

LENT 2019 Looking Backward, Looking Forward.. Arriving Now

- What were some of the memories you have and messages you were given about the meaning of Lent as you were growing up?
 - Which of these have remained real and relevant for you, and what have you had to argue with or set aside or have they evolved to this day?
 - What for you now is the meaning and personal significance of these 40 days? What do you hope for? What invitation do you find in them now. for yourself? For this community? For our world?
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PRAYING

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but a doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

–Mary Oliver

Marked by Ashes Walter Brueggemann (b. 1933)

Ruler of the Night, Guarantor of the day . . .

This day — a gift from you.

This day — like none other you have ever given, or we have ever received.

This Wednesday dazzles us with gift and newness and possibility.

This Wednesday burdens us with the tasks of the day, for we are already
halfway home

halfway back to committees and memos,
halfway back to calls and appointments,
halfway on to next Sunday,
halfway back, half frazzled, half expectant,
half turned toward you, half rather not.

This Wednesday is a long way from Ash Wednesday,

but all our Wednesdays are marked by ashes —

we begin this day with that taste of ash in our mouth:

of failed hope and broken promises,

of forgotten children and frightened women,

we ourselves are ashes to ashes, dust to dust;

we can taste our mortality as we roll the ash around on our tongues.

We are able to ponder our ashness with

some confidence, only because our every Wednesday of ashes

anticipates your Easter victory over that dry, flaky taste of death.

On this Wednesday, we submit our ashen way to you —
you Easter parade of newness.

Before the sun sets, take our Wednesday and Easter us,

Easter us to joy and energy and courage and freedom;

Easter us that we may be fearless for your truth.

Come here and Easter our Wednesday with

mercy and justice and peace and generosity.

We pray as we wait for the Risen One who comes soon.

For over thirty years now, Walter Brueggemann (b. 1933) has combined the best of critical scholarship with love for the local church in service to the kingdom of God. Now a professor emeritus of Old Testament studies at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, Brueggemann has authored over seventy books. Taken from his *[Prayers for a Privileged People](#)* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), pp. 27-28.

Brett Foster (1973–2015)

Longing, Lenten

The walk back, more loss. When I open the door
it's over, so I set to piddling: tidy
end tables, check the mail, draw a bath.

The restless energy finally settles
as I pass the mirror. I peer into it.

My nose touches glass. Not much left,
already effaced, not even a cross
to speak of. A smudge. A few black soot stains
like pin points on the forehead. The rest
of the blessed ash has vanished to a grey
amorphousness, to symbolize... not much.

Except a wish for those hallowed moments
to be followed by sustaining confidence.

Except spirit, which means to shun its listless
weight for yearning, awkward if not more earnest
prayer and fasting in the clear face of dust.

Taken from Jay Hopley and Kimberly Johnson, editors, *Before the Door of God; An Anthology of Devotional Poetry*(New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 425pp.

A Catholic Guide to Ashes, *Extended Edition*

@BillDonaghy



Reflections on the Offering of Ashes John McDargh

This morning after our 7:30 am launch of Lent at St. Paul's, I donned an alb and with a plastic container of ashes and a damp paper towel made for the Newton Centre in-bound Metro stop on the Green Line. I discovered this morning the wisdom of Sara Miles new book *City of God: Faith in the Streets*, who says that when the church leaves the safety of its own space and gets out where the people are, and in ways that are generously sacramental, "things happen".

Numbers of people approached me to ask for ashes, but the most memorable encounter was with the first man to whom I offered ashes. "Yes, thank you. I am Catholic", he replied and then added that his high school aged son was an altar boy and went to a diocesan high school in Springfield. I wondered whether he felt he needed to establish his religious credential before receiving this sign of our shared mortality and common need for God's healing and hope. After I had placed the smudge of burnt palm on his forehead and prayed with him we stood and talked for some time before his train arrived. He offered that he had a degree in accounting but that some years ago for about eight years he had been unable to work because of a perfect storm of illnesses: a stroke, a heart-attack and a long difficult recovery. Now that he is able to work again, at least part-time, potential employers note that lacuna in his resume and do not want to talk with him; and even if he is given the chance to explain the circumstances they still do not want to touch him. I shared with him my thought that on this day it is perhaps such employers who are most in need of this visible reminder of the vulnerability and fragility of every human life, and to experience the way in which this might open the door of our hearts to the radical compassion exemplified in the life of Jesus.

As I left the station, my frozen hands finally getting the best of me, I found myself remembering my first Ash Wednesday in Washington DC at Coast Guard Headquarters which was then located next to St. Dominic's Church which on that day of the year distributed ashes all day on the half hour beginning at 6:00 am. By noon when I left the building for lunch it seemed that every other person I passed - and in range that crossed age, gender, class, physical appearance and race - had an ashen cross smudged on their foreheads. I suddenly found myself close to tears as I imagined that somehow on this single day of the year an invisible sign we all bear miraculously became visible. The black cross announced to all who could read it: "*this precious human person beloved of God, she too will die.*" I recall that this limerick came to mind by that great Anglican poet W. H. Auden. He expresses with typical humor a sober realization about the human condition that is in fact the place we are asked to stand in to begin the Lenten journey back towards the Creator who "hates nothing that He/She has made" (*Book of Common Prayer* for Ash Wednesday).

*As the poets have mournfully sung,
death takes the innocent young,
the rolling in money,
the screamingly funny,
and those who are very well hung.*