

Re-remembering the love of God

by [Roger Lovette](#)

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*"We cannot shop,
sleep or date
our way out of this."*

— Anne Lamott

I try never to miss attending an Ash Wednesday service each year. I usually select a church where nobody knows me. So I drive up to an unfamiliar parking place—find the church door that leads to the sanctuary and sit down.

Usually the room is sparse—people sitting here and there. Lots of gaps in between. I try to sit up close. When you have a hearing problem, you want to hear.

It's good just to sit in the silence. I don't do this enough. But to leave it all behind, to be quiet and anonymous feels like a breath of fresh air. I usually find an Episcopal church. I love *The Common Book of Prayer*. I've been going to this service year after year until finally the readings for Ash Wednesday are familiar. There is no singing. No announcements. Thank God. No jazzy, smiling preacher welcoming everybody and trying to make us feel at home. It never works. What does work for me is the silence.

I find myself looking around at the Stations of the Cross on each side of the small sanctuary. Soon, very soon we will follow that rocky familiar trail—the way of sorrows—which will lead us from trial all the way up the hill to that awful quiet place—the morning after death Emily Dickinson called it. That time when you just don't have anything to say. What can possibly be said as we stand before death and all its hopelessness? Ash Wednesday begins another Lenten journey.

The Minister rises and we pray the collect together:

Almighty and everlasting God, who hatest nothing that thou hast made, and dost forgive the sins of all those who are penitent; create and make in us new and

contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

We hear the gloomy words of Joel: "Rend your hearts and not your garments..." And then the reminder from Matthew's gospel that when we fast we should not be like the hypocrites who love to show off their supposed piety.

Finally we come to the part we have all been waiting for. This is the reason we came. The first row files down to the altar and kneels as the priest touches the foreheads of each person with the sign of the cross. "Dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return," the priest whispers. Finally people on my row get up and trail down to the altar. This is why we came—not to be reminded of our finitude—the limits of our lives. God knows we feel it in our bones, and some of us in our backs and legs and arthritic hands. No, we are not here really to be reminded of our frailties. We come, one and all, kneeling and hoping that something or someone will wash away all the sins and smudges of our lives. Someone will whisper forgiveness so that we might start again. Believing or at least hoping that these 40 days that lead to the cross might just touch something deep in our hearts.

The priest comes and dabs his finger into the ashes. "Dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return..." And I leave the kneeling bench and move back to my pew. I notice that they keep coming row after row. Some on walkers. Couples holding hands. A young woman—probably a student. A lot of silver hair. But all ages stand in this line hoping to hear some word that they don't usually hear outside these walls.

Everyone returns to their seats. There is a prayer by the minister. And we quietly walk out. Nobody says much, if anything. We are all one. Sinners. Needing grace and forgiveness and hope for the days to come. The ashes are still on our foreheads. Hours from now I will look into the mirror and ask: What's that? And then I remember the kneeling bench and the quiet and the reminder of my finitude—the dustiness of my life. But that smudged cross tells me I am kept and so are all those others. Kept, thank God, in arms that can hold us fast despite whatever happens. Maybe this is why I came and sat in the silence. To re-remember that maybe the Apostle Paul was right when he said: "Nothing...nothing will separate us from the love of God." I hope that even after I have washed the smudge from my face I hope I still remember. For this is why I come.

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