

ASH WEDNESDAY

Wednesday, February 18, 2026
Holy Family Episcopal Church,
Laurel Springs, NJ

Joel 2:1-2,12-17

Psalm 103 or 103:8-14

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

I cannot believe that we have already arrived at Ash Wednesday. We have gone through Advent, Christmas, Epiphany and now we begin Lent- a six-week, 40 day period (excluding Sundays) dedicated to prayer, fasting, and reflection in preparation for the great celebration of Christ's Passion, Death, and Resurrection. The late theologian Henri Nouwen described Lent as a time to re-focus and to re-enter a place of truth. It is here where we find our identity.

Ash Wednesday reminds us all that we are mortal. It's a day for everyone, when we are all reminded that we are dust, and to dust we will return. If we are lucky enough to grow old, we do see the lines on our faces as signs that mortality is creeping closer. We have also all known people in the prime of their lives who died way too young. Most of us know children who passed, far too early.

We are all, however, on a march toward an end. Whether we like it or not, Ash Wednesday is here to confront us with this uncomfortable reality. Many of us believe, explicitly or implicitly, that we are paying our dues by attending here, especially today. "Blow the trumpet in Zion," the prophet Joel practically yells at each congregation following the lectionary. "Sanctify a fast." We believe that we can somehow push off mortality or at least make ourselves feel better by attending church, by paying our dues to the Creator.

One of my personal Ash Wednesday stories involves my younger sister Kathleen. Believe me, I wouldn't be telling this if she were visiting with us this evening. We attended an Ash Wednesday service when we were both quite young; she was around three and I was about eight. It was the late 60's, before the Book of Common Prayer revision, so definitely Rite One. When it came time for the Imposition of Ashes, we approached the altar. Father Lewis looked at adorable Kathleen and said, "Remember oh Man, that thou art dust," and made the sign of the cross on her forehead. She replied, "Old Man? I'm not an old man. I'm just a little girl." She did not need to be reminded of her mortality that evening. She knew full well that she had her entire life ahead of her.

Ash Wednesday is the best way to begin the Lenten season, which calls us into self-examination as well as self-denial, into deeper contemplation about the mystery, and grace of God's mercy, and towards more radical giving towards those most in need of comfort, sustenance, and hope. The ashes imposed on our foreheads are a sign of penitence and a reminder of our mortality. We need to remember that the imposition of ashes as part of the liturgy is optional. That is not to say, however, that we should not make a right start to Lent by participating in this evening's liturgy.

The ancient practice of Ash Wednesday reminds us that we are mortal. It causes us to pause and look at our lives— remember what we are made of, remember where we are going- and encourages us to fully immerse ourselves in the Lenten season.

“Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” Genesis 3:19

The line from Genesis, which is traditionally included in the Ash Wednesday liturgy, reminds us that our lives on this earth won't last forever. We are a finite people who hold hope in something infinite and beyond ourselves. It's a reminder that you are human, you will die, that you are a sinner, and that, yes, there is reconciliation and healing through Christ.

Ash Wednesday calls us to be honest. Honest with God, honest with ourselves, honest within our communities, about who we really are and who we are in Christ. We must begin with the honesty of our baptism where we are assured of our belovedness in God's mercy. Everything must begin and end there. Yet even as we are dust, mortal and too often trapped by our own brokenness and that of all humanity, we are **redeemed** dust. We are, by grace, continually being made new, transformed into the likeness of Christ.

We are here because we are dust, but we are beloved dust, redeemed by God. We are here to begin the journey of Lent, to tell the story of Jesus crucified and risen, not *so that* God will love us, but *because* God already does. We are God's beloved dust.

Despite everything going on in the world, the liturgy rolls on too, as it has for two thousand years. The church has told the story of Jesus through war, famine, plague, and pandemic, not to distract or entertain itself, not to pay its dues, but because it sheds light on human life in every age.

When you see suffering and death, whether on the news or in your own life, you may feel powerless. You may feel powerless as you watch people you love suffer. You may feel powerless in your own suffering, whatever that looks like for you personally. Human life leaves us all feeling powerless at some point.

The world is full of self-help, and it is full of talk of ways that we can all single-handedly change the world. We are told, directly and indirectly, that we are bad people if we can't solve every problem we encounter. We feel personally responsible for far too much, far too often.

This evening, we acknowledge that we are dust. We are powerless to help ourselves or others. On Ash Wednesday, we are called to humility. We cannot save ourselves because we are not saviors.

But Ash Wednesday does not leave us without hope. In the midst of it, we are still encouraged to dream on, because we are redeemed. Not because we paid our dues. Not because of who we are or what we have done. But because of who God is. We are dust: God's beloved dust. God creates humanity — all of us — out of the dust of the earth.

The purpose of the spiritual practices we will each decide individually to pursue this Lenten Season is to help us to look toward God as the ground of our being and to all God's people as worthy of our love. Making this real and present is our work this Lent.

So, remember that you are dust – and rejoice. For God is with us – in the beginning, at the end, and even now as we live in between. And repent, return to the Lord – in joyful obedience. For he who created us is calling us to him. To this end, we are given the special gift of Lent – a time to allow us to hear that call and to respond. May it be a time of grace, peace, and growth for us all.
Amen