

Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday begins the season of Lent. The biblical witness is found in the opening epic of the human story: "you are dust and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:19). In the tenth century the use of ashes was employed in visibly reminding worshippers of their mortality as they began their Lenten "watch by the cross."

This first day of Lent reminds us (in the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, question and answer #88) that two things are involved in genuine repentance: "the dying of the old self and the coming to life of the new." The way to Easter is the way of the cross. "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (Romans 6:3). New life with Christ involves a daily surrendering of the old life. The first step of this Lenten journey invites us to acknowledge our mortality and our sinfulness by the imposition of ashes.

Traditionally, the ashes for the service are prepared (well ahead of time) by burning the palm branches from the previous year's Palm Sunday. The ashes should be ground to a fine powder and mixed in a shallow bowl with a little water or oil. (It is also helpful to have a damp towel available for the hands of those who impose ashes.) As each worshiper comes forward the ashes are imposed on the forehead in the sign of a cross and the words of Genesis 3:19 are repeated each time: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." The imposition of ashes is often preceded by a call to confession and followed by a litany of penitence or a corporate prayer of confession, calling to mind the words of Job, "I repent in dust and ashes."

Imposition of ashes can be a deeply moving, though sobering experience. If imposition of ashes is likely to be new and unfamiliar to all in your congregation, care should be taken in introducing the practice and in preparing the congregation for their participation. There should be adequate explanation and ample opportunity for discussion and decision by the worship committee and consistory. If the consistory decides to include imposition of ashes in the Ash Wednesday service, no worshipper should feel compelled to come forward to receive ashes, nor should the practice be seen as a way of displaying one's piety before others. It is simply a vivid and tangible reminder of our sinfulness and mortality and of our utter dependence upon the grace of God and the power of Christ's resurrection.

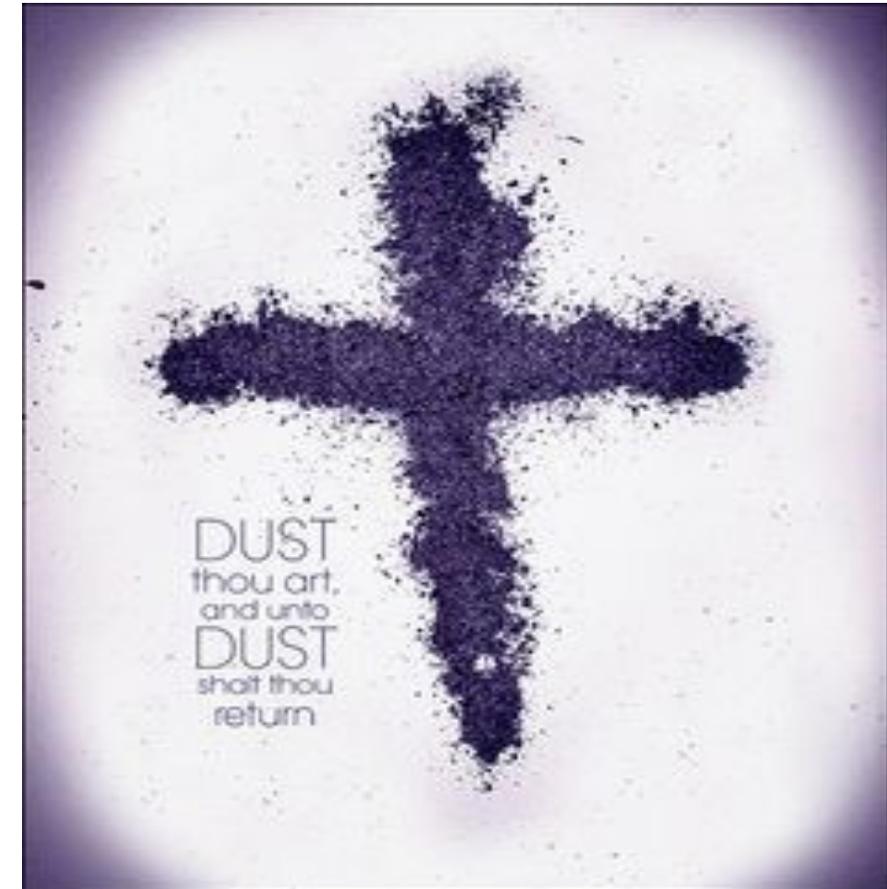
All are invited to come forward to receive the imposition of ashes. During the imposition of ashes suitable psalms or hymns may be sung, or silence may be kept. The worship leader marks the forehead of each person with the ashes, using the following words:

"Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return,
but the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever."

First Presbyterian Church

Ash Wednesday Service

February 17, 2021



CALL TO WORSHIP

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. John 3:16-17

PRAYER OF THE DAY

One: O God the father, creator of heaven and earth,

All: Have mercy on us.

One: O God the Son, redeemer of the world

All: Have mercy on us.

One: O God the Holy Spirit, advocate and guide,

All: Have mercy on us.

*One: Holy, blessed and glorious Trinity, three persons and
one God,*

All: Have mercy on us.

One: Loving God, whose glory it is always to have mercy:

All: Be gracious to us who have gone astray from your ways, and bring us again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son.

Hymn: "Lord, Who Throughout These Forty Days" No. 81

Pastoral Prayer and Lord's Prayer (*forgive us our debts*)

Scripture

Luke 4:1-14
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Meditation

Rev. Dr. Paul E. Hayden

"Spiritual Disciplines, Lent, and the Christian Life"

Invitation to Observe a Lenten Discipline

Sisters and brothers in Christ:

Every year at Easter we celebrate with joy our redemption and renewal through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The season of Lent is a time to prepare for this celebration and to make room in our lives for the Spirit of God to renew us in this mystery.

We begin this holy season by acknowledging our need for repentance and our need for the love and forgiveness shown to us in Jesus Christ.

I invite you, therefore, in the name of Christ, to observe a Holy Lent, by self-examination and penitence, by prayer and fasting, by practicing works of love, and by reading and reflecting on God's Holy Word
Let us begin our Lenten journey by together confessing our sins and seeking the forgiveness and new life that is promised to us in Christ Jesus.

Responsive Reading

Psalm 51

[OT p. 492]

Prayer of Response

Gracious God,
you created us out of the dust of the earth
and breathed into us the breath of life.
By your hand we live and to your hands we return when all our days are done.
Grant that the awareness of our mortality may lead us not to fear, but to faith.
In our weakness teach us to look to you for strength,
in our failures to turn to you and find forgiveness,
and in our dying to await the gift of everlasting life;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Imposition of Ashes

"Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return,
but the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever."

Responsive Reading:

Psalm 103

No. 222 (hymn book)

Prayer

Hymn

"Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley"

No. 80

Charge and Blessing

*Written by John Paarlberg, pastor of First Church in Albany, New York.
Adapted by Paul Hayden, Interim Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Polson, MT*