

## Ash Wednesday

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Joel 2:1-2,12-17

Psalm 103

2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10

Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

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If you ask the average person what he or she knows about Ash Wednesday, you might get a funny half-answer like, “Ain’t that the day when those weirdoes put ashes on their heads?” (And to be clear: yes, that is the day when those weirdoes put ashes on their heads.)

Or, if you’re lucky, you might hear something a little deeper: that it’s a day about sin and mortality, about service and devotion, about fasting, repentance, and prayer.

Tonight, however, I wish to push us beyond the surface of weirdoes wearing ashes, beyond even the obvious themes of fasting and prayer, to scratch at a deeper understanding of why we do this. Why is it that you and I gather year-in and year-out for this peculiar day, this ancient and unsettling tradition? Why is it that we look one another in the eye today and say the thing our culture spends billions trying to hide and deny, namely that we are dust, and to dust we shall return?

Well, when it comes down to it, I believe the thing drawing us together tonight is not just ashes and foreheads. It’s not just penitence and prayer. What’s drawing us together tonight is a love story. For you and me, Ash Wednesday is one of the greatest love stories ever told, written in the dust of the earth, on the flesh of our hearts, and on the hard wood of the cross.

Of course, I know it doesn’t seem that way. I know. The lights are dim; the music is somber; the church is bare. There has been an obvious and solemn change, and all upon us lies the heavy weight of something palpably serious this evening. You have every right to ask, “How in the world could tonight ever be a love story?” But I swear to you, it is. These ashes tell a love story like no other, and like every story, it is has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

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Let’s start, then, at the beginning.

In the beginning, God fashioned the whole cosmos, the infinite expanse of all that is. And out of all the galaxies, all the systems, all the swirling pools of white-hot stardust, for some reason God peered over this way at our little no-count corner of our little no-count galaxy. He looked at our simple, little, round ball of dirt flying through space, and cried out, “Ah, *this!* *This* is what I have been looking for! *This* is what I desire! I will make something out of *this*: a people for myself, my beloveds whom I will love forever and who, in turn, will love me.” And so, as the story in Genesis chapter 2 goes, the Lord our God bent down into the cold wet earth, dug his fingers into the soil, and made a man. And because that man could not live as dirt alone, the Lord our God breathed into his nostrils, and he became a living being.

This earth, this dust, these ashes are the beginning of God’s love story for us because they tell us of a God who so yearned for others with whom to share his love that he created life—

*created you and me*—from nothing more than the dust of the earth and the Spirit of his own heart. This is God’s love affair with you, with me, and with all of humanity . . . and it all begins with ashes and dirt.

That’s the beginning. But these ashes also tell us about the end: *our* end. And like all good love stories, I believe that even that end—*our* end—is a happy one.

Some of you have heard me speak before about my friend Melody, a terrific priest living now in Texas. Melody, who grew up an Episcopalian, says she often thought of Ash Wednesday as some kind of vague threat. Who can blame her? It’s a an imposing thing to come to church, to kneel before God, and to have a priest smear dust on your head while intoning the words, “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” As far as love stories go, these are not the kinds of words lovers say to one another.

But one day, Melody went to a church where the priest said these words differently: with love, tenderness, generosity, understanding, and humanity. In that moment, Melody says things changed for her. She realized these ashes are not a threat, but a promise.

The simple fact is that *all* of us, whether we like it or not, are made of dust. *All* of us, whether we like it or not, already have one foot in the grave. This is the condition of our lives, and this is what it means to be human. But because we know the beginning, we also know the end. You and I are made of equal parts dust and God, and if that which is the earth’s will one day return to the earth, then that which is God’s will one day return to God. And why should that be? Because the Son of God has paid the price for us, that’s why. For all our failings and sin, Jesus Christ has already made the way for us to return to the God from whom we came. And on that day, as we leave behind all that binds us and stare naked into the longing eyes of the Creator and Lover of our souls, the love story that began in Genesis will be made complete in Jesus Christ for us, with us, and in us. That, my friends, is not a threat. It is the Good News. It is a mercy. It is a promise.

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So, that’s the beginning and the end, the prologue and the epilogue of God’s great love story for us. But what matters more tonight is neither of those, but the middle, for the middle is where some of the best stuff gets written. This middle is where we have the opportunity to be co-writers *with* God in his great love story for our lives. We know where we have come from, and it is good. We know where we’re going, and it is good, too. So what in the world do we do as we make our way from one to the other? What gifts, what responses do we bring to the story of God’s great love? The holy season of Lent holds a few clues.

Most people look at Lent all wrong. Some speak with such dramatic flair about “giving up something for Lent” as though their selflessness in denying themselves cocoa, cursing, or caffeine is a sacrifice like unto martyrdom itself. Others talk about “taking something on,” adopting a special practice like Bible study or daily prayer, but become so easily discouraged when they can’t make the habit stick after a couple weeks. And of course, don’t even get me started on those who view Lent as a “New Year’s 2.0,” the ones who drag their failed New

Year's resolutions for thinner bodies and whiter teeth into Lent, this time with a thin layer of Jesus over it all to motivate them with self-righteousness and religious guilt.

If any of those were the way Lent is supposed to go, I'd say let's pack up, go home, and hide 'til Easter. But it's not. Lent is not about accomplishing things just for the sake of accomplishment. Lent is not about proving anything to anyone . . . not even to yourself, not even to God. Lent is not even about improving yourself or becoming holy, because the hard truth is that you can't. You, my friends, cannot make yourselves holy; only God can do that.

So what, then, is Lent about? *Lent is about the love story.* Lent is about being wooed by God; falling in love with God; participating with God in the greatest love story of your life.

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To be sure, there are some good, time-tested ways of doing that, which work well if we can just keep from trivializing them. In tonight's Gospel, Jesus upholds three practices that are good ways to grow in the love of God during Lent (and, really, in *all* seasons of life), as long as we don't warp them toward our own ends and trip over our egos along the way. Those practices are fasting, praying, and almsgiving.

In the old days, people fasted not from trivial things like candy and Coca-Cola, but from real necessities. They did this to remind themselves of their dependence on God alone, and the money saved was then given to the poor. If you fast in a truly intentional way—whether from meat, or a daily meal, or your dependence on gasoline, or even things like your cellphone, Facebook, or television—you might be surprised by how much undistracted time you can spend engaged with God and God's people.

Prayer is also good. As a priest, though, I find that so many people are *really* uncomfortable and uncertain when it comes to prayer. People tell me all the time that they don't know how to pray, and they feel awkward and unrewarded when they try. But if you know you are equal parts dirt and God, then I say offer whatever dirty prayers you have, and God will hear them. There's no secret to it. You were made to love God, and expressing that love is inherent within you. Don't try to be good at it; just do it.

And finally, there is almsgiving. The practice of giving of your goods (and yourself) to the poor and needy is not about simple charity. God is not calling you to mindlessly throw a buck here or there to whatever comes along. Neither is it about showmanship and heroism. God is not calling you to solve all the world's problems. In almsgiving, God is simply calling you to take a risk, to find him in the dust, the dirt, and the ashes; to seek him out in lost people, in forgotten people, in foreign and "undesirable" people. This does not take a major church campaign or government program. It simply takes you being attentive to who's around you, seizing the moment, and asking, "Lord, how will you use me to be a blessing to this person?" These are often the moments where worthy chapters of the love story get written.

The key in all these things, as Jesus commands in tonight's Gospel, is to do them quietly, secretly, modestly. The moment you start making it about you, you've lost the point. Love isn't love when it's all about you.

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Brothers and sisters, there's no getting around it: you are dust, and you are dying. But as hard as that truth is to hear, the good news of this night is that you carry God within you . . . and you ain't dead yet.

Forty beautiful days now lie before you. Forty days to be blessed by God. Forty days to be a blessing to others. Forty days to write another chapter in the story of God's love for the human race. So when you leave this place with the dust of the earth smudged upon your head, for God's sake, don't settle for asking yourself, "Should I give up coffee or Coca-Cola for Lent?" Don't you dare settle for the simple, the easy, the insipid, the vapid, and the trivial.

Instead, leave this place and ask: "Lord, what can I do these forty days to allow myself to fall more deeply in love with you: my Creator, my Lover, and my God?"

And then, whatever the answer is, do it.

Ash Wednesday is a love story because life in Jesus Christ is a love story. All of life is a gift. So take your ashes, take your life, and go write the next chapter with God.

Amen.