

“COME BACK TO ME”



Perhaps one of the best promises in all of scripture is one that speaks specifically to the restoration of a “sinful person”: *“Come back to me with all your heart... for I am gracious and deeply loving as a mother, quick to forgive and abundantly tender-hearted...”* Joel 2:12-13

As an invitation to the season of Lent, these words from the Book of Joel are an open embrace to return to Love’s Source. And even though the journey begins with ashes and invites us to step into that which is arid and bare, the road into the wilderness, in fact, opens up into vast expanse of sacred, recuperative space.

In this stark emptiness of desert, “fasting, weeping and mourning” (Joel 2:12) gives way to the “oil of gladness instead of tears, a cloak of praise instead of despair” (Isaiah 61:3).

JOEL 2:12-18

12 "But now, says Yahweh: "Come back to me with all your heart, with fasting, weeping, and mourning.' 13 Tear open your heart, not your clothes." Come back to Yahweh your God, who is gracious and deeply loving as a mother, quick to forgive, abundantly tender-hearted - and relents about inflicting disaster."

14 Who knows? God may come back, relent, and leave a blessing behind - grain and drink offerings for Yahweh your God?

15 Sound the shofar in Zion! Order a fast! Proclaim a solemn assembly!

16 Gather the people! Purify the community! Assemble the elders!

Gather the children - even infants at the breast!

Call the bridegroom from his bedroom and the bride from her canopied bed!

17 Let the priests, the ministers of Yahweh, stand weeping between the portico and the altar and say, 'Spare your people, Yahweh! Do not let your heritage become an object of ridicule, a byword for the nations! Don't let the peoples say, "Where is their God?" '

18 Then Yahweh will be stirred on behalf of the land, and will take pity on the people.

FOR REFLECTION

1. If you are an LGBT person or someone who works for LGBT equality, then you probably have great familiarity with the desert. Working for justice and equality is often a painful, desolate, and discouraging experience, where the temptation to give up, give in, or become cynical and bitter abounds. In light of such roadblocks, how do you flower in deserts where trials, isolation, and dangers await? Do you feel God guiding and caring for you in these spaces? Can you hear the voice of God in the wilderness?

2. Though Lent is a time to mourn the ways we stray from God, it is also a time to remember that we are still loved by God. If grey ashes symbolize a "turning away from sin and being faithful to the Gospel," what symbol/s could you wear (or keep close to you) as a reminder of God's unwavering love for you?

3. "Repent" is a word largely associated with Ash Wednesday as a scriptural metaphor to "come-back" to God. With the LGBT community, however, the word "repent" has often been used to condemn their sexualities and gender identities. Given your own unique experience and relationship with God, how do you feel about the word "repent?" What does your "repentance" or "return to God" look like?

4. Verses 15-16 of the passage from Joel, above, suggest Lent to be a personal *and* communal return to God. As an LGBT person or ally, how can you "gather" or inspire others to "repent" for communal sins (like global warming, human trafficking, anti-LGBT violence, immigration discrimination, etc.) so as to "purify" our assemblies, communities, nations, and world of the wider-reaching consequences of our sin?

5. If you were to incorporate LGBT history and your own LGBT experience into a liturgy for Ash Wednesday, what would help you to remember who you really are and who your God truly is? Some churches have adopted "[glitter ashes](#)" to show support for the LGBT community. Would something like this appeal to you? Is there some other symbol or ritual that would aid your prayer? Do you prefer the more traditional aspects of Ash Wednesday?

6. As a LGBTQ person or ally, how have you emerged from the deserts of your struggles? What are some of your personal resurrection stories that speak of a rising from the ashes?

PRAYER



Creator God,
You who formed my inmost being;
Knit me together in my mother's womb,
You, who affirm my deepest yearnings,
and channel my deserts towards the great end of your love,
Send down your angels
as I enter this wilderness to "come back" to you

I am marked with the sign of your cross
And through this ritual of dust and ashes
I know of my beginnings and endings with you.
This comforts me
And assures me of your loving embrace -
Even those parts of me
that the world treats with scorn

May your angels minister to me, direct me,
Strike rocks to quench my thirst
And as I empty myself
to be filled with your light and truth
I ask that my life journey on
as testament to your surprising grace.

In scripture, the wilderness has always been a place for discovery and transformation. Besides forging vocations like those of Jesus and John the Baptist, the “wilderness” keeps providing more. In 1 Samuel 23:14, the wilderness protects David from the wrath of Saul. In Genesis 21:17-21, when Hagar wanders in the wilderness, God reaches out to her and guarantees her a “great nation” through her son. In Isaiah 48:21, God promises deliverance to the people of Israel during the Babylonian exile.

One modern example of how the “wilderness” has encouraged creativity and inspiration is the poetry and writings of Andrea Gibson who has used their pain and struggles to rise from ashes. Andrea is a poet and activist whose poetry focuses on gender norms, politics, social reform, and the struggles LGBT people face. Andrea uses plural pronouns for self-reference.

After reading about a soldier who was burned to death for being gay, [Andrea Gibson](#) wrote one of their most powerful spoken word poems from the perspective of victims of horrific hate crimes.

Below is their poem “Ashes.”

ASHES

The night I was torn from the pages of their Bible
and burned alive
my ashes came down like snow
and a girl who had never seen my face
saw me falling from the sky
and laid down on her back to make an angel
in the powder of my bones

From heaven, I watched her,
'though my eyes were still flame
and my ribs were still blue,
they didn't win, I whispered
as her arms built my wings
they didn't win

Look at that moon
it is a pebble in my hand
tonight, I could skip it across that fog-drunk sea
to the lashes accordion in the night
and all they know of hate
is that it couldn't beat the love out of me
that when they dropped me to the grave,
I fell like a bucket into a well and came up full;
carving my lover's name in to the skin of a weeping willow
that had spent its entire life laughing at the rain

Hold me like a lantern;
staircase my spine
When they bring their children to my funeral
to scream faggot at my dust
tell them
I was born into this casket
but I wouldn't pull the splinters from my heart
any more than Christ
would've pulled the thorns from his crimson head

They can come a thousand times
with their burning match
and their gasoline
with their hungry laws
and their empty mouths full of prayers
to that God that greeted me at his gates
with his throat full of trumpets
and his tears full of shame
as his trembling palms
collected the cinder of his children's crime

I know what Holy is
I know that the soul is shaped like a bowl;
I know the lies we try to fill it with
and we spill too often the orchards inside
but my lover's shoes were tied with guitar strings
and when I walked beside
there was a silo in my chest;
there was a field full of sun;
there was a river full of gold
that we left
to pick our sweet hearts from the trees
that kept uprooting tombstones
so the names of the dead
would crumble into poems

Write me down like this:
say my ashes never made the news;
say the jury was full of shotguns
and say the snow that fell on the tip of your tongue
refused to melt away
say this
to the kids hiding their heart beats
from their father's fists

I planted the garden of my kiss;
I opened the night with my teeth;
I loved so hard that when they pressed their ear to the track,
the train they hear coming will still be my chest - a rumbling harpoon;
a sky they can not bury

Look at that moon
I am a pebble in her hand;
a harmonica held to the mouth of the river where
nothing
ever
burns

- Andrea Gibson