



Called to More: Ash Wednesday Service Worship Resources

Call to Worship

Return to the Lord with all of your heart, with fasting, with weeping and with mourning. Take a good look at what is going on in your heart.

We will return to God because our God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, loves us without wavering and relents from punishing.

We, too, can relent - from the things that keep us from God. We can make ourselves a living offering to God, a blessing to others.

Let us call everyone together, people of all ages and stages of life, to return to the Lord and be present to all God has done for us.

(Inspired by Joel 2:12-17)

Introduction to Lent

Friends, we gather here to mark the beginning of Lent, the time of year when we prepare ourselves to celebrate Christ's suffering, death and triumphant resurrection. During Lent we remember the humanity of Jesus and his temptation in the wilderness. In doing so, we are called to focus on our own humanity, our own temptation to sin against others, God and ourselves. For some people, sin brings up images of judgment and guilt, of do's and don'ts, even of painful shame. As we begin this Lenten journey, may we reflect on ourselves with the compassion of Jesus. May we commit to learning about what separates us from God, not so that we can feel guilt and shame, but so that we can experience grace, grow closer to God and live into the abundant life we are called to. We do this knowing that Jesus has gone before us, goes with us, and that because of him, our sins are forgiven in the eyes of God.

Opening Unison Prayer

Holy God, pour out your Spirit upon us as we prepare ourselves for a time of reflection and prayer. Give us a spirit of humility and openness to hearing what you have to say to us this day. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Opening Song

UMH #354, AAHH #196 – I Surrender All

Scripture Reading Isaiah 58:1-12

Message

Introduction

In this passage, God's people have fallen into a pattern of thinking about sin that is still common today. They think they know what "good religion" is – fasting, putting on sackcloth and ashes – and they don't understand why God is not responding to them with favor, why they aren't getting any closer to God. In the same way, we often think about sin narrowly. We follow the Ten Commandments, pray and go to church and wonder why we aren't growing in our relationship with God. Speaking through the prophet, God helps the people to see what is getting in the way of the relationship they seek.

Main Points

1. The people are focused on external acts (fasting, putting on sackcloth) that they do as individuals to keep them "good with God." But their behavior towards others is not matching up with their piety (their religious practices, the things they do to show their faith in God). God calls them to take care of the oppressed, the hungry and the poor.



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A Lenten Series on Wrestling with Sin

They need a wider perspective on life, not just to think about what they do as individuals in relationship to God, but also what they do as communities and how they affect others in the world. Praying and fasting aren't wrong, but they bring us closer to God when we are honest and thoughtful about our shortcomings, and when we seek justice.

2. Taking care of others is something the Israelites, and we are called to do as an expression of gratitude for what God has done for us. It's not about being perfect to earn rewards and blessings from God. Rather, when we give freely and seek justice, we participate in God's work in the world and we can see with greater clarity the way God is guiding us, providing for us, loving us.

Concluding Invitation to the Observance of Lenten Discipline

The Israelites put ashes on their heads, wore sackcloth and fasted as a sign of mourning and repentance. As Christians, we too receive ashes at the beginning of Lent, a season where we reflect on our mortality and turn from away from sin and back to God. Just as God called the Israelites to repent inwardly as well as outwardly, let us also ask God to show us where we need to repent, ask forgiveness and change. Let the ashes be an outward reminder of the work we need to do on ourselves and in our communities. May they remind us that we owe our existence to the God who formed us from the earth and that we are united with all people in the human experience of finitude and frailty.

Song of Response

TFWF #2164 – Sanctuary

Thanksgiving over Ashes

Holy and gracious God, we thank you for these ashes and we receive them to remember that we are made of dust and live only as you give us life. We pray for a spirit of honesty and repentance this Lent as we reflect on our sins. Thank you for being the kind of God to whom we can bring our shortcomings in the confidence that you love us no matter what. In your Son's holy name, we pray. Amen.

Imposition of Ashes

The leader may invite people forward to receive ashes on their foreheads or hands. Dip a thumb in the ashes and make a cross on the forehead of each person (or hand, if the person prefers). Alternatively, the leader may invite people to receive ashes from one another. This would work particularly well if congregants are few in number. Consider forming a circle and passing a bowl of ashes, each person imposing ashes on the person next to them. As ashes are imposed, the following words are spoken:

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. *OR*
Come, walk in the light of the Lord.

The recipient of ashes may respond:
Lord, teach me your ways.

Confession and Pardon

Leader: Ash Wednesday provides us with an opportunity to reflect on our sins, both those we do ourselves and those with which we willingly or absent-mindedly participate. The prophet Joel invites us to rend our hearts and not our clothing, to return to the Lord our God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Let us now as a community gathered in our need of God's grace and mercy, lift up those places where we ourselves and the world we share fall short of your vision for this world, O God.



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Those gathered are invited to confess sins aloud (e.g. racism, poverty, violence). Each time something is named, the people respond:

In the midst of life, we are in death; from whom can we seek help?

At an appropriate time, bring the confession to a close with an assurance of pardon.

We seek help from the Giver of Life, the Defeater of Death, who loves us so much that he gave his Son that we might live abundantly.

We are forgiven in the name of Jesus, and for this we give you praise, O God!

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Greeting with Peace

As a forgiven and reconciled people, those gathered are invited to share a sign of Christ's peace with one another.

Sending Out

Closing Song

UMH #393, CLUW #214, MVPC #177, AAHH #320 – Spirit of the Living God

Benediction

As you go out into the world marked with ashes, a sign of your humanity, may you see and serve the humanity in every person you meet. May this Lenten journey be a time of clarity and renewal. And in it, may you know the fellowship of God – your creator, your redeemer, and your sustainer now and always.

Additional Components:

If you choose to have congregants impose ashes on one another, be sure to have hand wipes available for them. For a more tactile experience, in place of the confession and pardon, have congregants use modeling clay to shape an idea of what sin looks like. It can be abstract or a representation of something in particular. After the service, take the clay and shape it into a paten and chalice, and follow the instructions to set the clay. Use this to serve communion on Easter Sunday. Be sure to line the chalice with a plastic cup. Share how Jesus takes our sin into his own body and blood, overcoming it so that we might have new life in him.



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