Since the Church commemorates events on both the lunar and solar calendar it occasionally leads to some weird crossovers. Today’s weird crossover is that Ash Wednesday and Valentine’s Day both fall on February 14th. Valentine’s Day is on the solar calendar, meaning it is always on the 14th, but Ash Wednesday by being on the lunar calendar occurs 46 days before Easter and Easter is the Sunday following the first full moon that happens on or after the March equinox. Now at first glance this overlap might seem like a train wreck, like when Lee Marvin and Clint Eastwood sang a duet in the 1969 western musical *Paint Your Wagon*. But if we remove the Hallmark-itazation of Valentine’s Day, I think there is actually a good bit of crossover between these two commemorations. So, stick with me for a minute.

Ash Wednesday writ large is the Church calendar equivalent of a defibrillator – it is meant to restore us to good health through an immense shock. Today’s readings and liturgy show us that our present condition is not good. The quick version being that we are sinners, God is coming, and without amending our ways we will end up as nothing but a pile of dust. Today is the beginning of a season of repentance and fasting through which we will be ready to hail Christ at his resurrection. The take home from today’s service is to get yourself right with God. There is no time to lose.

Now that we have summarized Ash Wednesday, let’s look at the life of St. Valentine. Contrary to popular belief his life was not one of romance. Rather his story was much different and went like this: He was born probably around the year 226 in Terni which is about 60 miles northeast of Rome (Italy not Georgia). He was a clergyman, probably a priest but possibly a bishop. And, as was the fashion in those days, Valentine was put under arrest by the Romans. It was a house arrest and he spent it in the house of a judge by the name of Asterius. Since there were no cell phones at the time, Asterius and Valentine started talking and the subject turned to the validity of Valentine’s faith. Being a judge Asterius decided to put Valentine’s beliefs to the test and brought him his adopted daughter who was blind saying that if Valentine restored her sight, he would do whatever was asked of him. Valentine did indeed restore her sight and then had Asterius live up to his end of the bargain telling him that he needed to destroy the idols in his house, fast for three days and then undergo the Christian sacrament of baptism. Asterius obeyed. And if we ended there it would be a nice story but there is a second part. Naturally Asterius released Valentine but Valentine would again be arrested and this time he was taken to a short-lived emperor of Rome by the name of Claudius Gothicus. Claudius was not so receptive to the Gospel message and ordered St Valentine to renounce his faith. Valentine did not and so Claudius had him beaten with clubs and beheaded outside the Flaminian Gate in Rome on February 14, 269 AD.

And so now for the big connection. How does remembering we are dust and St Valentine’s life and witness fit together? Well…Lent is a call to get right with God. To remember that no matter what comes, our faith in Christ is the only thing that prevents us from spending eternity as a pile of dust. For, as we say there is nothing in us that can save us. And to avoid this end state we need an unshaking faith that God will deliver us. St. Valentine beautifully illustrates this type of faith because whatever befell him, his faith was constant. When he was successful in convincing the judge Asterius of the truth of the Gospel his faith in Christ was the same as it was when he was unsuccessful in convincing the Emperor Claudius Gothicus. Come what may his faith never wavered.

Ideally our faith would not go up and down, but, as we all know it does. That is why we have Lent so that we can have our faith renewed to be like the faith of St. Valentine. In the book of Job we are told the story of a man named Job who, “was blameless and upright…feared God, and turned away from evil.” In the story Satan tells God that the only reason for Job’s uprightness is because God has, “put a hedge about him and his house.” Protecting him from the problems of this world. Satan argues that if God removes that hedge Job, “will curse [God] to [his] face.” The story continues with Job’s life getting worse and worse and yet he never does what Satan guaranteed. Job never loses his faith. Do we have such faith? Will we be like Valentine and Job? As we begin this season of Lent, we need to take time to see where our faith is weak and pray that God will restore and strengthen it so that come what may we will be God’s own this day and forevermore.