

As Ash Wednesday approaches, here are three teaching points to consider as you invite your community into a meaningful experience of Lent.

Ash Wednesday marks the first day of the season of Lent, the forty days set aside to prepare to celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus. In early Christian communities, the time spent “getting ready to come close to the mystery of Easter” (as we say in Godly Play) was much shorter. Now, we spend forty days preparing just as Jesus spent forty days in the desert fasting and getting ready for his public ministry.

Sundays in Lent do not count towards the forty days because Sundays are always celebrations of the Resurrection! As Ash Wednesday approaches, here are three teaching points to consider as you invite your community into a meaningful experience of Lent.

The Call to A Holy Lent

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent. In the Episcopal tradition, our liturgy directly invites us into a holy season of specific practices aimed at helping us reconnect with God in preparation for the celebration of Easter. “I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word.” (Book of Common Prayer, page 265)

Ash Wednesday, or the time leading up to Ash Wednesday, provides an appropriate time to explore with people of all ages in your community what it means to “observe a holy Lent.” Find out what people have done in the past that helped them feel that they engaged in a “holy Lent.” Inquire about the practices they plan to adopt this year.

This is also a great opportunity to provide some specific guidance on the practices suggested by the Book of Common Prayer. What are some practices for self-examination that people might use during Lent? What are some prayer practices that people of different ages could engage in doing Lent? What particular scripture might folks engage with during Lent?

We Are Dust

Many Ash Wednesday liturgies provide an opportunity for worshipers to receive the mark of the cross in ashes on their forehead accompanied by the words, “remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” There are many layers of meaning within this simple, powerful ritual. There is the call to remember God created us from the earth (Genesis 2:7). It is by the grace of God that we live and move and have our being and we are inextricably linked to the earth from which we were created.

There is also the call to remember our connection to the rest of humanity. We are all made from the same “stuff.” We come from dust and we dwell in skin, bone, blood, and cartilage. And there is the call to remember we will return to the earth from whence we came (Genesis 3:19). Ash Wednesday provides us that rarely comfortable, but certainly important opportunity to sit with our own mortality.

Repentance

Lent is a penitential season in the church, a season with a particular emphasis on repentance. To repent is to both acknowledge that we have not loved God with our whole heart and we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves AND to make every effort to do things differently. Repentance is about turning away from behavior that is not in alignment with these two great commandments. Rather than something to check off the to-do list, repentance is a practice.

Being human means we will never be fully without sin and we will never outgrow the need for God’s forgiveness. While repentance is certainly a powerful teaching point around Ash Wednesday, we must not focus so heavily on sin during this season that people forget they are beloved children of God.

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