

Ash Wednesday

Joel 2:1-2,12-17

Psalm 103:8-14

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber writes,
“Ash Wednesday is my
favorite day of the church year,
and Lent is my favorite season.

“Our culture has quite ruined Christmas and Easter
with Santa and the Easter Bunny
and all the grotesque consumerism
and made-for-TV specials behind it all.

“But oddly, nobody waits every year
to watch the *Ash Wednesday Peanuts Special*.

“There are no doorbuster sales at 4 a.m.
on the first day of Lent.
There are no big, garish displays
in the middle of [the mall]
with mechanical children in sack cloth and ashes.

“Nope,” she says,
“we get this one all to ourselves.
Our culture has no idea
what to do with a day
that celebrates the fact
that we all sin
and are going to die.”¹

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With all of that being so, so true,
it cannot be lost on most of us this year
that by some strange calendrical quirk,
Ash Wednesday has collided

¹ Bolz-Weber, Nadia. “Why I Love Lent: Sin Is One Of My Favorite Things To Talk About.” *Sarcastic Lutheran*. Patheos, 22 Feb. 2012. Web. 12 Feb. 2018. <<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2012/02/why-i-love-ash-wednesday-and-lent-part-1-sin/>>

with that most artificial of all holidays:
Valentine's Day.

Don't get me wrong.
I'm not here to tell you
you shouldn't love people.

And I'm not here to tell you that
Valentine's Day is just a conspiracy
perpetrated by the Valentine Industrial Complex
to take all your money
and to raise our collective romantic expectations
to unreasonable heights
that no one can ever live up to.

(Okay. Maybe I am here to tell you that.)

But put these two days together,
and it becomes crystal clear how right Pastor Nadia is:
we *don't* know what to do with Ash Wednesday.

One of our own members
said in all seriousness to me this week,
"Maybe instead of ashes this year,
you can give us little hearts.
Maybe instead of telling us we are going to die,
you could tell us that God loves us."

I get it.
Most of us are not clamoring
for what Ash Wednesday has to offer.

But at the end of the day,
I think what a statement like that reveals
is not that we as a culture
don't understand
what Ash Wednesday is about.

**It's that we as a culture
don't understand
what *love* is about.**

* * *

There's a writer named Heather Havrilesky who writes,
"Our dumb culture tricks us into believing
that romance is the suspense of not knowing
whether someone loves you or not yet,
the suspense of wanting to have sex
but not being able to yet,
the suspense of wanting all problems and puzzles
to be solved by one person,
without knowing if they have any time or affinity
for your particular puzzles yet.
We think romance is a mystery
in which you add up clues
that you will be loved."

But she goes on to say,
"What I would argue
is the most deeply romantic thing of all
is [the] palpable, reassuring sense
that it's okay
to be a human being."

She then tells the story—
in convincing yet restrained detail—
of a time when she became violently ill
and collapsed in her bathroom
in a scene that she claims could have come
straight from an episode of *Game of Thrones*.
It was not pretty.
It was awful.
But then, in walked her husband
in what she says was the most romantic gesture
in all their years of marriage.

"My husband was not happy about this scene," she says,
"but he handled it without complaint.
That is the very definition of romantic:
not only *not* being made to feel awful
about things that are clearly out of your control,
but being quietly cared for by someone
who can shut up and do what needs to be done
under duress."²

Amen to that.

² Havrilesky, Heather. "What Romance Really Means After 10 Years of Marriage." *The Cut*, 9 Feb. 2016. Web. 12 Feb. 2018. <<https://www.thecut.com/2016/02/what-romance-means-after-10-years-of-marriage.html>>

I would go a step further,
and I would suggest that this is also
the very definition of Jesus:
the One who does *for* you
the thing that needs to be done—
the thing that you in your weakness cannot do—
and who does it under duress
yet without complaint.

For us Christians,
that is *the* definition of grace.
That is *the* definition of sacrifice.
That is *the* definition of love.

Our culture continually tells us
that romance is about tawdry suspense
and the tormented hope
of being loved one day.
But Jesus makes clear
that the suspense is over,
and we are loved already.

Love is not about
sweet surprises
and stolen kisses.

**Love is about
the nitty-gritty
of being vulnerable,
and human,
and finite,
and incapable of doing everything for yourself.**

**And nobody loves you like that
more than God.**

* * *

Which brings us to today.

Ash Wednesday is the day—
and Lent is the season—
in which we confess that we

just
can't
do it.

We cannot fix ourselves.
We cannot make everything better.
We cannot even keep ourselves alive.

And so, today, we look to the One who can:
the One who came to us
in the greatest romantic gesture of all time
and did for us what needed to be done
because we were incapable of doing it ourselves.

By becoming human,
and living our temptations,
and dying our death,
and conquering our sin,
he came to our rescue,
and he made it okay
to be human again.

* * *

So as you prepare for this holy season—
as you think about how you might once again
rekindle your love affair with God—
I want to close with a different kind of suggestion
than what I've offered in years past.

Despite the clear instructions we just heard from Jesus,
we often turn Lent into a time of truly self-righteous piety.
We “give things up” in hopes of becoming “better” . . .
better at praying,
better at living,
better at self-control,
better at being worthy, and loveable, and loved by God.

But O you beautiful sinner,
don't you know that
God's love is not contingent
on what you can or cannot do?

**There is no cheating death.
There is no bettering our way to God.
There is only the romance of the One who
steps in, comes to our rescue,
and just gets it done.**

So, whatever you do for this Lent,
I encourage you to remember
that it's never actually about
"giving *something* up."

**It's
just . . .
about . . .
*giving up.*³**

You who are so utterly
human, and finite, and frail,
you are loved, and rescued, and saved
by the One who once gave everything up, too.
So stop trying so hard.
There's no more suspense.
The Lover of your soul
has already come
and rescued you once and for all.

Ashes to ashes,
dust to dust.

It's the greatest love story
ever told.

Amen.

³ "Possibly Insane Thoughts on Ash Wednesday (Written on the Occasion of a Sleepless Night)." *Mockingbird*, 9 Mar. 2011. Web. 12 Feb. 2018. <<http://www.mbird.com/2011/03/possibly-insane-thoughts-on-ash>>