

“Up from the Earth”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

March 17, 2024 - Fifth Sunday in Lent

[Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-33](#)

Happy almost-spring! We’ve just about made it through winter as the spring equinox is only a couple days away, and we’re already seeing springtime signs of new life all around, with crimson buds appearing on maple trees above us and purple and white crocus flowers popping out of the ground along with tulips that are just starting to wake up and from their winter slumber and rise from the earth.

These delightful signs of the earth’s renewal are lovely reminders of the work that God is doing in and among us to sprout forth something new that can bring more beauty and goodness to the world. And it is in this season of Lent, as we prepare for the coming of Easter, that we pay attention to this work of God and our role in it by preparing ourselves to be used by God in new ways.

We just heard in our gospel lesson from John, Jesus speaking about being prepared for this new work of God. He told his disciples and others who had come from afar to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration that God was indeed about to do a new, glorious thing among them all, but that first, Jesus himself had to give up his life, just a seed must fall to the earth before it can sprout and produce a plant that could grow and send forth a multitude of seeds. It was through lovingly and selflessly giving his own life that he indeed fell to the earth to then rise gloriously and send forth many seeds in the lives of his disciples and all people of all generations who would follow him.

But just as this season of new life could begin only through Christ’s falling to the ground, so too renewal in the lives of his disciples would happen only as they fell to the ground as well. We modern disciples, like those first followers of Christ, aren’t always too eager to focus on this part of discipleship, but it is an essential element of our faith journey: For us to grow and be fruitful, we must first fall to the ground through our own humble, selfless service.

The journey down to the earth can be a long and painful one, especially if we are living lofty lives, having received much from others. Many of us are indeed lofty, and we are all too often oblivious of our own glory and how it has come to us. So we are reminded this Lent that no matter the heights to which we've risen, no matter how much we've received or have taken or have earned, we are but dust, and to dust we shall return.

Many times, however, even without smudges of ash and other Lenten reminders, we are already well aware of our human dustiness. We've all experienced brokenness and have been brought low by losses and failures. We all know sorrow and have experienced pain. We are aware that people around the world are hurting. And we know that so much of the world's pain is caused by our own action or inaction.

Truly, though, it is when we are brought low to the earth that we can be open to receiving the work of God in our lives. It is only when our hearts are humbled and softened that we can pay attention to God's writing on them of the divine law to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. It is when we willingly humble ourselves or are unwillingly humbled by life that we can be prepared to sprout and grow, to beautify the earth through our own fruits of selfless love, and to spread throughout the world the seeds of love that can bring the hope of new life everywhere.

Today, let us be a part of that story. Instead of reading the news of the day and lamenting without hope, let us become co-writers with God of a story of renewal for people and the planet we share. Let us use our lives, dusty as they are, to build life in others. Let us celebrate the good work of renewal that we see around us.

And it is around us. Did you know that right here in Massachusetts we are now generating enough electricity through renewable resources, such as solar and wind, to provide power to half a million homes? And with a now-online wind farm just south of Martha's Vineyard steadily adding additional wind turbines, by the end of this calendar year, we will be producing enough through renewable resources to power 900,000 homes. With the solar arrays above us here, as well as on top of many of the homes we live in, we are being part of that good story of responding to the emergency of climate change through real action. And this

year we have taken additional steps forward in reducing the amount of carbon we are emitting into the atmosphere by installing efficient, electric heat pumps throughout the Purpose School.

These are just a couple of examples of how we are responding to our awareness of the great need of the earth and its people by using our own resources to participating in the writing of a better story about new life sprouting.

Let us also continue to participate in the writing of the story of new life sprouting in people by our work to feed hungry families through the Food Pantry that sits right below us as well as the Community Dinner program. And let us continue our support of our many mission partners, including Mission of Deeds, whose work we will hear more about shortly, as they help people to build new lives full of hope.

We are but dust, and the world is a dusty place, but we are all called to follow Christ in sprouting and rising up from the earth and helping others to do the same. As we do so, may more of God's love and life sprout within us now and in all the days to come. Amen.