

Ash Wednesday – 2026

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Psalm 103

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

I am convinced we'll get what we want during Lent. One of the freedoms with this attitude is that we're "free" to undertake this season however we feel moved. We're not beholden to anyone else about how we will spend the next 40 days of journeying in the wilderness with Jesus, as we explore the depth and quality of our lives in relationship with God and each other. Each year, we are challenged to determine how we will not only survive this Lenten season but also make it mean something to each of us as we prepare to celebrate the great Paschal mystery. How and where we begin this journey through Lent matters; we can suffer through Lent or choose to move through Lent with an attitude of amazement and gratitude.

Our journey through Lent begins today with a smudge of ash on our foreheads that also bears its mark on our souls. This smudge of powdery, fine ash is an indelible reminder and sacrament that reveals our own mortality, a sobering reminder indeed. This smudge calls us to a level of honesty and personal introspection unique to each of us. Honest introspection is another opportunity for freedom: freedom from wearing a mask that hides who we really are, freedom from those things that keep us from the relationship with God that he so desires, and freedom to experience life as it should be lived. Lent offers us a sacred time to refocus our energies and reorient our priorities. Lent is a gift of the Church that strengthens our souls to journey with Jesus, a passage not for the faint of heart, but a passage in which we go not alone.

We read in the second chapter of Genesis that from the Ruach of God, the divine breath of God, we were formed out of the dust of the earth. God breathed into humanity the breath of life. This breath animated all of creation. We are "living dust," and our earthly lives are bookended with dust.

Lent also tells us “what we are” and “whose we are.” “Who we are” is God’s precious treasure. We are his adopted daughters and sons. We are loved beyond any measure we can imagine. We are so priceless that God was willing to go to any length to tell us that we are loved, have value, and have purpose. Lent affords us the time to absorb this reality. Each of us here today sacramentally bears this relationship from our baptism. With the sign of the cross, we were sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ’s own forever. We were welcomed into the household of God. We belong to God, not just that day, yesterday, or today, but forever!! Think about THAT during Lent.

“What we are” are fragile and imperfect beings. No matter how “big” or “tough” or “rich” or “popular” or “fearless” we think we are, that smudge of ash reminds us that we’re none of those things, that all the trappings of this world and the idols we try not to admire or worship are just that, “trappings.” Deep down, we know how fragile we are, how imperfect we are, and how tenuous and short our lives are. The psalmist reminds us that “our days are like grass; we flourish like a flower of the field; when the wind goes over it, it is gone, and its place shall know it no more.” Ouch.

My friends, Lent calls us to honest reflection on our lives, relationships, and priorities. It reminds us that we are God’s beloved daughters and sons and that, ultimately, we are but dust, and to dust, we shall return. But by returning to dust, we enter into the joy of his kingdom. The smudge of ash we receive today reminds us of all these realities.

So, as we leave this service, the opportunity before us is to decide how and what we want out of Lent. Lent is a time grounded in hope and confidence, of honestly reviewing where we stand with God and one another, not one of beating yourselves up. (Baptismal Covenant comments). Think about how you might work your way through the next month and a half in prayer, worship, study, and fellowship so that you come to Easter neither exhausted nor wiped out but with a sense of knowing exactly what resurrection life looks like. That will be a memorable gift indeed.