

Ash Wednesday



You are dust,  
and to dust you shall return.

GENESIS 3:19

*“Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return”*(Gen. 3:19). These words and the imposition of ashes on our foreheads are a stark reminder that we are mortal. They are outward and visible signs that the liturgical season of Lent has begun. The imposition of ashes in the shape of a cross reminds us of our baptism when we were sealed with chrism and marked as Christ’s own forever (BCP 308). The ashes are “a sign of our mortality and penitence that we may remember that it is only by God’s gracious gift that we have life” and through belief in Jesus the Christ, we have live forever (BCP 265). “Penance includes those acts of making whole again and repairing damage done and of growing in grace and living into who we really are” according to John

Westerhoff.<sup>1</sup> God can transform “our brokenness into wholeness, our incompleteness into completeness and our evil into good.”

During the next 40 days, we have an opportunity to reflect upon our lives and determine to make amends, when necessary and appropriate, for the ways in which we have fallen short of the love and grace of God. The service of Ash Wednesday dates back to at least the early middle ages, if not back to the earliest church. Our continuing this service is one way we are reunited with those who have gone before us and one way we also look forward into tomorrow through being honest with ourselves about ourselves and where we need to take action to live more fully into the life set before us and in relationship with God.

Sackcloth and ashes as outward and visible signs of repentance date back into early Biblical times. We read in Job, Jeremiah and Daniel about putting on sackcloth and sprinkling our heads with ashes to evidence mourning, fasting and repentance – an outward sign of where we have fallen short in our relationship with God. In the gospels of Matthew and Luke, we also have references to putting on of sackcloth and ashes (Matthew 11:21, Luke 10:13). The tradition of imposing ashes, and what they symbolize, goes back a long way.

The ultimate purpose of Lent, however, is to strengthen our lives as Christians. “Repentance is not always pain free, but it is the start of profound healing.”<sup>2</sup> Lent has been likened to our annual medical examination. That is, a time to reflect upon where we are, where we would like to be and to determine what steps we need to take to get to where we want to be. In the tradition of giving something up for Lent, the giving up might be of something that keeps us bound to our

<sup>1</sup> John H. Westerhoff III. *A Pilgrim People* (New York: Church Publishing, 2005), 82 et seq.

<sup>2</sup> Vicki K. Black. *Welcome to the Church Year* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2004), 52 et seq.

materialistic society and that keeps us from being closer to God. In the tradition of adding something for Lent, it might be a deepening of our prayer life or of study or of community service. Something that perhaps reminds us in tangible ways that Jesus calls us to feed the poor, clothe the naked, heal the sick and visit those in prison.

Lent consists of 40 days, excluding Sundays. The time period reflects the 40 years of wandering in the desert by the Israelites following their escape from Egypt. It reflects the amount of time that Moses spent on Mt. Sinai before returning with the Ten Commandments. It also reflects the time it rained, and rained and rained and Noah and his family and the animals were in the ark. Forty days also reflects the 40 days spent by Jesus in the wilderness following his baptism.

Jesus was baptized by John the Baptizer and immediately was driven out into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit. During this period, Jesus fasted and faced temptation – turn these rocks into bread; jump from the top of the Temple; rule over all you can see. In each case, Jesus referenced scripture and kept true to God. This sets the model for us.

We will be tested and tempted. We can also reference scripture and keep our sight and our hearts focused on God. At the end of our 40 days, we too can break our metaphorical or literal fast and be tended by angels. We are each so busy that it can be hard to set aside time to rest and to reflect and to recenter our lives on God. Lent offers us a specific time within our church year to do so. It is a day-by-day approach that recognizes few of us have a literal ability to withdraw into a wilderness to fast and reflect on God. We can, however, take some time each of the next 40 days, to take stock of our lives and repent where we have need to be forgiven. We can build new habits of prayer and study and service. Little by little the water drops eat through rock to form the Grand Canyon. Little by little we can turn around to face God and acknowledge the source of life.

We do not have to be afraid of having ashes put on our foreheads. We do not have to be afraid when the words are said: “*remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.*” God is with us. God is waiting for us to say: “*my Lord and my God.*” Go in peace knowing that God loves you and waits for you. God has given us grace and strength for the journey. It is all we need, *thanks be to God.*