

Ash Wednesday 2023

Every year we celebrate Christ's death and resurrection. Lent is a time to prepare for this celebration. In order for Lent to be a time of renewal and growth, we begin this season by remembering our need for repentance and for the forgiveness of God proclaimed by Jesus Christ.

I want to call to mind Justin's message from this past Sunday morning. We focused on Peter's journey through orientation, disorientation, and reorientation in light of seeing Jesus fully and humbly. This is a good framework for us to continue to keep in front of us today. Just like Peter, each of us have a certain notion of our Savior. Just like Peter, each of us falls short. And just like Peter, each of us is invited to see with renewed vision the Christ who stands before us and leads us forward on a path of not only sweeping mountaintop transfiguring — but also lowly valleys and ordinary struggle as we learn to take up our cross daily.

Some refer to Lent as a "spiritual spring" — a time when we open the windows of our hearts and allow the fresh wind of the Spirit to clear out excess, remind us who we are, and awaken our inmost being to our ever-present God, knowing we don't need to fear the future and can embrace the limitations of our humanity with grace.

Below, I would like to share some elements of our Ash Wednesday gathering from earlier today. You can use these liturgical elements on your own, or with loved ones. Together, we will walk through:

- *Acknowledging our wounds and brokenness through scripture*
- *Repenting and turning toward God's forgiveness through prayer*
- *Stillness and comfort in the presence of peace*
- *Hope of the Resurrection to come*
- *Symbolic action to center our hearts*

First Reading (Portions of Psalm 51 The Voice):

Look on me with a heart of mercy, O God,
according to Your generous love.
According to Your great compassion,
wipe out every consequence of my shameful crimes.
Thoroughly wash me, inside and out, of all my crooked deeds.
Cleanse me from my sins.
For I am fully aware of all I have done wrong,
and my guilt is there, staring me in the face.
It was against You, only You, that I sinned,
for I have done what You say is wrong, right before Your eyes.

So when You speak, You are in the right.

When You judge, Your judgments are pure and true.

You long to enthrone truth throughout my being;

in unseen places deep within me, You show me wisdom.

Help me hear joy and happiness as my accompaniment,

so my bones, which You have broken, will dance in delight instead.

Erase my guilt from the record.

Create in me a clean heart, O God;

restore within me a sense of being brand new.

Do not throw me far away from Your presence,

and do not remove Your Holy Spirit from me.

Give back to me the deep delight of being saved by You;

let Your willing Spirit sustain me.

Now my tongue, which was used to destroy, will be used to sing with deep delight of how right and just You are.

O Lord, pry open my lips

that this mouth will sing joyfully of Your greatness.

Prayer of Response:

Almighty and merciful God,

you hate nothing that you have made

and forgive the sins of all who are penitent.

Create and make in us new and contrite hearts,

so that when we lament our sins

and acknowledge our brokenness,

we may receive your full and perfect forgiveness;

through Jesus Christ our Redeemer

who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,

one God now and forever. Amen.

After reading the Psalm and prayer for forgiveness, many of us may still feel tension. As we surrender to the heart of God, trusting his mercy, it is important to remember that “praying without ceasing” doesn’t just refer to the words on our lips, but the posture of our lives. Below, find the instructions to a centering breath prayer. Praying with our bodies and breathing patterns through meditative moments is another way to focus on the presence of God.

Centering Breath Prayer:

Release the physical and emotional tension that we often carry when we call to mind the nature of our brokenness.

Noticing tension in your body, breathe. Relax, releasing the tension, and breathe. Breathe in and out, deeply, three times before continuing.

We breathe in the goodness of God, and we breathe out, breathing forth that goodness into the world. As God forgives, heals, and redeems, we can rest in the Breath of Life knowing that he is good. Continue to breathe deeply as you speak these profound words from Psalm 46:

Be still and know that I am God

Be still and know that I am

Be still and know

Be still

Be

Second Reading (Portions of Psalm 108 NIV):

The Lord is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.

He will not always accuse,
nor will he harbor his anger forever;
he does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities.

For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

As a father has compassion on his children,
so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him;
for he knows how we are formed,
he remembers that we are dust.

The life of mortals is like grass,
they flourish like a flower of the field;
the wind blows over it and it is gone,
and its place remembers it no more.
But from everlasting to everlasting
the Lord's love is with those who fear him,
and his righteousness with their children's children—

with those who keep his covenant
and remember to obey his precepts.
Praise the Lord, my soul.

Prayer Of Ashes And Absolution:

*Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.
Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.
Repent and believe the Good News: God longs for you to be whole.*

*Through the cross of Christ,
May God have mercy on you, pardon you, and set you free.
Know that you are forgiven and be at peace.
May God strengthen you in all goodness and keep you in life eternal.
Amen.*

Challenge Of Action:

Think of something you can do in the remaining hours of the day to remind yourself of the themes we have just focused on. Dust represents both our brokenness and also our hope of resurrection and new life. Dust scatters, but dust also allows things to grow. Here are a few ideas:

- Write a prayer of lament or repentance on paper and then burn it to ash outside your home
- Stand barefoot in the dirt briefly and meditate on your connection to and dependence on God
- Plant something in soil today - outside or a houseplant - something that reminds you that the dust of brokenness also allows new life to flourish.

In closing, offer up the prayer below as you go about your day.

Closing Prayer:

*Loving God,
You created us from the dust of the earth.
When we witness a fire's remnant of ash,
Or a dust-covered, dry, and winding path,
Or a piece of ground whose dirt and soil are broken up,
Remind us that you are the God of refining fire.
You are the God of both wilderness and rain.
You are the God who makes beautiful things grow
Where death once swallowed up life.
In you, we have no fear, for your perfect love
has cast out all fear.
Lead us in grace as we go from here. Amen.*