

Rev. Alida Ward
Springsteen, Ash Wednesday & Jesus
Matthew 4:1-11
Feb. 14, 2016

Today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent -- and since Lent is traditionally a season of humility, spiritual discipline, prayer and confession, I'm going to begin this Lenten sermon with my own confession.

Here it is:

Four days ago was Ash Wednesday, the very first day of Lent. All over Christendom, churches hold worship services to observe the day, and to offer the mark of ashes to their congregants.

We, too, here at Greenfield Hill, worship on Ash Wednesday.

And here is my confession:

I, your minister, skipped church to go to a rock concert.

Let me offer a little context, which may at least somewhat diminish my guilt in your eyes.

For as long as you have known me, which for some of you is the full 26 and a half years I've been here, you have known me to be a fan -- or perhaps the word is devotee -- of Bruce Springsteen.

On a Friday in December, tickets for his 2016 tour went on sale, and sold out in ten minutes.

I, however, was lucky enough to get hold of two tickets, for David and me, for Wednesday, February 10 in Hartford.

A few minutes later, a friend of mine emailed me asking if I'd had any luck getting tickets, and I triumphantly announced I had two tickets for Hartford.

He wrote back "oh, I didn't try for those -- just seemed wrong to go to a concert on Ash Wednesday."

He's not even a minister, and he knew February 10 was Ash Wednesday. I didn't.

"Now what do I do?" I said to David.

I have a very nice husband.

"You do the noon service," he said, "I'll take the evening service. Go enjoy the concert."

So, somewhat guiltily, that's where I was on Wednesday evening -- with, I might add, quite a number of fellow church members also in attendance.

It was actually a strangely emotional evening for me. Music, of course, has incredible powers of nostalgia -- like nothing else, I think, it has the ability to pick you up out of the moment you're in and drop you into the past -- you know how that works -- a certain song takes you back to high school prom, a tune wafting by puts you right back into your dorm room. This concert picked me up and set me down in 1980 -- what Springsteen is doing on this tour is playing in its entirety one of his early albums, called *The River*, released 36 years ago.

And so, not just for me, but for all us old folks there, and there were a lot, it was music that took us back decades.

And of course for the performer, too.

As he introduced one song, Springsteen said, somewhat ruefully "When I wrote this song, I was still under the illusion that life unfolds with a predictable pattern, and that things will go as you have planned."

Then he chuckled, and said, "All you young people out there, turn to the old folks beside you and ask them how THAT works out."

And at the end of it all, as he finished the last song of this old album, he said this:

"The subtext here," he said, "is the passage of time, and our own mortality, and simply remembering that we are all meant to do the best we can to craft a life of meaning in the time that we have."

And standing there in the Hartford Civic Center, I thought, that's an Ash Wednesday message, actually, Bruce. Not in the most orthodox of worship spaces, not with the most expected of preachers, but that was an Ash Wednesday message.

Because when people worship on Ash Wednesday,

when they come forward to the front of church, push their hair aside and wait for the mark of ashes on their forehead, what they are remembering **is** mortality.

The ancient words that many priests and pastors still speak are these: *remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.* Remember, that is, that time on this earth is limited, and the passage of time goes quickly.

Well, oh my goodness, that sounds depressing, right? Why would anyone **go** to church on Ash Wednesday? For that matter, why would anyone want to go hear an artist sing an album 35 years old? Why be reminded that time moves quickly, that we are dust and to dust we shall return?

But in *this* place, this church, in this Sanctuary of God's presence where generations have worshiped, that reminder is **not** depressing, not meant to be any more depressing than dancing to an old song is.

Instead, we are meant to hear it as a comfort and as a challenge.

We are *not* immortal, that's true -- our days on earth are not forever. But the comfort is this: that every day, every one of our days, is lived in the presence of God. That we are held in God's arms in every moment, that we cherished in every minute, that we are beloved children of God from our first breath to our last -- and beyond. And beyond.

And the challenge -- the challenge is to live in that love and live out that love. The poet Mary Oliver asked the question "what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" And on Wednesday, those of us at the Springsteen concert were reminded that our task is "to craft a life of meaning in the time that we have." That's the challenge.

The season of Lent is meant to be that time when thoughtfully, humbly, faithfully,
we remember that we are loved
and we seek to better live out that love.

And so now to that scripture story Leonard read you.
Because in truth, it's a story about someone trying to figure out how to craft his
life with meaning,
how to live his days on earth loved and loving.
It's just that this someone happens to be Jesus.

It's the story from which the whole concept of Lent comes from,
this notion that 40 days of reflection is what we all need to figure out ourselves.
Because that's what Jesus did -- gave himself 40 days to reflect.
The scripture says that around the age of 30,
Jesus appeared at the River Jordan to be baptized by his cousin John, John the
Baptist.

It's the first thing we know about Jesus as an adult,
as God's Messiah.

And right after he was baptized, it says, Jesus took himself off into the
wilderness, into the desert,
for forty days of what -- prayer, reflection, opening himself to God.
And alone in the desert, hungering, thirsting, wondering and wandering,
Jesus encounters the Devil, Satan, the Tempter.

Now I know this is where the story gets a little strange for people,
because as soon as you hear 'Satan' you start picturing some guy in a red suit
with a pitchfork, and you start thinking 'really? am I supposed to believe this?'
But the truth is, saying Satan is really just a way of saying Evil,
and Evil is just a way of saying everything that comes between us and God,
everything that gets in the way of our being what God created us to be,
everything that throws us off track.

That's what Jesus encounters in the wild.

In the midst of his prayer, in the midst of preparing himself to love and to serve,
to teach and to heal, he comes up against a voice, an Evil voice, within, around
him.

And this is what it says: Jesus, whispers the voice, you don't have what it takes to do this. You're hungry, aren't you? just turn these stones to bread.
No, whispers Jesus back, no. I live by God's word. God's word is all I need.

Jesus, the voice whispers again, trying harder, you don't have what it takes to do this. This servanthood you're choosing, you don't have what it takes to endure it. You want power, you know you do. Look – all these kingdoms could be yours, the voice hisses, just turn from God and stick with me.
No, whispers Jesus, no, I am God's child. No.

Jesus, the voice whispers a third time, you don't have what it takes to do this. You're choosing humility – why? You could dazzle the crowds, leap from the Temple and fly with the angels, you know you want to do it that way.
No, says Jesus, no, leave me alone. That's not God's way.

And in the face of such strength, such faith, such conviction, the devil, the voice, the doubt, the temptation, slinks away, disappears.
And Jesus, with the strength of angels, it says, came out of the desert and began to preach the way of Love to all who would listen.

He knew who he was.
He knew whose he was.
He knew from where his true strength came.
He knew he was loved.
And he began to live love.
With the time here that he was given,
with the life he was given to craft, that one precious life,
Jesus chose -- or he let himself be chosen -- for love.

That's what we're meant to use these forty days for, too.
I'm not suggesting you go find a wilderness to go hang out in --
it's really cold out there.
And 40 days of fasting could be rough.
But to use the time to remember that you are loved
and that you are called to love --
well, that would be a good use of Lent.
To accept our mortality, our humanness,

as both comfort and challenge --
that would be a good way to spend these weeks.
To accept the comfort of being loved,
and the challenge of loving.

Right after Christmas, as you know,
a bunch of us from this church flew to India,
to spend time with those whom we support through Friends of Christ in India.
You'll hear much more about our trip on March 13,
when the kids and adults who went share their stories here in church.
But let me just tell you about one woman,
who, it seems to me,
knows what it is to craft a life of love.
Knows what it means to take the days that she has been given and create
something precious and of meaning.
Her name is Pramilla;
and she lives just outside the city of Khammam, India.
30 years ago she gave birth to a son with severe disabilities,
physical and mental.
You have to understand -- 30 years ago in India there was nothing but shame
when a child was born that way;
and at best they were kept hidden away in a back room.
It's not too much better now.
But Pramilla would not let her son live that way.
Instead, in her own home, she created a place of love and welcome
not just for her son, but for children just like her son.
30 years later, when we entered her home,
one of the first people to greet us was that son of hers.
Now a young adult,
he is in a wheelchair cobbled together out of a plastic chair and bicycle wheels,
but full of joy: grinning broadly and clapping with delight.
Around him were dozens of other children and young adults,
and a staff of caretakers whose compassion shows in every touch, in every
word.
Two of those caregivers are Pramilla's grown daughter and her other son,
who, inspired by their mother, and their brother,
graduated school with degrees in nursing, and have now returned to help.

And in the middle of the room, on the day we visited,
was Pramilla herself, her smile shining as brightly as the sari she wore.
As she spoke excitedly to us, she raised her hands up to God in thanksgiving
and thanked us -- us -- for being a blessing of love.

You are the blessing, we told her,
and our teenagers' eyes were shining bright with tears as they spoke.
You are the blessing.

She, Pramilla, she has taken the life she has been given,
the breadth of days that are hers,
and she has filled them with love:
the sure and certain knowledge of God's love for her and her family,
and the joyful task of being love to others.

We are not immortal. So Lent reminds us.
But in this, I tell you again, in this is comfort and challenge.
The comfort is that every day is lived in the love of God,
in knowing that in every minute, we are cherished,
from our first breath to our last --
and beyond.

And the challenge -- the challenge is to live *in* that love and live *out* that love.
As Christ did.
As my friend Pramilla does.
As each one of us can do.

May this Lent be a blessing to us.
May we be a blessing to others. Amen.