

Title: Love in the Time of Lent

Date: 2/25/2024 (Ash Wednesday)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 7 pm Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Isaiah 58:1-12](#); [2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10](#); [Matthew 6:1-6,16-21](#); [Psalm 103 or 103:8-14](#)

Audio Link: <https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/st-albans-austin/episodes/Ash-Wednesday-Love-in-the-Time-of-Lent-e2fqolq>

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/d4OhaLkmdIo?t=1082>

This year, Easter falls on March 31. So, working backwards from there, Ash Wednesday lands on February 14, otherwise known as Valentine's Day. Even though, according to BCP 17, Holy Days take precedence over all other days of special observance, people have gotten really clever about mashing up the two.

Wherever you are on the scale between wholeheartedly embracing Valentine's Day or resentfully calling it "Singlens Awareness Day," whether you prefer to celebrate Galentine's Day with your gal pals or ignore everything pink and red and heart-shaped, I hope we can all take a second to stop and appreciate their creativity.

From Jubilee Church in North Austin:

"Roses are Red. Someday we'll be dead."

"Violets are blue. I want to remember my mortality with you."

From Trinity Church Boston:

"Roses are red, violets are blue, when you are dead, God will still love you."

My favorite is "You can't spell Valentine" without "Lent."

Years ago I was invited to preach at the wedding for two of my friends from seminary. Rather than choosing from the selection of suggested readings in the Book of Common Prayer, they decided to pick their own readings from Scripture.

As I prepared for a Bible study with them based on these passages, something gradually dawned on me. The word "love" did not appear anywhere in the readings, and in fact the Old Testament reading they chose was the passage from Isaiah we just heard. We can call it a lot of things, but romantic is probably not the first word that comes to mind.

They were getting married, and the word "love" was nowhere to be found. Yet, because of the life they lived, their commitment not just to care for each other but for all of Creation and all of God's creatures, including their fellow human beings, love is the reason they chose these words. Love is their foundation and their driving force. They embodied the patient love that loosens injustice, the fierce love that breaks every yoke, and the nourishing love that grows gardens and feeds the hungry.

So, I want to propose that Ash Wednesday is all about love, specifically God's love for us, and Lent is all about living into that love and responding to that love.

Yes, the ashes we receive are a sign of our mortality. These ashes are ALSO a sign of our belovedness, a reminder to repent, as in turning back toward God and strengthening our connection to the source of life.

Yes, we are dust, and to dust we shall return, AND every moment we breathe, we are filled with the breath of life. The breath moving through us? It is the breath of God, the Spirit of God.

This life we have? It is a gift from God, a gift of God's grace and love. This gift of life is not something we had to earn, not something we could earn. It's a miracle that we are alive at this time, in this place, gathered here together.

Likewise, salvation is not something we had to earn or could possibly do enough to earn. Yet, we aren't passive recipients. We need to be open to receiving these gifts, to recognizing that they are indeed gifts and not the result of our personal achievements. And when we acknowledge them as gifts from God, we are moved to respond in some way that shows that we know this to be true.

That's not for God's sake. That's for our sake, to know, to believe, to live as if our identity is grounded not in sin but in belovedness, to have our starting point not be avoiding punishment but becoming more fully a child of God. Take a moment to think about the difference it makes when our goal isn't to avoid doing wrong...but to discover and nurture the seed of joy and light and life that is already in us.

Why do we care about Lent? Why do you care about Lent?

God's not keeping score. "Peggy gets a point for Monday, but I'll have to deduct a point for Tuesday."

God's not grading us at the end of these 40 days, "Peggy gets a C for fasting, A for almsgiving and B for prayer."

We're not doing Lent for God. We're not doing Lent so God will love us more. We're not doing Lent to be more saved. And since Bishops and priests are most definitely **not** in the position to issue any kind of report card, you're not doing Lent because Bishop Ryan is coming on March 17, nor are you doing it for me.

Lent is not something we do in exchange for something.

To answer the question "Why do we care about Lent?", we might take a step back and ask ourselves, "What is Lent for?"

Lent is for getting back to the basics; it's meant to help us intentionally find the kind of time and space we need to reflect and re-focus. It's easy to get caught up in getting through life one day at a time, one week at a time.]

There's a lot to do; there will **always** be more we can do. When things get busy, we talk about putting our heads down and grinding it out. Lent is for looking up...to see where we are and to notice the direction we're heading in and ask, is that where we want to go?

Lent is for focusing on what's most important, on what's essential to our life in God and with God. The reason we would stop doing something during Lent is to remove obstacles that keep us from seeing or hearing or experiencing that which is essential. The reason we start doing something in Lent is to help us better see or hear or experience that which is essential.

The idea behind trying something for a season is to see what happens when we do this new thing consistently. If it helps us be more righteous, as in more right with God, more in line with the kind of worship and fasting that God desires, we keep doing it. If it doesn't, we stop. Or maybe we discover it's an adjustment we only need to do for forty days, once a year.

Whether we do something related to prayer, fasting or almsgiving, it's all about transformation, about getting somewhere. That's one reason I like these bookmarks with our logo on it. They remind us that church is always pointing toward something; it's not where we stop. It's taking us somewhere, closer to right relationship with God, closer to alignment with the way Jesus walked, closer to feeling and following the Holy Spirit as it moves in and through and among us.

The goal isn't to fast and then have a huge feast and go back to the way things were after Lent is over. The goal isn't to give up something so that we can say that we "did" Lent. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, that would be like seeking God without doing what is right in the eyes of God. That would be like fasting while ignoring God's commandments.

You might already know the answer to "What is Lent for?" or "Why do I care about Lent?" or you might need forty days to figure it out. There might be another question that's been poking at you. We're all in different places on our spiritual journey.

So, before I officially invite you to the observance of a holy Lent, think both about how you want to observe it, and for what purpose. How will it make a difference in your life with God and the people of God? How will it make a difference in the way you love God with all your heart and soul and might, and your neighbors as yourself?