

Reflection and Prayertime: Turning toward Ash Wednesday

February 15, 2021

In much of our country today we find ourselves covered up in snow with the 33 days until spring a bridge too far for some of us or at least our preferences. Not that we have an option. I hope any snowbunny types here are ecstatically happy because today I'm just not feeling it 😊.

We are moving forward from chocolate-covered, rose-petaled Valentine's day, and I hope you felt so beloved yesterday whether you are in a current personal relationship or not; you can always be in a healthy relationship with God and with yourself. And that can be enough. And here we go to Ash Wednesday this week.

So as we turn toward Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent, it can feel like heading toward a dire, dark place. Perhaps you picture it as a desert or a barren place, a place where we are reminded of our mortality – ashes to ashes, and dust to dust. As if we needed any more reminding of our humanness, our vulnerability, our susceptibility to all the things that are out of our control. I have a close friend whose father fell yesterday, hit his head, had a heart attack and passed away. He was 85 I believe and had begun to have some difficulties and they were looking to move him out of his house, but no idea that they would be waking up this morning with his physical absence. Now her dad is not around to care for the mom with her quickly advancing dementia. We all have something that has happened in the past year that was an unexpected, unwelcomed occurrence, and you just want to say, "what's happening? Please just make it stop."

We have been inundated non-stop with news stories and photos of people succumbing to Covid-19 and other causes of death, and now we are asked to look toward Ash Wednesday and all that it means and to reflect upon our returning to dust to dust, ashes to ashes. I'm seeking spring and liveliness and rejuvenation and joy, not wanting to think of the dust today.

And so I tell myself, we will get there to the Easter joy. But first, reflection time on our state of humanness with our foibles, our shortcomings, our "if only I had.... (fill in the blank). I'm finding I don't want to go there today. Or tomorrow. Or Wednesday.

But Ash Wednesday has its sweetness and I'm choosing to focus on that. I will observe Ash Wednesday and will refrain from some of the pleasures of life that day as traditionally we do not shop, party, or feast on this annual observance – we soberly reflect and refrain and give the seriousness of life and the fleeting nature of our time here its due.

But there are other aspects to focus on as well. For one, with all our human foibles and shortcomings and bad choices and sins and wishes for do-overs, do we even stop to be amazed at the fact that God sees every little bit of all that "badness" – all the lack of, all the worst of us on our worst day, and God still swoops in with love. As Bryan Stevenson says, we are all more than the worst thing we have ever done. Maybe the best gift of Ash Wednesday is to remind us that despite our humanness, despite our mortality, despite our propensity sometimes toward the opposite of God's goodness, God stands there waiting for us.

Recently I was facetimeing with my son Jordan in Albania and he was telling the story of how there were no furgons (which are the buses that go from city to city) coming from her town to his and so she

hitched a ride with a man driving a pickle truck. My son really embellished the story saying that Livia hid under a blanket but that when the truck was stopped, she had no choice but to avoid detection by hopping in the pickle barrel under some gherkins and held her breath until it was safe to emerge, but how she constantly smelled like pickles no matter how many showers and kept making his mouth water for a good American cheeseburger with pickles. Livia just sat beside him, shaking her head the whole time, but I played along with this whale of a tail and told him I'd heard in a movie that you can get rid of the smell of pickles by using vanilla.

I may have shared before that this movie, one of my very favorite movies from the 1980s and really of all time, is called "Crossing Delancey" and in the movie a Jewish grandmother Ida gets a truly annoying professional matchmaker to connect her granddaughter Izzy, played by Amy Irving, to a man named Sam who works at his father's pickle store family business. Izzy works at an independent bookstore and considers herself too cultured to date a man who handles pickles all day and instead has her sights set on a Dutch author who is clearly arrogant and manipulative and elitist, but she has a blind spot and can't see it. Sam is smitten and has game and tenaciously but respectfully stays in her orbit and keeps up the charm until she finally sees him for the awesomeness he is and plans a date with him. He's to pick her up for dinner at the home of Izzy's Jewish grandmother Ida.

The elitist author gets wind of the date and finds an emergency to keep her working so she'll be very late, luring her with the invitation to review his latest script because her feedback is so uber important. Izzy succumbs to this manipulation, so Sam, the pickle man and grandmother Ida are waiting a long time for Izzy and Sam is about ready to throw in the towel on it. He's bordering on "I tried and I failed and I have too much self-respect for this." Grandmother Ida tells him that before marriage, her future husband came to her and said, "Look, Ida, I'm falling into pieces if you want have me. Ida, I won't move until you say yes, I'm stuck here like a piece of furniture." She goes on to say she married him and it was very good. She said, "if somebody wanted me so much that he was ready to make a fool of himself, it was easy to see that he'd be good to me."

God is like Ida's husband and like Sam who waited for Izzy: God loves us with an unshakable fidelity. Despite anything we do or don't do, God stays steady and sturdy, like a piece of furniture, ready to love, forgive, sustain, and restore us to right relationship. And Ash Wednesday reminds us that God always crosses the vast domain between our humanity and God's divinity. Ash Wednesday is another step along the bridge that leads us from Christmas to Easter, and is a day for us to soberly and thoughtfully consider deeply who we are, who God is, and who we are to one another in that relationship.

So meanwhile we feel stuck. Stuck in snow, stuck in ice, stuck in less than ideal thoughts, behaviors and actions sometimes. Stuck in a pandemic. Stuck in the house. Stuck in patterns of thinking and doing we want to escape. Stuck in maybe a million ways that we don't want to be.

Ash Wednesday reminds us we are stuck with mortality. But we can also be stuck with the immortal God, who loves being stuck with us and is immovable like that piece of heavy furniture. In winds of change, in times of unsettling, in the ground shifting beneath our feet at times, we can be stuck with God who walks alongside us, props us up, restores us, brings us to deep relationship.

If you observe Ash Wednesday this week, may every piece of ash that lights on your forehead bring the abiding awareness of God's abiding love and sustain you wherever you find yourself today. Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust. God's got you. What a day of great joy to realize that fully! Thanks be to God.