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# Ash Wednesday, Salt Lake City

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## ASH WEDNESDAY, SALT LAKE CITY

by

Jake Clayson

While writing for an ad agency in downtown Salt Lake City I sometimes found myself lost in a haze of office banter, or tangled in a web of endless internet “research,” unable to write headlines or scripts about burritos or fiduciaries or healthcare. So I’d walk six blocks to the Cathedral of the Madeleine and scribble ads in my notebook. It was quiet. The temperature was right no matter the season. And, most important to me, it was a solitary place to work. Until one day in February when cars lined curbs two blocks out.

Reaching the imposing doors of the cathedral- tall, thick oak doors that swing slow and easy- I pulled the cool iron handle, entered first the foyer, then the nave. A youth choir sang Bach’s Mass in B Minor, transmuted and lofted as prayers mingling with burned incense above a warm hum. The music rose and tumbled and rose again, at once created and uncreated, holding residence among gold and turquoise vault ribs and winged angels, from lips I could not see. I knew my work would have to wait.

Observing full pews, I reverently joined those standing near the confessional, exchanged pleasant nods, and wondered why and

by what devotion so many received small ashen crosses on their foreheads at the hands of the Father.

I stood transfixed until the music ended, then watched the white-robed choir emerge from behind the chancel screen and file down the isle past me into an adjacent hall. On their way I saw choirboys jostling, smirking, scowling, and smiling. I smiled too, reminded of the twelve and thirteen year old deacons I taught each Sunday in my own congregation. I lingered, soaking in well-trod creak and clatter, robe rustle, and a rising whisper. When I finally returned to the street and walked down the hill toward my office, I saw more ashen crossed saints. Still a stranger, my heart received the first blush of communion.