



Ash Wednesday Worship Service

Helpful Elements:

Purple tablecloth (Lenten color)

Burlap and/or gray table runner (place over purple cloth)

Ashes mixed with a little olive oil (*not* water)

Wet, soapy towel and dry towel, for cleaning hands

Welcome: Welcome! I want to welcome you to our time of community and fellowship. My name is _____ and I'll be leading our worship time today. It's unusual to meet on a Wednesday, but **today is Ash Wednesday**, which marks the beginning of Lent, the 40 days leading up to Easter. It's a time of dependence on God and humility, modeled on Jesus' 40-day fast in the wilderness. For all of Lent, our table color will be purple, the color of repentance.

"Lent begins with a symbol of repentance: placing ashes mixed with oil on one's forehead. Ultimately, our Lenten disciplines are supposed to transform our entire person, body, soul, and spirit, and help us become more like Christ."¹

Please pray with me as we open our time together.

Opening Prayer:

Father in Heaven,
the light of your truth bestows sight
to the darkness of sinful eyes.
May this season of repentance
bring us the blessing of Your forgiveness
and the gift of Your light.
Grant this through Christ our Lord. Amen.²

¹ <http://www.churchyear.net/lent.html>

² International Committee on English in the Liturgy (ICEL)

Hymn: Doxology

Statement of Faith: Let us affirm our statement of faith by reciting Psalm 23, “The Lord is My Shepherd,” together:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

³ He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.

⁴ Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

⁵ Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Hymns:

Holy, Holy, Holy

My Jesus, I Love Thee

First reading: Psalm 103:8-14

⁸ The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. ...

¹⁰ God does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.

¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is God’s steadfast love toward those who fear him;

¹² as far as the east is from the west,
so far does the Lord remove our transgressions from us.

¹³ As a father shows compassion to his children,
so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.

¹⁴ Because he knows how we are formed;
he remembers that we are dust.

This is the word of the Lord; thanks be to God.

Hymns:

Jesus Loves Me Great is Thy Faithfulness

Second reading: Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² And after fasting forty days and forty nights, Jesus was hungry. ³ And the tempter came and said to Jesus, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” ⁴ But Jesus answered, “It is written, “‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

⁵ Then the devil took Jesus to the holy city and set Jesus on the pinnacle of the temple ⁶ 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 “‘On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.’”

⁷ Jesus said to the devil, “Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

⁸ Again, the devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. ⁹ And the devil said to Jesus, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”

¹⁰ Then Jesus said to him, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written, “‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.’”

¹¹ Then the devil left Jesus, and behold, angels came and ministered to him.

This is the word of the Lord; thanks be to God.

Hymns:

Jesus Calls Us

Fairest Lord Jesus

Interactive Homily: This special Ash Wednesday remembrance starts the beginning of Lent, the 40-plus days leading up to Easter Sunday.

- Lent is considered a time of humility and dependence on God, “like a spiritual spring cleaning.”³
- Let’s think about that: Why do we clean things? And what is it like when you clean something, like your house or laundry or body – how does it feel?

³ <http://www.churchyear.net/lent.html>

- Something is dirty! You notice it, and the uncleanness bothers you.
 - When cleaning is done, it feels good! A fresh start.
- The sign of Ash Wednesday is, of course, ashes. When you have ashes, what does that mean happened? What did you start with?
 - Something has burned; something is changed.
 - Could be paper, or wood, or coal; turns into ashes.
- I wonder why we place ashes on our forehead? Let's think about the symbolism: What is true about every single human being on this earth?
 - We all pass away eventually; it's part of the cycle of life itself.
 - Ashes are a tangible reminder of our own mortality. Ashes help us remember that:
 - We are human.
 - We are not perfect; we all make mistakes.
- But we don't just slap ashes on our foreheads; the ashes are applied in the shape of a cross. What does the cross represent?
 - A reminder of Christ's death on the cross, paying the penalty for our sin, to reconcile us to God.
 - The ashes and cross *combine* the truth of our mortality with Christ's work to redeem us and give us everlasting life.
- In celebrating Ash Wednesday, we bring our mortal beings before God; as God told Adam and Eve, "for you are dust, and to dust you shall return." God knows all our weaknesses! God calls us to confess our weaknesses, and to receive God's forgiveness and cleansing. On Ash Wednesday, we celebrate God's steadfast love for us.

Now we will pray over the ashes. Then, I'll walk around and offer the sign of ashes for those who would like to receive it on their foreheads. This is not required! Feel free to say "no" if you'd rather not receive the ashes today.

Let us pray.

Thanksgiving Over the Ashes:⁴

Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth.

Grant that these ashes may be to us a sign of our mortality and repentance,
so that we may remember that only by your gracious gift

⁴ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/a-service-of-worship-for-ash-wednesday>

are we given everlasting life;
through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

[Quietly play instrumental hymn music, or a confessional hymn such as "Softly and Tenderly." Walk around and ask each person if they'd like to receive ashes on their forehead.]

Imposition of the Ashes (say over each person while applying ashes):
Remember that thou art dust, and to dust thou shalt return.

[When finished, return to the front of the room.]

Let us pray together in silence for a moment.

(Silent Prayer) ... Lord, hear our prayers. Now let us pray the Lord's prayer together:

Lord's Prayer: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever, Amen.

Hymns:

Amazing Grace

The Old Rugged Cross

Closing Blessing:⁵

Now please receive this special prayer for Ash Wednesday:

May God, who has forgiven and fed us,
now make us strong for these days ahead.

May Jesus lead us, and may we be faithful to follow.

May the Spirit drive us into the wilderness,
burning away the chaff of our lives,
and purifying our hearts for all to see
and be blessed.

⁵ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/contemporary-service-for-ash-wednesday>

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you, and be gracious unto you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and grant you peace. Amen.

Closing Hymn: Doxology, Reprise

Extra Material

“Blessing the Dust,” by Jan Richardson⁶

[for a shorter reading, omit the bracketed portion]

[All those days
you felt like dust,
like dirt,
as if all you had to do
was turn your face
toward the wind
and be scattered
to the four corners

or swept away
by the smallest breath
as insubstantial—

Did you not know
what the Holy One
can do with dust?
This is the day
we freely say
we are scorched.

This is the hour
we are marked
by what has made it
through the burning.]

⁶ <https://www.janrichardson.com>

This is the moment
we ask for the blessing
that lives within
the ancient ashes,
that makes its home
inside the soil of
this sacred earth.

So let us be marked
not for sorrow.
And let us be marked
not for shame.
Let us be marked
not for false humility
or for thinking
we are less
than we are

but for claiming
what God can do
within the dust,
within the dirt,
within the stuff
of which the world
is made,
and the stars that blaze
in our bones,
and the galaxies that spiral
inside the smudge
we bear.