

Stephen Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

February 14, 2024

All Years, Ash Wednesday, Revised Common Lectionary

[Joel 2:1-2,12-17](#)

or [Isaiah 58:1-12](#)

[Psalm 103 or 103:8-14](#)

[2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10](#)

[Matthew 6:1-6,16-21](#)

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Once everyone noticed that Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day fall on the same day this year, it didn't take long for clergy everywhere to start texting each other with tongue-in-cheek ideas or posting them on social media. Maybe this year we should draw the ashes on people's foreheads in the shape of a heart. Maybe we should give out little candy hearts but instead of "BE MINE" or "YOU'RE SWEET" they should say "REPENT" or "U R DUST." Someone posted that they were renaming today VaLENTine's Day.

The pairing seems a little incongruous: the frivolous and the serious. Valentine's Day, a day about love, mostly romantic love, although stretched to cover friendship for kids who will exchange cards and candy with their classmates, a day some take seriously but one that also feels somehow a little trivial and commercial.

Ash Wednesday, a day that at least in the popular imagination might seem like a day of somber glumness, a day for feeling bad about yourself and meditating on your inadequacies and your mortality.

But I wonder if that incongruity is only there if we imagine love as not fierce enough, or God as not loving enough.

St. Valentine, after all, was a Christian martyr, a priest or maybe a bishop who held fast to his faith through persecution. There's something of Ash Wednesday in that story. Only in the Middle Ages, by a historical accident, did his name get associated with legends about romantic love. And anyone who's truly loved another human being, romantically or otherwise, knows that love isn't about candy hearts but about the very unglamorous, very earthy work of sacrifice and empathy and shared labor. You haven't loved unless you've loved in the ashes.

And Ash Wednesday is less a day to chide ourselves or imagine a stern and distant God wagging a divine finger at us than a day to feel the fierceness of God's love for us precisely as the dust and ashes we are: a God who loved us into being at the first, who scooped us and molded us out of the dust of the ground, and who has a destiny in mind for us beyond what we can possibly imagine.

That destiny includes not leaving us as we are. Because God's fierce love for us and God's radiant purposes for us get blocked in all kinds of ways, including through some of the choices we make. This part of Ash Wednesday is true. You and I are sinners, which means each of us, in the course of our lives, has made and will make choices, some almost beyond our control not to make, some absolutely conscious and intentional, that harm ourselves, harm others, harm God's creation. In a few minutes we will pray a Litany of Penitence that tries, as much as human words can do, to cover the whole range of the ways we fall short of God's purpose, from brutal violence to minor but exquisite interpersonal pettiness, with participation in systemic injustice and collective neglect of creation along the way.

It's been rightly said that God loves each of us exactly as we are and also loves each of us too much to leave us exactly as we are. Which is why God has already done something about it. Jesus Christ, our friend and our brother, came into this world as a new kind of life, a new kind of humanity, one completely filled with God's life and completely aligned with God's purposes. Because this world is what it is and what we humans have made it, it rejected him and killed him. But he is a life that can't be extinguished, and he shares his divine life with anyone who asks for it, anyone who is drawn to him. When we put our trust in him, when we're baptized in his name, when we're made members of his Body, we're filled with that same life. We don't stop being sinners, at least not right away, and not all the way in this lifetime. There will never be a time when it's not right for us to examine ourselves and confess those things that still separate us from God's full vision for us. But it's also true that, as the late bishop of Atlanta Frank Allan used to shock people by saying, "Sin is a problem that God has solved"; or as Paul puts it, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. You are wrapped in an eternal blanket of God's love and grace that will never let you go, even in your worst moment; you are bound to Jesus Christ in an unshakable bond that is stronger than hatred, stronger than the devil, stronger than death.

So today perhaps you might receive these ashes, and this Eucharist, as a kind of valentine from God; a sign of God's love for you that's far beyond any dozen roses or candy heart, a love that's fierce and wild, that's unfazed by the worst of what we human beings can do, that's willing to sit with us in the ashes and to raise us out of them into new life.