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WATCH OUT FOR THE MUD

Mud season in Maine. Do we groan as we look out and see that brown slush in some of our driveways and backyards? Many of us live in rural areas and reach our homes by dirt roads. Does the ooze make us lose patience? Not at all. A puddle won't befuddle--not a Mainer anyway. We knew as the snow mounted high this past winter that one sure outcome of thawing would be a good amount of mud. Many areas in our state have an abundance of clay-like soil that favors mud production. But we also have high quality sunlight (which proponents of solar heat delight in) so we realize that sunshine eventually will dry it up. Until then, soft terrain can give way if pressed down too hard. *Mud* is a Middle English word: short, precise and with a certain heaviness in its "u" sound. We may pronounce it with a down tone: "It's all mud out there."

God comes to us in the various changes that affect our lives, including developments in our northeast climate, with its special demands and yet beautiful alterations. Writers in many cultures turn to nature to suggest a likeness for what life is all about. Winds, hail, pelting rain, soft breezes, smooth stretches of land, downward valleys, hillsides rising—all can express human struggle as we try to make progress forward.

Religious teachers too use earth metaphors to describe our journey with God. I don't actually know any writer who has suggested mud as a spiritual image, but there could be someone somewhere—especially in our state this time of year.

Walking on muddy terrain requires careful movement lest we be sucked in by a sloppy pull. "My steps have held fast to Your path." (Ps 17:5). "You gave a wide place for my steps under me, and my feet did not slip"(Ps 18:37).

We have a lively hound dog who demands long walks through woods and fields in every weather. Mud doesn't bother her that much. Yes, it's wet and messy, but just shake it off. Lots of shakes. As I move cautiously along with her, I think how travel over mud reflects the moral ground we cover in our daily choices—some of which can take us away from the firm ground of our faith. We may be tempted to traverse a wet area far from solid virtue. Then when we emerge we are covered with damp sediment hard to dispose of. Perhaps we have willingly followed unwholesome directions gradually pointing toward dishonor and deceit.

Just as mud can be a signal of possible danger, so God lets us see where such decisions might lead us. Warnings by a loving Father are like spring signs along our back roads, meant to protect a vulnerable stretch of tar from heavy vehicles. An inner voice says, "Don't go this route. Damage could occur."

It is a necessary part of every march onward to pause at times and consider the trail, where it may eventually take us. Too often we discover ourselves in a situation of our own foolish making, and need to escape from where we are. Rushing ahead without weighing possible consequences invites disaster. How will we emerge from the downward pull that holds us and keeps us from advancing? When we have chosen wrongly and find our feet submerged, we turn to our Savior. "Rescue me. O Lord, make haste to help me....You are my help and my deliverer. O my God, hold not back" (Ps 40:14, 18). And we are assured of divine aid. "God drew me out of the mud of the swamp and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure" (Ps 40:3).

Once we emerge from the mud, based on our own unwise choosing, we pause by the wayside and ponder carefully how it all happened and how we can avoid being deceived by such an erroneous judgment in the future. "The one who acts hastily, blunders. A person's own folly upsets the way" (Prv 19: 2,3).

But mud--like all things given us by a loving Creator--can also be considered in a favorable light. Its sticky mass has much to teach us. While it quietly disappears from numberless Maine acres, we remember its lessons as we deal with a fresh dryness. Perhaps we repeat the lines of the English poet Rupert Brooke in *The Hill*, where he pays tribute to soggy earth, "One may not doubt that, somehow, good/ Shall come of water and of mud;/ And, sure, the reverent eye must see/ A purpose in liquidity."

Maine mud, we salute you. But to be honest, we are rather glad to see you go.

Sister Margaret Dorgan, DCM