
Dirt is not Dirty

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By Dean Sam Candler

One of the great realizations of my boyhood was in discovering out how fun it was to play in the dirt, discovering that dirt is not dirty. When I would walk back into the house after a day outside, my clothes had soil and stains and briars and brush all over them, but I didn't feel dirty at all. Instead I felt rather clean; I felt like I had been baptized into the glory of God's creation!

Since then, I have been glad to learn of others who have played in the dirt, outside the boundaries of custom and design, off the beaten trail. Beautiful accidents occur in the dirt, don't they? Discoveries occur in the dirt.

In 1947, a young shepherd boy ventured off the normal grazing fields near the Dead Sea, going after a sheep. Inside an old cave, near Qumran, he discovered some ancient pots, full of strange documents. In fact, they have since become known as The Dead Sea Scrolls, written in 100 BC, the earliest manuscripts we have of the Old Testament. Before their discovery, the earliest complete text of the Hebrew Bible dated from 900 AD. These Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered only sixty years ago, in the dirt.

In 1802, a Massachusetts farmer, named Pliny Moody, was plowing the dirt. He uncovered a strange slab with ancient footprints on it. It was a fossil, the first of many indications of the dinosaur, the first of many great pieces of evidence for evolution. He kept that stone as his front door step for years, before scientists –and also a Christian minister, by the way– were able to determine its scientific importance.

In 1868, workmen were also digging in the dirt, laying a railway line in France, in the Dordogne Valley, when they unearthed a strange skeleton. These bones became known as Cro-Magnon Man, and humanity was on its way to discovering our ancestors. School children on a fishing trip to Alberta, Canada were the ones who discovered the best preserved skeleton of Tyrannosaurus Rex, a specimen named Black Beauty because it is so well preserved.

Many of the great human fossil finds are in the Great Rift Valley, in Tanzania and Kenya. That valley is a tremendous chasm, up to eight miles wide and two thousand feet deep in some places, providing a slice of the history of human life itself. Before it was named the Great Rift Valley, its name was the graben. Graben is the word for grave. The area is a grave, cut deep into the earth, and providing for us an incredible history of life itself. We know about life from this grave.

I appreciate, then, all those folks who have played in the dirt, or who have plowed in the dirt, gone exploring in the dirt, who have appreciated the dirt of this earth, and who have appreciated even the graves of this earth. "All we go down the grave." "Remember that we are dust, and to dust we shall return."

There are those who claim that the scientific theory of evolution contradicts Christianity and the Bible. Nonsense. Both evolution and the Bible are true. Both the Bible and the fossil record of evolution are records of God's life among us. Both the Bible and the fossil records are important documents explaining where we came from, who we are.

According to the Bible, God played in the dirt one day. From the primal clay, God formed first humanity, whom he named Adam. The Hebrew word, "Adam," "man", comes from "Adamah," which means "earth." It means early dirt. God shaped

humanity from the dust, and God breathed the spirit of life into us. We humans, then, are the result of Godly play, Godly creation.

The word “humble,” a key word for this season of Ash Wednesday and Lent, comes from the Latin word for humus. Humus, as any gardener knows, means “good earth.” Or, better, it means “good dirt.” “Remember that you are dirt, and to the dirt you will return.”

To be humble means to return to good dirt. We might say it means “getting down to earth.” The dirt is not dirty. Lent is for playing in the dirt again. Lent invites us to get down to earth, to discover the world in a different way, and to find God again, in the glory of creation, and in the glory of humanity.