

Blessed Are the Binary Breakers,
A Multifaith Podcast of Transgender Stories

Episode 79:
Ash Wednesday, Saint Valentine & Amatonormativity, Isaiah 6

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I'm Avery Arden, and you're listening to *Blessed Are the Binary Breakers*, a multifaith podcast of transgender stories.

[music plays]

Hello, beloved! Can you believe that Lent is upon us so soon?

Honestly, I'm grateful Lent comes early this year. We need space to grapple with grief, space for intentional lamentation, now as much as ever.

I will be praying hard, and ask that you pray with me too, that permanent ceasefire will come to Gaza before Lent's end. May our actions reflect our prayers — again, I'll be sharing [a link to a whole bunch of resources on Palestine in this episode's notes](#).

I want to let you know, dear listeners, that episodes of *Blessed Are the Binary Breakers* may be more sporadic than usual this year. In 2023, I did my best to post an episode on the last day of every month, and often succeeded in posting one in the middle of the month as well. As I've been contemplating how I want to spend my time and energies in 2024, I've decided that this podcast will move downwards in my list of priorities.

Heck, who knows with life, maybe I'll end up making an episode most months anyway! But I make no guarantees. This year, I want to direct more of my energies towards showing up for justice in physical spaces. And in the virtual realm, I'll be focusing more on videos about faith, poetry, justice, and the like. For instance, I have some video essays in the works for YouTube;

meanwhile, over on TikTok and Instagram I've been sharing lots of Palestinian poetry — and I also plan to be sharing a video most days in Lent about a variety of topics.

So if you are sad to hear that this podcast might be quieter, come find me elsewhere — I'll include my linktree in the episode notes that shares links to everywhere else you can find me on the internet. And if you have a faith community — a church, a chaplaincy program, a school, whatever! — that you believe would benefit from a conversation with me about disability or trans theology and welcome, please reach out to me at queerlychristian36@gmail.com! I'm available for workshops in person or online.

One project I'm joining this year — in fact, I just started this week — is a fantastic (and free!) daily worship resource called Daily Ripple. I'll be offering you a taste of it at the end of this episode, so stay tuned for that. First, I want to share some rather incomplete musings about Ash Wednesday, Saint Valentine, and Amatonormativity.

I've been struggling to articulate it, but since I first found out that Ash Wednesday would be taking place on Valentine's Day this year, I felt a sense of *rightness* about that coincidence.

For starters, Saint Valentine, who lived in 3rd-century Rome, was well-aware of his own mortality. He lived in a way that he must have known would inevitably end with his martyrdom. Valentine was imprisoned and eventually executed for offering aid to persecuted Christians and performing marriage ceremonies, two things that were illegal under the Emperor Claudius. ([Btw for a queer take on Valentine's bold resistance to marriage restrictions, check out this QSpirit article!](#))

Some legends suggest that many of the couples he married were seeking marriage so that the man would not be drafted into military service. Valentine knew that war is death's favorite game; he risked his life to protect these men from becoming servants and casualties of death.

Till the very end, with death's shadow looming over him, Valentine chose to live a life of defiant service and love. Similarly, Ash Wednesday invites us to contemplate our own mortality, to grapple with the reality of death, and consider how we can spend our limited time here to liberate and cultivate life.

Then there's the way St. Valentine's Day has been consumerized and watered down to serve amatonormativity.

If you've never heard that term, it was first coined by Elizabeth Brake in *Minimizing Marriage: Marriage, Morality, and the Law* from 2011. Basically, it's the assumption that everyone must surely want (even need!) romantic love — especially a heteronormative, monogamous romance.

Valentine's Day is fueled by and feeds into this assumption. Our society places romantic love on a pedestal as the end-all, be-all to a happy, fulfilled life.

In a way, this serves our culture's fervent fear and denial of death very well: we're all pressured to get swept up in daydreams of "happily ever after" with our "other half," to romanticize the romantic till it's devoid of any "bad" things like sadness or anger or even boredom.

This is an unattainable dream, of course, and people who devote all their energy and hopes to it are doomed to end up disappointed. Those who want it but can't attain it feel like failures; those with no interest in it are made to feel broken.

This Ash Wednesday, let's envision and then work towards the death of amatonormativity. Death to all systems that chip away at the beautiful diversity of life, that teach us that deviation from the status quo is sinful brokenness! Death to pretty daydreams sold to us to distract us from what matters!

From dust we came, and to dust we return — but while we are here, while our hearts beat boldly in us, let us seek what brings true, liberating life. Let us celebrate all forms of love and solidarity, all life-giving relationships — without pretending they're perfect, without fearing and shunning life's messiness, sorrows, and cares, and yes, relationship with death.

Now that you've humored my half-baked musings, let's end with prayerful reflection! I promised I'd share an example of the Daily Ripple worship resource with you, so here we go:

If you want to incorporate queer-affirming, justice-oriented snippets of biblical reflection written by a diverse range of Christians into your everyday life, [Daily Ripple](#) is a lovely option. It's free, and every weekday, subscribers receive a short reflection, ending with a question meant to guide you towards action.

I've been writing the daily posts for this week, incorporating queer and autistic theology into readings of Psalm 119, Mark 4, and Isaiah 6. Let me share today's post with you now, written for Ash Wednesday:

I said, "Mourn for me; I'm ruined! I'm a man with unclean lips, and I live among a people with unclean lips. Yet I've seen the king, the Lord of heavenly forces!"

Then one of the winged creatures flew to me, holding a glowing coal that ze had taken from the altar with tongs. Ze touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips. Your guilt has departed, and your sin is removed."

- [Isaiah 6:5-7](#)

Did the glowing coal leave a mark? A smear of dark? A bright burn?

Reading this text on Ash Wednesday, I can't help but connect Isaiah's coal and our ashy crosses:

He confesses himself unclean — admits his limits, where he and his people have failed.

We profess ourselves dust — acknowledge our limits, the finite time we have here and now, and how often we've failed to cherish that time.

In the confession, we open ourselves to blessing. Accepting our limits, we fall into God's limitless love.

Why these physical, ritual actions — coal to the lips, ashes to the brow — to mark these limits and the blessings they yield?

God knows, respects, loves our existence as embodied spirits, inspirited bodies. She pairs spiritual gifts with tangible signs to help us experience Her truths with our whole selves.

A glowing coal — dead plants packed deep, transformed over eons, unburied at last and set alight — touches truthful lips to set them free.

Ashes of palm branches once waved in worship, burned down to begin the cycle anew, mark us as individually finite, but gathered into an infinite love.

Take time to prayerfully consider your own limits. What blessings, what liberation can you imagine flowing from our individual finitude? How can you connect your limited time and gifts to a greater whole, in small ways with great love?