

March 1, Ash Wednesday (Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21)

by [Nurya Love Parish](#) in the [February 15, 2017](#) issue

The first time I ever attended Ash Wednesday worship, I was in seminary. I was also a spiritual tourist.

I hadn't been raised in any faith. My call to ministry came when, curious about this thing called religion, I visited a Unitarian Universalist congregation. That was my first bout with spiritual tourism. I was 19 years old. I thought I was checking out religion to see if it might suit me. I figured this would take only a few hours on a single Sunday morning. Little did I know that God would hook me during the first five minutes of that worship service and keep me for 26 years (and counting).

Three years after that first visit, I was an aspirant for ordination in the Unitarian Universalist Association. But I was still curious about religion, and I had learned nothing about the risks of spiritual tourism. So I thought it would be interesting to visit King's Chapel in Boston on Ash Wednesday. King's Chapel was one of the only UU churches that offered an Ash Wednesday service; I had heard that they actually offered it with an authentic Christian liturgy. I was skeptical about Christianity. It seemed to me to be generally aligned with bigotry and the denial of scientific fact. But King's Chapel was Unitarian, and I was a Unitarian seminarian—one who remained curious about religion.

I'll never forget sitting in that old box pew, watching as people went up for the imposition of ashes. I realized something: this was a place where people told the truth. The liturgy made them do it. They told the truth about themselves—that they were mortal, that they were sinners, that they were scared.

I had been a lot of places in my first twentysome years of life. I had never been anywhere quite as truthful as that Ash Wednesday liturgy.

Jesus was new to me as a teacher, and I hadn't been raised to call him a friend. He was still pretty much a stranger. But his lesson stood out to me for its call to integrity, for its commonplace acceptance of a supernatural reality.

“When you fast,” says Jesus in the Ash Wednesday Gospel reading, “put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” Jesus doesn’t want his followers to appear to be fasting so that they can gain the respect of a crowd. He wants them to actually fast, so they can gain a relationship with God.

I knew something about God—after all, God had caught me and led me into a life of faith—but I hadn’t yet found a person whom I could trust to teach me more. It struck me that Jesus, unlike a lot of his followers, might actually be trustworthy. I had to ask myself: What did all this mean for my life? Not long after that first visit I was back at King’s Chapel, asking to be prepared for baptism.

In the 20 years since, I’ve learned a few things about Christians and the truth. We’re great at telling the truth when the liturgy forces us to do so. We keep showing up to tell the truths the liturgy holds. We’re still mortal. We’re still sinners. We’re still scared.

But when the liturgy doesn’t force us to tell the truth, we’re not as good at doing it. We fall into the trap of caring about appearances, seeking the respect of the crowd. We want our churches to look shiny and happy and pretty; we want shiny, happy, pretty young people to fill them. We want it to seem like God is breathing new life into us, like we are following Jesus with our whole hearts, like the Holy Spirit is working through us to make all things new. But we’re often unwilling to take the risks these practices require. We’re often better at storing up treasures—endowments, salaries, pension fund balances—on earth than in heaven.

The average American is 37 years old. The average member (lay or ordained) of my denomination, the Episcopal Church, is 59. When I look at the diocese where I am blessed to serve, I find myself wondering how many churches we will close, and how soon. Before I die, will I vote to end the life of my diocese by merging with another? Or will God act decisively and surprisingly in the life of my diocese and my church, just as God acted decisively and surprisingly in my life more than 20 years ago?

Am I in any way an obstacle to the work of God in the church? What do the hard truths of my time and place mean to me?

These are hard questions, but they are the right questions. They are Ash Wednesday questions. They echo the words of the prophet Joel:

Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy. Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep. Let them say, "Spare your people, O Lord, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, "Where is their God?"

Where is our God, the God who worked in our lives for transformation and healing?
Where is our God, to bring us new life again?