

Ash Wednesday
March 2, 2022

In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.

Meister Eckhart was a German Christian mystic who lived in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. He believed that God was present in all living things, and he wrote that hidden in all of us is “something like the original outbreak of all goodness, something like a brilliant light that glows incessantly ... and this fire is nothing more than the Holy Spirit.”

Over five hundred years later, Dominican priest Matthew Fox explored this idea in his book, ***Original Blessing***. Although ***Original Blessing*** was a best-seller, the Roman Catholic Church did not receive it well. Specifically, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (who later became Pope Benedict XVI), and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (formerly the Office of the Holy Inquisition) condemned it. Matthew Fox was eventually excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church, and is now an Episcopal Priest.

In the introduction to ***Original Blessing*** Matthew Fox says, “A Native American elder summarizes the entire thrust of this book in the following teaching:

Goodness is the natural state of this world. The world is *good*! Even when it seems evil, it is good. There is only goodness in God. And that same goodness is in all of us. You can feel it in yourself. You know when you feel good inside.

Yes, you are God’s child too. You are good. You are sacred. Respect yourself. Love the goodness in yourself. *Then put that goodness out into the world.* That’s everybody’s instructions.

Matthew Fox chose the title ***Original Blessing*** to contrast with the general Christian theology of “original sin” conceived by St. Augustine in the fourth century. According to Augustine’s concept of “original sin” humans, by the mere fact that they are born, inherit a tainted nature in need of redemption.

So, what does this have to do with Ash Wednesday and Lent? According to Christian theology, simply put, if we are born into “original sin,” then the only means of redemption is through the sacrifice of God’s son on the Cross at his crucifixion. This is theology is called “sacrificial redemption.” The greater the sacrifice and suffering, the greater the redemption. The standard Church teaching is that Lent is our preparation for that sacrificial redemption of Jesus dying on the Cross, and his Resurrection on Easter Sunday.

Now, I'm of an age where I don't have a lot of time left to say the things I have to say, so I better go ahead and say them. Some in the Church may find me heretical, but I DO NOT believe in "original sin." I DO NOT believe in "sacrificial redemption." I DO NOT believe that my suffering ... or for that matter, Jesus' suffering ... or anyone else's suffering buys redemption from God. I DO NOT believe that Jesus was sacrificed on the Cross by God for my sins.

I DO believe in original blessing. I believe that Jesus lived as if that God of goodness and love was alive in him. I believe that kind of life threatens people, especially people of power. Jesus spoke this truth to the people of power ... and it got him killed. I DO NOT believe that Jesus died to redeem my sins ... I DO believe that Jesus died because of the sins of humanity exercised by those in power ... the religious powers and the state powers.

So, if we are born beloved and blessed children of a loving God, in a world that was created in goodness and for goodness, what do we do with Lent? Rather than focus on our original sin, what if we focus instead on our original blessing.

What we know is that in the earliest communities formed around Jesus it was the Resurrection that was primary ... the new life after death ... Jesus' Resurrection after dying on the Cross ... and our resurrections into new life after a death in this life of one kind or another. Lent was a time of preparation for those who desired Baptism on Easter ... Easter the day of Resurrection ... the day of new life ... a day to celebrate the original blessing that was bestowed upon us at our creation.

Since "blessing" is the theological word for "goodness," original blessing is about original goodness. The forces of fear and pessimism so prevalent in society and religion can be countered by an increased awareness of awe and goodness. This goodness is inherent in the beauty, wisdom, and wonder of creation. Goodness and creation go together as do goodness and God. As Meister Eckhart put it, "Goodness is the proper name of God the Creator." When creation ... original blessing ... becomes the starting point of spirituality, then hope will be present as well. We will see everything differently, including Divinity itself. To put a love of life first will mean seeing the world differently. It will mean detoxing our souls from that which steals life away from all of us. It means finding the holy, the sacred in even the little things in life. Lent can be a time of looking for the goodness in the world around us, rather than focusing on the denial of pleasure to remind us of suffering.

Ross Douthat is a New York Times opinion columnist. Several years ago he and his wife bought a farm house on several acres of meadow and woods in Connecticut. After they closed on their property, Douthat took a walk in the woods, brushing against the low hanging branches. The next day he had a rash on his neck, then he started having symptoms ... pain, fatigue, brain fog. The story of his diagnosis is a saga in itself, but in the end it turned out he had Lyme's disease from a tick bite. Douthat has written a book about his ordeal, ***Deep Places: A Memoir of Illness and Discovery***. He was recently interviewed about the book, specifically about a story of being in prayer and finding a sand dollar on the beach. This is what he had to say:

I wouldn't say that I had overtly supernatural experiences, exactly, in the course of this illness. But then these things happen where it feels almost like God is winking at you. Finding a sand dollar on a beach is obviously a completely normal experience that can be explained perfectly well through material cause and effect. But after spending your entire vacation in pain and imagining that finding one would be a sign of divine grace, it's a rather intense coincidence.

Much of how we live our lives, for both religious and nonreligious people, is reacting to things that happen that are not miraculous but still feel providential. Everyone is in some sense looking for a way to understand the story they find themselves inside. They're looking for signposts. Sometimes the signpost is saying, "You're not alone, keep going." Right? It wasn't like the sand dollar had the chronic Lyme disease cure written in Sanskrit on the back.

As we enter this Lent, my hope is that it can be seen as a time of real preparation for a new life where each of us is more full of the goodness we were created with than we are on this Ash Wednesday. We were born in goodness to live a life of goodness. Sometimes things get in the way of our self-worth ... our own assessment of just what that goodness is for ourselves. Our lifelong spiritual journey is to recapture that goodness. Lent is one of the ritualistic ways for people of faith to set some time aside to reflect upon that journey ... to find those moments when God is winking at us.

The Church says that we are unworthy by the mere fact of the dogma of original sin. However, I believe there is another option ... original blessing. So, I invite you to focus on the blessings you have in your life, especially those that you may take for granted. Look for what stops you from living that blessing in its fullness in your life right now. Open yourself up to find wonder and awe, sand dollars and sunrises, beauty and miracles.

Last Sunday, at the end of our worship service, just the Dismissal, I said that we would not be saying "Alleluia" again until Easter. It is the custom of the Church to cease singing ... and shouting ... "Alleluia" during Lent as we wait for it to be proclaimed amid the celebration of Easter, bursting forth from its captivity, just as Jesus broke out of the tomb.

Well, an ancient tradition ... still practiced in some churches ... is to symbolically bury the "Alleluia." Sometimes an "Alleluia" banner is placed in a coffin like box and left in a conspicuous place in the sanctuary. In other cases, it could be a painted sign with the word "Alleluia" on it that is literally buried in the churchyard, often with seeds to sprout as spring warms the soil.

But there are other ways for us to "bury" our "Alleluias," and I would like to propose one possibility for our Lent. Think of "burying our Alleluias" as a metaphor so that we can bury our Alleluia in solidarity with those who can't proclaim their own Alleluia ... those who have lost or let go of their Alleluia because life or death ... external or internal factors ... are preventing them from doing so.

We can “bury our Alleluia” for the people of Ukraine during this unnecessary war. I “bury my Alleluia” when I see a young mother holding her baby in a bomb shelter in Kyiv. Sure, I want to be strong and not show my vulnerability, so I make an excuse that they are thousands of miles away, and I’m impotent to do anything about it. That way I can force my tears to stay hidden. But this mother holding her baby is a picture of a broken world that was created in goodness, and so I allow the tears to well up in my eyes ... I allow the tears because I have “buried my Alleluia.”

We can “bury our Alleluias” for ourselves, and for those for whom Alleluia is the furthest word from their lips because of captivity, or mental illness, or addiction, or homelessness, or hunger, or bereavement, or loneliness.

We can “bury our Alleluias” for Afghan refugees, and for our sisters and brothers who are struggling at the US/Mexico border, risking everything to find life for their families. We “bury our Alleluias” for our trans-siblings, and the fear-based harm that is inflicted on them. We “bury our Alleluias” for all who face a lack of welcome and belonging based on their gender identity, sexual orientation and sexual expression.

We can “bury our Alleluias” for all who suffer at the hands of a country built and propelled by white supremacy and economic exploitation of black and brown bodies. And we can “bury our Alleluias” for those who are incarcerated and those who have been killed at the hands of the state.

We can “bury our Alleluias” for the recently bereaved, for our loved ones preparing to die, for the broken, the lonely, the suffering, and maybe even ourselves, and we will make our lack of Alleluias in Lent our prayer ... it can become our Lenten discipline.

We “bury our Alleluias” with the hope and belief that Easter IS coming, that resurrection IS God’s promise, while knowing that Lent is a time to prepare for goodness.

Today we “bury our Alleluias” until Easter, and we press ash into one another’s foreheads and remember that from dust we were created and to dust we shall return.

When we “bury our Alleluias” ... like digging a hole in the garden ... we dwell in this dust, this soil, this dirt ... believing that Easter will come, that there will be Alleluias, but our job isn’t to force ourselves there ... it is to dwell with the goodness of a loving God in this place for forty days.

In a world torn apart by anger, hatred, and conflict, we have the privilege of being living signs of goodness and a love that can bridge all division and heal all wounds. Let that be our Lenten discipline.

Amen.