

“Spirituality Series: Sermon #1 - Dirt, Water, and Sky  
Stouffville United Church  
Sunday, February 3, 2019

Genesis 1 and Psalm 115

Welcome to Sermon #1 of 3 on Spirituality, based on the 2015 book, *Grounded*, by Diana Butler Bass. Diana is the author of 10 books, *A People’s History of Christianity*, *Christianity after Religion*, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*. Some are in our church library. In 2018, she published her latest book, *Gratitude*. She has held speaking engagements throughout North America, speaking about church trends and culture shift working with many denominations, both in Canada and the United States. She lives in Virginia, with her husband, daughter, and dog.

*Grounded* represents a complete departure in her writing style. If anything it is her spiritual memoir. A card carrying Episcopalian for most of her life, Diana became disengaged from traditional church and found herself without firm church roots. She became increasingly aware of how God was present all around her, in her relationships, where she lived, and in the world about her. This book is about finding new spiritual ground by discovering and embracing God in the world around us – in the soil, the water, the sky, in our homes and neighbourhoods, and in the global commons.

A spiritual revolution is happening. Bass traces this movement in her analysis of national survey data. In particular, she likes the work of the Pew Research Center which is a nonpartisan American “fact tank” based in Washington, D.C. It provides information on social issues, public opinion, and demographic trends shaping the United States and the world.<sup>1</sup> In the 2015 PEW Fall Research survey of the American religious landscape, she notes a rise in the % of NONES. A None is someone who when asked to check off the box of your religious affiliation, will check the box, “None of the Above”. 23% of respondents indicated they were ‘nones’, which means 1 out of every 5 people do not identify with any religious affiliation. And yet, in the same survey, over 90% indicated they believe in God.<sup>2</sup>

Bass attributes this difference to the ‘rise of the mystic’. And she will qualify that to say that a mystic is someone who when asked, will say that yes, they have had a spiritual or mystical experience that has changed their lives. In 1962, that number was 22%. In 1994, it was 49%. In 30 years, it doubled. That number has continued to grow. The rise of the mystic indicates that the culture has taken a deeply experiential turn. This is a shift of thinking.<sup>3</sup>

For a long time the question the church asked was ‘Who is God’. Many of us were raised in a church where we learned that God was up in heaven and we were here on earth. And some models had hell below us. And church functioned as a ‘holy elevator’, bringing messages down from God to us below. And if we were faithful, and when we died, some one would push the up

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia search on PEW.

<sup>2</sup> Notes taken from watching a January 10, 2016 Forum Interview, Washington National Cathedral, found at [www.dianabutlerbass.com](http://www.dianabutlerbass.com)

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

arrow on the elevator and up we'd go to heaven. Our older church hymnody posits a God who dwells up on high, all knowing, all powerful, but at the same, distant.

As she writes in *Grounded*: “Stories and sermons taught us that God occupied the high places, looking over the world and caring for it from afar, occasionally interrupting the course of human affairs with some miraculous reminder of divine power.”<sup>4</sup> But God is not a distant God in today’s culture. There is a spiritual revolution happening in which the question “Who is God?” has evolved into the question “Where is God? God is with us, here and now, in the world we inhabit, in our relationships, in our neighbour. Elevator churches are disappearing. The God of the elevator church has no draw anymore for people who are seeking a God who is close, nearby, a part of their world. Bass writes, “Many people have left organized religion because they experience too great a distance between the old structures and their experience of God.”<sup>5</sup> A new theology is emerging, and this new understanding of the nature and work of God is finding voice.

In an interview, Bass said, “Part of what I think has caused the decline in Christianity, at least in the Protestant world, is that we’re still talking about God as if it’s a hundred years ago, if not further ago than that. We’re talking about holy things in categories that don’t take into account quantum physics, climate change, religious pluralism, changes round family and sexuality. We’re not understanding at some really deep level in our soul that all of those things have changed the way people experience and apprehend God.”<sup>6</sup>

In recent years, the term ‘spiritual but not religious’ or SBNR’s for short, has become the trademark phrase to indicate that you don’t need to sit in a church to find God. You need look no farther than your backyard, or perhaps hike through the York Regional Forest to find God. There is a hunger for new words to express an emerging theological language to give definition to how and where we sense God in our midst. The United Church of Canada adopted ‘A Song of Faith’ in 2006 to reflect this desire for new words to describe our relationship with God. Our Call to Worship today is from the Song of Faith.

Bass writes, “There is a widespread sense that God is *with us*, *within* creation, culture, and the cosmos. If anything, recent decades have revealed not a dreadful, distant God, but have slowly illuminated that an intimate presence of mystery abides with the world, a spirit of compassion that breathes hope and healing. And with it faith is shifting from a theology of distance toward a theology of nearness, from institution to unmediated experience.”<sup>7</sup> “What was once reserved for a few saints has now become the quest of millions around the planet – to be able to touch, feel, and know God for one’s self.”<sup>8</sup>

In Genesis 2:7, we read that God fashioned Adam from the dirt: “Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.” In Genesis 2:15, we read that God sent “human beings out to till

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<sup>4</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded: Finding God in the World – A Spiritual Revolution*, (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>6</sup> From “Finding God in the World: An Interview with Diana Butler Bass” by Deborah Arca (available at [www.dianabutlerbass.com](http://www.dianabutlerbass.com))

<sup>7</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded*, 15.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

and keep the soil and to work on behalf of the earth delighting in all its gifts.”<sup>9</sup> Bass remarks that “generations ago, no one would have wondered about God and dirt, for divinity and soil were easy companions ... the ground was created and sustained by a gracious God who walked about in a garden.”<sup>10</sup> However, she argues that following the Industrial revolution, “this kind of spiritual intimacy between land, creature, and Creator made less sense. Not only did that revolution move us away from the soil; it also turned the land into an object to be managed instead of a relationship to be experienced.”<sup>11</sup> We move truckloads of topsoil off the land in order to build new housing. Our agricultural and mining practices have turned the earth into dustbowls and scarred pits.

How do we recover this spiritual intimacy between dirt, us, and God? Genesis 2 left us tending the soil. If you have ever reached your hands into some good composted soil, this is what you would find: “There is an entire ecosystem in a handful of soil: bacteria, fungi, protozoa, nematodes, earthworms. Through their breeding and dying such creatures vivify the world ... Here is one of the most profound of all religious themes: death and resurrection.” Bass quotes Fred Bahnsen, a Methodist minister, “Soil is a portal to another world, the world as God intends it to be.”<sup>12</sup>

The Book of Genesis begins with water: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” (1:1) Water covers 71% of the earth’s surface. Bass offers this image of the oceans: “This tiny blue marble, as the first astronauts called it from space, so fragile from afar, is a planet of azure-endued life. “How inappropriate to call this planet ‘Earth,’” noted science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke, “when it is clearly ‘Ocean.’”<sup>13</sup> And yet, we abuse it. “The world’s oceans are full of garbage. Some of it is visible, like cargo that falls from ships carrying goods around the world, and some is less visible, like tons of plastics and chemical sludge washed – or purposely dumped- into sea currents from the world’s watersheds.”<sup>14</sup> This debris creates floating islands in oceans around this globe.

Psalms 115, verse 2, asks, ‘Where is God?’ Our God is in the heavens; The heavens are the Lord’s heavens, but the earth he has given to human beings.” Beyond the heavens is the cosmos and deep space, and we ask “what mysteries are revealed in the stars?”<sup>15</sup> Bass traces the Big Bang theory back to us, “Out of the big bang, the stars; out of the stardust, the Earth, out of the matter of the Earth, life ... every atom of iron in our blood would not be there, had it not been produced in some galactic explosion billions of years ago and eventually condensed to form the iron in the crust of the Earth from which we have emerged. Quite literally, human beings are made of stardust.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 82-83.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

Humanity has wrecked havoc on the air that we breathe. *Grounded* offers these stats: “We human beings are causing more carbon dioxide to be emitted into the atmosphere than can be absorbed. This has led to a 40 percent increase in carbon dioxide levels since 1750, with the fastest increases coming in the last three decades.”<sup>17</sup>

We become increasingly aware of the fragility of this ecosystem we are a part of – this web of life which includes us. We are not the sole proprietor of the globe, but share it with intertwined ecosystems that depend upon the health of the whole to survive. And this balance is devastatingly compromised by our greed to rob, destroy, consume its treasures, altering its original balance with an irreversible finality.

The spiritual revolution is the shift from a vertical God to God-with-us, a remembering of the balance and perfection of God’s creation and our place within it, and a deeper awareness of our connection to God through the dirt in our gardens, the water we drink, and the air we breathe.

What is Spirituality? Spirituality is about opening your heart to discover and embrace God in the world around you, in dirt, in water, and in sky. You *are* grounded in the world you live in.

Amen.

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.