

Message from Robin+ Ashes, Ashes

The focal point of Ash Wednesday is the imposition of ashes in the sign of the cross on the forehead. In the Hebrew scriptures, ashes are often part of stories of pleas to God for mercy, compassion, and forgiveness. The prophet Daniel wore sackcloth and ashes as a sign of his people's regret for the ways they had turned away from God (Daniel 9:3). The Ninevites did the same when they turned away from corruption and back toward God (Jonah 3:6,10). In the Church however, Lent was not observed until the 5th century, and the first recorded use of ashes during Lent was in Germany in the 10th century. The ashes were sprinkled on the heads of the people, not imposed in the shape of a cross until around the 11th century.

Central to Ash Wednesday is the invitation to reflect on our own mortality, with a focus on the words God speaks to Adam in Genesis 3:19: "For dust you are and to dust you shall return." The ashes in the sign of the cross on our forehead recall our baptism and remind us that in life and eternal life we belong to God, "marked as Christ's own forever." The ashes also point forward to our burial when our bodies will be committed to the ground with the words, "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust." The ashes remind us that the cycle of our life and of the church year is full and complete, and that following the Way of Jesus encompasses this fullness, from birth to death to eternal life.

Did you know that our current 1979 Book of Common Prayer is the first of our prayer books to include the imposition of ashes, and that it is optional? Even so, it has become an important ritual moment (though not a sacrament), so eliminating ashes due to the pandemic would be a great loss to many of us. Receiving ashes on Ash Wednesday is a sign of our repentance and commitment to walking the way of Lent together.

So how do we impose ashes in a pandemic when we are keeping a safe distance and not touching one another? Perhaps I could sprinkle ashes on your heads from a distance, but oh how messy that would be! Instead, I'll be using a long cotton swab, which will allow us to stay safely distanced, and will impose ashes in a cross shape on your foreheads. This way you won't need to go home and wash your hair.

If you cannot come by the church and would like to make your own ashes at home, here's a great "how to" video by my friend and colleague, The Rev. Shirley Smith Graham at Christ Church in Glen Allen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PDrMgCN6kt8>

We hope you will come to church for ashes, because we'd love to see you. If you make your own ashes and worship at home, you can begin by saying this prayer together:

Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth: May these ashes be to us a sign of our mortality and penitence, that we may remember that it is only by your gracious gift that we are given everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

Then impose the ashes on one another saying,
"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

However you spend time in reflection and prayer on this Ash Wednesday, may you be blessed.