

# “Ash Wednesday”

*The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – March 2, 2022 – Ash Wednesday  
Isaiah 59:12-20 and Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21*

What exactly is “Ash Wednesday?” Where does it come from? It’s not in the Bible, obviously. But some of its ideas are. Ash Wednesday has its origins in the early Christian Church – somewhere between the sixth and eighth centuries. Originally, the idea was that a Christian, as a sign of repentance, would sprinkle ashes on his or her head.

Where did this idea come from? In the Bible, ashes were always associated with humility and mortality, fasting and remorse. If you had sinned against God, and you felt remorse about that sin, and you were repenting of that sin, then sometimes, in the Bible, you would sprinkle ashes on your head as a sign of sorrow and repentance. Ashes were supposed to remind you that you were mortal, that you will eventually become ashes after you die. We’re only ashes, and we need to repent of our sins now while God gives us a time of grace.

During 6th or 7th centuries, Christian churches thought about this idea. People, in private, at times, would sprinkle ashes on themselves as a sign of repentance. Eventually, this became a public practice. Instead of sprinkling the ashes on your head, the ashes would be rubbed onto the forehead in the shape of a cross. It was a sign of repentance, and a reminder of your baptism. The ashes would actually be taken from the palm branches from Palm Sunday, burned the year before.

Some churches today have retained this practice, while others have let the practice go. What’s really important is not whether you have ashes on your forehead. What’s important is what’s going on in your heart, what’s going on in your soul.

For every Christian, ashes or not, Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the somber season of Lent. Lent is a forty-day span of time from now until Easter. During this time, we focus on Christ’s battle with sin and our salvation.

Why forty days? Right after Jesus was baptized, the Bible tells us that Jesus went out into the desert to fast and to be tempted by the Devil for forty days. For Jesus, those forty days were a time of introspection, a time when he battled the temptations of the Devil and emerged stronger than he had been before. For

us, Lent is a time when we make that journey with Christ. We think about OUR temptations, our sins, and we repent. After these forty days, we emerge stronger than we had been before.

Lent is a time to evaluate yourself in light of God's Word. It's a time to abandon the sins you have grown accustomed to committing in your life. It's a time to receive God's forgiveness and strength to lead a Christian life. It's a time to renew your desire to serve God, and to be the Christians that God has made you to be.

This evening, let's take a miniature Lenten journey as we look at *Isaiah 59*. Right away in verse 12, we read, "OUR OFFENSES ARE MANY IN YOUR SIGHT, AND OUR SINS TESTIFY AGAINST US" – that's true, isn't it? If you were to count all the sins you have committed in just one week – and remember, sins include not just your deeds, but your thoughts. Sins include not just the things you do, but the things you don't do, but should. If you were to count all these sins, your offenses would be many. Thousands, millions of sins, testifying against you in God's court of law.

"OUR OFFENSES ARE EVER WITH US. WE ACKNOWLEDGE OUR SINS" – there you see a key phrase as we think about Lent this evening. Lent is a time when you look you at yourself and acknowledge that there are some things that need to be fixed up. There are some things about me that are not perfect, things that need to be changed, things that need to be adjusted. My attitudes. My lifestyle.

Listen to Isaiah describe some of those things he sees that are wrong: "WE KNOW OUR SINS: TRANSGRESSING, AND DENYING THE LORD, AND TURNING AWAY FROM FOLLOWING OUR GOD, TALKING OPPRESSION AND REVOLT, CONCEIVING LYING WORDS AND UTTERING THEM FROM THE HEART."

Are these sins you have committed in your life? Take a close look at yourself, and ask yourself some hard questions – what are my sins?

- Where am I "not so Christian" in my life?
- What kind of person am I?
- Am I really loving?
- Do I show that in my words and actions?
- Am I really patient?
- Do I really love God more than anything else in my life?

- Do I make sacrifices for him?
- Am I peaceful?
- Or, do I like to fight, to assert my will over other people?
- What kind of person am I?
- What are my weaknesses?
- What are my sins?
- Where do I need to get better in my life?

That is the first part of repentance, the first part of Lent. To look at yourself and to recognize your sins. And then comes the second - to look away from yourself, and to Christ. Isaiah does that here... *“THE LORD LOOKED AND WAS DISPLEASED THAT THERE WAS NO JUSTICE. HE SAW THAT THERE WAS NO ONE, HE WAS APPALLED THAT THERE WAS NO ONE TO INTERVENE.”* Before Jesus became a man, he looked out over the world and saw all our sin, and he was appalled at what he saw. And what appalled Jesus the most, was that there was no one to intervene, no one to rescue the human race from its sins.

Judgment Day is talked about in these verses: *“ACCORDING TO WHAT THEY HAVE DONE, SO WILL HE REPAY WRATH TO HIS ENEMIES AND RETRIBUTION TO HIS FOES; HE WILL REPAY THE ISLANDS THEIR DUE.”* On that day, everyone will see Christ’s glory: *“FROM THE WEST, MEN WILL FEAR THE NAME OF THE LORD, AND FROM THE RISING OF THE SUN, THEY WILL REVERE HIS GLORY. FOR HE WILL COME LIKE A PENT-UP FLOOD THAT THE BREATH OF THE LORD DRIVES ALONG.”*

But what about those who do repent and turn to Christ? What about you? Our final verse tells us: *“THE REDEEMER WILL COME TO ZION, TO THOSE IN JACOB WHO REPENT OF THEIR SINS, DECLARES THE LORD.”* Christ will come to you, your Redeemer, and he will grant to you salvation forever.

Lent is that time when you do some “spring cleaning” in your soul. You look deep within yourself and acknowledge your sins. And then you look to Christ, who won the battle for you, and you receive his forgiveness. The forgiveness of sins, won for you on the cross. Lent is a time when you grow in your appreciation of all that Christ has done for you. Not only do you become more aware of your sins; You become more aware of just how much your Lord Jesus loves you, that he would do all these things for you.

The last part of Lent is leaving that sin behind. Quitting the sin you have acknowledged in your life. Some have compared it to quitting smoking. It's a very difficult thing to do sometimes – to quit a certain sin, to leave a favorite sin behind. These next 40 days, what I suggest you do is this . . . if you want to give up something for Lent, give up a half hour a day – and during that half hour, read a half a chapter a day from the Book of John every day – a half a chapter – it will take you 40 days to do it. Read those verses slowly, and think about the words you are reading, and then evaluate yourself. Think of your sins, and then rejoice in Christ's forgiveness. Let God strengthen you through his Word this Lenten season. Let God help you to “quit that certain sin.” That is Lent. And may this be something you do, not just these forty days before Easter, but throughout your entire life. Amen.