

Station Three Reflection: Ashes

Ash Wednesday is exactly 46 days before Easter Sunday. It is a moveable feast based on the cycles of the moon. Many Christian denominations ritualize Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, by fasting and attending services where a priest or other minister uses ashes that come from the burning of palms from previous Palm Sundays, to mark a cross on their forehead, saying, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

In the early church Lent was mostly a time of repentance, especially for those who had committed serious crimes or hurt the community in some way. Lent has evolved over the centuries to a time when we reflect on death and our own mortality.

Death is really hard to talk about and makes us uncomfortable. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul writes that God alone is immortal. In the Ash Wednesday liturgy we are told that we are not immortal, we are dust—dirt—soil. You had an opportunity at the first station to experience and reflect on this.

Jesus was born as human (humus). He went on the same journey we are on and made it holy by His death. That means our physical bodies are not just heaps of organic matter but that we are filled with God because God made the dust. Remember those words: *we are dust and to dust we will return*. We will die a physical death but pass into a new life. All this can sound a little scary, creepy and uncomfortable but it really is good news. We have new experiences and reminders to take with us on our journey through death to new life in the Resurrection.

Ashes are referred to often in the bible as symbols of mourning and repentance. I'm sure you can remember a reference or two to sack cloth and ashes. Ashes remind us of our mortality and the impermanence of life. They can suggest renewal, the burning of old sins and old ways of living.

Think about your experience at Station 2 with brokenness. The pottery shards and stones are made from dust that was formed into something, a flower pot or part of a mountain. We are formed in God's image as unique humans. When we are broken or sinful, we are dead in a way. We are no longer whole, no longer able to do what we were made for. By God's grace and sacrifice we pass through earthly death to a new life we have no human words for.

Lent is not a gloom-and-doom season, but a journey of preparation. When we take on a spiritual practice during Lent we are not taking on something else to do but being set free to turn our lives back to God. You will have a chance to give up your brokenness at the next station. You could think of Lent as a GPS course correction on our journey to Resurrection. I like to think about Lent as a time to plant new seeds in the humus of my life. I can plant seeds of repentance, forgiveness, compassion and generosity through prayer, action and sacrifice. What can you do?

Take some time now or whenever you have a few minutes and reflect on what death, mortality and ashes mean to you, not just during Lent but always.

- Sit still with God.
- Trust that God is present, loving and forgiving.
- Think about what is good in your life and give thanks.
- Think about what diminishes or burdens your life and pray for change.

When you are ready take a packet of ashes from the basket and hold the packet while you say this prayer from our Book of Common Prayer.

***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,
that it is only by your gracious gift that we are given everlasting life;
through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen***

Ashes are imposed with the following words:

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

You can use the ashes to make a cross on your forehead or the forehead of a family member. If you are not comfortable doing that you can: Sprinkle a bit of ash on your head or the head of a family member. Or put a little bit of ash in your hand and feel it, smell it, rub it between your fingers and then gently pour the ashes on the ground. When you are ready slowly continue your prayer walk to the Labyrinth.