

Ash Wednesday 2026
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
February 18, 2026
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Have you noticed that our Ash Wednesday ritual is **really** counter-cultural?? Like more so every year? How many people in the news actually take responsibility for their actions, 'fess up to crimes they've committed, admit to screwing up, or simply say, "I was wrong"? In contrast to playing the blame game or "taking the Fifth," we wear a cross on our foreheads in what could be seen as an act of self-incrimination, silently but powerfully announcing, "Guilty as charged!" After all, I can't say, "I'm sorry for my sins," and genuinely repent of them without acknowledging that I committed them.

Ash Wednesday brings sin and death into a collision course with each other. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." The ashes on our foreheads are what's left of sackcloth and ashes, way back when: public sinners, guilty of murder, adultery, apostasy (forsaking the faith), sitting on the steps of the cathedral, dressed in a potato sack, sifting ashes over their head all the day long. (You've gotta admit: our ritual is pretty tame in comparison 😊.) Why was that the prescribed penance for the "big" sins? Well, "If you can't be a shining example, be an awful warning." "You don't want this to happen to **you, do you?**" Public shaming was a part of it, for sure, but also the supposed imposition of **humility**, through the shaming.... Although humility is a matter of the heart, not of what you're wearing, where you're sitting, what you're doing. We can **humiliate** each other, but no person can really impose **humility** on another. To humiliate another is a sin in and of itself. To experience true humility is a virtue. Wearing ashes is admitting being a sinner. But the ashes aren't just imposed as a blob: they are traced in the shape of a cross, the reminder of God's love in life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The cross lends the fragrance of resurrection hope to a ritual that speaks of sin and death. St. Paul puts it this way in his letter to the Romans:

"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23)

Imposing ashes is no small thing. As a pastor, next to baptizing, offering Holy Communion and anointing people for healing, tracing the cross on people's foreheads is one of the most powerful

moments of the year. Imagine what it was like for me to see Daisy Rae's mother bring her to the rail last year, then to trace the cross on her infant forehead and whisper to that tiny person, "Remember, you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Or to impose the ashes on the forehead of church friends I know are undergoing cancer treatments. Or to trace the cross on the brow of newlyweds and remind them in their midst of their joy that earthly life and joy are finite. Or to impose the ash on a pregnant woman, reminding her that both she and her unborn baby are finite. It is a solemn and holy duty. It gives me pause. It makes me that much more grateful that forgiveness is available for sin and resurrection follows death, because of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But Ash Wednesday isn't only about sin, repentance, death, and resurrection. In today's Gospel from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us what makes for life and what composes "the sacred tripod of Lent": prayer, fasting and almsgiving (giving to charity). He gives us a lot of credit: He assumes we're already doing all of those things. He tutors us on **how** we should be doing them: with a **righteous heart**, concerned about our relationship with God, not our neighbor's opinion of us.

In Matthew's Gospel Jesus is laser-focused on "the higher righteousness," not just crossing spiritual t's and dotting spiritual i's, but living a life of love of God and neighbor. Prayer, fasting, almsgiving, are all part of the higher righteousness. Why is **prayer** important? Well, how can we be in relationship with **anyone** without communicating?? Prayer is our communication with God. Intimacy is increased with frequency and depth of communication. How often are we speaking with **and** listening to God? How well do we alternate between being on "Send" and "Receive"?

Jesus also expected that His followers were fasting, like all good Jews. We may associate fasting with a Roman Catholic or Orthodox proscription against meat on Fridays, but fasting far pre-dated Reformation times. The Jewish people fasted to express their penitence for sins, to underscore their pleading for God to avert national catastrophe, to prepare themselves to enter God's presence. Fasting is a time-honored spiritual discipline in many world religions, beyond Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Alcohol-free January, Clean Bro diets, health cleanses: all underscore the physical as well as spiritual benefits of choosing to go without. The ultimate goal of fasting, though, is to make us hungry for God. It's interesting and meaning-full that the beginning of Ramadan and Lent coincide this year. Pastor Hank Lay taught us some years ago about the Five Pillars of Islam. They include prayer, fasting and almsgiving, the sacred tripod of Lent! On-line I found this explanation of the meaning of fasting in Islam, not much different than fasting in the Jewish or Christian traditions, other than the obvious difference of Islam requiring fasting from all food and beverages between dawn and sundown for 30 days:

The fasting pillar is intended to bring believers closer to God by cultivating gratitude and building self-restraint. Through fasting, believers also experience the hunger and thirst of the poor, further building a sense of compassion and generosity.¹

If eliminating a food, beverage or activity saves us money, we should seriously consider giving away the bounty. Drawing closer to Jesus through prayer or fasting should draw us closer to our brothers and sisters in need. As we follow spokes into the hub of a wheel, the spokes converge. Jesus is the Hub. He calls us to serve and love Him in the last, the lost and the lost. That is what almsgiving is all about. Lent is never just "Jesus and me." To draw close to Jesus is to become aware of our responsibilities to those who do not enjoy our abundance of material blessings. It is to hear Him say, "I was hungry and you fed Me. I was naked and you clothed Me.... Whenever you did it to one of these, the least members of My family, you did it to Me." (Matthew 25: 35, 40)

Regardless of how we feel, we **are** holy, because we have been set apart for God in Holy Baptism. The goal of Lent is for us to become holier. Ultimately that's up to the Holy Spirit, but She requires our cooperation. May this Lent be the springtime of our souls. Amen

¹ Isa Almeida, "When is Ramadan 2026? Here's what the Islamic holiday celebrates," *The Oklahoman*, February 17, 2026.

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