

Ash Wednesday Service

[Joel 2:1-2, 12-17, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21](#)

Ash Wednesday is an interesting tradition in the Christian Church. The origin of the custom of using ashes in religious ritual is lost – we simply don't know when it started as a practice for the beginning of Lent. But we find references to the practice in the Old Testament. The prophet Jeremiah, for example, calls for repentance this way: "O daughter of my people, gird on sackcloth, roll in the ashes" (Jer 6:26). The prophet Daniel pleaded for God to rescue Israel with sackcloth and ashes as a sign of Israel's repentance: "I turned to the Lord God, pleading in earnest prayer, with fasting, sackcloth and ashes" (Dn 9:3). Perhaps the best known example of repentance in the Old Testament also involves sackcloth and ashes. When the prophet Jonah finally obeyed God's command and preached in the great city of Nineveh,

his preaching was amazingly effective. Word of his message was carried to the king of Nineveh. "When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in the ashes" (Jon 3:6). In the New Testament, Jesus refers to the use of sackcloth and ashes as signs of repentance: "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty deeds done in your midst had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would long ago have repented in sackcloth and ashes" (Mt 11:21, Lk 10:13).

Even though we have a hard time finding when the tradition of Ash Wednesday started in the Christian church, we can see the origin in scripture. Ashes were routinely used as a sign of repentance. It was a symbol that meant

someone was willing to turn around and begin to follow God's call.

So what does Ash Wednesday mean for you? Last night we had a pancake supper for Shrove Tuesday, also known as Fat Tuesday where you used up the fats in your house in order to prepare for Lent. Traditionally, Lent represented a time of fasting so you would need to use up those things in your home that might go bad during that time. It is hard to imagine, but the tradition was to fast for the 40 days of Lent. If you were to pull out a calendar, you would see that Lent actually lasts a little longer than 40 days because the Sundays were not included in the count. The actual time is 6 weeks from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday so the fasting would last even longer (I'm not clear on whether or not the fasters would take Sundays off – it's possible). So Ash

Wednesday would mark the beginning of a time of penitence and prayer and remembrance.

So – is anyone interested in taking on a 40-day fast? In the scripture lesson from Matthew, Jesus was educating people on the ways to serve God through alms-giving, prayer and fasting. The language Jesus used made it clear these activities were expected to continue. Yet Jesus was contrasting what the hypocrites were doing as opposed to what disciples of Christ should do. We are to give alms in order to help the poor. We are to spend time in prayer. We are to fast. These are practices that should continue – practices Jesus did himself.

So I ask again – what does Ash Wednesday mean for you? Are we preparing for the Easter season through soul-searching and prayer? Are we sacrificing some of our selves

in order to help others? Are we spending extra time communing with God to maybe take the next faithful step in our Christian walk? Are we praying for this community of believers? Are we praying for our neighbors here in Etchison and beyond?

I can't tell you what a blessing it was to see so many here last night for our Shrove Tuesday Pancake Supper. Our good turn out very well could have been because so many folks were suffering from cabin fever! That's ok. It was a wonderful time of fellowship with many who do not routinely attend church with us. It was also an excellent opportunity to invite our families and friends to join us for worship. It may take many invitations before some take us up on it and visit for services, but the hand of welcome is being extended. We may never know the impact we are

having on this community but there is no doubt in my mind that in a world that is becoming more individual-focused, a warm and welcoming congregation is making room for its neighbors here at Mount Tabor.

Ash Wednesday gives us an opportunity to search within ourselves to see what God would have us do as this body of Christ. We are reminded that God did not create us out of special matter including Intel Pentium processors or 8 gig hard drives. Through the act of receiving ashes, we are reminded that God formed humankind from dust – nothing glamorous about it. God took the basic stuff of the earth and created human beings in God's image. We are reminded that everything we have comes from God – our gifts, our substance, our very being comes from our creator. Ashes to ashes – dust to dust.

There are those in our area who are in need a healing for body, mind, or soul. There is a healing message throughout the Lenten season as well. The Upper Room devotional includes this insight – it is interesting that the Lenten season lasts about as long as it takes for a broken bone to heal.

Healing is most definitely a process, similar to our process of what is known as sanctification. Through our daily walk with God we are becoming more Christ-like in our thoughts and our actions. But just like a bone takes time to heal, our Christian walk takes us down a path that requires some time and focus.

So perhaps you are in need of healing during this Lenten season. For some it can be the need for physical healing of the body. For some it can be healing of the mind, either by surrendering a burden to God or perhaps some need relief

from despair or grief. For some, there is a need for the healing of the spirit. Our spirit is what helps us to cling to God in times of trouble. Our spirit is what knits the body and mind together to create a whole person in union with the Creator. Our spirit is what allows us to hope and to have faith that God will be with us always.

Our world is in desperate need of healing. As we enter this season of Lent in preparation for Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection, let us remember those who are also suffering. Our young people may be suffering with a feeling that the world does not care about them. Our families may be suffering because they have not seen the need to include God in the family structure. Our neighbors may be suffering through the economic difficulties that bring on stress and loneliness. We ourselves may be suffering as we look to God to show us the way to go

and the help we need to offer others. Often when we extend the hand of God's grace to others, we in turn are truly blessed.

Thank you for all you do for this community of believers and our extended community beyond our doors. We are truly walking the Christian path together as we share God's love with a hurting world. May God continue to work through us as humble servants – ready to lend a helping hand without expecting a return investment. As the scripture tells us, let us lay aside treasures in heaven. Amen.