Witness to the dark: Ashes in the streets

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Here's how our new tradition got started. Back in 2009, at the urging of the diocesan office where the young priest Bertie Pearson was working, Episcopal churches in San Francisco's Mission District met to discuss possible joint projects. Bertie had pink cheeks and a sweet, pale face with swept-back, jet-black hair; in his formal black clericals he looked like a choirboy dressed up as Johnny Cash. A former DJ and drummer in the Mission music scene, Bertie was completely respectful of tradition, a real believer and still a punk at heart—a punk for God.

Bertie's mentor at Church of the Advent had suggested creating an outdoor processional liturgy as "a public act of repentance" for homelessness and street violence and holding it on Good Friday. "You know, the Anglo-Catholics love processions," Bertie said. "So folks from Advent, St. John's, Holy Innocents and St. Gregory's, and I think the Franciscans, did that 2009 Good Friday walk."

That day we covered a lot of ground, walking from one end of the Mission to the other, stopping to chant prayers at places where people had been murdered or at sites of suffering designated as "stations of the cross." We prayed at the police station, in a garbage-filled park where a boy had been shot, in front of a homeless shelter. Some in our group—about 40 men and women and a couple of small children—chatted as we strolled, while others seemed lost in their own meditations. A nun in a brown Franciscan habit carried a large photograph of a bound, blindfolded, kneeling Iraqi prisoner with a duct-taped wound in his side; two women

in sweatshirts took turns carrying a heavy cross; and a couple of thurifers censed storefronts and passersby enthusiastically. Most onlookers smiled, and a few fell in step with us at different points, joining in the hymns. In this neighborhood, an outdoor Good Friday commemoration wasn't entirely unusual.

Still, I felt awkward when the procession crossed paths with people I knew: a caseworker at the homeless shelter, a guy from our food pantry outside the check-cashing place on 16th Street, a friend at the achingly hip Ritual Coffee. I'd been a member of St. Gregory's for almost a decade by then and a leader in its liturgies, but what I thought of as my "church" life and my "real" life didn't usually intersect so publicly.

I was assigned to chant a prayer in Spanish at a boarded-up gas station, and when we got there, I leaned against the chain-link fence in a borrowed cassock, dry-mouthed, feeling self-conscious and fraudulent. I wasn't clergy, I wasn't a native Spanish speaker, I'd never before been part of a Good Friday procession, and in fact I couldn't remember all the stations of the cross in order. But then, as the group started walking again, a sweaty black guy with a shaved head came up and grabbed my sleeve. "Mother!" he blurted out urgently, "I want to come with you all, but I have to go somewhere in a hurry, can you bless me?" He bent in close, sorrowful and dope-sick, and suddenly it seemed silly to be concerned with how others might see me. "You're just out there," Bertie said, "as an icon of the church, and people come before you in humility and bow their heads, and it really isn't about you at all."

The next year, 2010, Bertie gave me a call. He was still working for the diocese, but he kept an ear out for what was happening in the Mission. He'd heard that a chaplain friend and I were planning to hold Ash Wednesday services at General Hospital and that I'd been talking with local churches about the possibility of offering ashes outside. Someone suggested that Bertie should get together with me and plan the liturgies, since I was determined to do it on the corner of 24th and Mission. He was terrified. "I mean, I *live* at 24th and Mission," Bertie told me, "right there, less than half a block away, and every day I walk past these fundamentalists screaming: 'The blood of Jesus is real, you must repent, Jesus loves you.' All of which I agree with, you know, but . . ."

"I know," I said.

“I *detest* the way they give the message,” Bertie said fiercely. “It’s really challenging to think about being in the heart of my community, trying to reclaim the public language of sin and repentance from the fundamentalists. So much of my life has been distinguishing myself from them.” He stopped and then continued in a gentler voice. “They must sometimes feel as awkward as we do.”

“I wonder,” I said.

I was used to the unease that many progressive Christians feel about “reclaiming the language of sin and repentance,” and I struggled with it as a preacher. People who had spent years condemned by various denominations for being gay boys or sexually active girls or for expressing doubt, and who had found their way back to a church that could accept them as they were, tended not to appreciate hearing a lot more about wretchedness or Jesus’ blood.

Like most converts, I had an annoying tendency to talk about Jesus just a little bit more than anybody wanted to hear. But sin—that was different. I preached about sin because I believed in mercy. And I believed in mercy because I knew how quickly even my stupidest, most ordinary sins could drag me into a spiral of misery. I’d be mean, or lazy, or selfish, and feel bad about it, and so I’d become meaner, lazier, less interested in thinking about anybody else. That inward-driving force, which takes the mind prisoner and locks the soul in solitary confinement, nourishes even the smallest sin and makes living with it essentially hell.

And the only way out of it, on Ash Wednesday as on any day, is repentance. Not feeling bad, but changing. Not pouring ashes on your head in a fit of self-loathing, but allowing Jesus to spit gently into a handkerchief and scrub off your face.

I’d experienced Jesus’ unexpected lifting of a burden, the freedom that could flood into my sorry heart from a larger, sacred heart. It was calling me to get out of myself and into the holy city, into actual relationships with other people and with God. Because, as those crazy preachers shout, startling the pigeons, out there on the streets is the revelation: *“Behold, I am making all things new!”*

Early in the year, Bertie and I arranged to meet in the plaza, checking it out and making notes for how to do our first Ash Wednesday street liturgy there. We sat on the little ledge that ran by a chain-link fence, near where the salsa band usually played, and studied the scene as commuters rose out of the depths of the BART station, waves of middle school kids swept along the sidewalk and panhandlers wove

in and out of the crowd. It felt oddly peaceful amid the blaring car radios, roaring buses and periodic shouts from vendors hawking SF Giants caps.

Perhaps hoping to distinguish ourselves from the fundamentalists, Bertie refused to even consider using an amplifier on Ash Wednesday. “One, amplifiers always sound terrible,” he said. “Two, you’re supposed to have a permit. Three, you can’t drown out the background noise anyway. We just need to make a sound that stands out.”

We came up with an outline for a street service that afternoon. I was concerned with the space and how we’d use it; I didn’t want to just take a standard indoor liturgy and transport it outside. Bertie, ever the traditionalist, wanted to open with the blessing of ashes from the Book of Common Prayer. But ever the cool Mission party promoter, he thought we could grab people’s attention by having a black-robed procession appear on the plaza as three Brazilian drummers he knew—“Awesome guys!” he exclaimed—pounded out an opening anthem to signal that something really exciting was about to start.

Over the next few days Bertie drew up a script. In his first draft, he suggested we walk to the plaza in complete silence. “The procession, in its haunting silence and gravity, should communicate the solemnity of the day,” he wrote. “If those on the street attempt to speak to one of us, we will respectfully, nonverbally communicate that we are maintaining silence with either a finger held up to the lips or a bow to them with hands folded in a gesture of prayer.”

“Are you kidding?” I thought to myself when I read his draft.

“Um, Bertie,” I said when we met, “I think that’s a little insider-y. First of all, how are you going to have a conversation with people if you don’t *talk* with them? And why in the world would we do *mime* on the streets to explain ourselves?”

“OK,” Bertie said immediately, humbly. “You’re right.”

But I was just warming up. “It’s like that stupid Episcopal secret language they use in fussy churches where if you don’t want communion, you’re supposed to signal it by crossing your arms over your chest and bowing, and maybe blinking three times, as if someone who’s in church for the first time is gonna intuit how to do these secret gestures instead of just saying, like a normal person, ‘no thanks.’ You really want to do that crap in the Mission? It’s so arrogant.”

“OK, OK,” Bertie said patiently. “Anything else?”

Winning an argument always made me even bossier. “Well, we could use copal for incense and cense the four corners of the plaza at the beginning of the service,” I began. Copal, the yellowish resin used by Aztecs to bless the four directions of the world, still fills Mexican Catholic churches with the smell of prayers more ancient than Jesus; it marks the opening of a sacred liturgy in both traditions.

“Copal,” said Bertie. “People will recognize the smell.”

I calmed down. Bertie was my comrade, and he knew what he was doing. He said he’d print some signs and postcards to hand out and find a card table to set up as the altar. I’d bring the copal and thuribles. We’d both put out a call to neighborhood churches for volunteers, and he’d round up the drummers. We made a little checklist: prayer book, matches, ashes . . . “Duct tape,” I said firmly.

And so, on Ash Wednesday 2010 we did our first offering of ashes in the street. About a dozen people volunteered to take part: Rosa Lee Harden offered to gather everyone at Holy Innocents, where she was serving as the vicar, and to lead the procession to the plaza where Bertie would be waiting with the drummers. A tough, funny, politically savvy priest from Mississippi, Rosa Lee had battled inside and outside the Episcopal Church for years on issues of inclusion. She was blond, with a straightforward, unfussy manner; she liked to drink bourbon and laugh loudly and throw big, messy dinner parties. Rosa Lee didn’t hesitate to take risks. “Let’s go!” she said when she heard our plan. “How many cassocks will you need to borrow?”

Holy Innocents was a small, old-fashioned wooden church standing on a hill at the western border between the Mission and the far more upscale neighborhood of Noe Valley. Maybe a third of its members lived in the Mission, almost all of them white: artists, techies and young upper-middle-class families, part of what Rosa Lee called “the incredibly complex demographic” of the neighborhood. It was a socially progressive and liturgically mainstream congregation; as Rosa Lee admitted, sometimes it felt a little predictable. “As a clergyperson,” she told me, “you tend to know what’s gonna happen inside your church. Surprise is rare. Ash Wednesday is small and by the book; it’s the same people showing up every year in the same way. Sometimes it gets hard to see the life in the ritual.”

“Here we go!” said Rosa Lee in her throaty voice when everyone was assembled. She smiled warmly and gave me a big hug. I was queasy and thrilled. We began

singing a repetitive chant and took off down 24th Street, trying to dodge overhanging trees and keep from tripping on the cracked sidewalks. There were a couple of priests participating and a few seminarians, but even the professionals weren't necessarily used to stomping through city streets in long black robes, and our group moved a little awkwardly. Medieval processions hadn't had to contend with traffic lights.

We arrived at the plaza. "Hey, did you know today is Ash Wednesday?" a white hipster shouted into his phone, staring at our procession and trying to snap a picture. "No shit!"

Bertie, wearing his clerical collar, was using the duct tape to post two large handwritten signs to the fence. Life Is Very, Very, Very Short, said one, and the other read, More Forgiveness. Near his feet was a stack of postcards with a black-and-white drawing of someone resembling one of the drag queen nuns from the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, wearing a cross of ashes on her forehead. The caption, in Spanish and English, announced that "the Episcopal Church is pro-immigrant, pro-equality and anti-hater."

The burly Brazilian drummers, three of them, were going wild. I fished a few sticky crumbs of copal out of my pocket and dropped them on the coals in my thurible, and then our whole group walked deliberately around the corners of the busy plaza, censing east and west, north and south, with clouds of smoke. We returned to the card table and gathered in a clump before it. The drummers pounded out a last barrage, then stopped. My ears rang with the sudden absence of percussion.

"O God," began Bertie, chanting in a serious, clear voice and looking up toward heaven, "you made us from the dust of the earth. Grant that these ashes may be a sign of our mortality and penitence."

He was holding a baby food jar full of ashes in both hands, raising it high in front of him. Now bystanders were edging nearer to see what we were doing, and a seminarian with long, curly black hair addressed everyone. "Let us kneel before the God who made us," she said to the crowd.

I knelt. I bent over and pressed my forehead to the sidewalk—the whole rush of this neighborhood, its crazy beauty and apparent hopelessness, flooding my heart. I'd walked through this plaza the day two teenagers were shot a block away. I'd seen someone OD in the subway entrance. I'd come here busy and distracted on the way

to the library with my lover and five-year-old daughter. I'd eaten tacos, chatted with beggars and laughed with friends on this holy ground. "Lord," I whispered, "have mercy."

Now it was 2012, and we were getting ready for another Ash Wednesday on the same streets. Bertie sat beside me in the passenger seat as I drove up 24th Street, past the plaza and the library toward the church where he was now serving. "That first Ash Wednesday . . ." he reminisced, looking out the window at an outdoor café where a group of men were playing cards. It was hard to keep track of all the details from previous years: When, exactly, did Bertie bless the Peruvian guy with the scar? When did that Italian lady offer me a sandwich? "I'd just been ordained for about 11 months, and really, all I remember is I was so scared."

"And the next time, was it different?" I asked.

Bertie was wearing extremely stylish pointy black boots, and his suit was perfectly creased. "You know those postcards I made," he said, "along with all the explanations? That first year I was a new priest, and I saw the whole street service maybe as more of a great PR opportunity, like 'Hey, check out the Episcopal Church—we're not like those other Christians, you'll like us.'"

"But then," Bertie said, and shot me a smile, "by 2011, maybe I didn't have quite so much to prove. I didn't think we needed postcards. Or drummers. Or even the entire ceremony of blessing the ashes, either—you were right, it wasn't about taking a regular church service and doing it outdoors, it was about doing an outdoor service. And the immediacy was amazing. Giving ashes just became about the real experience for me and each person I touched: our experience of God."

I told Bertie about a friend's comment upon seeing photos from Ash Wednesday of the two of us "calling the Mission to repentance," as my friend nicely put it. "The advantage of being a religious fanatic is that you get to do stuff like that without fear," he mused. "Sort of like being a punk—you can get drunk in the day and shoot up in the street without worrying about what the neighbors think."

I still worried about the neighbors, though, I confessed to Bertie. Despite our previous Ash Wednesday experiences, I was anxious about this year's service, the one we were about to begin: I felt exposed. Punk as he was, Bertie admitted he did too. "Sometimes in the Mission I run into old music friends who say, 'Bertie! What are you doing in that priest outfit?' and I say, 'Well, um, I'm a priest,' and they just

look at me with horror."

We laughed. "You live right here, too," Bertie said to me. "Don't you find it hard to be out in the Mission in front of all your neighbors?"

"Yes," I said. "I do."

"And especially," he continued, "on Ash Wednesday, it's crazy: it's like getting a face tattoo for an hour. The whole day is wild. It's such a brief, sacramental moment when you impose ashes, under 60 seconds, but each time your faith is so visible and out there."

"Yes," I said, pulling up in front of the bright red doors of the church. "Well, here we go again."

Bertie chatted with his friendly deacon for a minute while I made a phone call. Maybe, I thought, the key to my nervousness would be to repent of my constant multitasking and focus on doing one thing at a time. But I checked my voice mail anyway. Then Bertie pulled a folding card table out of the closet, packed it into the car next to my crates, and with all the supplies finally together, we headed back down to the Mission to meet the others who'd be giving out ashes with us.

It was nearly four o'clock. I worried that Vera and Kelsey might have arrived at the plaza already and wouldn't find us there. Kelsey was funny and grounded and pretty unflappable: a therapist, she'd done counseling with victims of trauma in places like Kosovo and Gaza, so I figured she could handle it if we were a little late. Vera always seemed calm, but I wanted to be there when she arrived. I'd learned, finally, why this day was so important to Vera. A few years ago, on Ash Wednesday, her older sister Audrey had killed herself.

"I was planning to read in the Ash Wednesday service at my church in Texas," Vera said, recounting the story, "and was getting on my bicycle when the phone rang. It was my dad, and he said, 'Audrey's no longer with us.'"

Vera had gone back into her house and collapsed. "I was wailing, pounding the walls. I fell down on the ground, saying maybe it was an accident, maybe she's still alive. I called my dad back to see if it was real."

Vera spoke carefully, deliberately, as if she were folding precious handwritten letters into tiny packets. "It was real," she said. "Audrey had taken her life, jumping from

the top of the parking garage at the hospital. She'd died by the time my parents got there. We found out"—Vera made a small sound, a moan—"Audrey received the ashes. A chaplain in the hospital gave her ashes."

"I couldn't speak," Vera said. "I went home to my parents' house. My brother was there, my dad was on the phone about organ donation. Nothing made sense. I remember writing one sentence in my journal: *From dust we came to dust we shall return*. It was what I call my first Ash Wednesday, when Audrey died."

"That year there was a really early Easter. It was such an offense. I couldn't bear it: How could Lent be just like the blink of an eye, when Lent is the world we live in?"

I could see the outline of her dead sister in Vera's steady, suffering gaze. "Ash Wednesday is like a homecoming for me," she said remorselessly. "It's the most honest of days. It's a mystery, a sitting-with." She let out her breath. "A sitting with the dark. It is bearing witness to the dark."

Now, as Bertie and I pulled up on 24th Street by the plaza, I thought I could make out Vera and Kelsey and someone in a clerical collar: it looked as if the ash-giving group might be gathering over by the entrance to the BART. As usual, the plaza was full, with scores of people striding through it purposefully and dozens hanging out around the perimeter. A bunch of the regulars were hanging out smoking and gabbing by the bus stop, and I waved at them. "Hey," I called, rolling down the window, "can you give Father a hand?" Bertie got out of the car, and he and one of the guys unloaded the table and my milk crates full of gear. "I'm gonna go park," I said. "Be right back, and then we can start."