

# RENEW LENT - ASH WEDNESDAY

## FEBRUARY 14, 2024

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*To bring our brokenness and learn to love mercy...*

By Leah Perrault

The words of the prophet Joel in the first reading for this Valentine's Ash Wednesday are piercing: "Even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping and with mourning. Rend your hearts and not your clothing." How is it that we worship a God who longs to hold our broken hearts, and thirsty souls, our most brittle and fragile selves? And why is it so deep in me to hide exactly these dry places far away from Love?

I have been walking with my four children for awhile now, trying my best to guide them through life. When I started out on this parenting journey, I (naively) hoped to spare them from suffering, shield them from sin, send them out with no scars. Gratefully, that was not what God asked of me. In a world that is both broken and beautiful, the invitation of parenting has been to walk beside them and allow them to glimpse the way of mercy.

When their eyes fill with tears, or they stomp out of the room and slam the door. When their favourite coat is stolen, and they run out of nice words. These are the moments when I long to wrap them in love. I do not want my children to say the words of apology without meaning them or tell me what I want to hear without truth. I want them to find the love inside themselves that is so much deeper than their pain or failure. I want them to know they are always so much more than what happens to them, than what they have done and what they have failed to do. Why is it so hard to imagine that God feels the same way about me?

When I comb my fingers through the dry earth in drought, I get a sense of why we hide. There is something so vulnerable about being cracked open. Deprived of moisture, molecules pack tightly together, breaking up what was once seamless and soft. The edges of the cracks become a sort of (ineffective) armour I can cling to. At least there is the façade of togetherness.

I become accustomed to holding myself together. Until I cannot. And I break a little bit more.

"Return to the Lord," the prophet Joel continues, "for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing."

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For so long, I had to get right to the very end of myself before I would return for mercy. A last resort. Only when I had no other options. Fine, then. And I found I could hear God's gentle laughter. See gentle eyes. Feel outstretched arms. Know softness and understanding. Be welcomed. To feel God grieving with me, sharing my sorrow, healing my broken heart.

Over four decades, I have learned to love mercy instead of resent it. To seek it out sooner, to confess with more eagerness, to be grateful for my mistakes and suffering to lead me back to God's tender heart.

My middle daughter loves collecting rocks, so we got her a small rock tumbler for her birthday, so she can polish her pebbles into treasures. And I can see so clearly how our family life is a tumbler, bumping all our hard edges against each other. There is grit and water, and the dust creatures with beating hearts and the breath of the Spirit. We are being refined by the process of learning to love.

The sins of the world crash into the shortcomings of our own selves. We get out the polysporin and the bandaids for the scratches and scrapes. We tell the stories behind the scars. We are failed by vengeance. So, we practice crying out for mercy.

Very slowly, I am trying to teach my kids that mercy is sweet relief. I wait for them and with them. And when they are ready, I am trying to be here for them with mercy, as Jesus waits for me. Hiding from our weeping and mourning only leaves us more dried out. When we come forward asking for mercy, relief comes like the rain.

Mercy often continues to be uncomfortable, in the way of wet clothes in a rainstorm. It is unsettling to have the dried-out particles saturated and soaked, pressed into the cracks that I had mapped, to be filled to overflowing where I became familiar with being parched. But it is a discomfort that heals and restores with its abundant tenderness.

May I remember that I am dust so that I will long for the breath and life of God, so freely given. May I cling to the mercy that heals me and reach for it often as I walk through this fleeting life. And may I remember that life ends in eternal stardust, a rebirth into the heart of Mercy.

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*For Your Reflection:*

- How do you respond to vulnerability and brokenness?
- How do you seek and give mercy in your life?
- Reflect on a transformative experience of mercy.
- How do you foster a culture of mercy in your family?
- How do you navigate life's challenges for growth?

*In our brokenness, we turn to you for mercy and grace. Help us to embrace our imperfections and extend forgiveness to others. Guide us to create a culture of mercy and reconciliation. Strengthen us to trust in your promise of redemption and be agents of your love in the world.*

*Amen.*