



Ash Wednesday: The Cup of Fasting | Isaiah 58:1-12

Focus Statement: Ash Wednesday is a moment for us to reflect on Jesus' suffering. We partner in his suffering so that we may better see the experience of those who suffer daily and work with them for lasting justice.

COVID-19 Recommendations:

Please work with the team responsible for pandemic health and safety precautions in your church to determine the safest way to handle the imposition of ashes this year. Possible alternatives to the traditional way of imposing 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 could 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
- Distributing temporary tattoos of crosses (to be applied to oneself) instead of ashes

Call to Worship:

We come to worship today in search of living water.

We do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from God's mouth.

We come ready to turn towards the fountain of grace –

Knowing that, so often, we have tried to fill our own cups.

We come to remember and to learn again: that we are human.

We are humbled before God. We are loved by God. We are fed by God.

We come not just to receive but to give, as the prophet calls:

If we offer food to the hungry and provide for the afflicted,

Our light will rise in the darkness.

Introduction to Lent: The season of Lent begins with Ash Wednesday as a day to remember our humanity and begin a period of repentance – a turning away from sin and evil – in preparation for the joy of Easter. We are joined in our humanity by Jesus who, though he was and is God, experienced the limits of human life in solidarity with us. In Lent, we recall Jesus' time in the wilderness when he was tempted to feed, save, and glorify himself. Instead, he humbled himself before God and began a ministry of feeding, healing, and saving others so that God might be glorified. We are called to recognize the ways we have been focused on ourselves, to repent, and to follow in Jesus' way of justice and compassion.



Opening Unison Prayer: God of all creation, as we begin a season of reflecting on ourselves, move us to repentance. Let our self-reflection turn into self-giving so that, like Jesus, we can faithfully serve one another. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 58:1-12

Message:

Introduction

This passage connects the practice of fasting, which Christians often observe during Lent, with the reality of what is happening in the world around us and how we are called by God to respond to it. During times of crisis, when the people of Israel felt God was far away, they would fast as a way to repent or mourn. Yet in this passage, the people wonder why God is not responding to their fasting in this time of trouble (Isaiah 58:3a). The prophet tells the people that their fasting is not pleasing to God because they are only engaging in it as a ritual. They are not also acting in ways that please God or that will bring about a just and peaceful future.

Main points

1. Commonly, people will practice fasting in Lent or “giving something up” for Lent. The purpose is to engage our whole bodies in repentance – turning away from sin and toward God – remembering that we are human creatures with human needs. Fasting can help us focus on God and prayer, following Jesus’ example in the wilderness. But, like the people of Israel in this passage, our fasting can become just a ritual with no meaning. Worse, fasting can become like a transaction with God: “If I fast/give something up for God, then God should answer my prayers, God should do something for me.” Isaiah calls out this type of thinking (verses 2-3).
2. Isaiah points out that the self-denial of fasting is hypocritical if those who practice it are serving their own interests and oppressing others. Fasting, by itself, is not real repentance. Through the prophet, God reframes what real fasting, repentance, and self-denial entail (verses 6-7, 9b-10a). You might illustrate this point with a modern-day example or story relevant to your context (e.g., posting about justice issues on social media, but not showing kindness to the real people around you or acting on those issues).
3. The good news is that real repentance is possible. Real repentance is active (not passive). And real repentance brings healing both to the world and to the one who repents. In verses 8-9 and 10b-12, the prophet describes what happens when we really repent and our calls for God’s help are matched with actions that participate in bringing about God’s kin(g)dom. We do not just fast, but in our fasting, feed others and ourselves become “like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail,” (verse 11b). If you are using the *Drink from the Fountain of Grace* series through Lent, this is a good time to introduce the series central image and theme of the cup. As we drink in God’s grace, we also become a source of it for others.



Concluding Invitation to Observance of Lent:

Modify as needed if you are not imposing ashes.

As you receive ashes today as a reminder of your humanity and a sign of your need for God's grace, you are invited into a season of reflection, repentance, and renewal. Whatever practices or disciplines you may choose to observe this Lent, make sure that by them, you are participating in the big picture of God's work – justice, freedom, and nourishment for all of God's children.

Thanksgiving Over Ashes:

God, bless these ashes for us today as a reminder that we are connected to the earth and all who live in it, as your good creation. As we receive our life only from you, keep before us the ways we can be bearers of life to others. 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 back to God and towards all God's creation.

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

Lord, please show me the way.

Prayer of Confession:

Maker of all, as we remember our humanity today, forgive us for forgetting the humanity of others. In our desire for help from you, we can become focused on ourselves and neglect the very things you care about. In this season of Lent, lead us in the way of repentance that is acceptable to you. May our prayers be matched by our actions and as we receive grace, so let us give it freely. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Music Suggestions:

UMH #354 I Surrender All

UMH #351 Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior

UMH #349 – Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus

Beautiful Things CCLI #5665521

Jesus, We Love You CCLI # 7030068

No Longer Slaves CCLI #7030123

I Give Myself Away CCLI #5873382



Additional Components:

Alternative Sermon Outline

ME: Tell a story about a time (or times) when you have chosen what is easiest and most comfortable in order to avoid minor discomfort or inconvenience.

WE: If appropriate in your context, talk about how much of our time is focused on eliminating inconveniences or minor discomforts (e.g., car starters so you don't have to sit in the cold, technology that will turn on the light so you don't have to flip a switch, not having to go to the store or wait more than a day or two for a package to arrive from online shopping). For many of us, we also spend a lot of time stressing about minor problems or issues and have lost a sense of the bigger struggles of our communities and those on the margins.

GOD: There is much in Western culture that encourages us think only of ourselves and our own security (financial, social, emotional). Sometimes we love ourselves more than our neighbors or God. Isaiah says that when we fast as faithful people but neglect our workers or our neighborhoods, our worship is worthless. He says "you serve your own interest on your fast day"; he likely thinks that we do the same the other 364 days of the year.

As we mark ourselves on Ash Wednesday, we may commit to minor suffering by "giving something up" during Lent: caffeine, social media, sweets. But as we realize what we value or in some cases, are addicted to, our minds are turned to how small these sacrifices are in the larger view of suffering in the world. It is sometimes a rude awakening. Isaiah talks about the kind of fasting God prefers (verses 6-7). Isaiah expects us to care for the sick, the poor, the dispossessed and the oppressed *while we fast*. Not after. Not if we feel like it. The implication is that when we hear the cry for help, we answer just as the Lord does for us: "Here I am."

Just as Jesus would later fast, pray, and still do justice on the sabbath or on a holy day, God wants our fasting to inspire meaningful care. To bring light out of the darkness we are called to offer our food, our lives, and our time to water the gardens of our neighborhoods. Lent is our chance to love God and neighbor simultaneously; to water the gardens (Isaiah's words) of our disconnected streets and communities. God invites us this Ash Wednesday to bring justice and mercy during our fasting.

YOU: Encourage people to think about what they will learn from what they're giving up or taking on, or to give up/take on something that will help them to understand the true nature of suffering and about the suffering of others. Offer ways that your congregation's observance of Lent can become a time to assess the real needs in the community. How can you reach out to neighbors and to hear the cries of darkness and oppression? How can you become a partner in transforming your streets and world?

WE: Isaiah invites us all to evaluate our fasting: that it not just be a checklist nor a showy type of self-denial. Isaiah challenges us to learn how to care for the oppressed and those who suffer in these next 40 days of Lent.