

Ash Wednesday, February 17, 2021

If you are using this liturgy for your personal worship, please take some time to sit in silence before beginning. Ash Wednesday, the most solemn day in the Christian calendar, begins the 40 day season of Lent: a season of reflection, repentance and renewal. Let it be that for you—a time and season for the reminder that, while we are dust and will one day die, that we are also the beloved children of God who live now under grace and, one day, will live forever under the kindly gaze of the One who loves us to death and to life.

GATHERING

Greeting and Prayer of the Day

God is with us. Let us pray. Gracious God, out of your love and mercy you breathed into dust the breath of life, creating us to serve you and our neighbours. Call forth our prayers and acts of kindness, and strength us to face our mortality with confidence in the mercy of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

WORD

First Reading Isaiah 58:1-12

Shout out, do not hold back!

Lift up your voice like a trumpet!

Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.

²Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments,
they delight to draw near to God.

³"Why do we fast, but you do not see?

Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.

⁴Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.

⁵Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?

⁶Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

⁷Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

⁸Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

⁹Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.
If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

¹⁰if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.

¹¹The LORD will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.

¹²Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.

Word of God. Word of Life. Thanks be to God.

Psalm 51:1-17

¹Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.

²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.

³For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.

⁴Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.

⁵Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.

⁶You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

⁷Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

⁸Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

⁹Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.

¹¹Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.

¹²Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

¹³Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.

¹⁴Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

¹⁵O LORD, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.

¹⁶For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.

¹⁷The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Second Reading 2 Corinthians 5:20b - 6:10

. . .we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. . .¹As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. ²For God says,

"At an acceptable time I have listened to you,
and on a day of salvation I have helped you."

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! ³We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, ⁷truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute.

We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see — we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

Word of God. Word of Life. Thanks be to God

Holy Gospel **Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21** (*Wherever you may be, please rise in body or in spirit*)

"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. ²"So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ⁵"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ¹⁶"And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ¹⁹"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The Gospel of our Lord. Praise to you, O Christ

Meditation

Is Ash Wednesday a Holy Day or a Holiday? Well, clearly, it's not a holiday.

None of us who are employed, unless we were sick, got the day off work,
or planned a pandemic party with an Ash Wednesday theme.

No Ash Wednesday BBQs with friends, and I'm guessing that very few, if any,

Ash Wednesday gifts have been purchased, given and shared. . .
or phone calls or zoom meet-ups with family are anticipated or scheduled.

So, Holy Day, yes, but holiday, no. And it is a Holy Day because this day
marks the beginning of the six-week season of Lent--
the 40 days, not counting Sundays--that precede Easter.

A former Trappist monk, Father Thomas Culleton, wrote of his memories of Ash Wednesdays
at the Abbey of Our Lady of the Holy Trinity monastery in Huntsville, Alabama.

He remembers how the monks would walk barefoot on the stone floors
of the old church in the very early hours of the morning,
keeping time to Gregorian chants,
marching in sombre and solemn rows to the altar
where they would receive a cross of ashes on their foreheads--
a visual reminder of their mortality and need for repentance.

He goes on to elaborate by writing "It was cold at this time of year,
which meant that each monk would try to step in the spots
where someone had stepped before, to feel some little bit of warmth."

In a way, "cold" is a good adjective to describe this day—
even here on southwestern BC where there is no snow (at least at the time this is being written). . .
no significant subzero temperatures, just cold and probably, by next Wednesday, steady rain.

But what I mean by "cold" is that it is a cold day spiritually—
cold when we confront the darker side of our humanity...
admit and confess our sin...and express our need for repentance.
And it can be very cold in our hearts and souls
until we do this thing—this coming face-to-face with the darkness thing—
coming hard up against the reality of our death thing.

But thankfully, we do not journey through this day, or other days for that matter,
we do not journey alone, for there are others who have gone before us
and walking in their footsteps, we find some warmth and direction,
some hope for spring and the promise new life.

Peter Perry, the pastor of a United Methodist Church in Prescott, Arizona—
sounds like a tongue-twister doesn't it. . ."Pastor Peter Perry of Prescott"--
Peter Perry describes this season in his book, "From Ashes to Fire"
in which he picks up this theme of the monks in the monastery.

"Beginning tonight," he writes, "we step out on the cold stone floor of that place in our souls
where we meet God in the midst of ashes and repentance;
we begin the undertaking of a journey that will lead us
through the days of Lenten preparation into a week called Holy and Great—
a journey that will take us through the heartache and darkness of Good Friday,
to the glorious new day of Easter, and finally bring us to the fire of Pentecost
and its burning promise of God's eternal presence with us."

For that reason, he calls Lent and his book a journey from ashes to fire.

Some time ago, I saw a TV news-clip of a house in California
that had been burned to the ground in one of the many forest fires
that have ravaged that state for the past several summers.
The trees were all scorched and bare; the grass was brown and hard;
a few blackened timbers stood near the back of where the house had originally been
and only the remains of the plumbing system rose out of the ashes high enough to be visible.

The clip showed a woman who had lived there,
standing in the midst of what once had been her home. . .and she was weeping
as she wondered aloud what would become of her and her family.
Standing next to her, with his arms around her, her husband was doing his best
to comfort her with the words, "We'll rebuild. We'll rebuild."
And they did, because the clip then moved to the same setting a year later,
showing a beautiful new home—a magnificent home built around a massive stone fireplace.

As I saw the home and the fireplace, I couldn't help but wonder if the woman and her husband and children
would sit around that fireplace on winter nights, watching the dancing flames on the logs they were burning
and remember the ashes. . .the ashes of their former home.

To return to Perry's reflections: He goes on to write that Ash Wednesday is a day
when we say to God, "Here I am! Imperfect and incomplete, weak and broken,
sorrowful and mourning. Here I am!
Sinner and saint all rolled into one. Here I am!
Frightened and needy, doubting and uncertain. Here I am!
Confessing and repentant, and hesitantly hopeful. Here I am!
In the midst of ashes, cold and lonely, weary and wanting. Here I am!
Looking for the fire of hope and forgiveness, of love and salvation. Here I am!"

It seems to me that such a metaphor is a good one for today or tonight—
whenever you and I—wherever all of us are reading this aloud or to ourselves--
to see that our journey from the ashes of this night
to the fire of Pentecost begins when we say to God, "Here I am!
Mold me, God into what you would have me be;
make me, God, into someone useful to you and to others;
create within me, O God, a new and clean heart. For, Here I am!"

On this day we come into a place of silence. . .to make our confession,
to receive God's forgiveness, to be marked with the cross of ashes,
and to step out in faith on the same journey our Lord took—
the journey to the cross and tomb. . .and we come. . .and go. . .on that journey
trusting that, because he had gone before us,
we can and will walk in his footsteps and be warmed by them.

One last image: The Rev. Perry tells the story of helping his grandfather on the farm.
One of his jobs was to carry water from a spring to the house.
He writes, "I would put a pole across one shoulder and a bucket on each end of the pole.
The house was a good distance away and the first time I tried this,
I just couldn't make it. The buckets were too heavy.
And I'll never forget my grandfather coming out of the house, taking the pole from me
and placing it over his strong shoulders and then carrying the load for me. . .
and I'll never forget how good it felt to get rid of those heavy pails."

I think that's kind of the way it is wherever we are on this Ash Wednesday:

The burden that we bear is heavy, but Jesus is here to take it from us
and carry the load for us. All we need to do is to bring our sins and fears,
our weakness and brokenness to God in confession,
and God will take it. . .all of it. . .from there. . .
so that we can go from here, from wherever we are now—
that we can go from here marked with ashes—to there—
to the joy of Easter and the fire of Pentecost.

May it be so for us now. . .and may it be so for us always. Amen. SDG

Hymn of the Day #326 "Bless Now, O God, the Journey"

- 1 Bless now, O God, the journey that all your people make,
the path through noise and silence, the way of give and take.
The trail is found in desert and winds the mountain round,
then leads beside still waters, the road where faith is found.
- 2 Bless sojourners and pilgrims who share this winding way;
your hope burns through the terrors, your love sustains the day.
We yearn for holy freedom while often we are bound;
together we are seeking the road where faith is found.
- 3 Divine eternal lover, you meet us on the road.
We wait for land of promise where milk and honey flow,
but waiting not for places, you meet us all around.
Our covenant is written on roads, as faith is found.

Text: Sylvia G. Dunstan, 1955-1993

Invitation to Lent and Confession of Sin

Friends in Christ, today with the whole church we enter the time of remembering Jesus' passover from death to life, and our life in Christ is renewed.

We begin this holy season by acknowledging our need for repentance and for God's mercy. We are created to experience joy in communion with God, to love one another, and to live in harmony with creation. But our sinful rebellion separates us from God, our neighbours, and creation, so that we do not enjoy the life our creator intended.

As disciples of Jesus, we are called to a discipline that contends against evil and resists whatever leads us away from love of God and neighbour. I invite you, therefore, to the discipline of Lent—self-examination and repentance, prayer and fasting, sacrificial giving and works of love—strengthened by the gifts of word and sacrament. Let us continue our journey through these forty days to the great Three Days of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Let us confess our sin in the presence of God and of one another. *Worshippers may kneel or sit*

Most holy and merciful God, **we confess to you and to one another, and before the whole company of heaven, that we have sinned by our fault, by our own fault, by our own most grievous 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 neighbours as ourselves.

We have not forgiven others as we have been forgiven. **Have mercy on us, O God.**

We have shut our ears 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. **Have mercy on us, O God.**

Our past unfaithfulness, the pride, envy, hypocrisy, and apathy that have infected our lives, we confess to you.

Have mercy on us, O God.

Our self-indulgent appetites and ways, and our exploitation of other people, we confess to you.

Have mercy on us, O God.

Our negligence in prayer and worship, and our failure to share the faith that is in us, we confess to you.

Have mercy on us, O God.

Our neglect of human need and suffering, and our indifference to injustice and cruelty, we confess to you.

Have mercy on us, O God.

Our false judgments, our uncharitable thoughts toward our neighbors, and our prejudice and contempt toward those who differ from us, we confess to you. **Have mercy on us, O God.**

Our waste and pollution of your creation, and our lack of concern for those who come after us, we confess to you.

Have mercy on us, O God.

Restore us, O God, and let your sorrow depart from us. **Hear us, O God, for your mercy is great.** *Sit or stand*

Imposition of Ashes

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

May these ashes be a sign of our mortality and penitence, reminding us that only by the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ are we given eternal life; through the same Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. **Amen.**

Since those following this rite will either alone or with another at home, the cross of ashes marked on the forehead may be said with this phrase slightly amended from the words which normally would be spoken

Let me remember that I am dust, and to dust I shall return.

OR if marking another with this sign of ashes, these words are to be said while the cross of ashes is imposed

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

Following the imposition, this prayer is to be used

Accomplish in us, O God, the work of your salvation,

that we may show forth your glory in the world.

By the cross and passion of your Son, our Savior,

bring us with all your saints to the joy of his resurrection.

May the Eternal One have mercy on us, forgive us all our sins through our Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen us in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep us in eternal life. **Amen.**

Concluding Prayers

Merciful God, accompany our journey through these forty days. Renew us in the gift of baptism, that we may provide for those who are poor, pray for those in need, fast from self-indulgence, and above all that we may find our treasure in the life of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

Lord's Prayer

Lord, remember us in your kingdom and teach us to pray.

**Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.**

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

SENDING

Blessing

Let us go in peace in the name of our Creator, Redeemer (+) and Sustainer. Amen.

Sending Hymn #325 "I Want Jesus to Walk With Me" *(see next page for tune and text)*

I Want Jesus to Walk with Me

1 I want Je - sus to walk with me; walk with
 2 In my tri - als, Lord, walk with me; walk with
 3 When I'm in trou - ble, Lord, walk with me;

me; I want Je - sus to walk with me; walk with
 when in my tri - als, Lord, walk with me; walk with
 when I'm in trou - ble, Lord, walk with me;

me; all a - long my pil - grim jour - ney,
 when my heart is al - most break - ing,
 when my head is bowed in sor - row,

Lord, I want Je - sus to walk with me.
 Lord, I want Je - sus to walk with me. walk with me.
 Lord, I want Je - sus to walk with me.

Text: African American spiritual
 Music: SOJOURNER, African American spiritual; arr. hymnal version
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A Season of Restrained Celebration

What comes to mind for people when they think of Lent? It might be repentance or giving things up or a focus on the cross. For some it brings to mind a heavy-handed season of inward focus that feels dark. For others it has been experienced as a time for excessive guilt. It is not uncommon for Lent to be a six-week meditation on the crucifixion, as if Holy Week and especially Good Friday weren't enough for the church's deep contemplation on Jesus' death. Not everyone loves Lent because of how it has been observed in some times and places. Our practice should change such negative attitudes so that Lent can be a high point of the church year for the faithful.

In spite of all the baggage some people still bring to the season, Lent can become a time of celebration. That may sound strange and unexpected. The key is that the celebration is restrained, is expressed in subdued and anticipatory ways, and is geared toward preparing to celebrate with exuberant joy the paschal mystery at Easter. Lent is a season of fasting, and fasting is about a discipline of restraint so that one can celebrate more deeply and extravagantly something wonderful later. But even in that time of preparation, the joy that is to come is known now. This is Lent. Since Sundays in Lent are feast days and not fast days, and the celebration of the eucharist is always appropriate, they are the perfect time to express a sense of restrained celebration and anticipatory joy.

Consider the origins of Lent: a time of intense preparation for baptism at Easter. What could be more joyful than to prepare for one's life to be transformed into a new life in Christ? Yet Lent was for preparation and expectation, not the full expression of celebration and joy. The disciplines and rituals of preparation all say to the baptismal candidate: Get ready, God is about to do something wonderful in you through the death and resurrection of Christ--a dying and rising in which you share in the waters of baptism.

How will you help Lent in your setting be a time of anticipation and restrained celebration, an encounter with the Christ who comes to us in word and meal no matter what season of the church year it is?

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Ecclesiastes 3:20

