

*Earth: A Sermon for Lent*

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Grace Church Red Hill

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*Intro:* Good morning y'all; strange pandemic Zoom times; multispecies congregation (so Willow is joining me in anticipation of Palm Sunday); honored and grateful for this invitation, to be in your virtual company and in the company of speakers like Beth Roach, who I know and respect; I live on land where Algonquin, Iroquoian, and Siouan languages (like ancestral dialects of the Monacan) were spoken, land stewarded by skilled farmers who were enslaved Africans, on land that has been colonized/polluted/hurt, but is also free/clean/healing, etc.; feel a jittery pulse of nervousness to speak to you today, mindful of the responsibility that comes with the task of addressing you on this day in the sacred season of Lent, from an Old English word for Spring, for the lengthening of the hours of daylight; in Celtic terms, we're about to enter the light half of the year; so in light of that, I hope I can offer something beautiful as a humble gift that speaks praise to this time of repentance, fasting, and keeping watch for resurrection to feed a desire for doing justice, loving mercy, walking humbly

My hands dig around in death. Almost every day, I grab handfuls of mortality called soil, which is also where the dead come back to life. Raised within Christian stories, I see resurrection in compost. In soil, every day is Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday.

Before going further, I should perhaps introduce myself, and my place, a little bit more. My friend Cornelius and I steward Silver Run Forest Farm, less a single place name than a name for the way we want to live in place. Our long name tells a short story. We farm in the floodplain of Blacks Run, a name possibly springing out of the tanning industries that leached dark water into its flow that goes through our backyard nursery beds and creek-side groves in Harrisonburg. In numerous places Blacks Run has been forced underground, like a fugitive in its own home, a hydrological version of house arrest. Its natural flooding has turned into a traumatic reaction to this concrete claustrophobia, spilling out of its beds more than its share of sediment, nutrients, and chemicals. And yet this watershed still supports Snapping Turtles, community cleaning efforts, Mulberry, Willow, and Walnut, which we tap for the sweet sap. We also farm in the floodplain of Cub Run, a rural water-vine twisting down its stony green bed from Massanutten Mountain, its folds formed by the rumble and shudder of geologic growing pains, its ridges peopled by Black Bear, Deer, Coyote, Turkey, Rattlesnake, and Mayapple, Chestnut, Oak, Spicebush, and Pine. Cub Run weaves together tangles of quick creeks growing Walnut, Sycamore, and Elm. Spring and rainwater descend together through Keezletown, where I am right now. Both Runs are marginal and fertile places.

The urban Blacks Run and the rural Cub Run are two headwater creeks of the South Fork of the Shenandoah, an Anglicized name with many possible Indigenous linguistic roots. One of these might be spelled out as *Silver Waters*. The name Silver Run is a confluence of two streams of thought, merging Silver Waters with both Blacks Run and Cub Run. We see in that old etymology a playful image of clean shimmering streams, moonlit pools, sun-sparked currents glinting with trout and shaded by trees providing food and medicine for land-loving cultures. With faith, we're trying to plant this mythic image by weaving together the farm (the life of culture) with the forest (the life of nature). Or, if you prefer, aligning the wheel of the farm with the green circle of lively land. A weaving and alignment based on feeding and giving gifts so we

all have enough within the twin runs of Shenandoah in the Great Appalachian Valley and beyond.

To be just a little more direct, Silver Run Forest Farm is a riparian (or waterway) nursery and folk school rooted in love and living soil. These roots sprout out as a deep desire to farm in the image of the forest and to remediate the toxins that pollute our souls, society, and soil, from chemical leaching to white supremacy. In our nursery, we grow groves of beautiful and useful trees, and other land-loving plants, that cross-pollinate food sovereignty and ecological restoration. We try to speak and farm in ways that honor our plants as fellow creatures with histories and gifts, respecting their lives and the human cultures that cared for them. I'm telling you the truth when I say that our nursery also grows us, teaching us to be kind of people we need to be, to be living beings filled with the breath of life.

Now for a long time, a band of us along Blacks Run has been learning to cultivate and celebrate the works of mercy, justice, and healing so it'd be easier to be good. We converted yards into gardens and eroding streambanks into riparian orchards, crafted restorative ways of channeling conflict and our emotions, offered hospitality to friends without houses and outside their home countries, and partnered with kindred efforts in our community. Along with the nursery, some of us are now dreaming and scheming along both runs for woodland collectives and community nurseries, for the redistribution of land so it can be held in common trust, for usury-free lending circles for debt freedom, all ways to put economies around gift and mutual aid. We follow a liturgical cycle of growing, tending, harvesting, eating, composting, and growing again. This liturgy cycles in the inner and outer landscape.

Like our basement-brewed cider, these piecemeal attempts to grow good culture taste a little yeasty, a little funky, maybe a little off. So, we're trying to ferment lots of patience, perseverance, humility, and trust. After all, we're trying not to hurry, we're planting trees and growing good soil! We know we aren't the people who'll get to see all those trees deeply root, all those mother yeast cultures fully mature. Still, we're grateful for the patches we get to feed and that feed us.

Circling back to those handfuls of mortal soil, my friends and I know what death feels like. The death of loved ones (sometimes ones in wombs), the death of health in abusive relationships, risking death to cross desert borders, the tombs of prison cells for being poor or drunk or dark, addictive numbing to survive and self-inflicted harm to wake up, the death of marriage and the identity and dreams that went extinct with it. "Till death do us part," but in my experience we're seldom told there's more to dying than physical death. Death does part us, even when our mortal lives continue.

But here's something else I think we're seldom told: death isn't always dead, at least not ecologically, not with the grace and intention of decomposition. I think we all occasionally feel like zombies, but that's not the type of undead I mean. I mean the kind that happens in the soil's soulful cycle of life, death, and life again. Where every day is both the fasting of Lent and the feasting after, where every day is Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday.

Even so, resurrection stinks. Kick into a young compost pile and you'll smell what I'm talking about. I've felt the way that smells, and I wonder if some of you have too. To be honest with you, at times my whole life felt like indigestion, when my heart burned from breaking and my energy stopped up. No, resurrection feels like crap, which is why I'm grateful for compost toilets, and that bitter perfectionism can become joyful growth, like the trees I tend, like the trees that teach me to grow up.

At this point, I have a confession about the grand finale of this Lenten season. The truth is I'm mostly uninterested in debates about whether crucifixion and resurrection are metaphors or fact. Sometimes I really do wonder: have the debaters never planted anything? Have they never seen gravel and clay turn into animate soil? Have they never held a friend back from the edge of ending their lives, or pounded the floor and perhaps themselves in darkness, and then seen daylight? Have they never felt suffocated in their own anaerobic aura until air and light saved them, their grief turned to praise or their grief acknowledged as a kind of praise? Have they never persisted through illegal self-medication or the slavery of prison, or been in awe of those who do? Have they never faced the threat of death from state-sanctioned violence but continue to sing stories and sow seeds? Have so-called believers, so-called disbelievers, ever seen the Messiah in mycelium or the miracle of conflicts transformed? I ask because, beyond metaphor and fact, this all feels like a species of truth.

At this point, I don't care a whole lot about belief in the soul's salvation or a historical moment that might've been videotaped. At this point, I think the crucifixion is what state execution looks like in public, like the police murders of last year, and every year since the founding of this country. And at this point, I think the resurrection is public love: a vindicating "yes!" to the wasted and exploited and a resounding "no!" to empire and its powers of anaerobic death, like the movements reminding us that resistance is fertile, that reconstruction is possible.

Because of soil and social movements, I think I actually believe in two kinds of death. Imperial and ecological. Imperial death is the death of the crucifixion and the landfill. But in the cycles of the good created earth, death is never really dead. Ecological death is resurrection and the eternal life of compost turning life, death, and life again. I want Christian theology to distinguish between these two deaths. At the risk of unauthorized theologizing, maybe freedom from the slavery of death isn't the absence of decay, or even death. Maybe it's building good soil with the deep roots of trees, maybe it's the Jubilee of Landback to the First People, maybe it's the abolition of prison and police. Perhaps the difference between these two deaths is that the fear of death (imperial death) has no regeneration, no resurrection. Imperial death cuts off the possibility of decay-to-renewal and leaves us in anaerobic conditions similar to landfills: things are wasted by being excluded from cycles of fertility to instead rot in a pit like a prison, releasing toxic fumes like methane into the air until the whole atmosphere is polluted. Similar to Gehenna, to that smoking trash heap on the brim of Jerusalem. Seems to me that the slavery of death constructs hell through the production of waste, which is life prevented from entering the lively cycle of decay and renewal. Because there is no such thing as waste, not in good soil. Resurrection is revolution, turning over life to live again like we turn compost piles. Biblically and ecologically, resurrection happens in gardens. It's a basic ecological principle of how the earth moves, and resurrection is a religious name for this truth. The earth's corpus is crusted with decay, but it doesn't stay that way. Resurrection is life uprising.

Each Winter, Cornelius and I start fires in old oil drums. We throw armloads of brush, wreathed like thorny crowns, into our homemade kilns. Most of the brush comes from Honey Suckle, Siberian Elm, some Mulberry, all often called invasive species by white settlers who also use language like *colonizing* and *pioneer* to describe the behavior of plants. Whatever names we call them, fast fire transfigures branch into black char. The char is long-lasting carbon that becomes biochar when it soaks up nutrients like a sponge for slow enriching release in the soil. Speaking of enriching, compost and biochar make us feel wealthy! John Ruskin, the English artist and Christian socialist who preached a lot about craft, once distinguished between wealth and illth. Wealth is the lively abundance that comes from being well, because there isn't any real

wealth other than life, “including all its powers of love, of joy, and of admiration.” Wealth is when the full gift of being well as ourselves has the “widest helpful influence” in the lives of others. But illth is ill-used abundance, the condition of being ill because we damage and are damaged by what we accumulate and hoard, “causing various devastation and trouble around [us] in all directions.” Wealth is the resurrecting circulation of compost; illth is the crucifying rot of the dump. The empire of racial capitalism has made white men like Cornelius and me illthy. Soil and the trees are teaching us to be wealthy, which means we have a lot of illth to recirculate!

Speaking of recirculating, we harvest the char for soil amendment and for mixing into compost piles, including using it as a base for compost toilet dump stations. The nutrients our bodies can’t digest will be poured as a crappy offering to be digested by the body of the earth, and the leaching living nutrients will charge the char below. Like seeds planted to break open, or like a tomb.

*Biochar*, life in and after death, which is an oxymoron. Unless you’ve been resurrected.

Thank you for listening.