



Where Are You From
Sermon by Pastor Paisley Le Roy
Bethlehem Lutheran Church, St. Charles
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This week we dive into our series, “I’ve been meaning to ask...” with the seemingly simple question, “where are you from?” As Pastor Sarah mentioned last week, it is our hope to make room for these questions in our life together as community so that we can grow in relationship with one another. It is our hope that the questions here will guide us in learning the stories of those sitting around you right now. And so I’m going to give us just a minute here to turn to someone around you, not a family member or someone you can with and, even better, someone you haven’t spoken to and share with them where you’re from and have them do likewise.

(give about a minute)

Now pretty regularly during this series the preacher will ask you to turn to someone and talk with them. I know this isn’t something we often do so consider today practice and, as we continue along this series, it’ll become even more normal.

Now, by a show of hands, who named a town as the place they are from?

I, too, answered the question first this way. I’m from Virginia. Well...kind of...I’m actually from Virginia by way of California and Vermont. And just like that the answer gets complicated. But I quickly answer Virginia because, to me, the question, “where are you from?” is one that has one answer.

Or maybe I’ve known that it’s deeper but prefer not to dwell in it because, to be honest, that question is not easy for me. It’s simpler for me to rattle off a location than to tell the story of where I’m from. But for us – myself, Pastor Sarah, and Deacon Heather – to faithfully lead you through this process of diving deeper into our stories, we must model it from the pulpit.

So, if you ask me where I’m from, I’d say Virginia.

I'd share of a yellow house with blue shutters that we moved into when I was eleven.

I'd share of the creek behind the house where you could sometimes find crawdads.

I'd share of my black lab Chief and my cats, Face and Miss Kitty Fantastico and how they instilled in me a love for pets I have to this day.

I'd share of the many kids that came in and out of our doors, arriving with a trash bag of few objects and staying for a day or a week or a year...or three.

I'd share about my family with three siblings but countless others whose paths crossed mine through the foster care system.

I'd share of escaping to church because I wanted something that was my own.

And I would probably more easily share what happened next than what happened before

But as this is one to dive deeper, I'll lean into this question even a bit more.

I'd share of the mountains throughout the country that shaped me: Mt. Hood, Buckskin, the Appalachian, Blueridge. But first the Green Mountains of Vermont.

I'd share of the dark brown wooden home on shady rill road with the bay window and the largest pine tree I've ever seen.

I'd share how it was to see snow for the first time when I moved from southern California.

I'd share of bike rides, crab apple fights, and fort-making with my best friend.

I'd share of how free I felt in the Vermont air.

And, if you really, really, cared to know.

I'd share how much before Vermont is kind of a blur.

I'd share of the pictures I have of me living in California in a home with an inground swimming pool. I'd share of my nana and my uncle Bill. He's holding me in all those pictures, so he must be an important part of my story.

I'd even share what's hardest of all... the baby book I have that contains a handful of pictures of unknown faces and unknown names.

And I'd share how I've searched long and hard to find all the answers because, you see, the question, "where are you from?" ...I'm not sure I'll ever know. And though it breaks my heart to not know more, I have learned that the blank spaces don't have to define me.

Because even if I can't quite figure out the particulars of my story...

I have a faith that can handle the unknowing. A faith that, in fact, leans into the mystery of it all.

A faith that tells me my truest origin...our collective origin...from the ground....and from breath.

And, as a child of the mountains, I find my anchor in that ground.

So where are you from? From dust and from breath. Adam came forth.

And it's important here to note exactly what was brought forth. We call him Adam and we call him male but more accurate is Adam, meaning "earthling or earth creature."

Genesis tells us, "then the Lord God formed Adam from the dust of the ground, and God breathed into its nostrils the breath of life; and it became a living creature."

Dr. Raj Nadella commented on the peculiar nature of this encounter. God breathed into the nostrils of Adam? Meaning...Adam already had nostrils? Nadella contrasts the creation story of Genesis 1 where things are spoken into existence with this one, where God takes a hands-on approach – scooping up earth and breathing into it.

Nadella writes, "I can picture God carefully crafting different part of the body, then kneeling over God's creation and breathing the breath of life into nostrils."

This embodied creation narrative with God the gardener lovingly forming us from the ground is one that provides an anchor for someone, like me, who has trouble

answering where I am from. I can walk outside and scoop up some dirt and be reminded of what I am, whose I am, and what I am yet to be.

But not only does this scripture enlighten for me where I am from but also what I am to be. Because in this narrative the earth creature is brought forth from the ground and was, in turn, given a charge...a charge to till the earth.

But to till the earth is not exactly right. It's a watered-down version of what the charge truly is. You see the verb here – abad - is better translated, to serve.

The earth creature is put in the garden of Eden to serve it. Nadella goes on to say, "the earth creature was formed from the ground and was, in turn, asked to serve it. Similarly, there is a symbiotic relationship between other parts of creation. The earth gave rise to the river and the river, in turn, watered the garden." A river that we hear does not only water The Garden but flows out from there, blessing the whole world with life abundant. And, like this river, I'm charged to nourish here where I am and all that I encounter.

And so perhaps this story from Genesis equips me with not only with the answer of where I am from but also what my story is and how I am to continue to live out my createdness....in service to creation....to all living things, humans, raccoons, plants, and soil.

Because, where am I from?

I'm from Virginia, by way of Vermont, by way of California
I'm from mountains and oceans
I'm from soil. And I'm from breath.

And so I ask you again, Bethlehem, turn to your neighbor and dive just a little deeper into your narrative. Where are you from?

(give about a minute)

We each answer this question a little differently, because God gave us our particularities, but above all, we are dirt. Dirt and breath. And, one day, dirt again.

For the gift of our stories shared this day we say thanks be to God. Amen.