A SERVICE OF WORSHIP FOR ASH WEDNESDAY

*Ash Wednesday emphasizes a dual encounter: we confront our own mortality and confess our sin before God within the community of faith. The form and content of the service focus on the dual themes of sin and death in the light of God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ.*

*Depending upon circumstances, this service may be held (1) early in the morning, before the work and school day begin; (2) at noontime, perhaps observing a fast with the deletion of the regular noon meal; or (3) early in the evening, perhaps following a shared sacrificial meal of bread and water.*

*The visual environment should be solemn and stark. Purple is the most traditional color throughout Lent; but on Ash Wednesday gray, with its suggestion of ashes, is especially appropriate. Dark earth colors or any somber hues are also appropriate. Rough, coarse textures such as burlap—sackcloth and ashes—suggest the character of the day and season.*

*The use of ashes as a sign of mortality and repentance has a long history in Jewish and Christian worship, and the Imposition of Ashes can be a powerful nonverbal and experiential way of participating in the call to repentance and reconciliation. This practice is the historic focus of Ash Wednesday observance and gave the day its name. It is traditional to save the palm branches from the previous Passion/Palm Sunday service and burn them ahead of time to produce the ashes for this service. Alternatively, ushers may distribute small cards or pieces of paper on which each person may be invited to write a particular sin or hurtful or unjust characteristic. They may then be brought forward by the ushers following the sermon and placed upon a grate to be burned with palm branches for the ashes. The ashes may be mixed with a small amount of olive oil (****not*** *water!) for Imposition of Ashes. A towel for cleansing the pastor’s hands should be provided.*

*Instead of Imposition of Ashes or in addition to it, Holy Communion may be celebrated. Immediately before Confession and Pardon, the congregation may be invited to turn for the rest of the service to A Service of Word and Table IV (UMH). Or the service may continue as given below through the Offering, during which the bread and wine are brought by representatives of the people to the Lord's table with the other gifts or uncovered if already in place. After the offering, the congregation may be invited to turn to A Service of Word and Table III (UMH ) or one of the musical settings in UMH, the pastor praying The Great Thanksgiving. If both Imposition of Ashes and Holy Communion are included in the service, they should always be separated, with the people coming forward for each action.*

GATHERING

*If a brief explanation of the service is necessary, it may be done quietly during this time, allowing for a return to silence before the Greeting.*

*If a choir is to process, it should do so in silence immediately before the Greeting.*

GREETING\*

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

**And also with you.**

Bless the Lord who forgives all our sins.

**God's mercy endures for ever.**

OPENING PRAYER\* *See Ash Wednesday (UMHI 353).*

HYMN \*Lord, Who Throughout These Forty Days (*UMH* 269)

SCRIPTURE LESSON Joel 2:1 –2, 12–17

[PSALM] \*

*If Psalm 51:1–17 ( UMH 785) is not used as the Prayer of Confession later, it may be used here.*

SCRIPTURE LESSON 2 Corinthians 5:20 b –6:10

HYMN \* *See suggestions under Imposition of Ashes.*

GOSPEL LESSON\* Matthew 6:1 –6, 16–21

SERMON

INVITATION TO THE OBSERVANCE OF LENTEN DISCIPLINE

*The following or similar words may be spoken:*

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

the early Christians observed with great devotion

the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection,

and it became the custom of the Church that before the Easter celebration

there should be a forty–day season of spiritual preparation.

During this season converts to the faith were prepared for Holy Baptism.

It was also a time when persons who had committed serious sins

and had separated themselves from the community of faith

were reconciled by penitence and forgiveness,

and restored to participation in the life of the Church.

In this way the whole congregation was reminded

of the mercy and forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel of Jesus Christ

and the need we all have to renew our faith.

I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church,

to observe a holy Lent:

by self–examination and repentance;

by prayer, fasting, and self–denial;

and by reading and meditating on God's Holy Word.

To make a right beginning of repentance,

and as a mark of our mortal nature,

let us now kneel (bow) before our Creator and Redeemer.

*A brief silence is kept, the congregation kneeling or bowed.*

*If there is to be no Imposition of Ashes, the service continues with Confession and Pardon.*

THANKSGIVING OVER THE ASHES

Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth.

Grant that these ashes may be to us a sign of our mortality and penitence,

so that we may remember that only by your gracious gift

are we given everlasting life;

through Jesus Christ our Savior. **Amen.**

IMPOSITION OF ASHES \*

*The pastor, and any others assisting, take their places in front of the congregation and with word or gesture invite the congregation to come forward. The leaders dip a thumb in the ashes and make a cross on the forehead of each person.*

*They sing (Hymn 217) or say:*

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

*Or they say:*

Repent, and believe the gospel.

*The Imposition may be done in silence, or one or more of the following hymns in UMH may be sung:*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 358 Dear Lord and Father of Mankind | 357 Just as I Am, Without One Plea |
| 355 Depth of Mercy | 402 Lord, I Want to Be a Christian |
| 382 Have Thine Own Way, Lord | 351 Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior |
| 354 I Surrender All | 491 Remember Me |
| 352 It's Me, It's Me, O Lord | 346 Sinners, Turn: Why Will You Die? |
| 488 Jesus, Remember Me | 356 When We Are Living |

CONFESSION AND PARDON

*The congregation prays Psalm 51:1–17 (UMH 785).*

*All offer prayers of confession in silence.*

*The pastor then says:*

May the almighty and merciful God,

who desires not the death of a sinner

but that we turn from wickedness and live,

accept your repentance, forgive your sins,

and restore you by the Holy Spirit to newness of life. Amen.

*Or one of the confession–pardon sequences or those in UMH 890–93 may be used.*

THE PEACE \*

Let us offer one another signs of reconciliation and love.

*All exchange signs and words of God's peace.*

OFFERING

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

THE LORD'S PRAYER

HYMN \* *See suggestions above.*

DISMISSAL WITH BLESSING \*

GOING FORTH \*

*If the choir is to recess, it should be in silence following Dismissal with Blessing. The people may depart in silence.*

**Keywords**: Ash Wednesday, ashes, Palm Sunday, palms, imposition, Holy Communion, Word and Table IV, W&T IV  
  
**Copyright**: “A Service of Worship for Ash Wednesday” Copyright © 1979, 1986 by Abingdon Press. Renewal Copyright © 1992 UMPH. “Invitation to the Observance of the Lenten Discipline,” “Thanksgiving over the Ashes,” and “Pardon” from *The Book of Common Prayer* (The Episcopal Church, 1979), 264-269. Public Domain.   
  
Note: The instructions regarding the mixing of ashes with olive oil (rather than water) in the introductory materials have been altered, 2013, by The General Board of Discipleship. Adding water to ash, as suggested in the original version, can create a caustic mixture which may seriously burn the skin.