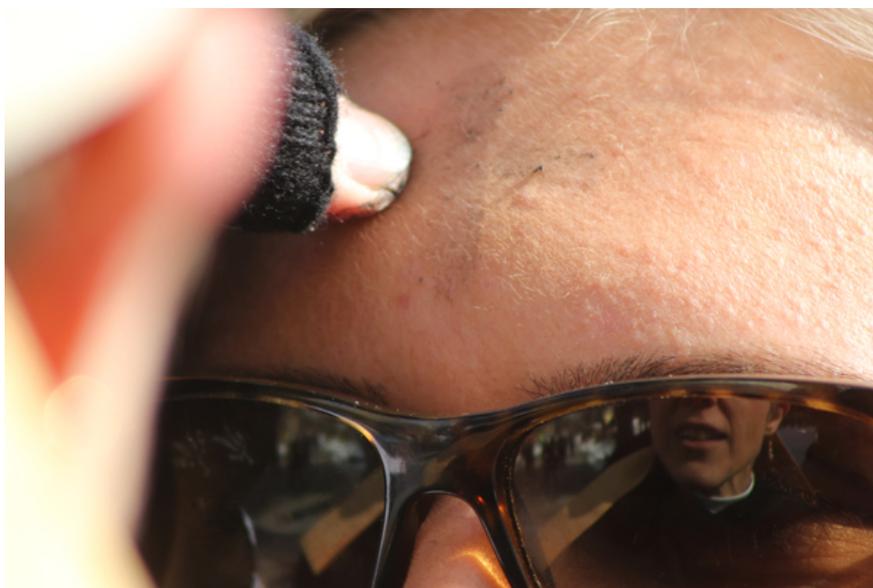

Religion News Service | (<http://religionnews.com/2016/02/10/ash-wednesday-sin-lent/>)

BELIEFS

On Ash Wednesday, I remember: I am a sinner. I will die (COMMENTARY)

By **Jacob Lupfer** | February 10, 2016



Nicole Been of Chicago receives ashes during “Ashes to Go” near the Foggy Bottom Metro station in Washington, D.C., on Ash Wednesday (March 5, 2014). RNS photo by Adelle M. Banks

(RNS) “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Every year on Ash Wednesday, I seek out some member of the clergy to say those words to me.

They come from the curse of mankind in Genesis 3, but I find blessing in hearing them in the tale of the loving purposes of God.

Though I think and write about religion, I am not particularly devout. I can accept faith as a way of seeing. But I struggle with faith as a set of theological propositions requiring intellectual assent.

ADVERTISEMENT

Why, then, do I seek out a church on Ash Wednesday, but rarely on Sundays?

I think the answer has to do with the radical and disorienting nature of the observance.

Our consumer culture promises that attractiveness and eternal youth are just one purchase away. Cash or credit. But Ash Wednesday reminds us we are dead in our sins and, soon enough, dead in fact. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

ADVERTISEMENT

There is a strong tendency in American churches to suppose that Christianity condemns other people's corrupt values, but never our own. Easily available, grace becomes cheap.

Ash Wednesday subverts the Sunday-best facade many wear to church every week and the happy-clappy shallowness they find there.

READ: [Did Coldplay appropriate Hindu themes in its latest music video?](http://religionnews.com/2016/02/10/coldplay-appropriate-hindu-themes-latest-music-video-commentary/)

(<http://religionnews.com/2016/02/10/coldplay-appropriate-hindu-themes-latest-music-video-commentary/>)

ADVERTISEMENT

To the degree that sin is even a relevant cultural category at all, it is almost completely subjective. And sin, if it even exists, is something other people do.

Yet the Ash Wednesday liturgy recalls memorable lines from Psalm 51: "My sin is ever before me."

It feels strange to recall my own sins and the manifold social evils in which I am complicit. Is there something rebellious and wicked in my very nature? On Ash Wednesday, I am forced to confront those parts of my self.

Many Catholics and liturgical Protestants attend services in the morning or at noon. The ashen crosses on their foreheads bear silent but compelling witness to their faith.

In secular Washington, D.C., a town obsessed with power and status, the ashes are welcome reminders that many people still lead quiet lives of devotion. Ultimately, they acknowledge, they have no power over nature. Ultimately, they are dust.

I prefer an Ash Wednesday service in the evening. I don't feel quite worthy to wear the sign of the cross on my forehead, supposing it to be more appropriate for people with stronger faith and more active devotion.

READ: [Sikh actor demands Mexican airline change staff behavior](http://religionnews.com/2016/02/09/sikh-actor-demands-mexican-airline-change-staff-behavior/)

(<http://religionnews.com/2016/02/09/sikh-actor-demands-mexican-airline-change-staff-behavior/>)

But even I can approach the altar on Ash Wednesday, suspending for a moment my speculations about what parts of religion are true and what parts are illusions. Even if I do not finally know what Jesus can do about it or how, it feels right to acknowledge my sin, my incompleteness and my mortality.

For all my childhood years of going to church to hear that God loves me, it seems worth remembering that “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). Church cannot be a place to have my ideological views, my consumer preferences or my lifestyle choices affirmed. It should be, in the words of a Catholic priest during the Civil War, “one clean spot on earth, uncontaminated by politics, where every sinner may bow his proud head before God.”

And so I will bow my head. I will receive the cross of ashes and hear the words, “Repent, and believe the gospel.” Of course, the meaning of the gospel has confounded the philosophers of the ages. And yet it is so simple, even a child can understand: Jesus “came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.” (1 Timothy 1:15).

I will leave the church in silent contemplation, then go to my home and wash the ashes off my forehead. And I will be vividly aware, for one day at least, that my immortality and righteousness are actually illusions, while my finitude and sin are very real.

I will credit the church, so fashionably and widely accused of trafficking in delusions, with telling me the truth. For the message of Ash Wednesday is indisputable: I am a sinner, and I will die.

And in the penitent days of Lent, my skeptical heart will wonder what other truths the church may possess.

(Jacob Lupfer is a contributing editor at RNS and a doctoral candidate in political science at Georgetown University)

Get RNS in your inbox  **SIGN UP**
