

Ash Wednesday Meditation

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*Ash Wednesday (B)
February 17, 2021*

Text: Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

Last spring, as we were settling in to the first weeks of what has turned out to be months of social distancing and restrictions, one of my friends, a Catholic priest, remarked, "I didn't plan on giving up quite this much for Lent!"

And it's true. All of us have made sacrifice upon sacrifice over the last year, and suffered loss upon loss—the big and obvious losses, like the friends and neighbors and family members who have died during the pandemic, as well as the disruption to our relationships, jobs, and well being. In one sense, last year's Lent never ended. We've been living with deprivation and loss and sacrifice for almost a whole year.

Typically on Ash Wednesday, the preacher's job is to convince people of the spiritual value of Lenten discipline and sacrifice, but that seems wildly inappropriate this year. I won't encourage you to give up more than you have already lost. If you find some small sense of enjoyment and dignity in a piece of chocolate, a moment's escape in a good TV show, or a healthy connection to distant friends on social media, I'm not going to tell you to give any of that up.

Likewise, when I hear Jesus say that we should beware of practicing our piety before others, I think, "Fat chance of that right now!" And when he says, "Go into your room and shut the door," I think, "We've got that one pretty well nailed down at this point."

But I think what we have to do is to tune out the negative commands in this passage—the stuff Jesus tells us to do that we're already doing, because of our circumstances—and tune into the positive side of what he's inviting us to do. And here's what it's about: create a space to be with God.

Linger over a verse of scripture with your morning cup of coffee. (I'll be sending out links to a Lenten devotional for those who want some structure and support in taking this on.)

Before you put on your mask to go into a store, give thanks to God for your health, and pray for the people you're about to encounter.

Light a candle when you sit down to dinner, as a way of remembering that God's light is still shining, and ask God how you might reflect that light for others around you.

Pick one or two of these things, or come up with your own, as a way of creating an intimate space for you and God in your days.

Jesus promises that those who turn toward God store up a heavenly treasure—invisible, but precious beyond measure. And he says that were we locate what is valuable to us, precious to us, is where our heart resides. In creating space for God in our day to day lives, we lodge our hearts with God. And out of that relationship of grace, acceptance, and fullness, we're able to treat others generously and to bear up in challenging times.

So I invite you, in the name of Christ, to observe this season of Lent not through

deprivation and sacrifice, but through creating spaces for God in your everyday life. In those spaces, may you meditate on God's Word, may you practice a Lenten posture of self-examination and penitence, and may you discover God's grace and forgiveness, equipping you for every good work. Amen.