

February 18, Ash Wednesday (Joel 2:1–2, 12–17; Psalm 51:1–17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10; Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21)

Who can sort out the ironies and challenges in these four texts? Where is the joy in this kind of salvation?

by [Thomas R. Steagald](#) in the [February 2026](#) issue
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Can I ask a simple question? I don't mean to be rude or argumentative.

In fact, this year for Lent I am giving up rude and argumentative, along with their many behavioral and spiritual cognates: pride, presumption, priggishness, puffery. Much in the same way as, last year, I gave up curmudgeonliness and judgmentalism, though admittedly without either immediate or protracted success.

Which is about how it goes with me and Lent. I have quite the backlog of unfinished repentances. *Devotione interruptus*, to coin a phrase.

I think I know why. It's because I come to Ash Wednesday *dipsychos*—of a double mind (James 1:8). From the jump I am confused as to whether I should focus on the upcoming season or on the Ash Wednesday scriptures, which, inexplicably, are the same every year: Joel 2, Psalm 51, 2 Corinthians 5 and 6, and Matthew 6.

Don't get me wrong. All four are great texts. But here's the thing: it is Ash Wednesday that makes these texts great, not the reverse. And elsewhere, the lectionary gives us more choices and variety and therefore more freedom to shape the days and seasons and sermons that seem rather more interesting than the same old same old. For instance, aren't there other prophecies besides Joel's that could give us a new or different slant on geopolitical calamity and a call for national contrition?

Aren't there other passages from other epistles that could name, at least as well as 2 Corinthians does, the truths and consequences of faithful discipleship in the world as it increasingly is? After all, Paul's suffering was not unique, then or now; ours will not be, either. But if we suffer as he did, and "commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone," some are going to charge us with doing what we do precisely to be seen, which is the very thing Jesus said not to do, but how can we not be seen if we dare to practice our piety at all?

Lord, who can sort out the ironies and challenges in just these four texts? And the same ironies and challenges we have to confront each year, Lent by Lent. Where is the joy in that kind of salvation?

So thank God for Psalm 51 and its prayers. But is this the only psalm that reaches deeply enough into the webs of brokenness and sin, into the shadows of individual angst and communal interdependence, that it can provide us the materials for confession and despair? And for hope and restoration?

Well, of course not. There are many such psalms. And epistles. And prophecies. Just as there are other gospel texts that make us probe the "why" of why we do or don't do what we do or don't do—from necessity or choice—as an expression of our faith in the world. So again, why the repetition? If Ash Wednesday's usual suspects are not alone in their power to cite historical precedents, to speak holy hortatories, or to declare gracious imperatives, why do we get only these?

The better question may be why I would want others.

It could be that, if I am being completely honest, I secretly long for some distraction and novelty. I might like to glance elsewhere, away from the reminders of my unfinished business. New poetry and fresh prose might bring some room for creative zest to the hard truths of the season—thereby making the beginning of Lent more interesting than it usually is. Different stories and phrases would be like glitter in the ashes (as was all the liturgical vogue some years ago), giving the day and the service and me some sparkle and variety. And escape.

Which is precisely not what Lent is going for. Lent does not want us to look away from what remains of our unfinished penitence or forgotten penances, whether in their human, political, psychological, social, or spiritual aspects. Lent wants to remind us, yet again, of the same realities that vexed us last year, and even to dash our feet against the same stumbling blocks that have diverted our faithfulness in the years before that, so that we have to revisit the selfsame delusions that challenge even those who want to be humble.

These texts warn us that whatever we do tends toward pride, forcing us to be wary of any act of humility that could be an excuse for self-congratulation. But they also remind us that we must do something to be reconciled to God and his purposes, for the crisis is real and now.

Such hard reminding is the one job Ash Wednesday has. Well, that and helping us find or form a community of repentance and devotion that perhaps, this year, will enable us to finish what we started for the sake of justice and mercy and the shalom of God. Less transaction, then, than transformation.

Why no variety? The answer is this: back to square one. Every year, a hard reset. A no-nonsense revisiting of the external and internal reasons for real confession, repentance, and acts of piety—from prayers and sacrifices to protests and service. Never mind the chocolate.