



One Page Sermon

By Pastor Robb McCoy

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Worship Every Sunday at 9:30 AM

An Ash Wednesday Reflection

I love doing crosswords. At the beginning of the pandemic, one of the things I bought for my own self-care was a book of crossword puzzles. My favorite part of doing the crossword is when I tackle one big blank part of the puzzle at once after feeling blocked. In one flash of brilliance the dam is lifted, and a tidal wave of right answers comes pouring out. Whole sections of the puzzle that were once blocked can quickly come alive once I remember that an artichoke is an edible flower, and that acme is a four-letter word for peak. Eventually though, I hit another block.

Sometimes though, I cannot finish the whole thing. It seems like there is always some intersection of an obscure town in India and the first name of an actress from the thirties that I just can't figure out. I try as hard as I can to finish the whole thing, but almost inevitably, I have to seek help. But first I have to declare to myself, "I give up."

"I give up" are three powerful words. On Ash Wednesday, Christians of many stripes feel compelled to give something up. Most people give up some vice or bad habit. The practice of self-denial is an ancient spiritual discipline. Others, and myself in the past, have poo-pooed the idea giving up of things for Lent. Many writers have warned against the dangers of going through the motions during Lent, or giving up something superficial that won't really get to the heart of the matter.

While I agree that the sacrifice that the Lord requires is not superficial, I'm giving up judging others' discipline. If you want to give up chocolate, who I am to tell you that you shouldn't do that? I know what the Lord requires of me. Nowhere in mercy, justice, and walking humbly with God does it include commenting on your spiritual discipline.

I haven't decided if I am going to fast for Lent. In the past I've given up chocolate. I've also done daylight food fasts. For a couple years in a row I didn't eat any solid foods between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. Every year I contemplate doing that again, but haven't attempted it in years. Some years I tried to write a note to someone for every day of Lent. I wish I could tell you I actually wrote 40 notes in 40 days. I can tell you though, that it was a very rewarding experience.

This year I feel ready to give up. Giving up is not an easy thing to do sometimes.

I feel weary, and I don't think I'm alone, and now Lent comes and I'm supposed to give something up, and I can't pick just one thing. So I give up.

Pass me the ashes, I give up.

I give up my plan. I give up my power. I give up my ability to affect change. I rub ashes on my head, and mark myself "given up." Weary. Tired. Defeated. I remember that out of dust I was formed. To dust I will return.

I give up. I confess my failures. I examine my shortcomings. I reflect on the ways that I cannot do it all. I resign myself to God's will, not my own. I remember that I will die, and pain and suffering will remain, but I will have lived. I will live without the need to be right every time. I will live without the need to follow my plan, without the need to check every box, without the need to fix everything. Out of dust I was formed, and to dust I will return, but in between I am going live.

I am going to live.

I fall on my knees and cry out to God, "I give up." God smiles, embraces me and says, "Finally. Now, allow me..."

And suddenly the dam is lifted, and a tidal wave of grace comes pouring out.

The fast I choose is justice, mercy, and kindness. Not because my actions will solve the world's problems, but simply because God is. God is justice. God is mercy. God is kindness. God is love. This same God took a pile of dust and breathed life into me, so how else can I live?

I can't solve the world's problems when I've got a sink full of dirty dishes. These ashes are a reminder of my own mortality. These ashes are a reminder of my own shortcomings. These ashes are a reminder that God took ashes and formed something that I could never form. God provides answers I could never know. God provides paths I could never find.

I give up. I get up with God, and I feel fine.