

Why Ash Wednesday?

On Wednesday we will come together as a family of faith and begin our Lenten journey together. The season of Lent consists of the 40 days (excluding Sundays) leading up to Easter. It is traditionally a time of prayer, reflection, and even self-denial as we consider what Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross means in our lives.

The event that begins our Lenten journey is Ash Wednesday. We will gather together at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday for a time of worship and prayer, culminating in the smearing of ashes in the shape of a cross on each person's forehead. I can remember being well into my time as a churchgoer and still being puzzled by this strange ritual. I understand the significance of the cross, of course, but why ashes?

In the early days of the church, pastors did not dip their thumbs into the ashes and draw the shape of a cross, but rather poured ashes over the heads of those beginning their Lenten journeys. As they did, they would remind the worshipers that it was from dust that they came, and it would be to dust that they eventually would return. And they would be urged to repent and believe the Good News of Jesus Christ.

It was an allusion to the story in Genesis 2 of God creating that first man from the dust of the earth and breathing into him the breath of life. And a reminder that, in death, we each will return to that from whence we came. But even as it reminded those early churchgoers of their humanity and mortality, it also reminded them of the importance of living the life with which God blessed them, and living it for God. The call to repent was a call not simply to turn around, but to see the world through God's eyes. To envision a world that made real the dream that God has for it. The ashes are a reminder of the ashes and sackcloth that were the symbols of repentance in the ancient world.

And so when we gather on Wednesday, we will do so to confront our sin, to acknowledge our inability to measure up to what God created us to be and our need to be forgiven. Those ashes – the remains of the palm fronds that welcomed Jesus as our King on Palm Sunday last year, serve as a reminder of how far we fall short of living up to the glory of Christ. But they also remind us that no matter how far we fall, God is always ready to lift us up.

- Pastor Lee