




ASH WEDNESDAY

Ash Wednesday begins Lent, a season of repentance and renewal of our faith. On Ash Wednesday we remember with prayer, and with the tangible symbol of ashes, our mortal nature, our place in the cycle of life, and our dependence on God. Many people prepare for Lent's humbling nature and call to simplicity the day before Ash Wednesday, on what is called Shrove Tuesday or Mardi Gras, by using the sugar and fat from their cupboards in their last feast or large celebration before Easter. The Lenten season of reflection and simplicity spans 40 days, not including Sundays. (Sundays always celebrate Jesus' resurrection.) This commemorates the 40 days Jesus spent fasting and praying in the desert at the beginning of his public ministry, as recorded by the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Though this season is solemn and reflective, it is also a time of preparing our spirits for all that is to come; a "spring cleaning" for the soul. As is said in Godly Play, Lent is a time spent "getting ready to come close to the mystery of Easter."

READ

Psalm 103:8-14

The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
God will not always accuse, nor keep anger for ever.
God does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is God's steadfast love;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far God removes our transgressions from us.
As a parent has compassion for their children,
so the Lord has compassion.
For God knows how we were made;
God remembers that we are dust.



WONDER

The focal point of Ash Wednesday is the imposition of ashes in the sign of the cross on the forehead. Ashes have several ritual and symbolic meanings. In the Older Testament, ashes are often part of stories of pleas to God for mercy, compassion, and forgiveness. The prophet Daniel dressed in sackcloth and ashes as a sign of his people's regret for the ways they had turned away from God (Daniel 9:3). The Ninevites did the same when they turned away from corruption and back toward God (Jonah 3:6,10). Central to Ash Wednesday is the invitation to reflect on our own mortality, with a focus on the words God speaks to Adam in Genesis 3:19: "For dust you are and to dust you shall return." The sign of the cross on our forehead with ashes recalls our baptism, and reminds us that in both life and life beyond life we belong to God; we are "marked as Christ's own forever."

Many churches burn last year's Palm Sunday palms for their Ash Wednesday ashes. This reminds us that the cycle of the church year is full and complete, and that following the Way of Jesus encompasses this fullness, from birth to death. If you don't have access to ashes from your faith community, consider burning your own from palms blessed last Palm Sunday -- or you may simply mark your forehead with your thumb. Whether with ashes or your thumb, the following Ash Wednesday prayer is appropriate: *Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth: May these ashes [or this action] be to us a sign of our mortality and penitence, that we may remember that it is only by your gracious gift that we are given everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.* When making the sign of the cross on your forehead, or the forehead of a family member, you might say, *Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.* After the cross is marked, offer your own prayer to God. What do you notice as you receive or contemplate receiving ashes? Is there anything you would like to let go of and place in God's hands? What does it mean to you to be claimed as God's own, in life and in life beyond life?

Prayers: *The Book of Common Prayer*, Church Publishing, 1979, p. 265 (adapted).

PRAY

God of all mercy, you love all that you have made. You forgive the sins of all who are truly sorry. Create and make in us clean hearts, that we, humbly confessing our sins and knowing our brokenness, may receive forgiveness and blessing; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Anne E. Kitch, *The Anglican Family Prayer Book*, Morehouse Publishing, p. 133.