

Introduction

The great twentieth-century theologian, Karl Barth, once advised Christians to pray with the Bible in one hand and *The New York Times* in the other. He meant, in part, that faith and daily life interpret each another. "Drink deeply of the Word," Saint Ambrose once told his people. "Soon you'll find yourself craving more." He was right, of course. God's Word forever illumines our path—a shining "pillar of fire" by night, daily bread for our journey. Yet our experience of the world's perils and opportunities also shapes our response to that Word. We're reminded that God's love for the world didn't result in indifference and neglect, but in the Word sent to "pitch a tent among us," to share our flesh, to taste the world in all its salty, roiling complexity. Word and world: they belong together.

Lent reminds us that Christians form a community gathered in contemplation around God's Word—and that means we're also gathered in meditation on the world, its goodness and grandeur, its beauty and brutality. Lent is a call to pay attention, to see creation as God does, to gather our faith not only from God's promise (where it begins), but also from God's presence in the low, vast murmur of human life that tugs at our hearts, heads, and hands. Be prepared for some surprises.

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Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust

You see them everywhere today: smudged on the foreheads of chirping school kids, etched above the eyes of young women walking to work, sprinkled on silver-haired seniors. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust"—a haunting, familiar phrase first found in the burial service of the *English Book of Common Prayer*—reminds us of a truth most of us prefer not to ponder: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19). After all, what are dust and ashes but dirt, *matter out of place*, evidence that things aren't what (or where) they should be, harsh reminders that our own lives will drift away like smoke? Yet Abraham, our forebear in faith, saw his dust-and-ashes condition as cause for celebration. In a story that blends humor and horror, he probes the wideness of God's mercy, boldly bargaining with the Lord to spare the "cities of the plain" (Genesis 18:23–33). "Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city...forty-five...forty...thirty...twenty...ten...?" Brazen in his belief that mercy trumps vengeance, Abraham discovers that God's passion to forgive surpasses every human plan to destroy.

Paradoxically, then, the ashes that signal our morality, our world's extinction, and our sore need for repentance (what the Gospel calls "conversion") also symbolize God's choice to forgive *everybody everything*. This was the unimaginable secret Abraham learned when bargaining with God. Our destiny isn't destruction but dancing. God seeks not the sinner's death but the heart's return: not ashes to dust but ashes to *Easter*.

Thursday after Ash Wednesday

A God of Communion and Covenant

One thing is clear to anyone who opens the Scriptures: Israel's God is a God of communion and covenant. The God of Sarah and Abraham, Rebecca and Isaac, Rachel and Jacob, is a God passionately focused on humankind, intent on participating in our history, hungry for relationship with every person. The God we meet in the stories of creation and Exodus is a "God with skin on," One who understands that our primary mode of perceiving reality—of interacting with God, world, and each other—is flesh and the body. Even after trouble erupts in paradise, and fiery angels slam the gates shut (see Genesis 3:22–24), God puts the divine self at the mercy of our bodies and dresses our shivering spirits in skin. From the get-go—as unthinkable as it seems—God longs to be at our *service*; he seeks to show heavenly goodness in human weakness, need, and limitation. There is something unspeakably tender and real about those words in Genesis 3:21: "The Lord God made garments of skin for the man and for his wife, and clothed them." Confronted by human failure, disobedience, and sin, God reacts by *clothing* and *comforting*, not by condemning. Genesis teaches us that God weeps when we bleed; that God's own sorrow and compassion outweigh our own.

So the Bible reveals a God who creates us as flesh, *thinking*, not as "talking heads." Eve and Adam were not sanitized sanctuaries of "pure thought," but eggs, meat, sperm, and jelly—all the things that make us, *us*. What does this mean? It means every day we meet the holy in the homely; the divine in the daily; the saving God in blood, sweat, and tears; in soil and labor; in sex, seed, and harvest; in fertility and childbirth. Poet Anne Sexton once wondered aloud whether God might not envy our *bodies*—might not, now and then, crave to smoke a cigar or give us a bath? I suspect she was right.

*We meet the holy in the homely,
the divine in the daily.*

Friday After Ash Wednesday

Made for Each Other

It has been estimated that the average consumer in North America devours five times as much grain as the more than two billion persons who live in the world's poorer nations—and more than twice as much as people in Western Europe, where many of our ancestors were born. Much of our grain consumption happens indirectly, in the form of meat, eggs, and alcohol. In addition, citizens in the United States use almost a quarter of the world's petroleum-based products (chiefly in the form of fossil fuels). In a nutshell, we over-consume in virtually every known category of natural resources.

Yet the Bible imagines human beings as trusted stewards—not exploiters—of creation. It suggests that creation and creatures were made for each other, and that earth's bounty—its energy, rhythms, beauty, and fruitfulness—is given to us as a sacred trust for which we are responsible. Ecology and “environmentalism” are thus more than trendy social or political movements; they are realities rooted in faith and Scripture. For Christians, especially, there is a bond between ecology, the environment, ethics, and Eucharist. For what we offer at Mass are gifts “earth has given and human hands have made.”

Can how I eat, what I eat, and the amount I eat or drink shape my relationship with God? Perhaps. Can over-consumption be construed as (literally!) taking food out of the mouths of the hungry? You bet. Lent's a time to take stock not only of what's in my heart, but what's in my kitchen. What will I find?

We are what we eat.

Saturday After Ash Wednesday

Twin Dramas

The Bible opens with two poems about creation. The first (Genesis 1:1—2:4a) is a solemn recital of how God called the world—and us—into being: “Then God said, ‘Let there be light....Let the earth bring forth living creatures....Let us make humankind....’” We read this poem—with its stunning account of how suns, stars, planets, people, worlds, and galaxies began—at every Easter Vigil. Yet this ancient text about the days of creation isn’t the Bible’s sole description of what God did “in the beginning.” Centuries earlier, an anonymous Hebrew poet had composed another, more colorful tale about a God, a garden, a man, a woman, a tree of knowledge, and a wily serpent who was “more crafty than any other wild animal” (Genesis 2:4b—3:24).

Both these poems show God creating, but they do so from very different perspectives. The first poem is *God-centered*, emphasizing the Lord’s dramatic initiative in bringing the universe to be. God brings opposites into unity: heaven and earth, light and darkness, evening and morning, night and day, land and sea, flora and fauna, plants and people, man and woman. God’s creating Word makes the world a wedding, a place where opposites find mutual love and communion. The second poem is *human-centered*. Its action focuses on “Adam and Eve” in a drama that leads from paradise and ecstasy to temptation, disobedience, fear, failure, and banishment. The first poem begins in darkness but ends in bliss. The second begins in paradise but ends in hell—or rather, in a world whose tears are bitter and unforgiving.

Two poems, two dramas, two versions of what it means to be human in a universe of God’s making. Our challenge this Lent is to move from bitterness to bliss, from world as weeping to world as wedding.

Make the world a wedding.

Sunday
First Sunday of Lent

Love's Human Face

The American Catholic writer, Flannery O'Connor, once claimed that an artist's principal task is to render the highest possible justice to the visible universe. She meant, I suspect, that great art arises not from isolated moments of private inspiration, but from sustained attention to what's going on around us—in our fellow humans; in the world's follies, dreams, and disasters; in nature's grit and grandeur. The world yields its secrets to those who *look*—whether our vision falls on squirrels raiding the bird-feeder in the backyard or extends itself through space, courtesy of cameras aboard the Hubble telescope.

It is surely no accident that after the Bible describes the world's primeval catastrophes, culminating in flood and failure, it explains how God's covenant with Noah's family and "every living creature" took visible shape as a rainbow in the clouds, "sign of the covenant between me and the earth" (Genesis 9:10, 13). A moving aria in Johann Sebastian Bach's "Passion According to St. John" makes use of the same image, likening Jesus' body, bruised and broken on the cross, to the rainbow that embodies God's ever-renewed covenant with the world. God may be "hidden" (Isaiah 45:15), but God's love is as visible as skies and scars, rainbows and wrinkles. Our job is to look for it in unexpected people and unsuspected places. When Paul praises love in 1 Corinthians 13, he shows us its human face. For love always needs a body—only then can it "bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things" (1 Corinthians 13:7).

Let your love be visible.

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Nathan Mitchell offers daily reflections for Lent and Easter that focus on the unity of Word and world in our lives. Drawing upon the wisdom of Scripture and such notable sources as St. Benedict, Flannery O'Connor, C. S. Lewis, Elie Wiesel, and on world events and folktales, Mitchell weaves together the threads of deep spiritual awareness and the familiar colors of our lives.

Allow yourself this Lenten season to be wrapped in the unique fabric of reflection and grace of *Daybreaks* with Nathan Mitchell.



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