



A S H W E D N E S D A Y

February 14, 2018

**St. James Lutheran Church
49 Middle Hwy Barrington RI 02806**

Ever Faithful, Ever Following: Covenant and the Way of the Cross An Ash Wednesday Experience for the beginning of Lent

How do we value each day?

Gracious God, sometimes it is hard to focus on you. There is so much going on in this world, and our lives. There are so many things that compete for our attention every day. There are so many things that promise fulfillment and we are tempted to put our lives into them.

And yet, through it all, you are here. You never leave us. You promise to stand beside us, in the midst of the chaos, in the middle of the craziness, in the tension that seems to always fill our world. You know what it is like to be tempted and you will not leave us alone when temptations arise.

Help us, this day-and throughout this season-to focus our lives on you. Help us to find quiet times each day to pray and turn toward you. Help us to let go of everything that stands between us and you. Help us to return to you, knowing that when we do you will always welcome us with open arms.

Help us to begin this journey toward freedom today, and continue it every single day as we commit ourselves to you and to the way that your Son Jesus laid out for us. We pray all of this in his holy name. Amen.

How do we prepare for the future?

Sit and read the lesson slowly, listening to the words of Jesus and what they are saying to you today. Read it a few times to yourself, and sit quietly for a few moments in between. What jumps out at you? What speaks most clearly to you? What questions do Jesus' words inspire in you? Ask those questions as if you and Jesus were having a one to one conversation.

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Jesus said: “Make certain you do not perform your religious duties in public so that people will see what you do. If you do these things publicly, you will not have any reward from your Father in heaven.

“So when you give something to a needy person, do not make a big show of it, as the hypocrites do in the houses of worship and on the streets. They do it so that people will praise them. I assure you, they have already been paid in full. But when you help a needy person, do it in such a way that even your closest friend will not know about it. Then it will be a private matter. And your Father, who sees what you do in private, will reward you.

“When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites! They love to stand up and pray in the houses of worship and on the street corners, so that everyone will see them. I assure you, they have already been paid in full. But when you pray, go to your room, close the door, and pray to your Father, who is unseen. And your Father, who sees what you do in private, will reward you.

“And when you fast, do not put on a sad face as the hypocrites do. They neglect their appearance so that everyone will see that they are fasting. I assure you, they have already been paid in full. When you go without food, wash your face and comb your hair, so that others cannot know that you are fasting—only your Father, who is unseen, will know. And your Father, who sees what you do in private, will reward you.

Riches in Heaven

“Do not store up riches for yourselves here on earth, where moths and rust destroy, and robbers break in and steal. Instead, store up riches for yourselves in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and robbers cannot break in and steal. For your heart will always be where your riches are.

**Pause for a moment and listen to the song:
“The Lord Our God” by Passion ft. Kristian Stanfill
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y1uliOLRpLU>**

How do we live each day with God at the center?

What are you carrying around with you? What feels heavy to you? What weighs heavy on your heart? How long have you been carrying these things? How many times have you tried to lay them down, only to find that somehow they’ve ended up back in your arms, back on your shoulders? Do they wear you out? Do they leave you tired? Do you thirst for relief from them?

What would it mean to let go of all that weighs you down and holds you back? What would you imagine it might feel like to be free of the burden that all those heavy things lay upon you? Think about it for just a little while—the things that weigh heavy on you and how they limit you—your time, your energy, your joy...

Now, choose a stone and hold it in your hand. Feel the weight of it. Turn it over a few times and look at it. The stone is dry and hard. The stone can’t quench your deep

thirst. Or, can it? In the wilderness God commanded Moses to strike the stone, and when he did life-giving water gushed from it.

Imagine that this stone represents all of those heavy things that you are carrying around with you. Imagine that setting all of those things down would be as simple as setting this stone down on the table in front of you. Think about it for a moment or two.

Now, try it. Set the stone-and all of those heavy things-down. Place it on the table. Let go of it. Surrender it, and yourself, to God. When God is at the center of our lives, the burdens that we bear become more manageable. We don't have to carry anything alone, when God is at the center of our life.

Bring this stone with you when you leave. Place it in a prominent place where you will see it each day. When life gets hectic and chaotic, and when those heavy things start to feel like they are weighing you down, stop what you are doing, pick up the stone and repeat this exercise. If it's helpful, you can use the following prayer:

Dear God, it's happening again. All of the cares and concerns of life are piling up and weighing me down. I'm losing focus on you because of this. I'm losing time that I could be spending with the people I love. I'm losing my ambition, my drive, my center. Help me to give these things over to you, help me to set them down as I set down this stone-knowing that it will all be ok because you are with me. Help me to let go of my own selfishness. Help me to release my controlling grip. Help me to let go of the things I've done wrong and the things I've failed to do. Help me to surrender it all to you. Help me to trust that, even from something like this stone, you can provide all that I need-you can quench my thirst for meaning and new life, In Jesus' name, Amen.

How do we walk with Christ?

As we return to God, we use the sign of the cross of Jesus, marked on our forehead in ashes. It is a reminder that God created us from the dust of the earth, and one day we will return to that dust. It is a reminder that the way of Jesus is the way of the cross, a path that leads through suffering and on to new life. We mark the cross visibly with ashes, in the place where that same cross has always been. In baptism, God marked us indelibly with the cross of Jesus Christ. Today, we see it clearly, and with it we are reminded of our own mortality, but also of our new life in Christ.

If you are working through this service alone, you may make the sign of the cross on your own forehead, saying the following:

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

If you are working through this service with others, turn to one another, and make the sign of the cross on someone else's forehead, saying the following:

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

How do we take heart in God's promises?

As we pray, we give thanks to God:

Renewed in the promises of baptism, let us pray for the church, the world, and all who are in need.

A brief silence.

We pray for the church. Turn our lives toward you in repentance. Turn our hearts toward our neighbors in love. Turn our actions toward the world in mercy. Renew us in faith, in prayer, and in compassion. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

We pray for the world. Teach us to treasure the earth as your beloved creation. Provide plentiful and healthy homes for all creatures. Bring new life from decay. Repair what has been damaged from misuse or neglect. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

We pray for the nations. Empower leaders to resist the use of power for personal gain or selfish interest. Teach us to build communities where all can live in safety and peace. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

We pray for those in need. Protect those who are victimized by crime or injustice. Unburden those who are weighed down by guilt or shame. Assist those who are unemployed. Comfort those who mourn, and heal the sick. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

We pray for this assembly. Deepen our faith. Empower those who work in our community to provide food, shelter, and health care to those who are in need. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Trusting in your covenant of mercy, O God, we lift our prayers to you, through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior.
Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

How do we follow where God leads?

Words of Blessing: pause at the font to remember God's love for you as you go

Spend some time thinking about what God's love frees you to do and be. Before you recite the blessing, think of one word that comes to mind—a word that captures the freedom you find in God's loving grace. Write that word on a piece of paper and place it in the bowl before you and then receive God's blessing with these words:

God, you focus yourself on us. Help us to focus our lives on you.

You are patient and understanding. Help us to live lives that mirror this for the people we meet.

You surrendered everything on the cross, that we might live. Help us to surrender to your grace this day, and always.

You are a God who promises to return one day. Inspire us to constantly return to you, especially when we feel lost.

For all of this, God, we give you thanks, and pray that you will bless us as we grow throughout these next forty days. **Amen.**