

## Dust to dust: Some thoughts on Ash Wednesday in 2021

“Remember that thou art but dust, and to dust thou shalt return.”

Whatever your thoughts are on Ash Wednesday, Lent, or Easter, there is something hauntingly honest and sobering about these words. They call us to pause. They stop us in our tracks and remind us of the blip that our lives are on the timeline of eternity. They also remind us of our connection to the rest of creation; we are made of the same chemical compounds as the earth, the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the beast of the field. We are human because the Creator breathed the Spirit, the breath of life, into our lungs.

We are made in the image of the Holy One.

But we are dust, and to dust we shall return.

Since becoming an Episcopalian, Ash Wednesday has been, perhaps, my favorite day of the Church calendar. While some may think it morbid, I have always been drawn to the raw honesty of it, to the call to unflinchingly acknowledge our own mortality and live out the rest of our lives in the light of that knowledge.

I clearly recall my first Ash Wednesday. I was a senior in college, and went with a few members of the Episcopal Campus Ministry to the campus green during the busiest breaks between classes to offer ashes to any students who desired them, but whose schedules made it difficult to attend a mass on that day. I received my first ashes from my deacon, and then imposed them on her in return.

For the rest of the day I walked around feeling like I had made it, like I had finally found my people and I bore their mark. Having had taken several courses on Islam and studied the nuanced meanings of the hijab, I felt a kind of kinship with my Muslim sisters who wore the mark of their faith day in and day out. I had often secretly envied and admired them. What must it be like to not be able to deny your faith? To know that anyone who saw you would know, or rather, would make assumptions, about you and what you believed? And what must it be like to live your life in light of that? For a few hours I imagined that I had some idea of what that might be like.

Since that day I have faithfully received ashes every February. I have gone to mass before work, stood at train stations with priests offering ashes to morning commuters, and unexpectedly learned that the Roman way of imposing ashes leaves no mark on one's forehead, as they are sprinkled in the hair instead.

This year will be different. It will be the first year since 2014 that I will not receive ashes. AND THAT IS OKAY.

Much to my dismay, over the past week or so I have seen the predictable debates and bickering in various online forums about the best way to impose ashes during a pandemic (there isn't one), if ashes should be offered at all (they shouldn't), if they are required (they aren't), and if they are not offered, what should be done instead.

That last question is one that I would like to address, and to do so, I'd like to take a page from the Desert Fathers and Mothers, specifically from the hagiography of St. Mary of Egypt.

Many of the desert monastics lived in isolation, but came together to celebrate mass in community, either weekly or on major religious holidays. Celebrating religious holidays in community is something that one might call a key feature of Christianity. I can certainly understand the desire to engage in communal worship.

But I would like to argue that it is not THE defining feature of Christianity, and that we have examples in our history that point to other options. Take St. Mary of Egypt.

As the story goes, in the 6th century there was a harlot named Mary who slept her way to Jerusalem with a group of pilgrims – yes, this is another one of those redeemed harlot stories that the Judeo-Christian tradition is so obsessed with. I can't help it. This one is going somewhere important though. Stick with me.

Once there, she attempted to enter a church to pray, but was mysteriously unable to do so. Upon praying to Virgin, she is granted entrance and experiences a conversion. Taking three loaves of bread, she then crosses the River Jordan and enters the desert, where she lives for the rest of her life as an ascetic, with no other human contact for forty-seven years.

Forty-seven years. Of no human contact. No ashes. No confession. No eucharist.

Her story is known due to her encounter toward the end of her life with the priest Zosimas, who comes upon her during his desert travels. She asks that he return to the same place the following Easter to administer the Eucharist for her, after which she dies. Zosimas, so impressed by her piety and spiritual excellence, returns to his monastery to tell all of the other monks of this holy woman.

Siblings in Christ, if Mary of Egypt can go 47 years without human contact and can achieve spiritual communion without the rite of communion, perhaps we can all abstain from human contact for a bit longer in the interest of preserving the life of our fellow children of God.

Continuing to engage in these physically communal practices even as the death toll rises is not Christ-like. It is not loving our neighbor as ourselves. It is endangering our neighbor, and ourselves, putting their lives and our own at risk.

Engaging in these practices, even if they are “probably safe” or “probably okay”- phrases that I keep seeing tossed about in these discussions- is harmful in another respect as well. It does not honor the sacrifice of frontline workers who are putting themselves in harms way day in and day out to care for those of us who are falling victim to this disease. It is not showing solidarity with those who are suffering, and what did our Lord do throughout his entire earthly ministry, even unto his death, but show solidarity with those who are suffering? Engaging in these rituals in this context is not honoring to God; it is making a gross mockery of the sacrifice of the Lord’s servants by cloaking worship of the Divine Healer in the vestments of piety.

Siblings in Christ, as we wander and stumble about in the wilderness of this pandemic, I urge you to look to the rich traditions of of our Desert Fathers and Mothers who fled TO the wilderness and led ascetic lives full of meditation, and of reading and singing the Psalms in their quest for spiritual enlightenment. As you consider your Lenten practices this year, consider that imitating the lives of these saints is how we can follow the great commandment to love our neighbors in the midst of this wilderness. Embody another aspect of the Christian tradition for a while. Perhaps our spiritualities will be all the richer for the variety of our experiences. Certainly more people will be alive for them.

*Emily Bange is a spiritual wanderer and student of religion, language, and culture who, thanks to a sociology project, stumbled upon The Episcopal Church in 2013 and has never looked back. Confirmed at St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Newark, DE in 2014, Emily has since been a part of several Episcopal communities in Delaware and Pennsylvania, and is presently finding spiritual nourishment in a Zoom Bible Study of a few fellow Episcopalian scattered across North America. She currently teaches Spanish to elementary schoolers in a virtual school and plans to pursue a degree in Religious Studies at Union Theological Seminary starting in the fall of 2021.*