

# There Your Heart Will Be

Depths of Love

**ASH WEDNESDAY, YEAR B**

Ash Wednesday is about refocusing and realigning ourselves in relationship to God and one another. We must encounter our sinfulness and frailty not with shame and blame but with honesty and truth, trusting that God receives our confession.

## REFERENCES

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Psalm 51:1-17

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

## COLORS

Purple

“Beware of practicing your piety before others” (Matthew 6:1). Not exactly the exhortation I’m looking for as I’m planning worship for Ash Wednesday. Isn’t the whole point coming together to worship, confess, and repent as enter the season of Lent? Shouldn’t we, as worship planners, be leading our people into practices of individual *and* corporate piety?

Yes and yes! Thankfully, Jesus isn’t telling us not to practice our piety together. Jesus tells us not to practice our piety *before* others. In other words, we need to be clear about why we come to worship on this day. It’s not about showing one another how righteous we are. Our piety is about properly ordering ourselves before God and then neighbor. On Ash Wednesday, especially, we gather to confess and repent to realign ourselves with the truth that God is God, and we are not. And then, properly ordered in relationship to God, we can learn to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Now, before you start checking to make sure you're not reading the sermon notes, I promise I'm going somewhere with this. There is a gravity to Ash Wednesday that, honestly, feels a bit odd some years. We've just encountered the glory of Transfiguration Sunday, and suddenly we're plunged into the solemn reminder that we are fragile earth beings, made of dust and returning to the dust when we die. The suddenness of this transition can sometimes make us veer into one extreme or another. Some might decide not to make a big deal of Ash Wednesday, to downplay the importance of confession, repentance, and grappling with our frailty within the worship service, if they hold an Ash Wednesday service at all. Others might decide to overcorrect, heaping on double helpings of shame and blame to try to convince congregants to care about their sinfulness and mortality. Such services can feel like previews of Good Friday, and while it's true that for many of our congregations Lent is bookended with Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, Ash Wednesday is not about over-anticipating the crucifixion.

Instead, Ash Wednesday is about refocusing and realigning ourselves in relationship to God and one another. We must encounter our sinfulness and frailty not with shame and blame but with honesty and truth, trusting that God receives our confession. So, live into the prayer of confession and repentance as an anchor for the whole service. Imbue the confession with honest naming and recognition of individual and systemic sin. Let confession testify to the realities of the brokenness in our world that we perpetuate. *And* guide your people into words and acts of repentance that are as robust as their confession. Celebrate—yes, I said celebrate—that God's grace empowers us to turn from sin and toward God.

As you drape your altar and/or space in purple, add in reminders of our deep connection to the earth. Fill some vases with rocks and sand. Place some potted plants on the altar or floor of the chancel. You might even want to include a palm branch as a reminder that Sunday's palms become Wednesday's ashes. Prepare the space in a way that draws the congregation into the truth that we are humble creatures, made in the image of God *and* created out of the dirt of the earth. Let this be a way of welcoming your people into the imposition of ashes as a ritual of humility, but also a ritual that celebrates the reality of our existence. *We are dust and to dust we shall return.* This is a statement of truth, not confession. We are called to repent and believe the gospel *so that* we can live in the truth of our beautiful frailty and dependence on God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

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