

## BELOVED

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Mark 9:2-9

Happy Valentine's Day! Today is February 14th, a day we memorialize with gifts of cards and flowers and candy, dinner out, and maybe even jewelry. According to a survey taken by the National Retail Federation, Americans are expected this year to spend \$21.8 billion on Valentine gifts. Approximately 52% of American adults will celebrate Valentine's Day in one way or another. Among them, they will spend an average of \$164.76. Because so many people will be staying home this year and not going out, average spending is expected to be \$32 less than last year. But if this year is like last year, at least 6% of that spending will go for Valentine's Day gifts for our pets.<sup>1</sup>

Why do we do this? Why do we celebrate a day of Valentine's? Well, it is a holiday that idealizes romantic love. (And what is better than that?) But where did this day come from? How did it start? Why February 14th? Couldn't they have picked a warmer month?

I wish I had a concise answer for you, but the origins of Valentine's Day are a bit murky. There are competing theories explaining how we arrived at the celebration we enjoy today—the cards, the poems, the flowers. Each of these theories takes into account history, religion, culture, and lore. I don't believe there is any single origin for Valentine's Day, but in fact it is the end product of an assortment of influences that have all woven together to produce our modern celebration.

The earliest place to start is the Roman festival called Lupercalia. This was a pagan fertility festival whose origins are likely older than Rome itself. If you are not familiar with Lupercalia, it is going to sound rather odd. Lupercalia was observed on the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> of February. During the celebration, the men would strip down and make sacrifices of goats and dogs. The young men would take strips of hide from the sacrificed animals and would use these to softly whip young women. There was the belief that this whipping would promote fertility. Or, if a woman was pregnant, then it was thought that this would ensure a healthy birth. Historians assure us that the women willingly lined up for these “whippings.”

Also, during Lupercalia, there was the practice of single women putting their names into a jar. A man would pull out a name at random and the two would be coupled for the celebration. If it led to marriage, even better. It sounds to me like a bad TV reality show.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://nrf.com/media-center/press-releases/valentines-day-spending-total-218-billion>

Not surprisingly, Lupercalia was a popular holiday (kind of like Mardi Gras), and it was one of the few pagan observances still celebrated after Christianity became legalized within the Roman Empire.

However, in 492 AD, Pope Gelasius came to power and put an end to Lupercalia. Sometime later, the church declared that February 14 would be a feast day celebrating the martyred saint named Valentine.

Now, the easy way to interpret this is that the church attempted to replace a pagan festival with a Christian feast. But that does not explain the love connection associated with Valentine's Day. The saint known as Valentine had been a priest who had been beheaded by the Roman authorities. The date of his execution was February 14. Despite its name, this feast day of Valentine was nothing out of the ordinary. It certainly had nothing to do with love. There are a handful of stories that associate this saint with acts of romantic love, but these are folklore from the medieval period.

Historians argue that the roots of our modern Valentine's Day lie in the 1300s with the English poet Geoffrey Chaucer. Chaucer was the first to link romantic love with this particular day. Mid-February—the time of the Feast of Valentine—just happens to be the time of year when the birds in Europe start mating. In his poem, *The Parlement of Foules*, written around 1380, Chaucer links romance and the birds and Valentine's Day all together. Other poets picked up on this idea including Shakespeare. In the play *Hamlet*, Ophelia sings of her love for Prince Hamlet saying:

To-morrow is Saint Valentine's day,  
All in the morning betime,  
And I a maid at your window,  
To be your Valentine. (*Hamlet*, Act 4, Scene V)

It should be noted that at this point in the play that Ophelia is quite mad.

The first known Valentine's Day card dates to the year 1415. It was sent by the Duke of Orleans to his wife. The Duke, at the time, was a prisoner in the Tower of London. In his famous letter he wrote of how lovesick he was for his wife, whom he called his "very gentle Valentine."

In the United States, Valentine's Day gained popularity during the Revolutionary War as people took up the habit of composing handwritten notes to their loved ones.

Valentine's Day soared in popularity in the 1840s as pre-printed cards became widely available. And then, in 1907, the fate of Valentine's Day in the U.S. was

sealed with the founding of a store called Norfolk Post Card Company in Norfolk, Nebraska. It was owned by the Hall family and eventually renamed Hallmark.<sup>2</sup>

So, it would appear that Valentine's Day is a confluence of pagan fertility, Christian martyrdom, romantic poetry, and unbridled commercialism. Happy Valentine's Day.

But, today is another day, as well. It is also the day on the church calendar known as Transfiguration Sunday. This is always the Sunday before the beginning of Lent. The last time Valentine's Day and Transfiguration Sunday overlapped was in 2010. But the next time it happens won't be until 2083—62 years from now.

Transfiguration Sunday is the day that we have ordained to commemorate the event that we find in our scripture known as Jesus' Transfiguration. This event, as we read a moment ago, tells of how Jesus leads three of his disciples—Peter, James, and John—up a high mountain. While they are on the mountain, something happens. Jesus is transfigured. His clothes become dazzlingly white, whiter than any clothes on earth. Then, appearing next to Jesus on that mountain are two heroes of the faith—Moses and Elijah—and they are speaking with Jesus. Peter has an idea. He says to Jesus, *Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah*. The gospel makes it clear that this idea of Peter's was not one that had been thought through thoroughly. Mark's tells us, *[Peter] did not know what to say, for they were terrified*. Of course, they were terrified. Jesus is glowing and these two old-timey prophet-looking guys appear out of nowhere, and it is possible that they could be Moses and Elijah. Peter's idea, at the time, is to construct three booths, three structures—one for Jesus, one for Moses, one for Elijah. It seems that Peter's intent is to create a shrine here to these men. This site would become a one-stop shop for prophets. People would come here and worship these greats.

But God immediately intervenes and declares, no. As Mark describes, *Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"*

After these words are spoken, the scene returns to normal. The disciples are alone with Jesus once more. They head back down the mountain.

What does it mean when we read that Jesus was *transfigured*? We can't say for certain. Some claim that Jesus was changed—that God filled him with the Spirit. I would argue with this line of thought. Even from the time of creation, Jesus had been filled with the Spirit. He wasn't changed, only transfigured. On that mountain, his humanness was for a moment removed and his divine nature shone through. The disciples were privileged to witness his full being.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hallmark\\_Cards](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hallmark_Cards)

But more importantly, on that mountain, once again God claims Jesus. *This is my son, the Beloved*. And then God delivers a command, *Listen to him*. Peter suggests building three booths, one for each figure, but this is not what God had in mind. Moses and Elijah are exemplary heroes, but now, now we are to listen to Jesus—God's beloved son.

When God calls Jesus the beloved son, he is labeling him as special. The word for beloved is *agapetos* based on the word *agape*, which means a love that is unconcerned with self and wholly concerned with the greatest good of others. It is a sacrificial love. *agape* is different than other types of love, such as *eros*, romantic love, or *philos*, the love you have for a friend. This is God's love. And when God loves something, we should pay attention.

Our modern Valentine's Day is a day to celebrate the romantic love we might share with one another. Romantic love can be an abiding love, a mark of the commitment two people make to one another. It is a reflection of God's love for us. Romantic love is a good love. Our Valentine festival came about because we wanted it, we needed it. It is the outward expression of our inward emotions.

But on this Transfiguration Sunday, we are also called to experience a different love, the love God has for Christ, the love that is formed at creation, the love that binds God to us and us to God.

The Transfiguration is not something that we are supposed to understand or explain. Like Valentine's Day, it is a bit murky. The Transfiguration is wonderful, frightening, unexpected, unnatural. It is holy.

Jesus Christ, himself, is holy. He is the one we follow. He is the one to whom we give our lives. He is the ultimate Valentine's Day gift. He is the perfect and complete embodiment of God's great love for us.

Happy Valentine's Day!