



Purple Theory: Ash Wednesday Self-examination | Scripture: Psalm 51:6-12

COVID-19 Recommendations

As we continue to accommodate our practices due to the COVID-19 pandemic to protect the health and safety of those we serve, it is recommended that churches do not impose ashes in any way that would require people who do not live in the same household to be within six feet of one another or touching one another. Alternative ideas include:

- Creating Lent kits/packages that include ashes (or, e.g., a piece of burlap with ashes on it) and sending/delivering to households
- Asking worshipers to use dirt from outside in place of ashes and to have some on hand before the service
- Pastor may speak the words for imposing ashes during an online service while worshipers self-impose ashes or members of a household impose ashes on one another. If worshiping in person, individual containers of ashes should be made available for worshipers to self-impose or impose on members of their household.
- Pastor may choose to include instructions, words of imposition, and a prayer in a kit for home so that individuals/households may observe Ash Wednesday without a church service
- For individuals living alone, the pastor might recommend imposing ashes in front of a mirror, which can symbolize the self-reflection that Lent calls for

Call to Worship

Come before God with an open heart and an open spirit.

We come seeking to know God and ourselves better.

Walk with Jesus who knew all the struggles of human life.

We walk with him and lean on him when the journey gets hard.

Open yourself to the Spirit who brings change and renewal.

We are open to how the Spirit is moving us to change.

Introduction to Lent

On Ash Wednesday, we begin the season of Lent, a period of 40 days, not including Sundays, leading up to Easter Sunday. These 40 days remind us of the 40 days Jesus spent being tempted in the wilderness. They remind us of Jesus' humanity. Traditionally, Lent has also been a season of repentance – a literal turning toward God and away from the sin that drags us down. For us, Lent can be a special time in our spiritual lives when we focus on our humanity devote some time to real self-reflection, and practice turning toward Jesus, who waits for us on the cross on Good Friday. This Lent, we will be exploring different practices, called spiritual disciplines, that can help us do these things as we seek to grab hold of the new life promised to us at Easter through Jesus.



Opening Unison Prayer

God, we pray that you will be with us today as we begin this season by looking at ourselves. Help us to see ourselves as you do. Give us the courage to change what needs changing, so we can grow closer to you and bear your love in the world. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 51:6-12

Message

Introduction:

If we want to grow in our relationship with God, it is important to be honest both with God and with ourselves about where we are in our own lives, like the psalmist in verse 6. As we grapple with our struggles, shortcomings, weaknesses and failures (in short, our sin), we can accept the forgiveness God offers (verses 7, 9) and make changes to grow in faithfulness and happiness (verses 6, 8, 10-12). This is where the spiritual discipline of self-examination comes in.

Main Points:

1. The writer of the psalm shows us some important aspects of self-examination. It's easy to fall into one of two extremes:
 - a. denying any wrongdoing or avoiding thinking about it
 - b. over-criticizing ourselves, punishing ourselves, low self-esteemConsider how the psalmist does neither of these things. He is honest about his sin and brings it to God in confession, knowing that God is "steadfast in love" and "abundant in mercy" (Psalm 51:1).
2. The psalmist asks for forgiveness. Hyssop was a plant used for sprinkling liquids to purify. The word translated "purge" literally means "unsin." The writer is asking for his sin to be undone. But it is not just about forgiveness, about not being guilty or avoiding punishment. Self-examination and repentance are starting points for transformation and growth in holiness and happiness (or, in theological words, "sanctification").
3. The psalmist knows that he needs God's help to change and prays for a clean heart, a new and right spirit, willingness to keep going and wisdom. These are not things we can give ourselves, and it is not a one-time change. The practice of self-examination can help us see where we need to be asking for God's continued help.



Concluding Invitation to Observance of Lent:

Friends, over the centuries, the season of Lent has been one of spiritual preparation to celebrate Easter. I invite you now to make this tradition personal. I invite you to observe Lent, to prepare yourselves spiritually for Easter. Consider committing to practice one of the spiritual disciplines we will be exploring over the next several weeks: prayer, reading and meditating on scripture, fasting, confession and repentance, worship, silence or gratitude. Or perhaps you would like to use this season to practice a different discipline each week. Whatever you choose, may this time of self-examination lead you into deeper relationship with God so that, by Holy Week, you may experience anew the events at the center of our faith.

Pastors, if you will be encouraging your congregation to try different spiritual disciplines weekly or pick one and stick to it, consider adapting the invitation to observe Lent so that it is consistent with your approach to using the series.

Thanksgiving Over the Ashes

Holy God, thank you for creating us from the earth. Help us to use these ashes (or “*this dirt*”) to remember our limits and our humanity. May they remind us that we live by your grace alone and may they call us into self-reflection and a genuine turning away from evil and wrongdoing. We want to turn toward you, Jesus. In your name, we pray. Amen.

Imposition of Ashes

The traditional words of imposition are on page 323 of The United Methodist Book of Worship. Alternatively, you can say (or have members of the same household say to one another, or individuals say aloud to themselves):

Turn towards God, who gives you life.

If the pastor is speaking the words of imposition or members of a household are speaking them to one another, the recipient may respond with:

God, draw me nearer to you.

Prayer of Confession

God, you desire truth in the inmost parts of who we are. We admit that we often hide our truth from you and even from ourselves. We fear the wrong we have done and the good we have failed to do, and so we hide it. Today, we ask that you help us to see ourselves clearly. Help us to face the facts our lives, in all their messiness and beauty. Forgive our sins – sins against others, sins against ourselves, and ultimately, sins against you. We ask not only forgiveness, but boldly we ask you to create a new and clean heart in us and to sustain a willing spirit within us. We ask all these things in the name of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

You may leave some time for silent confession.



Music Suggestions:

Traditional:

Just as I Am, Without One Plea (UMH #357)

I Surrender All (UMH #354)

Lord God, Your Love Has Called Us Here (UMH #579)

Contemporary:

Create in Me (CCLI Song #106855)

Lord I Need You (CCLI Song #5925687)

O Come to the Altar (CCLI Song #7051511)