to be born even today as we cry over farming tactics that enslave the poor and marginalized.

An Eden trying to be born even today as we worry over the longterm affects of pesticides and genetic engineering.

We trust that God is still at work, drawing out from us the Eden that is trying to be born. Here and now. In this place and time.

We are Advent people, drawn to this season anticipating the birth of the infant Jesus. And maybe more importantly, anticipating the fullness of his birth brought nigh in our time. What would it mean for us - earth people - to know the fullness of Eden today? How might life flourish in ways we don't even

know fully how to dream? As cousins of the earth, how are we being called to partner with God to bring about this Eden?

Fed and nurtured by the abundant gifts soil can bring us, we grow and thrive, we create and comfort. Every loaf of bread we smell baking, every berry we savor and glass of wine we sip. It all comes from earth. And as it fills us and makes us who we are, we come from earth. We are *Adamah* - both figuratively and literally.

Perhaps that is why in this era of industrialized farming we are witnessing a return to gardening. In a span of five years from 2008 - 2013 17% more households are growing food. Urban gardening is up 29%. And more than 13 million people under the age of thirty have begun gardening. People are putting their hands back in the soil and are reminding themselves of what they are made.

And in re-grounding ourselves in this way, we nurture our souls and the soul of the land. Which aren't that different.

Isaiah foretold a shoot growing out of an old stump - one which was probably seen as dead. And that shoot, so Isaiah proclaims, will overturn what is considered the natural way of things. And instead the cow and the bear will graze together, the wolf will lie with the lamb, and Eden will be once more.

Who knows what can regenerate when we remember - remember that we are of dust, of soil, and to soil we belong. Who knows what can grow from us if we are ready to get dirty and work to bring to life an Advent reality. Who knows what new life is lurking in the soil that is beneath our feet. That is lurking in the soil that *is* our feet.

Who knows what antidote for the anxiety and fear of our time lurks in the earth beneath us. How it might be literally grounding for us.

People of the soil, remember, give thanks, and get dirty. All so the realm of God can break in.

Amen.