

Lent in Plain Sight

A Devotion through Ten Objects

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Contents

| | |
|--------------------------------------|-----|
| Introduction | 1 |
| Week One: Dust | 3 |
| Ash Wednesday | 5 |
| Week Two: Bread | 17 |
| Week Three: Cross | 41 |
| Week Four: Coins | 65 |
| Week Five: Shoes | 89 |
| Week Six: Oil | 113 |
| Holy Week: Coats, Towels, and Thorns | 137 |
| Maundy Thursday: Towels | 151 |
| Good Friday: Thorns | 154 |
| Holy Saturday: Thorns | 157 |
| Easter Sunday: Stones | 160 |

Introduction

God works through the ordinary. Ordinary people, everyday objects, things we bump up against moment by moment. From burning bushes to talking donkeys to a booming voice from heaven, God goes to great lengths to communicate with people, sending Jesus Christ, God's only Son, to unmistakably tell human beings about salvation, grace, and reconciliation. People of faith report epiphanies, revelations of God's word to them, sometimes by way of miraculous interventions or otherwise inexplicable happenings, but often and also through the mundane made holy due to timing and perception. The note from a friend arrived with the right words, just when encouragement seemed utterly absent. A deer appeared as if out of nowhere, after a voiced prayer for a sign.

Often it is in hindsight that God's providence becomes recognizable and events previously considered mundane become evidence of God's presence and work in our lives. The question for us becomes: Do we have the eyes to see

God's near presence? Do we have ears to hear the word of the Lord, spoken in a multitude of ways and languages? Will we open ourselves to the holy not only in heaven but also on earth and right in front of us? Can everyday objects remind us to stay awake and pay attention?

This Lenten devotional invites readers to open themselves to the kingdom of God, which is close at hand and in our midst. These forty days beckon people of faith to a nearer following of Jesus and an awakening to the work of the Spirit in their lives and in the world. Each week of this book highlights an object, something we encounter in our daily living—things like coins, shoes, and crosses—and asks readers to consider through these objects the possibility, the promise, that God is present, speaking, seeking to be in relationship with them.

I hope this book opens our eyes and ears to the certain providence and power of God, allowing us to lower our anxiety about the future, lessen our burdens about the past, and free us to follow Jesus in faith right here and now. Perhaps if we truly trust that Emmanuel, God with us, never abandons us, we will worry less and risk more for the sake of the gospel. Perhaps when we see a stone or hold coins in our hands or pour out oil into a pan, we will remember that God loves and leads, transforms and heals, guides and intervenes in ways that offer us abundant life, an abundant life we are called to share with others. Perhaps contemplating these ten objects will enable us to see God everywhere, in all things, all creation, not just during these forty days of Lent but every single day of the year, honing our sense of the holy to the point we feel God's presence every single moment and act accordingly.

Jill Duffield
Summer, 2019

Week One

Dust

Ash Wednesday

Genesis 2:4b–7 Psalm 119:25–32

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.

Genesis 2:7

Dust That Clings*

I have held the last of what remains of an earthly life in my hands, whole people now only ashes, years of living reduced to fine rubble, relationships, work, dreams packaged in a plastic bag to be scattered, buried, or put in a concrete square or ornate urn. Time after time, the wind has blown or I have brushed my hand against my side leaving a trace of the remains on my black robe of ritual sackcloth. It used to bother me, as I did not want those gathered to think I had carelessly handled the dust to

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which their loved one had returned. Eventually, I came to welcome the inadvertent imposition, a mark of the communion of the saints clinging to me as I worshiped.

Every Ash Wednesday I think of them, those who've gone to the grave, no longer needing to remember the reality of human finitude we speak plainly each year on the first day of Lent. I think about those I looked at in the eyes and said, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return," and then commended at their gritty restoration, "ashes to ashes, dust to dust." I miss them. I remember them even as I remember the One who gives us the sure and certain hope of the resurrection.

I remember not only that I am dust and to dust I shall return, but I cling to the memory of those who've gone before me even as they have clung to the hem of my impotent garment. I remember because that cloud of witnesses gives me hope that I, too, might run the race set before me and that someone, someday, will wear symbolic sackcloth while wrapped in a band of resurrection white and pray I be recognized as a sheep of the fold of the Good Shepherd, a good and faithful servant who has finished her race.

As the dust and ash is imposed on me, forcing me to see my myriad of limits, I remember. I remember I am surrounded by the household of God, sinners redeemed by grace, limited like me, but ever seeking to imitate Christ, however poorly. I remember that I am incapable of doing the good I know but am forgiven anyway. I remember that even as I have shaken the dust from my feet in haste and without just cause, the Holy Spirit has sometimes blown the dirt on my head that I had thrown at others. I remember that repentance means turning away from myself and toward Jesus. I remember that nothing angers God more than rituals of penitence unaccompanied by

actions of love. I remember that this Lenten journey is not only about giving up something, but also about standing up for someone. I remember that my years on earth will come to an end and that, God willing, my works will follow me and, thanks to the journey Jesus is embarking on, I don't need those works to save me.

Even as sin clings as closely as the gray remnants of ash on our foreheads, mercy surrounds us like a dust storm stirred up by the relentless wind of the Spirit. Remember. Repent. Turn and follow Jesus Christ, singing alleluia even to the grave until God raises Him from the dead and we are overcome with resurrection joy.

Questions for Reflection

1. As you begin this Lenten journey, whom do you remember? Who has walked with you when you have reached your limits and helped you get through that difficult season?
2. Why do we need to be reminded of our finitude, our dustiness? How does God work within and through our limits?
3. When you encounter dust this week, as you walk, in the wind, or on the side of the road, remember that you are dust, given life and breath by God, and give thanks for the day, the hour, the moment.

Ash Wednesday Prayer

Lord God, giver of our every breath, as we begin our Lenten journey, send your Holy Spirit to blow the dust off whatever in or around us needs new life. Remind us of our limits so that we will once again experience your limitless power. May the ashes on our foreheads prompt us to live our lives in the shape of the cross so that even when the ashes have been washed away, others will see in us the face of Christ. Amen.

Thursday

Job 30:16–23

*“And now my soul is poured out within me;
days of affliction have taken hold of me.”*

Job 30:16

Ground to Dust

The pain of Job’s cries resounds through history in the laments of faithful people in every generation. Like Jesus from the cross, sometimes we encounter situations that cannot help but elicit from us the question, “Why, oh God, have you forsaken me?” One of the strangely packaged gifts of Lent is the invitation to lay our souls bare before God. Like Job, like Jesus, like the psalmist and the prophets, we, too, demand God to account for the circumstances that confound our understanding of a good and faithful God.

When we hear of news across the globe of innocents suffering, or we learn of a terminal diagnosis of a loved one, or we struggle with our own inability to get out of bed in the morning, we shout with Job, “I have become like dust and ashes. I cry to you and you do not answer

me; I stand, and you merely look at me” (vv. 19b–20). Do something, God! Intervene. Give a sign. Speak in a way that is undeniable and clear.

God’s silence echoes in the stillness of our grief and we feel ground to dust. St. John of the Cross describes this state in *Dark Night of the Soul*: “a dense and heavy cloud overshadows the soul, distresses it and holds it as if it were far away from God.”* In the presence of this absence time seems unmoving and the darkness seems impenetrable. Life becomes an unending Lent with no alleluias uttered.

Escaping grief, loss, and suffering is impossible. When faced with inexplicable circumstances, asking “Why?” and “How long, O Lord?” and “Where are you, God?” are faithful prayers. When nothing remains of hopes or health, dreams or relationships, but dust and ashes, Lent offers the space to grieve unabashedly and without apology or embarrassment. And yet Sunday, the day of resurrection, cannot be stopped from coming. Alleluias may remain stuck in our throats, but nonetheless rebirth is proclaimed. Resurrection is promised even when we find ourselves weeping by the tomb.

If you find yourself in a dark night of the soul, know you are not alone there. Job is with you. St. John of the Cross as well. Thérèse of Lisieux and Mother Teresa, too. No other than Jesus abides with you there, in the wilderness, in the Garden of Gethsemane, and on the cross. Know, too, that like Lent, this season does not last forever. From the dust and ashes will come new, good life, because the forty days of Lent do not include Sundays, and Sundays, like the light of Christ, cannot be thwarted, no matter how deep the darkness.

*Saint John of the Cross, trans. David Lewis, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, vol. 2 (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 115.

Questions for Reflection

1. Have you ever experienced a “dark night of the soul”? Were there glimpses of light in the midst of it? How did it impact your faith? Your understanding of the character of God?
2. Take a few minutes to pray for those who may be feeling ground to dust this day. If you are feeling ground to dust and can muster no words of prayer, read aloud Psalm 23 or another passage of Scripture that is meaningful to you.

Prayer for the Day

Gracious God, when we cry to you and feel as if you do not hear us, grant us a tangible reminder of your promise to never leave us alone. When we feel ground to dust, unable to sing your praises or whisper a prayer, surround us with others who will sit with us, pray for us, and be the hands and feet and face of Christ to us. When the night has past and we see the coming dawn, help us to bear the light of Christ to those who still sit in deep darkness until we all shout alleluia on Easter morning. Amen.

Friday

1 Samuel 2:1–10

*“There is no Holy One like the LORD,
no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.”*

1 Samuel 2:2

Raised Up from the Dust

Hannah sings of the great reversal that comes as a gift from God, promised and yet unexpected. Hannah prayed fervently, pouring out her heart, so much so that Eli the priest thought her drunk. Confronted for her inappropriate behavior in worship, Hannah holds nothing back from the priest, telling him she had been “speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time” (1 Sam. 1:16). Eli, moved by her pain, tells her to go in peace, adding his hope that the Lord will grant her prayer for a child.

God does indeed grant her petition; Samuel is born and then Hannah prays this song to the Lord. Hannah prayed in her grief and she prays in her joy. Her prayer of anxiety and vexation focused on her own suffering, but

this prayer of praise includes all who suffer. The feeble, the poor, the needy, all of them God will raise up from the dust and make sit with princes in seats of honor. No one will be left in the ash heap. Hannah's mourning turned to dancing encourages anyone still desperate or destitute to keep hope—God will not forget you or leave you brokenhearted.

When we are in the ash heap, looking up and around is almost impossible. All we can do is get through the day the best we can. Doing so uses all our emotional resources, with nothing left over. But when we start to feel our burdens lifted, when God raises us from the dust, we begin to notice the pain of the world. Our season of suffering grants us a hard-won empathy that expands not only our prayers but our actions as well. We know we are unable to fully rejoice in our great reversal until everyone has experienced relief from sorrow, too.

Reaching back to help raise others from the dust becomes the unexpected ministry of unwanted days in the ash heap. Countless times I have witnessed Hannah's song enacted in community. The cancer survivor walking alongside the newly diagnosed. The person now sober for twenty years sponsoring a neighbor, who is anxiously attending AA for the first time. One woman I know works tirelessly on suicide prevention because she knows the unspeakable pain of burying her child who took his own life. Even when we've been raised from the dust there are ashes that still cling closely, and we cannot forget those still mired in them.

Hannah's song gets sung again and again when those who have been raised from the dust don't forget what it is like to be consumed with anxiety, perplexed, and covered in ashes. Hannah's prayer of praise gets mixed with the prayers of the suffering, bolstered by Eli's word of peace

and lifted from the dust when, in our gratitude for relief, we come alongside others until they are upright, too.

Questions for Reflection

1. Read each verse of 1 Samuel 2:1–10 aloud and notice which verse or verses stand out to you. Use that verse as a breath prayer throughout the day. Make note of any observations or insights that breath prayer calls forth.
2. Must this “great reversal” entail both the bringing up of some and taking down of others? Why or why not?

Prayer for the Day

God of great reversals, you bring transformation, relief, peace, and joy in ways and at times that are utterly unexpected. When we find ourselves in the ash heap, grant us your peace, assure us of your promises, give us a glimpse of hope to sustain us. After we have been raised up from the dust, never let us forget what it was like to be so down. Use our remembering to reach back and help others, to sit beside them until they too know the grace of your transforming love. Amen.

Saturday

Luke 9:1–6

“Whatever house you enter, stay there, and leave from there. Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.”

Luke 9:4–5

Shake Off the Dust

Why are Jesus’ instructions to his followers so clear and simple and yet so complicated and difficult? I cannot remember the last time I packed light, let alone took nothing, when setting out on a journey. Nor do I say to myself as I start my day, “Well, good, I have all power and authority over demons and can cure diseases, best get to healing and proclaiming God’s kingdom.” My days begin and end with much less lofty goals. Getting everyone out the door to their respective places and myself up and ready counts as a win. Not hurting anyone in my orbit often remains an elusive goal.

But Jesus says take nothing, you have the power of God. What more could you need? Also, don't worry about where to lay your head, nor whether you are well received. Go where you are welcomed, move on where you are not. Shake the dust from your feet and keep going. Would that we could let go of rejection, failure, grudges, and anxieties by simply shaking the dust from our feet and trying again.

If I can't leave all I own behind, though, could I let go of just a little? Give up some of the extra baggage I have carried and moved around for years? Lent affords us a time of giving up and letting go, not just of things, but of emotions that weigh us down, too. Guilt rarely moves us closer to the kingdom, neither does shame or vengeance or grudges. Maybe, just for a day, I could leave that bag of ill feelings toward someone at home and see what it is like to walk around the world without having to carry it, drag it, keep track of it.

If I don't imagine I can cast out demons or stand up to villains like a superhero, would it be possible to apologize and ask forgiveness from someone I have injured, thereby, if not stamping out evil, at least creating space for good to grow?

Could I, at least for today, shake the dust off my feet, look forward, keep moving, and simply try again to bring healing where I am able, share and show the Good News wherever I am, and let God take care of the rest?

Questions for Reflection

1. What staff, bag, bread, or extra tunic do you need to leave behind so that you can travel unencumbered today?
2. Is there dust you need to shake off? Something you need to turn over to God in order to focus on the journey ahead?

Prayer for the Day

Lord Jesus, you give us simple, clear instructions and yet we complicate matters and fail to follow them. Forgive us for ignoring your teachings and going our own way. Help us this day to leave behind those things that prevent us from following you. Grant us the power to bring healing and proclaim the kingdom in ways that invite all we encounter to shake off the dust of pain they carry, confident that you welcome us and give us what we need. Amen.