

Ash Wednesday B  
Peace, Seattle  
February 18, 2015  
Genesis 2, 3

## **TWO POCKETS, ONE TREE**

**“Each of us should have two pockets,” the rabbis teach. “In one should be the message, ‘I am dust and ashes,’ and in the other we should have written, ‘For me the universe was made.’”<sup>1</sup>**

**The invitation, of course, is to live our lives in that place of paradoxical tension between these two realities. Tonight we put on ASHES. Yet even as we do so, we keep the other pocket, and its message, close at hand.**

In her commentary on St. Benedict’s Rule, a Rule which has guided Christian communities for over 1,500 years, Joan Chittister writes:

Prayer...is a journey into life, its struggles and its glories.

Prayer is not an escape [but is] intended to impel us through the cold, hard, realities of life in the home, life in the community, life in the world, life with people whom we love enough to hate and whom we hate enough to dampen every other kind of love in us.

It is sometimes difficult to remember, when days are dull and the schedule is full, that God has known the depth of my emptiness but healed this broken self regardless...<sup>2</sup>

**Brokenness – goodness; dependence – greatness; fragility – grandeur. Two pockets; the warp and weft of life, and the primeval dance that is set before us in our reading from Genesis this evening.**

**Genesis, the first book in the Bible, is no easy nut to crack.**

**The Story as it begins is so promising:** Man and woman, formed of Earth, set up in Paradise, with everything they could possibly need—and yet somehow it slips through their fingers and all unravels; all falls apart. And for the rest of the Story, we do our best to follow the twisted plotline of what God is up to in order to bring it all back together and put it all put back together again.

From the beginning, Jews and Christians have struggled mightily to dig beneath this Story to gain some understanding of the roles, the motives, and the meaning behind what went down in the Garden, and around the story’s chief characters—First Man, First Woman, Serpent, God.

Theologies as complex, interwoven, and dense as any root ball have grown up beside the Garden.

The Tree of the Knowledge gets much of the focus in these verses, but there’s another tree in Eden’s garden: the TREE OF LIFE.

And our purpose in this series of Wednesday services this Lent is to keep our eyes on that TREE, explore that TREE, watch for that TREE as it sends up shoots and branches here and there in God’s unfurling salvation story, to see how, ultimately, it becomes the symbol of the healing and mending of all creation.

**Here’s our planned trajectory, then:**

- Next week we meet the low tree and high tree of the prophet Ezekiel.

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: Spirituality for the 21st Century*. P. 113

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

- The week following that, we explore Wisdom as Tree of Life.
- In week three we hear the echoes of trees “clapping” their hands.
- In week four it’s the fruits of the Tree of Life—the fruits of the Spirit—that hold our attention;
- and finally on week five we encounter the healing Tree in the book of Revelation.

To parallel our journey through this grove of choice trees this Lent, we’ll watch as the CROSS HERE, at the East end of our sanctuary, gradually becoming transformed into a Tree.

**On our family’s final sabbatical day in Rome last June, we went on a tour of the Church of San Clemente**, one of the older Christian church sites in that ancient city. A few short blocks from where gladiators trained for battle in the Colosseum, we entered the basilica with our guide Jose Peralta and saw the stunning mosaic of Christ on the Cross, depicted as the Tree of Life, from which the four rivers of paradise flow, restored.<sup>3</sup>

Sprouting from an acanthus plant<sup>4</sup> at the base of the Tree of Life are numerous spiraling vines, which nourish a breathtaking variety of images: birds, deer, baskets filled with fruit, a shepherd with his sheep, a peasant woman feeding chickens, to mention just a few. Taken together, they symbolize the fecundity of nature and human culture, which find their origin in the life-generating power of the Cross.<sup>5</sup>

Excavations beneath the current 12<sup>th</sup> century basilica have uncovered the remains of a much earlier 4<sup>th</sup> century church also dedicated to Saint Clement. The street level entry to the 4<sup>th</sup> century church sits 15 feet below the current ground level. But from above you can look down and see the ancient fountain—still active—where road-weary pilgrims would stop to wash and refresh themselves before entering Saint Clement’s shrine.

We descended down stone stairs to touch the walls of the 4<sup>th</sup> century church, but that 4<sup>th</sup> century church was by no means the earliest building on the site. Below it, yet other layers of structures have been found, dating to the first century and possibly earlier.

And further below still, ran the SOURCE which was the reason these holy places were founded here in the first place: A spring we first heard and then saw, still gushing, still pouring out water through limestone rocks far beneath the city, as it has for thousands of years; **water** which was and is used not only to refresh pilgrims but to baptize them, rooting their lives in living waters.

**As we mark our foreheads tonight with ashes that come from the fronds of the Palm Tree, we begin a journey once again.**

**It is a journey for which we carry the contents of both pockets:**

**Brokenness – goodness;    dependence – greatness;    fragility – grandeur.**

**A journey rooted in baptism. A journey forever tethered to the Tree of Life.**

Go with God. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> The congregation I serve received a [National Clergy Renewal Grant](#) from the Lilly Foundation, administered by Christian Theological Seminary, in 2013. The final stop on our family’s four-month pastoral sabbatical was Rome.

<sup>4</sup> The acanthus is associated with healing and regeneration in Greek. See more @ <http://biblefocus.net/consider/meaning-of-acanthus-greek-verus-hebrew/index.html>

<sup>5</sup> The description of the mosaic by David Foote as published in the November 22, 2012 edition of CRISIS Magazine augments my memory of our visit there during my sabbatical in 2014. His full article can be found here: <http://www.crisismagazine.com/2012/a-sign-of-contradiction-the-apse-mosaic-of-san-clemente>