

**Ash Wednesday Service**  
**February 14, 2024**  
**5pm**

**Welcome**

Rev. Stillwell

We want to welcome you to our Ash Wednesday service. Ash Wednesday begins the forty days of preparation and self-examination of Lent, as we move toward the cross and empty grave. On Ash Wednesday, we are like Isaiah, seeing who we are in light of God's majesty: We are mortal, frail, and dependent. We examine ourselves, allowing God's holy light to reveal our sin, leading us to come in repentance before God. We can be honest about our frailty, about the temptations and weaknesses we face in this life. Ash Wednesday is also about recognizing the God who saved us from sin and death. Jesus stared death in the face, and won. So, with Christ Jesus, we too can stare death in the face, and enter into the fullness of life that will not end when our mortal bodies die.

As we begin our time of worship, let's join God's heart in prayer.

**Invocation**

Pastor Gena

God of our Hearts, not of our outer garments, nor our church structures, nor our programs and human plans, you are the only one who can make us pure. You are the only one who can wash us clean of all of our sin and guilt. You alone can save us. You are the merciful and just God. When we turn, we see you. So help us to turn, O God of all hearts, and find you here with us as we worship. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

**\*Opening Hymn**

*"Near to the Heart of God"*

#581

There is a place of quiet rest, near to the heart of God;  
a place where sin cannot molest, near to the heart of God.  
O Jesus, blest Redeemer, sent from the heart of God,  
hold us who wait before you near to the heart of God.

**Scripture Lesson**

**Matthew 4:1-11**

Kevin Puskarich

**Meditation**

*"Ashes to Ashes, We All Fall Down"*

Rev. Stillwell

Do you remember being a young kid? If so, you likely remember playing on the playground in elementary school or maybe in the back yard of a grandparent or friend's house. If you recall these halcyon days, then perhaps you also recall joining hands with some young friends and singing the lyrics to the nursery rhyme, "Ring Around the Rosie."

Ring around the rosie, pocket full of posies,  
ashes, ashes, we all fall down!

And then the kids, after singing the song, holding hands, and moving in a circle, would drop to the ground and laugh! Ah, the good ol' days.

But perhaps later as an adult, you learned that "Ring Around the Rosie" is really all about the bubonic plague in London in the 1600s. 'My God,' you may have thought, how could children sing about things like this? A "Ring around the Rosie" meant the itchy rash around the infected

sore of a person sick with the plague. A pocket full of posies were the flower pedals that plague doctors showered upon their deceased patients helping to ward off their odor. Ashes, ashes meant the cremated remains of the deceased. We all fall down refers to those who fall down dead from the plague.

I wondered when I heard this how a serious and tragic thing such as the plague could be commemorated in a children's song, and then I learned that there is a great deal of evidence that the nursery rhyme does not come from these deathly origins. The first recorded version of the nursery rhyme did not show up until the mid-1800s, some 200 years after the plague. One would think that if 50 million people died and a convenient little nursery rhyme had come up to commemorate their demise, someone would record it. What's more likely is the rhyme was really just a fun game that manifested later, after the Great Plague, and it was just a ditty for kids. Likely, they joined hands around a flower bush or a rose tree, circled it a few times and fell down laughing (or even sneezing from the flower's pollen).

There are a great many variations of the verse, from German to Indian and each is different. Some include different breads, some include terms like "Husha busha!" or "Red Bird Blue Bird." The fact that so many variants exist means that it likely did not originate via a single historical event like the Great Plague.

So if the song was not inspired by some real world event I still can't help but wonder if its origins has a connection to Ash Wednesday; a time when ashes are prominent in our life. This is the time historically that Christians have marked as the beginning of their Easter preparation. It is a time that marks the beginning of Lent which remembers the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness facing temptation and fasting as he prepared for the beginning of his public ministry.

If Easter is the victory, Ash Wednesday looks like the war. If Easter is the celebration, Ash Wednesday is the funeral. If Easter is the feast, Ash Wednesday is the fast. You can understand why so many more people come to celebrate the resurrection of Christ than repent of their sins, but if you know anything of the gospel, you know these two things go hand in hand. Jesus began his ministry by saying, "Repent for the kingdom has come near," so it stands to reason that repentance is the key that opens the gate of the kingdom.

But what do the ashes have to do with anything? They are the burnt remains of last year's palms reminding us of many things. First, they remind us that nothing lasts. The fame of Jesus Christ when he entered into Jerusalem faded before the week was out. The beauty of a plant in full bloom will last for a while but eventually give way to death and decay. Our lives are short in the grand scheme of the world, and we too will return to dust. So we wear the mark of the ash to remind us of these things.

Ashes to ashes, we all fall down. We do all fall down from time to time. I am not just talking about our footing, but we do fall down on our journey of faith. Maybe we fall down when it comes to being there for others. Perhaps we fall down when it comes to resisting temptation of any sort. Perhaps we fall down simply by not standing up when we should and for those who have already fallen. The word fallen is often used to mean sinful as in a fallen world or a fallen person, and I think of sin as that which keeps us from standing our tallest.

We all fall down in the sense that we all commit sin, but we all fall down in another sense as well. No matter how tall you stand, no matter how strong you are, at some point you will fall down and not get up. No one lives forever, and one of the things that separates humans from

animals is that we know it. We are aware of our mortality and that is not something on which we should dwell, but neither should we forget.

So we all fall down, but Ash Wednesday is neither a dour nor depressing time, for in remembering death we embrace life. I never learned to ice skate because I feared falling down. If we fear falling down in life we will never go anywhere. So we gather on Ash Wednesday not so much to lament our fallings, but to draw near to the heart of God knowing that God will pick us up when we fall. That is truly what this day is about. Our falling and God's helping; our wayward faith and God's steadfast love; our sin and God's grace.

We all fall down so we know that we need to stay close to God so that the falls won't hurt so much and the getting up will be easier, and when we fall down for that final time we trust that God will be able to raise us up not just from dry bones, but even from mere ashes.

We receive the ashes not because we fall down more than others, but because we want to fall less, and we hope that being reminded of our falling will help keep us up, and because more than anything else we do not want to stay fallen when our ashes return to dust, but our spirit return to the one who made it, our Lord, our God

### **Anthem**

“Just as I Am, Without One Plea”

Choir

### **The Sign of the Ashes**

Rev. Stillwell

The Church has long used ashes as an outward sign of grief, a mark of humility, mourning, penance and mortality. The Old Testament is filled with stories describing the use of ashes in such a manner. In the Book of Job, Job repented before God: “Therefore, I disown what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes” (42:6). Daniel “turned to the Lord God, to seek help, in prayer and petition, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes” (Dn 9:3). Jonah preached conversion and repentance to the people of Nineveh: “When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in the ashes” (Jon 3:6). Ashes were imposed on the early converts when they began their preparation time for baptism. So when we come forward to receive this sign like all those before us, we unhesitatingly embrace this invitation to sanctity. We dirty our foreheads while asking God to create in us a clean heart. In doing so, we take our place among that great cloud of witnesses who through all the ages have donned the ashes, publicly acknowledging that we are Christians who have sinned and seek to repent.

### **Prayer**

Pastor Gena

Be with us Lord. Keep us strong as we enter into the desert of Lent with Jesus, as our sins come into focus as shadows across the landscape of our lives. Today, we acknowledge our humanity as ashes are placed on our foreheads. May this mark of the cross call us into further relationship with you, our God, the one who forgives us, saves us, and brings us into life abundant and everlasting. Amen.

### **Confession of Sin**

Barb Bailey

Holy and Merciful God,

We come to this place to worship You, to Praise Your Name, to renew our spirit of community in you - Jesus Christ, Our Lord.

We come to rejoice in who you are and who You are in us and to us.

We come giving thanks for your Presence in our lives.

We come also to confess our sin and our sins. We are in need of Your forgiveness. We accept the sacrifice You made for us - You did not sin, but You became sin so that we may be forgiven of ours.

Your body and blood in Holy Communion bring us into a very real and present relationship with You - with Your life and with Your death.

We come to be marked by ashes by means of which we witness to your passionate love for us. We receive these ashes as a palpable touch of YOU in our lives.

We ask that, as the Gospel of Luke asks, 'You be merciful to us, as sinners.' We come in humility and with a modicum of understanding of the sacrifice and pain you endured for us out of Your love for us.

We surrender our entire selves to you in recognition of the fact that You surrendered Your entire self for us. As the hymnist wrote, we ask that You "create in us clean hearts, O God, and renew right spirits within us."

We are not perfect but in Your eyes we are precious.

Hear our prayer, O Lord.

Amen

### **Imposition of Ashes**

Pastor Gena and Rev. Stillwell

### **Assurance of Pardon**

Rev. Stillwell

May the almighty and merciful God, Source of our salvation in Christ Jesus, who desires not the death of a sinner but rather 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

In the name of Christ you are forgiven! Thanks be to God!

Rejoicing in the fellowship of all the saints. Let us commend ourselves, one to another, and our whole life to Christ our Lord.

May the peace of the Lord be with you all.

### **Invitation to Communion**

Pastor Gena

We are not sent into the wilderness without provision. Our 40 days of Lent will not be without food or drink. Our 40 days of Lent will not be without company in a barren wilderness. For each Sunday during Lent is like a little Easter when we come together to remember the Good News that Jesus walked this earthen journey just as we do. Each Sunday we come together to remember the Good News that although Jesus' ways of love ultimately led him to be killed on a cross, suffering and death was not the final answer for him - and it will not be for us either.

So let us dig deep into Lent this year, spending time in quietness and solitude, knowing that the company and provision of Sunday - a little Easter - is coming. Let us dig deep into Lent this

year, challenging ourselves with a new practice or two that will deepen our relationships with each other and with God, always knowing that the rest and oasis of Sunday – a little Easter – is just around the bend. Let us dig deep into Lent this year, extending compassion and walking the difficult road with those who suffer and who are oppressed, always knowing that the great Feast of Easter is coming for us and for all of God’s creation.

The Lenten journey can often be dry and difficult. So come, be sustained and nourished at this Table. Come, eat and drink. Come, spend time with Jesus, who has walked this journey ahead of us. Let us come and sit among our brothers and sisters in Christ, and be encouraged and filled for another six days on the Lenten path. We are not sent into the wilderness without provision.

**Communion Hymn**

*“In the Lord I’ll Be Ever Thankful”*

In the Lord I’ll be ever thankful, in the Lord I will rejoice. Look to God, do not be afraid, lift up your voices, the Lord is near; lift up your voices the Lord is near.

**Prayer at the Table**

Linda Reese

**Words of Institution**

Pastor Gena

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. (1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

**Sharing Holy Communion**

*You will receive the bread and cup together. Please hold them; we will take each together as one body. Disciples of Christ believe in an Open Table. All who profess Christ and follow Him are welcome to share His meal. Gluten free wafers are available in the Narthex.*

**Closing Hymn**

*“Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed?”*

**#204**

Alas! And did my Savior bleed? And did my Sov’ reign die? Would he devote that sacred head for sinners such as I! At the cross, at the cross where I first saw the light and the burden of my heart rolled away—it was there by faith I received my sight, and now I am happy all the day!

**Benediction**

Rev. Stillwell

Go forth on your heart’s journey, strong in the face of afflictions, speaking truth, and knowing that you are loved well by God. Go in peace. Amen.

