



February 2018 will begin with the season of Epiphany and end with the season of Lent. Ash Wednesday will be on February 14 this year, yes on Valentines Day. Ash Wednesday begins Lent as a reminder of sackcloth and ashes from the Old Testament which is a sign of mourning and grief. Ash Wednesday begins the Lenten season with the imposition of ashes on the forehead (or back of the hand) as a universal sign of penitence. The Old Testament gives several examples of using sackcloth and ashes as a symbol of grief and mourning. Job chapter 2 verse 8, for example, depicts Job sitting in ashes as a sign of mourning over his personal losses. Some other examples from the Old Testament are found in Daniel 9:3 and Jonah 3:6 as even the King covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes after the Word of the Lord had come to Nineveh. The Word of the Lord came to Nineveh calling them to repentance and in sorrow for sin they repented and God relented from that disaster that was to come on them.

The custom of placing ashes on the forehead to commemorate the season of Lent is thought to have originated in France during the sixth century. Here at St. Paul, we have agreed to practice the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday this year as a sign of our grief and mourning over our own sins. Although Lent is a penitential season, it also is a celebration of what Christ has done on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. We especially reflect on the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus realizing that we were lost in our trespasses and sins unable to do anything to change our broken relationship with God. Christ changes all that by stepping into our place to replace us on the cross and suffer God's wrath and anger over sin for us. This is called the "vicarious atonement" by which Jesus is the substitute who pays the penalty of sin and God's wrath for us in our place.

Ashes are obtained by burning the palm leaves from Palm Sunday of the previous year and then mixing them with a little olive oil prior to the service. A prayer can be spoken which remembers ashes as both a symbol of our repentance and that we are mortal.

This emphasizes that we are sinful, and we need our Savior Jesus Christ and the forgiveness He bestows through His life, death and resurrection. The imposition of ashes should be followed by the rite of Confession and Absolution which is done in The Order of Holy Communion on page 15 in The Lutheran Hymnal.

The ashes can be placed on individuals in this service as the pastor makes the sign of the cross with the ashes on the forehead or the hand as you prefer while saying the words. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19). This reminds us that we are sinners, that we are mortals and that we need Christ as our Savior. While there should be no shame in wearing the ashes, as it has a long tradition, it is also acceptable for you to wash them off following the service if you so desire. No one is to feel pressured to participate in this rite nor is it a tradition which belongs only to the Roman Catholics. This custom has been practiced for a long time and can serve as another reminder of sorrow over our sin and of gratitude and praise to Christ for His death for us in our place.

I pray that as you consider your sin during the upcoming season of Lent and while we anticipate the joy of celebrating the Resurrection of our Lord you are given great comfort in the fact that Jesus has done everything necessary for your salvation. Our Lord Jesus Christ gave His life and shed His blood that you would have life everlasting in the presence of the Savior. I pray also, that the practice of Imposition of Ashes is a blessing to you and helps you in understanding the full extent of God's love for you in Christ, that He was willing to sacrifice His Son on the cross that you would belong to the Kingdom of Heaven by our Savior Jesus Christ.

God's Blessings to all of you in Christ our Savior as we finish the season of Epiphany this February celebrating the manifestation of Christ in human flesh for us and transition to the season of Lent reflecting on our own sin but also joyfully celebrating God's precious gift of Jesus to us as our Savior who makes us His own by His great sacrifice in our place.

In Christ, Pastor Ahrendt