

Ash Wednesday

Note to Leader: [outline of lent] [suffering – following in Christ’s footsteps, Lent]

Defining Lent: Since the time of the early Church, the first Christians observed the time of the Lord's passion and resurrection (what we may think of as “Holy Week” or more commonly “Easter time”) with great devotion, and it became customary for Christians to prepare themselves for that time by a season of prayer, fasting, and repentance. This season of Lent, the 40-day period leading up to Easter, provided a time in which converts to the faith were prepared for Holy Baptism.

It was also a time when certain members of the church who had fallen out of fellowship due to questions of serious sin were invited to be reconciled back into the church by a process of repentance and forgiveness. You could say that both new Christians and renewed Christians were focused on in this season, but in doing so, the whole church was granted the opportunity to realize afresh their own need to continually pursue Christ in repentance and faith, by daily taking up their own cross & following Him. In this way, Lent is not an event. It is a season. It’s a time of preparation. It is a journey. A journey into the wilderness with Christ.

[outline for the service]

Why “Ash Wednesday”?:

Why is this service in particular called an “Ash Wednesday” service, then? Well, that’ll likely be a lot clearer by the end of this service, but in short: It’s because we are invited in this service in particular to focus on the one thing many of us try our entire lives to avoid: the fact that we will die...

Invitation To Lent:

I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word. And, to start things off right, I’ll invite you to stand with me for the reading of God’s Word:

Main Scripture:

[contextual preamble]

— Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After he fasted 40 days and 40 nights he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread.” But he answered, “It is written, ‘Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” Then the devil took him to the holy city, had him stand on the highest point of the temple, and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you’ and ‘with their hands they will lift you up, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’” Jesus said to him, “Once again it is written: ‘You are not to put the Lord your God to the test.’” Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their grandeur. And he said to him, “I will give you all these things if you throw yourself to the ground and worship me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Go away, Satan! For it is written: ‘You are to worship the Lord your God and serve only him.’” Then the devil left him, and angels came and began ministering to his needs. —

(Matthew 4:1-11, NET)

Collect:

Let's pray these words together:

Almighty and everlasting God, You don't hate anything you have made, and You freely forgive the sins of everyone who is repentant. We ask that You please create in us new, humble, and repentant hearts, that as we lament our sins and acknowledge our brokenness, we may receive from You (the God of all mercy) perfect forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

[Sing "Create In Me A Clean Heart", with words on screen]

The Bread of His Word:

In the historic Christian tradition, what we tend to call in our tradition the meal of communion was associated more with feasting than with fasting. Today, we'll consider these two elements (the bread & the cup) in ways that may be a little less familiar...

[the association between "bread", "manna", and the "word of God"]

Scripture Reading: Remember the whole way by which he has brought you these 40 years through the wilderness so that he might, by humbling you, test you to see if you have it within you to keep his commandments or not. So he humbled you by making you hungry and then feeding you with unfamiliar manna. He did this to teach you that humankind cannot live by bread alone, but also by everything that comes from the Lord's mouth. — (Deuteronomy 8:2-3, NET)

The Cup of Suffering:

["the cup" as not only "the blood", but also "the suffering" that we experience as a type of "grace"]

Scripture Reading: Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to the disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and he became anguished and distressed. Then he said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved, even to the point of death. Remain here and stay awake with me." Going a little farther, he threw himself down with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if possible, let this cup pass from me! Yet not what I will, but what you will."

Scripture Reading Continued...

Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. He said to Peter, “So, couldn’t you stay awake with me for one hour? Stay awake and pray that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” — (Matthew 26:36-41, NET)

This is not merely a cup of refreshment, but also a cup of refining.

Scripture Reading

The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁵ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” ²⁶ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

(1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

Serve Communion

[focus on communion as a reminder of our dependence on God and need for refining]

Litany of Penitence

[invite them to pray with me, in a prayerful & penitent posture]

Leader: Most holy and merciful Father:
We confess to you and to one another,
and to the whole communion of saints
in heaven and on earth,
that we have sinned by our own fault
in thought, word, and deed;
by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.

We have not loved you with our whole heart, and mind, and strength. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We have not forgiven others, as we have been forgiven.

All: *Have mercy on us, Lord.*

Leader: We have been deaf to your call to serve, as Christ served us.

We have not been true to the mind of Christ. We have grieved
your Holy Spirit.

All: *Have mercy on us, Lord.*

Litany of Penitence Continued...

Leader: We confess to you, Lord, all our past unfaithfulness: the pride, hypocrisy, and impatience of our lives,

All: *We confess to you, Lord.*

Leader: Our self-indulgent appetites and ways, and our exploitation of other people,

All: *We confess to you, Lord.*

Leader: Our anger at our own frustration, and our envy of those more fortunate than ourselves,

All: *We confess to you, Lord.*

Leader: Our intemperate love of worldly goods and comforts, and our dishonesty in daily life and work,

All: *We confess to you, Lord.*

Leader: Our negligence in prayer and worship, and our failure to commend the faith that is in us,

All: *We confess to you, Lord.*

Litany of Penitence Continued...

Leader: Accept our repentance, Lord, for the wrongs we have done: for our blindness to human need and suffering, and our indifference to injustice and cruelty,

All: *We confess to you, Lord.*

Leader: For all false judgments, for uncharitable thoughts toward our neighbors, and for our prejudice and contempt toward those who differ from us,

All: Accept our repentance, Lord.

Leader: *For our waste and pollution of your creation, and our lack of concern for those who come after us,*

All: *Accept our repentance, Lord.*

Leader: Restore us, good Lord, and let your anger depart from us;

All: *Favorably hear us, for your mercy is great.*

Leader: Accomplish in us the work of your salvation,

All: *That we may show forth your glory in the world.*

Litany of Penitence Continued...

Leader: By the cross and passion of your Son our Lord,

All: *Bring us with all your saints to the joy of his resurrection.*

[moment of silent reflection, perhaps kneeling]

Gift of Absolution:

God has promised us in His word that "if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). He calls us to not only confess our sins to Him, but to one another (James 5:16). Therefore, today, as we have openly taken steps of repentance in the sight of one another, God freely & faithfully extends to us His forgiveness, His mercy, His grace.

May this Spirit of repentance that He has granted us carry us further along in His grace throughout all these days of Lent.

Imposition Of Ashes:

[give instructions and invite people to pray these words:]
Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth: Grant that these ashes may be a sign to us of our mortality and repentance, that we may remember that it is only by your gracious gift that we are given everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Savior.

[Invite those willing forward. The ashes are imposed with the following words:]

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Closing:

[could consider further silent reflection, the passing of the peace, reiteration of the totality of Lent...]

Bonus Scripture Readings:

Psalms 51, Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 or Isaiah 58:1-12, Psalm 103 or 103:8-14, 2 Corinthians 5:20b--6:10, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

