



## GRACE LUTHERAN CHURCH

EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN CANADA

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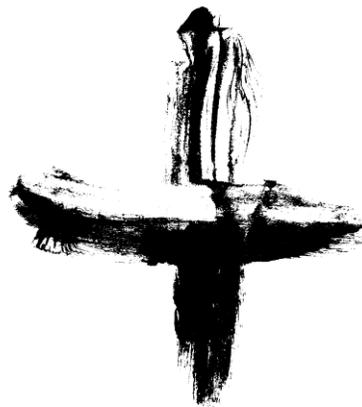
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**Ash Wednesday**

**February 17, 2021**

**ELW Ash Wednesday without Communion**

On Ash Wednesday we begin our forty-day journey toward Easter with a day of fasting and repentance. Marking our foreheads with dust, we acknowledge that we die and return to the earth. At the same time, the dust traces the life-giving cross indelibly marked on our foreheads at baptism. While we journey through Lent to return to God, we have already been reconciled to God through Christ. We humbly pray for God to make our hearts clean while we rejoice that “now is the day of salvation.” Returning to our baptismal call, we more intentionally bear the fruits of mercy and justice in the world.

A warm welcome to those who are here worshipping on-line with us tonight! Here at Grace Lutheran we believe God is active in your life. Even you being here now is testament of God’s calling and leading in your heart, which you have faithfully heeded. So we welcome you, and pray that today you will be nurtured and that the gifts that God has graciously given you will be stirred for the sake of God’s mission in the world.

## GATHERING

### ANNOUNCEMENTS

**GATHERING HYMN:** I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say (#611)

### GREETING

The mercy of God,  
The steadfast love of Christ,  
And the great compassion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.  
**And also with you.**

**KYRIE** (p. 203, verse 1)

### WORD

#### **Psalm 51:1-8**

- <sup>1</sup>Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;  
in your great compassion blot out my offenses.
- <sup>2</sup>Wash me through and through from my wickedness,  
and cleanse me from my sin.
- <sup>3</sup>For I know my offenses,  
and my sin is ever before me.
- <sup>4</sup>Against you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight;  
so you are justified when you speak and right in your judgment.
- <sup>5</sup>Indeed, I was born steeped in wickedness,  
a sinner from my mother's womb.
- <sup>6</sup>Indeed, you delight in truth deep within me,  
and would have me know wisdom deep within.
- <sup>7</sup>Remove my sins with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be purer than snow.
- <sup>8</sup>Let me hear joy and gladness;  
that the body you have broken may rejoice.

**KYRIE** (p. 203, verse 2)

#### **Psalm 51:9-17**

- <sup>9</sup>Hide your face from my sins,  
and blot out all my wickedness.
- <sup>10</sup>Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and renew a right spirit within me.
- <sup>11</sup>Cast me not away from your presence,  
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
- <sup>12</sup>Restore to me the joy of your salvation  
and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit.
- <sup>13</sup>Let me teach your ways to offenders,  
and sinners shall be restored to you.
- <sup>14</sup>Rescue me from bloodshed, O God of my salvation,  
and my tongue shall sing of your righteousness.

- <sup>15</sup>O Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.
- <sup>16</sup>For you take no delight in sacrifice, or I would give it.  
You are not pleased with burnt offering.
- <sup>17</sup>The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit;  
a troubled and broken heart, O God, you will not despise.

**KYRIE** (p. 203, verse 3)

**PRAYER OF THE DAY**

God of righteousness, you see the secret acts of our devotion and know the hidden motives of our hearts. Confirm in us a spirit of humble obedience, that we may live as your faithful children during these 40 days and beyond, with Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**

**FIRST READING: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17**

A reading from Joel.

*Because of the coming day of the LORD, the prophet Joel calls the people to a community lament. The repentant community declares that God is gracious and asks God to spare the people lest the nations doubt God's power to save.*

- <sup>1</sup>Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
sound the alarm on my holy mountain!  
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,  
for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—
- <sup>2</sup>a day of darkness and gloom,  
a day of clouds and thick darkness!  
Like blackness spread upon the mountains  
a great and powerful army comes;  
their like has never been from of old,  
nor will be again after them  
in ages to come.
- <sup>12</sup>Yet even now, says the LORD,  
return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
- <sup>13</sup>rend your hearts and not your clothing.  
Return to the LORD, your God,  
for he is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,  
and relents from punishing.
- <sup>14</sup>Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,  
and leave a blessing behind him,  
a grain offering and a drink offering  
for the LORD, your God?
- <sup>15</sup>Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
sanctify a fast;  
call a solemn assembly;
- <sup>16</sup>gather the people.  
Sanctify the congregation;

assemble the aged;  
gather the children,  
even infants at the breast.  
Let the bridegroom leave his room,  
and the bride her canopy.  
<sup>17</sup>Between the vestibule and the altar  
let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep.  
Let them say, "Spare your people, O LORD,  
and do not make your heritage a mockery,  
a byword among the nations.  
Why should it be said among the peoples,  
'Where is their God?'"

The word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

**HYMN:** Change My Heart, O God (#801)

**SECOND READING: 2 Corinthians 5:20b--6:10**

A reading from 2 Corinthians.

*The ministry of the gospel endures many challenges and hardships. Through this ministry, God's reconciling activity in the death of Christ reaches into the depths of our lives to bring us into a right relationship with God. In this way, God accepts us into the reality of divine salvation.*

<sup>20b</sup>We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup>For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

<sup>6:1</sup>As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.

<sup>2</sup>For he says,

"At an acceptable time I have listened to you,  
and on a day of salvation I have helped you."

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! <sup>3</sup>We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, <sup>4</sup>but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, <sup>5</sup>beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; <sup>6</sup>by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, <sup>7</sup>truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; <sup>8</sup>in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; <sup>9</sup>as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; <sup>10</sup>as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

The word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

**GOSPEL ACCLAMATION** (p. 142)

## **GOSPEL: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**

The holy gospel according to Matthew.

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

*In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus commends almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, but emphasizes that spiritual devotion must not be done for show.*

[Jesus said to the disciples:] <sup>1</sup>“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

<sup>2</sup>“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>3</sup>But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup>so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

<sup>5</sup>“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>6</sup>But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

<sup>16</sup>“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>17</sup>But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup>so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

<sup>19</sup>“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; <sup>20</sup>but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup>For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

The gospel of the Lord.

**Praise to you, O Christ.**

## **SERMON**

O God, may our hearts be opened to hear your Word, may we be humbled to feel your grace, and may our faith be increased by your unending love, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

So... this is different. A little weird. Kind of strange, even. Of course, I'm talking about having an Ash Wednesday service like this... online... and without ashes. I mean, doesn't that defeat the purpose of Ash Wednesday? Doesn't that kind of ruin the experience? Doesn't it take all meaning out of the day and leave us with this empty shell of what it's supposed to be? How much more can this pandemic take from us?

And I suppose I can see and understand this line of thinking. I can see how this pandemic has been so very disruptive and has forced us into such change that so many things are left unrecognisable. I can understand how we might feel like we don't even need to bother with our spirituality and disciplines anymore, if ever at all, because what is the point? We can't even gather in the church, for crying out loud. We can't sing together. We can't greet each other with a hug or hand shake. And we most certainly can't get actual ashes smeared on our foreheads and be reminded that we're dust and to dust we shall return.

So again, what's the point?

What's the point if we can't do this together, we can't journey with one another through Lent, we can't keep each other accountable because we can't actually see who is here in the church and who has decided to skip out? What is the point of sitting by ourselves in our homes watching this video and playing with a little dirt? Why do we even have this Ash Wednesday service at all?

Well, believe me when I say that I had to think long and hard about whether we should bother or not. I mean, it's been tough enough to just put out one service online every week, I don't really jump at the chance to put out two. And if that second one isn't even all that helpful to have? Well then it would seem like a waste of time, if I'm being honest with you.

But then I got to thinking, what is Ash Wednesday even for? What is the point of kicking off Lent in this way year after year? Why do we even need ashes on our foreheads besides showing off to the world that we actually attended church on this day?

I found the answer to these questions in the Ash Wednesday readings, of all places. These are the same readings that we get every year, readings that talk about discipleship, discipline, and discovery of self. Readings that talk about repenting from sin, returning to God, and the reconciliation with God and each other. Readings that talk about living in humility, honouring God, and honest reflection of who we are and whose we are. These readings reminded me that really, this is what this day is about, this is what this season of Lent is about, and this is something that we probably should reflect on for more than just 40 days out of the year (if even that).

But can these things be done while we're apart? Yes, of course they can, they aren't dependant on having others in the room with you. Can we still have a proper Lent during pandemic? Surprisingly, it'll probably be even more Lent because of this pandemic if that even makes sense. Can God be seen even in times like these? I actually think God is made to be more apparent because we need God to be more apparent, and this kind of landscape that we're in right now actually lends itself to making God more apparent.

What I mean is that it's in times like this pandemic, this time that the world is so different, this time that many of us are angry, frustrated, and tired, that we need to learn to rely on God and God's strength with even more gusto and resolve. It's in times like these when we have to be extra careful when dealing with others, extra safe in our conduct, and extra diligent in discerning fact from fiction that we can exercise our discipline, practice our care for each other, and really see how patient or impatient we really are. It's in times like these when we haven't seen each other in person for so long, we haven't gathered in person in so long, and haven't been able to worship in front of each other for so long, that we can finally be truly real with ourselves.

Because I think having our Ash Wednesday service like this is actually beneficial for our own reflection and recognising of our shortcomings since we don't need to worry about who is watching, what others are thinking, and what kind of impression we're leaving. I think it's actually helpful to have Ash Wednesday in our own homes so we can honestly look at ourselves and not be concerned about the others around us. I might even argue that having this time

somewhat private and to ourselves is better for own confession and repentance, because then we aren't, how should we say, distracted by our innate need to confess the sins of others.

I mean let's face it, we're really good at that. We're really good at seeing and recognising the shortcomings of those around us. We're really good at pointing out how others are wrong. We're really good at confessing the sin of everyone else... everyone else but ourselves. We're not so good at confessing our own sin, our own need of forgiveness, our own need of repentance.

And that is what today is for.

It's to remind us that we are sinners. that we are mortal, that we are but dust, and to dust we shall return.

This isn't to put us down or bring shame onto ourselves. It isn't to belittle who we are or make us feel bad. It isn't even to guilt us into coming to church more, or at least watch these videos more often, as it were. Rather, reflecting on our sinfulness, our mortality, our being but dust is to show us just how much God loves us in spite of all that. It's to reveal to us just how much God cherishes us and our limited time in this corporeal state. It is to remind us how God's grace motivates and strengthens us to repentance, draws us into God's love, and welcomes us into God's community and kingdom.

But all that isn't easy to see and feel when we don't think we have any confessable sin, not like everyone else at least. It isn't easy to feel the joy of salvation when we don't think we need to be saved or that we can just save ourselves. It is darn near impossible to feel just how gracious God's love is when we don't see just how much we don't deserve it.

And so I am thankful that we are worshipping at home today, that we might be more honest with ourselves of who we really are. I am thankful that we have this means to continue to worship with each other, even when we can't see each other, but we know that we stand together in God's grace and love and community. I am thankful that we have this unique opportunity to see the contrasts of this day: that as we are alone in our homes, we are gathered together in the Spirit; as we are unworthy we are made to be worthy by God's grace; as we are imperfect and full of sin, God has made us perfect and forgives us of any guilt and shame that we might have been denying we even had.

So as we begin this season of Lent, as we look ahead to these 40 days of wilderness and scarcity, as we are reminded of our sinfulness and need of a Saviour, let us honestly reflect and humbly repent, recognising and admitting our fault and submitting to a merciful love and gracious forgiveness, that we be brought into the fullness of joy and hope of the Resurrection. Thanks be to God. Amen.

**HYMN OF THE DAY:** Healer of Our Every Ill (#612)

#### **INVITATION TO LENT**

Friends, today marks the beginning of our time of remembrance of Jesus' passover from life to death and again to life, as we are, with the whole church together renewed with Christ.

And so we begin this holy season by acknowledging our need for repentance and God's mercy. We are designed and formed for relationship with God, each other, and all of creation, but our sinful and rebellious nature hinders us from enjoying this to the fullest as God had intended. Thus, as disciples of Jesus, we are called to a discipline that brings to light our selfishness and distraction from God's love, and centers us back in communion with God and each other. I invite you, therefore, to the discipline of Lent—self-examination and repentance, prayer and fasting, sacrificial giving and works of love—strengthened by the gifts of word and sacrament. Let us continue our journey through these forty days to the great Three Days of Jesus' death and resurrection.

### **CONFESSION OF SIN**

Let us confess our sin in the presence of God in solidarity with each other.

Most holy and merciful God,  
we confess before you without self-conscious worry about those around us,  
we confess to you with whole hearted honesty in our isolation from others,  
we confess that we have sinned by our own nature and personal fault  
in thought, word, and deed,  
by things done and 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 shut our ears 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.**

Our past unfaithfulness, the pride, envy, hypocrisy, and apathy that have infected our lives, we confess to you.

**Have mercy on us, O God.**

Our self-indulgent appetites and ways, and our exploitation of other people, we confess to you.

**Have mercy on us, O God.**

Our negligence in prayer and worship, and our failure to share the faith that is in us, we confess to you.

**Have mercy on us, O God.**

Our neglect of human need and suffering, and our indifference to injustice and cruelty, we confess to you.

**Have mercy on us, O God.**

Our false judgments, our uncharitable thoughts toward our neighbors, and our prejudice and contempt toward those who differ from us, we confess to you.

**Have mercy on us, O God.**

Our waste and pollution of your creation, and our lack of concern for those who come after us, we confess to you.

**Have mercy on us, O God.**

Restore us, O God, and may our shame be washed away by your gracious and loving forgiveness.

**Hear us, O God, for your mercy is great.**

### **IMPOSITION OF ASH WEDNESDAY**

Normally on Ash Wednesday we would bless the ashes from the previous year's palms for Palm Sunday, but this isn't a regular Ash Wednesday nor was our last Palm Sunday a regular one for that matter. So instead of ash we are using soil from the earth. For this soil is where we come from, it has fed us and nourished us, and it sustains life. And to this soil, we will all return.

So soil is just as appropriate a symbol for what connects us together and it reminds us of where we come from and where we will return. This soil is also a sign of our mortality and penitence, and much more readily available than ash ever will be.

And so if you have some soil in front of you, I invite you to put your hands in it. Feel the history of our species on this planet. Feel it speaking to you and reminding you of who you are, where you come from, and where you are going. Feel the earth that God has created for us and through it, provides for us with love and grace.

I won't ask you to mark your foreheads with the sign of the cross because it isn't the same and it likely won't stick if the soil is dry. But you can shape the soil in front you, perhaps flatten it like the equal plain upon which we are all regarded by God, and in the middle of it, you may draw a cross as a final reminder that it is from dust we come and to dust we return.

May this soil be blessed. May this earth flourish with God's love and beauty. May our connection to it, to each other, and to God be strengthened and renewed in these upcoming 40 days as we walk to the cross alongside Jesus Christ, our Saviour, our Lord, our friend. **Amen.**

### **PRAYER**

Let us pray.

Merciful God, accompany our journey through these forty days. Renew in us our faith, our hope, and our desire to love you and each other, that our service be filled with good news and humility, leading us and all people to the treasure found in the life of your Son Jesus Christ, with whom we pray.

**Amen.**

### **LORD'S PRAYER (p. 112)**

As we embark with Jesus on this path of discipleship, let us pray as he taught us.

**Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.**

**Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those  
who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial  
and deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power,  
and the glory are yours,  
now and forever. Amen.**

## **SENDING**

### **BLESSING**

With the blessing of God our maker, Christ our redeemer, and the Spirit our sustainer, may your light break forth like the dawn and your healing spring up quickly with God's protection and glory holding you and watching over you, now and forever.  
**Amen.**

**SENDING HYMN:** Abide with Me (#629)

### **DISMISSAL**

Go in peace, serve God with gladness and humility, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.  
**Thanks be to God.**

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