

Sermon “It’s Been a Weird Week”

Kirk of St James

Sunday May 24, 2026

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It has been a weird week, not least of all because the noise for the bathroom renovation has been loud—taking out cinder blocks with sledgehammers and then grinding things down is deafening and it can be hard to hear yourself think--however, I will not complain because it means the work is moving along! This week has also been odd because I have been reading widely and sometimes you know there are connections that are important, but they are teasing the edges of your brain, and you are working to pull it all together. Blessings for Ash Wednesday and Pentecost collided with a Substack post from my former Mennonite Psychology professor along with our reading from John this week which is not the typical Acts passage on Pentecost.

I know I am not the only one feeling the chaos, this week I had four different people show up to the church for meetings which were on other days, and I myself prepared for a meeting that was a day later than I thought. Someone said it is because it is, “Maycemeber” a play on the busyness of December but it is people trying to wrap things up before the summer, which feels true! So, how does Ash Wednesday, Pentecost, a Mennonite Psychology professor, and John come together this morning?

It starts with an Ash Wednesday blessing from Jan Richardson we used in February. In it she says the following:

“did you not know
what the Holy One
can do with dust?
This is the day
we freely say
we are scorched.
This is the hour
we are marked
by what has made it
through the burning.”

The thought Jan offers with this blessing is, “I do want to keep asking what the Holy One can do with dust, and to keep looking for how I can be part of that.” This is how we started Lent, and eventually it led us to the Easter season.

We understand the feeling of being like dust all too well, especially lately. I do not believe that we can underestimate the wearing down of lives by the current news cycles, crises, and disunity currently plaguing the world around us. Even reading about the Alberta separatism movement this week just felt impossibly heavy. During my preparatory reading this week one scholar commented, “When you look at our nation today, you wonder if we are not in an epidemic of thirst. There is a dryness in the land—a dryness in relationships, a dryness in leadership, and a dryness for the dreams of the future. There are many people in our pews whose dreams have dried up. They are thirsty and in need of some spirit. Jesus cried out, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me.” And as renowned preacher and pastor Tom Long says, “Who among us is not thirsty, thirsty for something? Thirsty for meaning, knowledge, intimacy, possessions, fame, power. To be human is to be thirsty for something more than we have, thirsty to be someone more than we are now.”

This longing, this yearning is one of the reasons advertising and algorithms work so well in our world. Marketing and social media industries understand these all too human feelings, and are able to put pressure on the places we feel it most in our lives. It is terrifying sometimes after spending time online to see advertisements relating directly to ourselves, exploiting our fears or things with which we are dissatisfied. We are encouraged to waste time in shallow pools and not think about things too deeply, short clips designed to attract our attention momentarily until we quickly move onto the next thing. As I was wrestling with this idea of the dust and dryness that we often think of as lifelessness or death vs. the dust that Jan Richardson talks about, where she is encouraging us to remember that even during the driest times in our life, God can work with the most miniscule bits of our lives I came across a Substack post by my former psychology professor, called “Loving the Desert.”

In it Walter speaks about how sometimes the desert is a gift that allows us to grow and more deeply appreciate life. As he writes:

"This is why I seek ways to paint the picture that **embracing the desert is wholeness and self-nurture**. It is not deprivation to *know* that the rewards that are subtler and less zingy, that come after a longer wait, are the rewards that lead to a fuller, richer life. When we come to believe it, we are awakened to grace, to freedom.

When a torn meniscus and displaced kneecap in one of my arthritic knees made me think my active days were numbered (and my doctor casually tossed out the rude comment that I was "too old" [!?] for a meniscus to heal), I chose physiotherapy rather than surgery. I was no instant fan of fifteen minutes of boring and unpleasant exercises every morning. But somewhere along the way, I started to believe in them. It actually *felt* like I was healing my knees as I exercised. I began to miss it if I was away from home and skipped them. Five years later, with a healed knee (in spite of the prognosis), I still do them "religiously" every morning because I've embraced the desert of boring and unpleasant exercise. What I truly experience is fifteen minutes of loving and protecting my knees, and they're worth it."

Even when we feel like we are in the desert and we feel like dust, we can find grace, and love and hope, and that is what John and Pentecost are really about. In John today the promised Holy Spirit has not yet arrived but there is the promise of never-ending living water. If you have ever travelled through the middle east, you quickly see how important water is. The ground tends to be either dry and rocky, or sandy, and life teems around sources of water, and drops off the further away you move from it. In a world where knowing where water sources were, and being prepared as you travel it would have been a number one concern. It is not surprising that the Israelites complained when there was no water. In the book of John in particular a lot of the

miracles involve water. Jesus turns water into wine in Cana, the pairing of water and the spirit when Jesus is baptized, and even as he talks to Nicodemus. Jesus is using the most life-giving way possible to speak about what the spirit of God is in our lives. It is the essence of what we need most to survive.

“When thirsty people come to Jesus, he does not merely hand them a spiritual beverage, momentary relief for thirst: he gives them instead the indwelling of the Holy Spirit...The shock of the Christian life is that the glorified Jesus has once again, through the Spirit, become flesh in the lives of believers, and the result is not that Jesus has become confined in the small space of believers hearts, but that the life of believers has become like his—large and life giving, “rivers of living water.””

There are moments, days and even seasons in our lives that feel like dust, and the wilderness of the desert. Where there is not a drop of water anywhere in sight, and we feel as if the wind could blow us away. Even there in the moment where we feel like we are the smallest we have ever been, when we are simply the dust and the ash that survived the burning, we are reminded that there is hope. As Walter suggests sometimes, we need the desert to find the truth, to see the blessings, or in the quiet to hear the words we need to hear most. The promise of living waters floods our lives when we least expect it, like a rain shower on a scorching summer day. Pentecost comes not to scorch us and reduce us to ash but rather to refine us, burn away what is unnecessary, and to open our eyes and our hearts to life as found in Jesus Christ. May our lives be flooded in the hope of Pentecost, and our hearts know the living water of Jesus Christ.