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**The honesty of Ash Wednesday**  
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## Study guide

# The honesty of Ash Wednesday

By Robert C. Blezard

In its overall tone and witness, Ash Wednesday is something of an outlier in the church calendar of Holy Days. Ash Wednesday begins the church season of Lent with distinctly somber, sobering messages: Not only is humanity sinful to the core, but we are also mortal. Reminding us that we are bad and we will die may be enough to wake us up spiritually. (Maybe that's the point?)

### EXERCISE 1: THE LENTEN JOURNEY

Always observed 46 days before Easter Sunday, Ash Wednesday begins the church season of Lent. For centuries Christians have understood Lent as a solemn season of repentance and Easter preparation, observed by refraining from celebration, excessive pleasure and luxuries on the one hand, and taking on regular spiritual disciplines, such as fasting, prayer and almsgiving, on the other.

The season remembers Jesus' 40 days of fasting and testing in the wilderness. So, why do we remember Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness with a 46-day season? Well, because Sunday is always the Lord's Day, and tradition holds that the Lord's Day is always a time of celebration. Thus, the six Sundays of Lent are exempt from fasting and other austere spiritual disciplines.

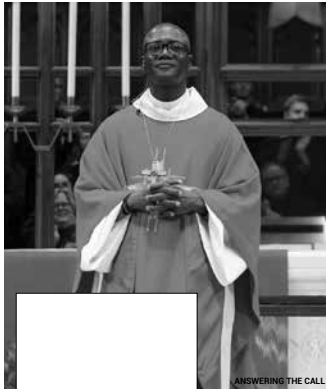
### Discuss:

How have you and your family understood Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent?

What traditions have you and your family observed for Lent? Identify familiar ones from the following list and describe how they relate to the penitential nature of Lent:

- "Giving up" a favorite food or sweet indulgence.
- "Giving up" a bad habit, such as swearing, smoking or drinking alcohol.
- Making special offerings or gifts to church.
- Serving the church or neighbor in some ministry.
- Being especially regular in church attendance.
- Reading Scripture or a Lenten devotional daily.
- Praying more often or with extra diligence.

What Lenten traditions have you observed in your congregation? Identify familiar ones from the list and describe how they relate to the penitential nature of Lent:



ANSWERING THE CALL

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- Refraining from scheduling baptisms or weddings during Lent.
- Setting out the purple-colored paraments in the sanctuary.
- Refraining from displaying fresh flowers on the altar.
- Placing a black or purple “veil” over the baptismal font and crosses.
- Refraining from using the word “halleluiah” in prayers and hymns.
- Omitting the prayer of absolution after the prayer of confession.
- Offering special mid-week Lenten services, often with a simple meal of bread and soup.

### EXERCISE 2: ASH WEDNESDAY SERVICE

Ash Wednesday begins the penitential season of Lent with a particular emphasis on human failing and sin. Remembering that, as 1 John 1:8 states, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us,” we enter Lent on our knees, fully aware of our need for God’s forgiveness and mercy. Review the Ash Wednesday service in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, pages 251-255, and discuss:

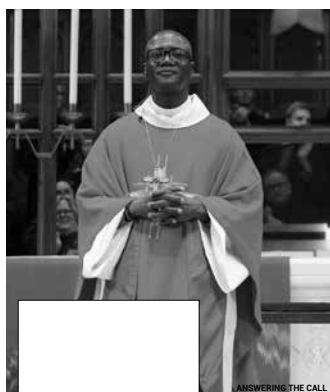
- The liturgy designates Psalm 51 as a key reading. Why? How does it fit into Ash Wednesday’s penitential theme?
- How does Ash Wednesday’s Gospel Acclamation (page 252) set the tone not only for the day but also for the entire season of Lent? What does it mean to “return to the Lord”? How do we endeavor to do so during Lent? And why?
- The prayer of confession on pages 252 and 253 is very comprehensive. Review each petition and discuss how it applies to our everyday sinfulness.
- The “dust to dust” comment that accompanies the imposition of ashes certainly gets our attention. Why is that a good and necessary thing? (More discussion below.)
- Explore the implications of the prayers following imposition of ashes, page 254, and the special dismissal, page 255. How do they express the intent and tone of our Lenten journey?

### Dust to dust

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” These cheerless words, uttered with the imposition of ashes, are taken from Genesis 3:19. To gain the full impact of the words and their relation to Ash Wednesday, read Genesis 3:1-19 together. The reading unfolds with some familiar characters and interactions.

### Discuss:

- Who are Adam and Eve? Why are they important?
- Where do these interactions take place? What is the story behind and significance of the Garden of Eden?



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- What was Adam and Eve's relationship with God before the start of Genesis 3? By verse 19, things have changed. How? Why?
- What is our connection to Adam and Eve?
- How have you understood "original sin"?
- The deeper meaning of "original sin" has been described as not simply that Adam and Eve disobeyed God by eating the fruit, but that they trusted in themselves rather than God to determine what was right and wrong. They became self-centered, following their own instincts, rather than how they were created to be—God-centered and following God's instructions. How is our self-centeredness the root of human sinfulness?
- What is the Ash Wednesday liturgy saying by using that snippet from Genesis 3:19?

### Oil and ashes

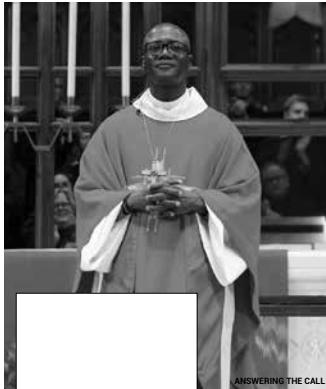
To mark God's people on Ash Wednesday, pastors typically use a mixture of oil—often fragrant holy oil—and ashes that result from burning palm branches. Imposition of ashes is typically done by a pastor dipping a thumb in the oil-and-ash mixture and then making a cross-shaped mark on the forehead. This is not an arbitrary gesture. Oil, ashes and the mark of the cross are all steeped in symbolism.

**Oil:** For thousands of years, God's people have used oil for anointing for special purposes and rituals. It's preparation and use are described in Exodus 30:22-32. Christians use consecrated holy oil to anoint the sick, to bless people and objects and to anoint people at baptism.

**Ashes:** In the Old Testament, putting ashes on one's body expresses humility, grief, repentance from sin. In his misery and suffering, Job humbles himself before God, declaring, "I had heard of you [God] by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 6:5,6).

**Palm ashes:** Tradition holds that the ashes used on Ash Wednesday are made by burning the branches or leaves from the previous Palm Sunday. That Sunday, which begins Holy Week, recounts how Jesus came riding into Jerusalem on a donkey and was welcomed as a king by people who lined his path with palm branches. In this way, Ash Wednesday anticipates and connects us to several important things: to Holy Week, to Jesus' arrival as king, to the eagerness of God's people to receive Jesus. Perhaps most importantly, it connects us to the betrayal that Jesus met from those same people who cried, "Crucify him" on Good Friday (Matthew 27:22, 23; Mark 15:13,14; Luke 23:20).

**The shape of the cross:** When a penitent is marked with ashes and oil in the sign of the cross, it echoes the anointing we receive at baptism. The pastor dips a finger or thumb in holy oil (no ashes) and anoints the person's forehead while saying the ancient words, "Name, child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the sign of the cross of Christ forever" (Evangelical Lutheran Worship, page 231). In this way, Ash Wednesday recalls our baptism and true identity as



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children of God.

### Discuss:

- How do these ancient symbols and traditions provide meaning and depth to your observance of Ash Wednesday?
- Why are they especially appropriate as a way to begin our Lenten journey of faith?

### Discussion questions

What thoughts go through your mind when you hear the prayer accompanying the imposition of ashes, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return”? How does that phrase cut through our egos, our pride, our self-centeredness and our refusal to acknowledge that we are simply mortal and sinners to boot?

Why ashes? What’s the significance of putting oil and ashes on our foreheads? Why the sign of the cross?

In her reflection, Lisa A. Smith declares that Ash Wednesday is the “most honest” of church festival days. What do you think she means? Do you agree? How is Ash Wednesday “most honest” for you?

Lisa Smith recalls how she unknowingly anointed a lieutenant governor with ashes. How does that underscore the notion that, despite our earthly wealth or status, we stand before God as equals—miserable sinners who need God’s mercy and love.

How will you carry the penitential spirit of Ash Wednesday through the season of Lent? What spiritual disciplines appeal to you? Why will you engage in them? On the other hand, if you are someone who does nothing special for Lent, why will you make that choice?





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# THE HONESTY OF ASH WEDNESDAY

*By Lisa A. Smith*

One blustery Ash Wednesday, some pastor colleagues and I went downtown to distribute “ashes on the go.” We spread on sidewalks that ran along towering office buildings and bustling restaurants, dressed in clergy wear and holding

small containers of ash and oil. “Ashes for Ash Wednesday?” I asked passersby. Some looked confused, others shook their heads and walked on, a few approached and pulled the hair back from their foreheads.

A middle-aged man stopped squarely in front of me, a typical office-worker type in khaki slacks and a button-down shirt. “What’s your first name?” I asked. He gave a small, slightly quizzical smile and told me. I applied the ashes, cross-shaped, to his forehead, starting with his name: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” He smiled again, nodded and walked away. One of my pastor colleagues ran up to me. “Did you know who that was?” he asked. I shook my head. “That was the lieutenant governor!” On the one hand, I was embarrassed that I hadn’t recognized him, even when he said his name. On the other hand, we all receive the ashes as equals. Ash Wednesday reminds us that each one of us, no matter our status, is mortal.

Ash Wednesday might be the most honest of church festival days. We receive a tangible symbol of our mortality on our bodies. We acknowledge that everything will come to an end. Everyone we love will die. Everything we own will belong to someone else. Every situation is temporary. Power, fame, riches, titles, thousands of Instagram followers—none of these will lead to eternal life.

If Ash Wednesday makes us honest about death at the end of life, it also makes us honest about the life we’re living right now.

### **IF ASH WEDNESDAY MAKES US HONEST ABOUT DEATH AT THE END OF LIFE, IT ALSO MAKES US HONEST ABOUT THE LIFE WE’RE LIVING RIGHT NOW.**

A day of penitence, Ash Wednesday throughout Christian history has been observed with fasting, prayer and worship. Psalm 51, traditionally recited at Ash Wednesday worship, sums it up well:

*“Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy,  
blot out my transgressions.  
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin” (Psalm 51:1-2).*

#### **New life**

On Ash Wednesday, we all stand before God in the same way: broken. There’s something powerful about admitting the ways that we’ve messed things up, from our pettiness to our selfishness to our apathy. We have spoken unkindly. We have made false claims. We have

ignored the needs of others. On Ash Wednesday, the jig is up. We might as well let it all out. Because if we hide our imperfections, we deny ourselves the opportunity to experience God’s forgiveness, redemption and renewal. God’s mercies are always there for us, of course, but it takes a sinner to know it.

### **GOD’S MERCIES ARE ALWAYS THERE FOR US, OF COURSE, BUT IT TAKES A SINNER TO KNOW IT.**

On that Ash Wednesday, when I failed to recognize a key political leader of our state (probably not my biggest failing that day), there was something else big going on in my life: I was 8 months pregnant with our second child.

There’s nothing like parenthood to put a finer point on all your shortcomings and failures. You also realize, at some point, that you are bringing a child into the world that is destined to die. No one talks about this at the baby shower.

The juxtaposition of bearing a new life in your body while placing a sign of death on other people’s bodies might seem odd. But it encapsulates the journey of Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday. We must go through Lent before we get to the new life; Ash Wednesday is the gateway.

In the season of Lent, we get not just one day but 40 days to acknowledge losses, grief, death and injustices that cause people to die a little bit each day. We can confess not just individual sin but corporate sin: systemic racism, indifference to the devastation of climate change, greed that creates chasms between rich and poor. Not just on Ash Wednesday, but throughout Lent, we can get more honest about naming our own pain, struggles, shortcomings, heartaches and losses. The holy work of Lent begins in the starkness of Ash Wednesday and leads us to the good news of Easter Sunday: that God is more powerful than death and that nothing can separate us from God’s extravagant love.

I will remember that downtown Ash Wednesday vividly, not because of my lacking political knowledge, but because of the way that Lenten season ended. The child in my womb that day would later be born on Easter Sunday. God is always bringing new life from the ashes. †

Download a study guide by searching for “Study guide for ‘A living tradition’” at [livinglutheran.org](http://livinglutheran.org).