



Ash Wednesday Meditations

February 2024

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Sunday Worship Service: 11:00 AM

“A time to search and a time to give up. A time to keep and a time to throw away.” Ecclesiastes 3:6 (NIV)

Ash Wednesday focuses the Christian’s heart. The ashes symbolize our humility before God, and our recognition that we are mortal. Ash Wednesday is the beginning of Lent. A 40-day faith renewal journey with Christ. It is a time to come before God recognizing our humanity, repent of our sins, and remember who we are and who we can be. It is a time when we reflect on what we need to change in our lives to live responsibly and lovingly.

Opening Prayer: O God, maker of everything and judge of all that you have made, from the dust of the earth you have formed me and from the dust of death you would raise me up. By the redemptive power of the cross, create in me a clean heart and put within me a new spirit, that I may repent of my sins and lead lives worthy of your calling, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

MEDIATION 1

Scripture: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

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—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.

Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; 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.

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?

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; 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.

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?'"

Mediation: (Adapted from Smudges on the Soul: A Meditation for Ash Wednesday (UMC Discipleship website))

I would rather wear the smudge on my forehead than to admit its residence upon my soul. In a place where self-confidence is rewarded and any sign of weakness or emotional predisposition are held suspect, it is difficult to consider actually following the advice of the prophet to return to the Lord with fasting, with weeping and with mourning. It is, however, acceptable — maybe even fashionable to appear in public with a dirty forehead as a sign that I have religion. It is amazing how the symbols of piety, sackcloth, and ashes, have been transformed into a mask that hides me from myself and circumvents the intent of Ash Wednesday.

Blow the trumpet in Zion, the prophet said. Not the trumpet that signals advance to war, or the trumpet that celebrates victory, but the one that warns trembling penitents that the day of the Lord is coming. Blow the trumpet that warns a penitent like me to wear the smudge of ashes long after my face has been washed and to admit the smudge on the one place that matters to God, my heart.

Blow the trumpet in Zion, the prophet said, and sanctify a fast. Hear the sounds of grumbling need in a world where few are filled — and where I am overfilled. Today I am called to push away from the gluttonous consumption of everything in my path, for at least a little while, in hopes that I might realize something about the equitable distribution of the world's resources before the fast is over.

Rend your hearts and not your garments, the prophet said. The gift of the day is personal reflection, a season of confession, and change. Start the arduous journey from shadow to substance, from ritual to reality, from façade to faith. Today, choose the harder course. It is easier to buy new clothing than to mend a soul.

Do you have smudges on your soul?

Hymn:

Nothing between my soul and my Savior,
naught of this world's delusive dream;
I have renounced all sinful pleasure;
Jesus is mine, there's nothing between.
Nothing between my soul and my Savior,
so that his blessed face may be seen;
nothing preventing the least of his favor;
keep the way clear! let nothing between.

Reflect and Pray: Take a moment of reflection and silent prayer: Nothing between you and your Savior. God does his part – how can you do yours?

MEDIATION 2

Scripture: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

"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. 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. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

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. 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.

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. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 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.

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

Meditation:

There is a false “piety” in today’s culture that is mocked for its outward show. True piety is found in the inward transformation of a life, the inner secret heart that spends itself in love and praise of God and humble service to humankind and all creation.

Lent is often looked upon as a time of fasting but can also be looked upon as a time of embracing. Fast from those attitudes and actions that drive a wedge between you and God or between you and others. Embrace with all of your heart those attitudes and actions which bring you closer to God and being a servant like Jesus.

In this Lenten journey that begins today, locate your heart in the treasure that is Christ. Journey to a place that rises up from dust and ash to the reward that is Christ.

Hymn:

Change My Heart O God, make it ever true.
Change my heart O God, may I be like you.
You are the Potter, I am the clay,
Mold me and make me, this is what I pray.
Change My Heart O God, make it ever true.
Change my heart O God, may I be like you.

Reflection and prayer:

Take a moment of reflection and silent prayer: This is a time of looking inward at your heart and your motives. Giving something up ... or taking something on ... you be the judge. Doing better ... versus digging deeper ... you be the judge of that, too. Ask yourself a question: "Which needs more work, my behavior or my interior?" Only you know.

Closing Prayer:

Loving God, today I began a period of inner reflection and examination. This special Lenten period invites me to examine my life through our Lord Jesus Christ’s eyes and the truth and reality of your love embodied. Lord, I open my heart to your presence, let your loving kindness flow over me and seep into the pockets of my heart. Create and make in me a clean and remorseful heart. Amen.

Benediction:

You have taken steps toward the cross. Now step out into the world, offering hope and healing love to all. Go in peace, in the name of the living God who loves you in Jesus and who empowers you to be witnesses through the Holy Spirit. Amen.