

Dirt & Grace Advent

Texts and Links to Accompany the Audio Liturgy

Music has the power to shift the soul, settling a truth deep within us, capable of the building of new worlds both external in the world around us, and internal, within the interior of our bodies. A few months ago, I was working on my laptop, typing away, half-listening to the songs on the new United album “Empires” when a few lyrics stopped me dead in my tracks, paralysed in wonder and conviction. Here are a few lines from the song:

“We are worlds, we are bodies, empires of dirt and grace. Silhouettes and reflections, caught in His holy flame. Beneath our skin, a new creation. The night is done, our chains are broken. The time has come, the wait is over. The King is here, and His Name is Jesus.”

Doesn't the power of music lie somewhere in the reality that truth can be conveyed on a much deeper level through melody and lyric, descending from the mind into the heart, where our truest self dwells, and thus beginning the process of transformation there, in our deepest core? If this experience with music is universal (and one must only reflect on the ubiquitous nature of music on our phones, in our cars, sung in the shower, hummed at the store, and more recently, 'in the cloud,' to know its relative omniscience, let alone the awesome slash annoying experience of a song that won't seem to leave our heads), then how could the Spirit of God, the Grand Conductor of our souls, desire to embed his world within us? Simply stated, through the burrowing of lyrics of such deep truth within us that we become new creations, empires of dirt and grace.

Stanley Hauerwas, one of the most preeminent theologians of the past few decades, was once asked the haunting question, 'What does it mean to be human?' His answer is prophetic, difficult, and convicting:

“To be a human is to first and foremost recognise that God became one of us in Jesus Christ. To be human means that we recognise that our lives are constituted first and foremost by God's refusal to let us destroy ourselves... and how we do that is through recognition of shared vulnerability.' In this same vein of thought, Hauerwas continues: 'To learn to follow Jesus is the training necessary to become a human being. To be a human being is not a natural condition, but requires training. The kind of training required, moreover, has everything to do with death. To follow Jesus is to go with him to Jerusalem where he will be crucified. To follow Jesus, therefore, is to undergo a training that refuses to let death, even death at the hands of enemies, determine the shape of our living.'”

Welcome to **EMPIRES OF DIRT AND GRACE**, our theme for this new liturgical year. Our focus will be two fold throughout this year, and yet both pieces concern identity: 1) Who is God and what He is doing in our midst as he creates this new world, and 2) Who are we in response to his initiative action, as empires of dirt and grace, small worlds within a massive rehabilitation project that is the Kingdom of God all around us.

Our Identity piece for Advent:

“God is Emmanuel, ‘God with us.’ He has become one of us in Jesus Christ. Therefore, as God is with us, having ‘become flesh,’ we are new creations, made in the image of the Trinity, capable and called to create new worlds ourselves, starting deep within our own souls, empires of dirt and grace. Advent reminds us that God has drawn near – and that we are no longer isolated and alone.”

“We are worlds, we are bodies, empires of dirt and grace. Silhouettes and reflections, caught in His holy flame. Beneath our skin, a new creation. The night is done, our chains are broken. The time has come, the wait is over. The King is here, and His Name is Jesus” (Hillsong United, “Empires”).

Discussion Questions for Around the Table

(Written by Chris Kamalski)

- If God is Emmanuel, 'God with us,' how does this challenge our isolation and feeling of being alone as human beings?
- What does it mean to be human?
- If we are 'empires of dirt and grace,' where do you need to embrace your humanity (the 'dirt' in you) and your potential for life as an image bearer of God (the 'grace' in you)?

Links to Accompany the Audio Liturgy

Download Empires of Grace podcasts throughout the Liturgical Year:

- Subscribe to the "3RDPLACEZA" podcast at iTunes ZA, Podbean app (available on iPhone/Android), or stream online at 3rdplace.co.za/listen.

3rd Place Liturgical Year Blog

- Find all podcasts, links, text, and other items used in the creation of "Empires of Dirt and Grace: A Liturgy for Advent" at 3rdplace.co.za/liturgical-year-blog.

Chris Kamalski, Visual/Audio Liturgist:

- Follow him @chriskamalski on Instagram / Twitter.
- Website: chriskamalski.com.

3rd Place Church:

- Follow our faith community @3rd_place on Instagram / Twitter.
- Website: 3rdplace.co.za.

Hillsong United's recent album "Empires" is incredible. Lyrics from "Empires" (Track 9) are the inspiration for our liturgical year theme. Support their work!

My new friend Rusty Gates has created the Audio Liturgy Podcast, which influenced the structure and format of this year's liturgy for 3rd Place. Subscribe to his podcast and you won't be disappointed. I've contributed to the Lament and Wonder episodes so far.

My lovely wife Maxie Kamalski can be followed @maxiekamalski.

Current sounds in the background you heard because I'm new to recording high quality audio, and don't know how to mix like a pro: Our daughter Mia, Helicopters, and a generous amount of white noise as I fumbled around with my iPhone.

Songs of Adoration videos referenced in "A Liturgy for Advent" to watch on YouTube:

- Empires Acoustic (Hillsong United)
- Noel (Chris Tomlin featuring Lauren Daigle)

Books referenced in "A Liturgy for Advent" to purchase on Amazon:

- Preparing for Christmas: Daily Meditations for Advent by Richard Rohr (We read from the Introduction).
- The Voice Bible by Ecclesia Bible Society (We read Isaiah 9:2-7)
- On the Night You Were Born by Nancy Tillman (Every single one of her books is incredible and comes from an identity rooted in Scripture!).
- Children of God Storybook Bible by Archbishop Desmond Tutu (We read "An Angel Appears to Mary" from Luke 1).
- Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us by Adele Calhoun (A must have for all Jesus followers. We borrowed some of her work on the Prayer of Examen, as well as some Introductory comments on liturgy).
- Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals, edited by Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hargrove, and Enuma Okoro (We borrowed the last few prayers from December 24th's liturgy for the "Our Father" Benediction section).

Share Your Experience: Use the hashtag #empiresofdirtandgrace to share about your experience on Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook. We encourage this to stand with each other – not to publicise our reflections or to drive traffic, but to create genuine lines of communication and connection across a virtual world.