

Ash Wednesday 2026 Sermon
Feb. 18, 2026
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It seems that more and more I am being asked to confirm that I am a human when I am on my computer, while opening certain emails or logging onto certain websites. “Confirm you are human,” the button says. I click the button and then there are these spinny dots that tell me my computer is somehow confirming my humanity. I’m starting to get used to this, but isn’t it weird? I know these are security tools that differentiate human users from malicious automated bots. I know they prevent spam and fraud. But sometimes when I’m asked to click these “confirm you are human” buttons, I get a little ... existential. "What does it really mean to be human," I think as I stare at the screen. How on earth does this computer know I am a human? Do I even want to be a human? What exactly happens when I click that button? What is real ???

While I’ll likely never be able to fully answer those questions, I think that Ash Wednesday has something to do with confirming our humanity. In our rituals today/tonight, we face much of what makes us human: our relationship with God, with ourselves, with each other, and even with our mortality. When we receive the smudge of ashes on our foreheads, we are receiving a mark of humanity, reminding us that we are creatures made of dust and love, joining Jesus in the wilderness of being a human. Remember that you are dust, the priest says. Remember that you are love. Remember that you are human.

Ash Wednesday is such a human day – a day when we get brave enough to face the harder parts of being human: that we all fall short, and that we all die. Facing these more difficult realities can bring us to a kind of edge. It’s not a comfortable place to be and it’s one we mostly try to avoid. Ash Wednesday, however, asks us to *go* to our edge, that place where we are confronted with our limitations, fear, and vulnerable human-ness.

Many things in life can take us to our edge: parenthood, childbirth, illness, financial instability, fill-in-the-blank. It's different for each of us, but we all get there from time to time. It’s part of being human. The Buddhist nun Pema Chodron says, "Life is a whole journey of meeting your edge again and again." When at the edge, she says, "if you're a person who wants to live, you start to ask yourself questions like, 'Why am I so scared? What is it that I don't want to see? Why can't I go any further than this?'"

Ash Wednesday begins a season when we allow ourselves to bravely ask these kinds of questions. Why? Perhaps because, as the songwriter David Wilcox likes to say, “The view is from the edge.” When we bump up against our fear and our limits and our pain, we sometimes see more clearly than when we were back in the safe middle. The view is from the edge: we see what we have taken for granted, we see what we are afraid of, and if we’re lucky, we see, perhaps, possibility.

The edge can be a spiritually fertile place because at the edge, we realize we can’t do it by ourselves and so maybe we finally surrender to God. Or we accept help. Or we stop trying to escape, because the edge demands that we become fully present.

So, whatever edge you find yourself on, whether that be an edge that life has brought you to, or whether you are allowing the liturgy of this day/night to bring you there, our faith, our Christian path, even our liturgical calendar invites us to trust that even though it can sometimes feel like our toes are teetering on the edge of an abyss, the fall that we fear is only, in its most startling truth, a fall into God. And there is nowhere, no way, no possibility that we can fall out of God. As it is written in Psalm 139: “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.”

So today we stand at the edge, together. We press that “confirm you are human” button, together. And we allow ourselves to be fully seen by God – in all our humanness.

A few years ago, I attended a Yom Kippur evening service at a local synagogue. As I flipped through the worship book, I was struck by how much the Yom Kippur language reminded me of Ash Wednesday! Both are days of atonement when we face the limitations of our humanity and when we commit to self-honesty and a return to God. I must admit, I think I like the Yom Kippur language better than the language we’ve inherited from the church over the centuries, which can sound so punitive and shame-inducing. Ash Wednesday and Yom Kippur invite us to look at ourselves in a loving, honest mirror. This is how one of the commentaries in the Yom Kippur book puts it:

“How brave, how hard it is to be 'good enough' in our ties to one another; to receive with grace the love imperfectly offered to us. Can this night set us free from the tyranny of expectations? Can this night release us from fantasies impossible to fulfill? We resolve this night to embrace the practice of forgiveness; to forgive others who fail to be all we hoped they would be; to forgive ourselves when we fall short of what others hoped we would be.” And I’d add, “when we forgive life itself for bringing us to such edges from time to time.” The commentary ends with, “We declare this night that we will cherish goodness wherever it is found; and open ourselves to the gifts that are before us.” That sounds like a good Lenten practice. Yes, we must look at ourselves honestly, but we are also invited to give ourselves, and others, a break, in our sometimes relentless and impossibly high expectations.

So tonight, we gather together and bravely face our humanness. We are only human, after all. But ... we are *human*! We collectively press the “confirm you are human” button and we lean into our edges and our fears, our limitations and our lack. We ask for forgiveness, and we forgive – God, ourselves, and each other. And we receive the mark of our humanity on our foreheads – together. This mark of humanity, this mark of dust and ash, is made in the sign of a cross, just like we do with fragrant oil at our baptisms when the priest says the words, “You are marked as Christ’s own forever.” You are marked as Christ’s own forever, dear ones. We cannot fall out of God. So let us bravely stand at this edge, this threshold, together.