

Ash Wednesday Service

What follows is the suggestion of a more experiential Ash Wednesday service that combines traditional and creative elements. Be aware: this is a long service and something of an ordeal that you will need to carefully prepare your people to undergo.

You will need

- a series of newsletter and bulletin articles explaining the imposition of ashes
- someone who can blow a few notes on a trumpet or other similar instrument.
- two people who can read the call to worship dramatically without overdoing it.
- ashes prepared by burning last year's palm branches from Palm Sunday. You can also buy these at a religious supply store. Fireplace ashes will not work! See *The Companion to the Book of Common Worship*, Peter Bower, ed., p. 120, for further preparation help.
- olive oil
- a small flat dish to put ashen mixture on. Put a small amount of oil on one part of the dish and the ashes on the other dipping your thumb into the oil and then the ashes before tracing the cross on the forehead. If you decide to mix the two, be careful not to get the mixture too oily. A little goes a long way for both ashes and oil. You want a good dark ash, and you'll need to practice ahead of time to get the mixture right.
- Consider having pastors robe even if this is unusual for your congregation. This is a more priestly service.
- 3 x 5 cards
- a list of sins for examination
- pencils
- water in the baptismal font
- a stack of white hand towels
- people of prayer and pastoral sensitivity to do the baptismal signation and blessing
- communion bread and cup
- a traffic plan for the service's movements
- names of catechumens and their sponsors
- offering plates or baskets
- a series of announcements in bulletins, web pages, emails, newsletters that explain and encourage people to come to this very special service (which will last longer than usual!)

Prelude ask your musicians to play soft, reflective music to aid silent contemplation

Call to Worship (based on Joel 2:12-18)

[Blow trumpet with 3-5 insistent notes resembling a call of warning/alarm. This should startle people out of their contemplations.]

Voice 1 (shouting, from back or up in balcony behind the congregation): Blow the trumpet! Call a solemn assembly! Gather the people!

[Blow trumpet same as before]

Voice 1: Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, including nursing infants. Let even the bride and bridegroom rise from their nuptials. Gather everyone!

[Blow trumpet again.]

Voice 1: And you ministers: Weep! Pray to the Lord on our behalf, saying, “Spare your people, O Lord. Don’t let others look at us and wonder where you are, O Lord. Spare, oh spare, your people!”

[Blow trumpet again.]

[Pause]

Voice 2: “Return to me with all your heart,” says the Lord. “Yet even now, return to me! Rend your hearts with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.”

People: O Lord, we turn to you. Turn now to us, and forget not your heritage, for you are God--gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

Prayer (Pastor): Almighty God: you love all your children, and do not want to see them punished for their sins. Help us to face up to ourselves, admit we are in the wrong, and raise our eyes with confidence to your mercy; in Jesus Christ, the Lord. **Amen.**¹

Hymn: “Lord, Who Throughout These Forty Days” St. Flavian

Words of Invitation to Enter into Ash Wednesday Contrition

Pastor: We are here on this Ash Wednesday to repent of our sins, intercede on behalf of a sinful world, and seek God’s face in the renewal of our lives and of this world. Today marks the beginning of Lent, which you can read about in your bulletin.² As part of our service today, we will have an extended period of confession and an examination of our lives in the light of God’s grace. As a sign of your penitence, you are invited to come forward to receive the imposition of ashes, as we trace the sign of the cross on your forehead with ashes, an ancient symbol of humility and grief. You may read

“Come now, let us reason together,” says the Lord. “Though your sins be as scarlet I shall make them white as snow.” (Isaiah 1:18) In penitence and faith in the goodness of God who wants good things for us, let us confess our sins.

¹ Adapted from the *Worshipbook*, p. 142.

² You may wish to use these words for your bulletin, taken from the Book of Common Worship’s Ash Wednesday service: Friends in Christ, every year before the Christian Passover we celebrate our redemption through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Lent is a time to prepare for this celebration and to renew our life in the paschal mystery. We begin our journey to Easter with the sign of ashes. This ancient sign speaks of the frailty and uncertainty of human life, and marks the penitence of this community. We thus begin this holy season by acknowledging our need for repentance, and for the mercy and forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. You are invited to observe a holy Lent by self-examination and penitence, by prayer and fasting, by works of love, and by reading and meditating on the Word of God.

EXAMINATION OF INDIVIDUAL SINS

[In a long period of silence, call people to examine their lives before God. They may do this through journaling or working on a worksheet with a list of sins, such as the ones that follow.]

- *Here is a sample of a list of sins from a solemn assembly that was compiled by the preparatory team who had met in prayer for weeks before the larger gathering. You will want to go through the same preparatory process to compile your own list, but this one, taken and added to from HeartRest,³ is a helpful start to you in compiling your own list for a bulletin insert. **You will want to add printed directions regarding what you want people to do with this list during your solemn assembly.***

SINS AGAINST OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH OUR LORD

Pride, self-satisfaction, self-righteousness, hard-heartedness
Worship: more performance than true devotion
Controlled by fear and anxiety rather than by faith
Holding back our money in fear of not having enough in the future
Too little time spent one-on-one with my Lord
Neglect of prayer, the Word, spiritual direction
Idolatry—gaining meaning from things instead of from God
Hypocrisy, inauthenticity
Joyless labor in God's house instead of joyful work by God's side
Allowing the world to change us instead of our changing the world
Not giving God first consideration in all decisions
Slowness to acknowledge and confess my sins...

SINS AGAINST OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH EACH OTHER

Lack of love for each other; little true connection between us;
Demanding total agreement; allowing others to be demonized for holding different opinions
Judgmental spirit, lack of grace, rigidity, being overly demanding
Talking more than listening
Gossiping
Complaining
Not taking in what the other is saying and weighing it in Holy Spirit and instead reacting immediately against it
Leaders not bringing prophetic challenges to people ...

SINS AGAINST OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH THOSE OUTSIDE THE CHURCH

Lack of sacrificial service to the poor and oppressed
Separating ourselves from the world so that we don't see social problems that keep people oppressed and captive
Weak engagement with those who set social policies
Lack of passion for those who don't know Jesus; failure to build bridges of relationships through service
Failure to call others to live in accord with God's sovereign rule as characterized by love and justice and shalom for all

³ <http://www.heartrest.org/>

Lack of vision for the church in our city/region
 Weakness in intercessory prayer for others and our ministries
 Lack of equal respect for all cultures, and between each
 Consumer mentality, allowing our possessions to own us instead of investing in
 Kingdom work
 Laziness – “Let someone else do it.”
 Failure to live as good stewards of the earth and all God has provided for us to
 share with one another
 Acceptance of and acquiescence to social sins that enslave and hurt others—
 pornography, slave labor practices, domestic violence, genocide, war, limiting
 access to food, housing, healthcare, etc.
 Refusing to blow the whistle on social and personal sin so that others may know
 God’s love for all ...

Personal reflections and confession:

- **LENTEN FORM FOR SELF-EXAMINATION⁴**

People are invited to examine the following sins:

Pride—putting self in the place of god as the center and objective of our life. Pride is the refusal to recognize our status as creatures, dependent upon God.

Irreverence—deliberate neglect of God’s worship, or contentment with a perfunctory participation in it. Manifest as cynicism toward the holy or as use of Christianity for personal advantage

Sentimentality—satisfaction with pious feelings and beautiful ceremony without striving for personal holiness

Distrust—refusal to recognize God’s wisdom and love. Undue worry, anxiety, scrupulosity, or perfectionism. Attempts to gain or keep control of our life in various ways

Disobedience—rejection of God’s known will. The refusal to learn God’s nature through scripture. Breaking confidence by irresponsibility, treachery, and unnecessary disappointment of others. Breaking legal or moral contracts.

Impenitence—Refusal to search out and face up to our sins, or to confess them before God. Self-justification by believing our sins to be insignificant, natural, or inevitable; by refusing to apologize; by being unwilling to forgive ourselves.

Vanity—Failure to credit God and others for their part in our lives. Boasting, exaggeration, ostentatious behavior, undue concern over “things”

Arrogance—Being overbearing, argumentative, opinionated, obstinate

Resentment—Rejection of talents, abilities, or opportunities God and others give us.

Rebellion, hatred of God or human beings. Cynicism.

Envy—Dissatisfaction with our place in God’s order of creation. Manifests itself in jealousy, malice, and contempt for others or others’ things

⁴ See Richard Lobs, III, in *The Services of the Christian Year*, vol. 5 of *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, Robert Webber, ed. Nashville: Star Song, 1994), 243-44. The author gives permission to adapt this form as needed by individual congregations. Some adaptation has occurred in this list.

Covetousness—the refusal to respect the integrity of other creatures, expressed in the accumulation of material things to prove self-worth, the use of others to personal advantage, or in the quest for status and power at the expense of others

Avarice—manifested in inordinate ambition or domination of others. The waste of natural resources or personal possessions. Extravagance or living beyond our means. Manifest in undue protection of our things. Stinginess, which can deprive others of life and thus kill them.

Gluttony—overindulgence of natural appetites for food and drink, and by inordinate quest for pleasure or comfort. Manifest in intemperance and lack of discipline

Lust—misuse of sex through seeing others as objects for our own pleasure without regard for their desires. Includes unchastity, immodesty, adultery, prudery.

Sloth—the refusal to respond to opportunities for growth, service, or sacrifice. Laziness in spiritual, mental, or physical duties. Neglect of family. Indifference to injustice or the world's suffering. Neglecting the outcast or person in need.

As part of your preparation for a solemn assembly, we recommend that your prayer group spend time to come up with your own list of sins for self-examination.

After an extended period of silent reflection, call everyone back together with another trumpet blast and/or with the

Reading of Isaiah 58: 1-12 [*again, the disruptiveness of the Word should be the effect*]

Naming of Societal Sins *Ask for people to look at the scripture and describe aloud the sins the scripture mentions. Do a little teaching on the social nature of sin to help them see that we don't just sin as individuals, but that we sin in the ways in which we structure our society and social norms.*

Litanies of Penitence

- Read Psalm 51:1-17 responsively or chant it. If the choir sings this later, choose one of the other litanies.
- **Holy and merciful God,
we confess to you and to one another,
and to the whole communion of saints in heaven and on earth,
that we have sinned by our own fault
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.**
We have not loved you with our whole heart, and mind, and strength.
We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We have not forgiven others as we have been forgiven.
Have mercy on us, O God.

We have not listened to your call to serve as Christ served us.

We have not been true to the mind of Christ.

We have grieved your Holy Spirit.

Have mercy on us, O God.

We confess to you, O God, all our past unfaithfulness:

The pride, hypocrisy, and impatience in our lives,

we confess to you, O God.

Our self-indulgent appetites and ways

and our exploitation of other people,

we confess to you, O God.

Our anger at our own frustration

and our envy of those more fortunate than ourselves,

we confess to you, O God.

Our intemperate love of worldly goods and comforts,

and our dishonesty in daily life and work,

we confess to you, O God.

Our negligence in prayer and worship,

and our failure to commend the faith that is in us,

we confess to you, O God.

Accept our repentance, O God,

for the wrongs we have done.

For our neglect of human need and suffering

and our indifference to injustice and cruelty,

accept our repentance, O God.

For all false judgments,

for uncharitable thoughts toward our neighbors,

and for our prejudice and contempt

toward those who differ from us,

accept our repentance, O God.

For our waste and pollution of your creation

and our lack of concern for those who come after us,

accept our repentance, O God.

Restore us, O God,

and let your anger depart from us

Favorably hear us, O God,

for your mercy is great.⁵

- **Beginning of the Great Litany:**

O God the Father, creator of heaven and earth,

Have mercy on us.

O God the Son, redeemer of the world,

Have mercy on us.

O God the Holy Spirit, advocate and guide,

⁵ Presbyterian Church (USA), *Book of Common Worship*, pp. 225-26.

Have mercy on us.

Holy, blessed, and glorious Trinity,
three persons and one God,

Have mercy on us.

Remember not, Lord Christ, our offenses,
nor the offenses of our forebears.

Spare us, good Lord,

Spare your people whom you have redeemed with your precious blood.

Spare us, good Lord,

From all spiritual blindness;
from pride, vainglory, and hypocrisy;
from envy, hatred, and malice;
and from all want of charity,

Good Lord, deliver us.

From all deadly sin;
and from the deceits of the world,
the flesh, and the devil,

Good Lord, deliver us.

From all false doctrine, heresy, and schism;
from hardness of heart,
and contempt for your Word and commandments,

Good Lord, deliver us.

From earthquake and tempest;
from drought, fire, and flood;
from civil strife and violence;
from war and murder;
and from dying suddenly and unprepared,

Good Lord, deliver us.

By the mystery of your holy incarnation,
by your baptism, fasting, and temptation;
and by your proclamation of the kingdom,

Good Lord, deliver us.

By your bloody sweat and bitter grief;
by your cross and suffering;
and by your precious death and burial,

Good Lord, deliver us.

By your mighty resurrection;
by your glorious ascension;
and by the coming of the Holy Spirit,

Good Lord, deliver us.

In our times of trouble;
in our times of prosperity;
in the hour of death,
and on the day of judgment,

Good Lord, deliver us.

IMPOSITION OF ASHES⁶

Prayer over the ashes:

Invite people to come forward to receive the imposition of ashes.

As the choir sings “Create in Me a Clean Heart, O God,” by Carl Mueller and/or as the congregation sings “Change My Heart, O God,” by E. Espinosa, people are invited forward to receive the imposition of ashes with the words:

Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return

which the pastor says while slowly tracing an ashen cross on the forehead, looking into the eyes of the person before her/him. The Clerk of Session or another pastor may impose the pastor with ashes. Think through how the musicians will receive ashes. They may want to go first.

After this is finished, keep a few moments of silence with music. Take your time here. Then ask the congregation to pray together one of the following:

UNISON PRAYERS OF CONFESSION

**Gracious God,
our sins are too heavy to carry,
too real to hide,
and too deep to undo.
Forgive what our lips tremble to name,
what our hearts can no longer bear,
and what has become for us a consuming fire of judgment.
Set us free from a past we cannot change;
open us to a future in which we can be changed;
and grant us grace to grow in your likeness and image;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

OR

**Almighty God,
you love us, but we have not loved you;
you call, but we have not listened.
We walk away from neighbors in need,
wrapped up in our own concerns.**

⁶ See some scriptures that mention dust and ashes:
www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/worship/assemblies/dustashes.htm

**We have gone along with evil, with pride, quarrelling, and divisiveness.
Holy God, help us to face up to ourselves,
so that, as you move toward us in mercy,
we may repent, turn to you, and receive mercy;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

OR

**Merciful God,
in your gracious presence we confess our sin,
and the sin of our church.
Although Christ is among us as our peace,
we are a people divided against ourselves,
as we cling to the values of a broken world.
The fears and jealousies that we harbor
set Christian against Christian.
We abuse your good gifts of imagination and freedom,
of intellect and reason,
and have turned them into bonds of oppression.
Lord,, have mercy upon us;
heal and forgive us.
Set us free to serve you in the world
as agents of your reconciling love in Jesus Christ. Amen.**

OR

**Almighty God,
you poured your Spirit upon gathered disciples
creating bold tongues, open ears,
and a new community of faith.
We confess that we hold back the force of your Spirit among us.
We do not listen for your word of grace,
speak the good news of your love,
or live as a people made one in Christ
Have mercy on us, O God.
Transform our timid lives by the power of your Spirit,
and fill us with a flaming desire to be your faithful people,
doing your will for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

[If you are inviting people into a period of Lenten discipline, you may choose not to do a declaration of pardon until Maundy Thursday or Good Friday, at which time participation in Christ's passion shows us the cost of our forgiveness, a price God was willing to pay out of great divine love for us and for our salvation. If you choose this option, you will need to say this ahead of time in newsletters and bulletins, including the one that will serve for this service.]

In lieu of a declaration of pardon, you may simply offer the following prayer each week during Lent, starting with this service:]

Prayer

May Almighty God, who of great mercy has promised to forgive all who truly repent and in true faith turn unto the Lord, strengthen you in all goodness and bring you at last into the fullness of everlasting life, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**⁷

OR

May the God of mercy strengthen in you true repentance that you may avail yourself of the fullness of divine grace and know the joy of God's salvation unto eternal life, through Christ Jesus the Lord. **Amen.**

OR

Accomplish in us, O God, the work of your salvation,
That we may show forth your glory in the world.
By the cross and passion of our Savior,
bring us with all your saints
to the joy of Christ's resurrection.⁸

Hymn “The Glory of These Forty Days”

This is in Long Meter, so you can sing the words to any tune your people know with LM (See the metrical index of tunes in the back of your hymnal. In the Presbyterian Hymnal, this can be found on pp. 705-06).

Prayer for Illumination: Spare your people, O Lord. Remember their making. Remember that they are but dust, save for your Spirit placed within them. Speak your Word once more in Holy Spirit that the dry bones of our dusty lives might rise with renewed vigor to proclaim your praise, now and forevermore. Through Jesus Christ we pray. **Amen.**

Reading 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Reading Matthew 6:1-6; 16-21

Sermon

[Some possibilities for the sermon include

- *unfolding 2 Corinthians, weaving it together with explanation of some of the liturgy*
- *comment on the irony of juxtaposing Matt. 6 with all the previous ritual.*
- *talk about being baptized dust (Teresa Stricklen offers a sermon for ideas:*

⁷ Based upon the *Book of Common Prayer*, Holy Eucharist I. 332.

⁸ “Ash Wednesday,” *Book of Common Worship*. 227.

www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/worship/assemblies/baptizeddust.htm), leading into the next part of the service

- allow people to testify where they have seen the Lord in the liturgy and scripture. The Spirit may well surprise you when you're willing to give up control, dear preacher.

Hymn of Consecration and Offering of Ourselves to God

[Choose a hymn of consecration like "Just as I Am" or something similar. During the hymn, ask people to make an offering of the Lenten discipline that they will undergo. You may have a sheet in the bulletin of things for them to consider: Lenten Bible study, morning and/or evening prayer each day, a service project, daily Bible readings, fasting, etc. The point is not to give up something as much as it is to include room for God to move in our lives.]

Presentation of Catechumens

Pastor: Lent is a traditional period of instruction for those wishing to be baptized or claim the promises made for them at their baptism. The folks who undergo this intensive period of instruction in the faith are called catechumens. They, along with those who will walk this journey as their mentors, request your prayers and support. Will the catechumens and their sponsors please come forth as I call your names. *{Name off those who will going through confirmation/catechesis during Lent for baptism on Easter Saturday, Easter, or anytime during Easter or on Pentecost (whichever date your Session sets)}* Are there any others who wish to join them in this course of instruction leading to baptism of confirmation? If so, please come stand with the catechumens. *{If any come forth, ask if they have a sponsor in mind, ask for someone to sponsor them, or assure them that a sponsor will be assigned.}*

These people are now enrolled as catechumens. Do you promise to support them in this journey of faith, praying for them, and encouraging them along the Way?

We do.

Let us pray.

Prayer of Intercession

O God, Wisdom of the Ages, bless these catechumens and all those everywhere who are seeking instruction in the faith. Instill in them perseverance in their journey. Enlighten their minds and open their hearts to you. Help them seek so that they may find, and ask that they might find grace upon grace. Bless too, these sponsors, and thank you for their willingness to participate in the cloud of witnesses that you surround us with to encourage us with care.

Keep all who come to you, O Lord, in whatever service this Lent, in your loving care. Watch over them as they draw closer to you.

The eyes of all look to you for mercy, Almighty God. Without your Spirit, we are but dust, full of death and decay. Breathe your life into us to renew us. Renew your church that we might be witness to your resurrection hope in Christ to a despairing world. Help us care for your good creation. Speak peace to silence all wars. Tend the wounds of all victims of violence. Feed the hungry. Grant your wisdom, courage,

and love to all who serve in positions of power over others that your justice may fill the earth with gladness. Gather the dying in your arms, and strengthen those weary with care for others. Comfort all who grieve, and turn their mourning into dancing in the delight of all your saints who forever sing before your glory.

All these things we ask in the name of our precious Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, to whom be all honor and glory and dominion now and forever. Amen.

Invitation to the Table

God doesn't just want us to grovel in the dust of our sin. God gives us the Spirit of baptism and the food of the Lord's table to strengthen us along the Way of faith.

As you begin your Lenten journey, you are invited to journey into the joy of your baptism even through the valley of the shadow of death on the way to the cross. As you come forward to receive, you will first pass by the font where [1-2 leaders—name them] will stand with a white towel reminiscent of the baptismal garment of Christ's righteousness that he has provided for us. Even if you are not taking communion because you have not been baptized or for whatever reason, you're invited to come to the font for a blessing. If you're not taking communion, you may return to your seat. If you are taking communion, proceed to one of the stations where our Lord waits to serve you, his beloved.

You are invited now, to come to the table where all who hunger and thirst for God will be satisfied. Let us join together in prayer.

Great Prayer of Thanksgiving

[This is written for two celebrants, but you could have just one.]

Celebrant 1: The Lord be with you

People: And also with you.

Lift up your hearts

We lift them to the Lord

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God

It is right to give our thanks and praise

It is truly right and our greatest joy to give you thanks and praise, eternal God, creator and ruler of the universe.

You are our God, and we are the creatures of your hand. You made us from the dust of the earth, breathed into us the breath of life, and set us in your world to love and serve you.

Even when we turned away from you, our Maker, you continued to love us, calling us through prophets to turn again to you in obedient love.

Celebrant 2: You sent Jesus to free us from the tyranny of sin. He lived as one of us, fully human, a creature full of your Spirit, who taught us your ways.

Baptized as one of your own,

death by torture could not reduce him to nothing.

By his rising, he released us from bondage to sin,

freeing us to live as new people, citizens of the Kingdom of God.

Remembering all that Jesus taught us, we come to this table to serve one another in

thanksgiving for all you've done for us, offering ourselves as a living sacrifice devoted to following in your way.

Gracious God, pour out your Holy Spirit upon us and upon these your gifts of bread and juice that we may be united in true communion with you, one another, and all the saints of all times and places who forever sing your praise. Keep us one in Christ as we pray for the world, as he taught us to pray, saying . . .

Our Father, . . .

Words of Institution

[at the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the cup]

Pastor: The gifts of God for the people of God. Come, for all is now ready.

[At the font, the leader(s) will wipe away the ashen cross and trace a new one with water, using any of the following combinations of words:

Remember your baptism and be glad.
Our God gives beauty for ashes.
The Lord has put Holy Spirit within you.
Go forth with joy.

For those who haven't been baptized, you may offer these words:

The Lord wants to claim you and mark you as one of God's own. May the Lord bless you in your Lenten journey and bring you at last into the joy of the baptismal life.

The leader may offer a blessing or prayer for the person before her/him, ending with a kiss of peace on the forehead.]

Prayer after Communion

Thanks to your grace in Jesus Christ, these bones live to proclaim your greatness, O Lord. You love us to the end, feeding us from your own hand scarred with love. You have placed your Spirit within and among us to set our lives spinning free into the New Creation according to your designs. May we go forth to serve as vessels of praise in all we do as we rise from this table to serve a hurting world in your name, and to your glory, we pray. **Amen.**

Hymn

Charge and Blessing

Postlude and Departure to Serve