

ASH WEDNESDAY 2023

At first glance, the beginning of Lent each year doesn't seem to have a very uplifting message. When we receive ashes on our foreheads, we are traditionally reminded that we are dust and to dust we shall return. But "returning to dust" doesn't sound all that positive, does it? Death isn't something we like to think about, much less celebrate, in our liturgy and prayer.

If we take a closer look, though, we find that the message of Ash Wednesday has far more to do with life than with death. It's much more about what it means to be human—on this side of death's door, not only beyond. Being human means being both blessed and broken, and Ash Wednesday is a special invitation to look at our own brokenness in a way that can bring healing, strength, and courage.

Of course, brokenness is never the goal, even if we can encounter God through the process. We don't set out to come up short, make mistakes, or feel "less than." But we often do, a reality that is one mysterious thread within the intricate tapestry of human life. We have another word for this kind of brokenness, one that captures our essence as incomplete all on our own. That word is vulnerable.

Vulnerability has become something of a buzzword in recent years. A simple online search of the word turns up countless videos, articles, book titles and safeguarding courses. But what does it really mean?

To be vulnerable is to be exposed, to be open. Being vulnerable means that the parts of ourselves that are not strong and beautiful are visible to others. Brene Brown, research professor at the University of Houston and best-selling author, has become something of a cultural icon as a "vulnerability guru." In her words, vulnerability is "having the courage to show up and be seen when we have no control over the outcome."

Have you ever tried something new without being sure it would turn out OK? Then you have been vulnerable because you allowed failure to be a real possibility. Have you ever forgiven someone who betrayed you? Then you have been vulnerable because you opened yourself to being hurt again.

Have you ever asked for help? You have been vulnerable because you risked having your weaknesses exposed. Have you ever loved another person? You have been vulnerable because you took a chance on the other person not returning that love.

Life affords us many opportunities to choose to accept vulnerability. We can choose to share our feelings in a relationship without knowing how the other person will respond. We can choose to take a chance on a new career path, knowing that we may not succeed. But we aren't always able to choose the kinds of vulnerability we experience. Life also forces us into brokenness entirely against our will.

We are thrown into a terrible, frightening vulnerability when our closest friend moves far away, when our child drops out of university, when we learn about the affair, when the biopsy results come back positive. Never in a million years would we choose these or many other challenges thrust upon us.

Jesus had a lot to say about this kind of vulnerability. In fact, the beatitudes are the blueprint he laid out to help us honour our broken parts as a means of growth and transformation. He taught that being vulnerable—in other words, being poor or meek, feeling sorrowful or persecuted—is an opportunity to encounter the divine.

Suffering has a way of stripping us of our ego and false notions of self-sufficiency, which makes room for an experience of the divine. In accepting our faults, challenges, and pain, we create a space for God's grace to work its inscrutable magic in our lives. Being vulnerable is the door through which we must travel to become the best, most authentic versions of ourselves.

Allowing ourselves to be vulnerable is how we accept our brokenness. The dust of Ash Wednesday is a powerful reminder of the vulnerability that is part of our spiritual DNA as human beings.

If Ash Wednesday today can remind us less about death and more about the mystery of vulnerability in life, then does the traditional focus on repentance still make sense? Absolutely! But it may call us to rethink its purpose.

John the Baptist preached repentance, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is near." It's easy to see his prophecy as an apocalyptic warning of imminent damnation if we don't get our collective act together. But an interpretation of repentance that's more consistent with the God of love and mercy is less about warning and more about promise.

John's message doesn't have to be his way of threatening us into good behaviour, a New Testament version of "Wait till your father gets home!" Instead, it can be an invitation to make room in our hearts and lives for a God who wants to fill up our empty spaces and doesn't take no for an answer.

Repentance isn't all about feeling guilt and shame for our shortcomings. The word's Latin root, *paenitentia*, has several nuanced shades of meaning, but they all boil down to one thing—a sense of "lacking." Repentance, then, is an acceptance of the fact that we do not hold all the cards, that we are not "enough" all on our own. Put another way, it's a way of embracing our vulnerability and brokenness. The dust of Ash Wednesday reminds us that life is larger than our individual experiences of it. We are not in control.

Being broken means that healing is needed, so the age-old Lenten practices of fasting, almsgiving, and prayer are not only relevant today but also perhaps more needed than ever. It's in giving up our reliance on those things we don't absolutely need, giving to those in greater need than ourselves, and giving in to God's presence in our lives that we are able to look our own "lacking" straight in the eye. It's how we become aware of both the blessing and the brokenness of our human condition.

Fasting, a spiritual practice that has declined in popularity over the years, has made a comeback in a less-than-spiritual way. "Intermittent fasting" is all the rage lately on nutrition websites and in best-selling books. But when fasting is understood not as a weight-loss technique but as a way of letting go of our reliance on things we don't actually need, it can be a powerful form of prayer. It's fine to give up desserts for Lent if that helps us reflect on the things we can do without. Perhaps it can be more powerful, though, to "fast" from gossip or unnecessary spending or an insistence on having the last word. Fasting is a way to experience our own "lacking" in a transformative way.

Almsgiving, which means the giving of money or food to those in need, is another traditional Lenten practice. This, too, is relevant for us today during Lent—and all year long—because it is how we recognize that we aren't the only ones who are vulnerable. The world is full of others just like us in our lacking. They may be vulnerable in different ways than we are, but by reaching out to them in their need, we bear witness to their pain. By standing in solidarity with their brokenness, we take steps toward being healed of our own.

Prayer as a spiritual practice never goes out of style. Not only during Lent but throughout the entire year, prayer is a powerful way of participating in divine community. By lifting our own broken pieces and those of others in prayer, we attest to—rather than run from—the vulnerable parts of our lives. Prayer connects us with each other and with God. This sacred unity connects our individual broken pieces with those of others, creating a beautiful new kind of wholeness.

Too often, we approach Ash Wednesday with liturgical gloom and doom. It's the "black sheep" of the family of dark solemnities in the liturgical calendar, failing now to even garner status as a holy day of obligation. But when painted in this light, it's easy to miss its beautiful invitation to claim our brokenness, embrace our vulnerability, and stand in solidarity with all those who do the same.

God is ready to heal our woundedness, to make us more whole than ever before. Ash Wednesday is our call to make room for the divine dance to work its sacred magic within us.

It is the opportunity to **Repent and believe the Gospel!**