



A Contemporary Liturgy for Ash Wednesday

Opening Prayer

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good
His love endures forever

Into your presence we come, Lord
a few moments of quietness
outside a busy world that demands our attention
Breathe on us now
that we might know your presence
and your power
during this time of worship
on this significant day.

Reading of the Scriptures

Hear from the scriptures of our faith, the word of God...

Joel 2:1-2,12-17 (NLT)

2 Sound the trumpet in Jerusalem!

Raise the alarm on my holy mountain!
Let everyone tremble in fear
because the day of the LORD is upon us.

²It is a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of thick clouds and deep blackness.
Suddenly, like dawn spreading across the mountains,
a great and mighty army appears.
Nothing like it has been seen before
or will ever be seen again.

A Call to Repentance

¹²That is why the LORD says,
“Turn to me now, while there is time.

Give me your hearts.

Come with fasting, weeping, and mourning.

¹³ Don't tear your clothing in your grief,
but tear your hearts instead."

Return to the LORD your God,

for he is merciful and compassionate,
slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love.

He is eager to relent and not punish.

¹⁴ Who knows? Perhaps he will give you a reprieve,
sending you a blessing instead of this curse.

Perhaps you will be able to offer grain and wine
to the LORD your God as before.

¹⁵ Blow the ram's horn in Jerusalem!

Announce a time of fasting;
call the people together
for a solemn meeting.

¹⁶ Gather all the people—

the elders, the children, and even the babies.

Call the bridegroom from his quarters
and the bride from her private room.

¹⁷ Let the priests, who minister in the LORD's presence,
stand and weep between the entry room to the Temple and the altar.

Let them pray, "Spare your people, LORD!

Don't let your special possession become an object of mockery.
Don't let them become a joke for unbelieving foreigners who say,
'Has the God of Israel left them?'"

Psalm 51:1-17 (NLT)

¹ Have mercy on me, O God,
because of your unfailing love.

Because of your great compassion,
blot out the stain of my sins.

² Wash me clean from my guilt.
Purify me from my sin.

³ For I recognize my rebellion;
it haunts me day and night.

⁴ Against you, and you alone, have I sinned;
I have done what is evil in your sight.

You will be proved right in what you say,
and your judgment against me is just.

⁵ For I was born a sinner—
yes, from the moment my mother conceived me.

⁶ But you desire honesty from the womb,
teaching me wisdom even there.

⁷ Purify me from my sins, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

⁸ Oh, give me back my joy again;

you have broken me—
now let me rejoice.
⁹ Don't keep looking at my sins.
Remove the stain of my guilt.
¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God.
Renew a loyal spirit within me.
¹¹ Do not banish me from your presence,
and don't take your Holy Spirit from me.
¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and make me willing to obey you.
¹³ Then I will teach your ways to rebels,
and they will return to you.
¹⁴ Forgive me for shedding blood, O God who saves;
then I will joyfully sing of your forgiveness.
¹⁵ Unseal my lips, O Lord,
that my mouth may praise you.
¹⁶ You do not desire a sacrifice, or I would offer one.
You do not want a burnt offering.
¹⁷ The sacrifice you desire is a broken spirit.
You will not reject a broken and repentant heart, O God.

2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10 (NLT)

²⁰ So we are Christ's ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us. We speak for Christ when we plead, "Come back to God!" ²¹ For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ.

6 As God's partners, we beg you not to accept this marvellous gift of God's kindness and then ignore it. ² For God says,

"At just the right time, I heard you. On the day of salvation, I helped you."

Indeed, the "right time" is now. Today is the day of salvation.

Paul's Hardships

³ We live in such a way that no one will stumble because of us, and no one will find fault with our ministry. ⁴ In everything we do, we show that we are true ministers of God. We patiently endure troubles and hardships and calamities of every kind. ⁵ We have been beaten, been put in prison, faced angry mobs, worked to exhaustion, endured sleepless nights, and gone without food. ⁶ We prove ourselves by our purity, our understanding, our patience, our kindness, by the Holy Spirit within us, and by our sincere love. ⁷ We faithfully preach the truth. God's power is working in us. We use the weapons of righteousness in the right hand for attack and the left hand for defence. ⁸ We serve God whether people honour us or despise us, whether they slander us or praise us. We are honest, but they call us impostors. ⁹ We are ignored, even though we are well known. We live close to death, but we are still alive. We have been beaten, but we have not been killed. ¹⁰ Our hearts ache, but we always have joy. We are poor, but we give spiritual riches to others. We own nothing, and yet we have everything.

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 (NLT)

Teaching about Giving to the Needy

6 “Watch out! Don’t do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven. ² When you give to someone in need, don’t do as the hypocrites do—blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity! I tell you the truth, they have received all the reward they will ever get. ³ But when you give to someone in need, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. ⁴ Give your gifts in private, and your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

Teaching about Prayer and Fasting

⁵ “When you pray, don’t be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get. ⁶ But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

¹⁶ “And when you fast, don’t make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, for they try to look miserable and dishevelled so people will admire them for their fasting. I tell you the truth, that is the only reward they will ever get. ¹⁷ But when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. ¹⁸ Then no one will notice that you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in private. And your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

Teaching about Money and Possessions

¹⁹ “Don’t store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be.

A Time of Confession

Take a piece of paper and pen, think about some of the things you have done that you would like to confess, and to have forgiven, write or draw it down.

Crumple up your pieces of paper. Only you and God know what you wrote on the paper.

Place the crumpled paper a bowl, or fire-proof container and burn the paper.

As you do this say out loud from Psalm 51:10 the following verse:

**Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.**

Ashes

Let the papers burn up completely so that they are no longer visible and then say:

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

Once the fire has cooled, take out the ashes and make the sign of the cross on either your forehead or on the hand and then return the ashes to the earth, ideally somewhere where it will nourish new growth from the earth.

Reflective Prayer

From dust we come,
to dust we will return,
we belong to God.

**Bless us now at the beginning of Lent,
hear our regrets,
our prayers,
our dreams.
Keep us close to you, God.
Keep us close to you. Amen.**

A Reflection

Fasting?
Okay God,
first thoughts...
sackcloth and ashes,
giving up something...
smoking...
chocolate...
coffee?
Trying to be extra kind
instead of giving something up?
Images of you as angry
and wanting us to feel miserable,
of you as not being very nice!
So, the day's lectionary readings...
well, Matthew seems to be saying
whatever we do on the fasting front
we need to do it secretly and quietly,
and that prayer,
spending time talking with you
and listening to you,
is part of the picture.
The psalmist is definitely into a heavy
sin and guilt trip
but he does ask you for wisdom
and knows that you look for integrity
and truth in our lives.

Paul tells us
that today is the day to act,
rather than tomorrow.
Joel tells us
in urgent tones
to stop in our tracks
and come back to God.
And then there's Isaiah
who has some very clear ideas
as to what fasting is about:
to take burdens off people,
to work for justice,
to share food with those who are hungry,
to share hospitality,
to give clothes to those who need them.
So God, how am I going to keep Lent?
By turning to face you?
By praying?
By sharing food and hospitality?
By being active in organisations
and movements that seek for justice?
By keeping what I'm doing or not doing a secret?
By thinking and reading and experiencing
what you are really about?
It is Ash Wednesday.
Time for fasting.
Time to turn away from the bad stuff.
Time to turn to God.

Closing Prayer

Loving Lord,
at the beginning of this Lenten season,
we are met with the challenge of handing over
every bit of our lives that do not come from You.
To rid ourselves of what clutters our lives,
and all that distracts us from the simple truth
of Your love for us.

Your prophets have called us to change the way we worship—
to make internal sacrifices instead of external ones.
To seek justice, and love kindness,
and walk humbly with You
each and every one of our days.

If we don't give anything up for Lent,
then let us at least give up this:
that we might live cease living in ways that disconnect us from You,
for every one of our steps is like a circle around Your temple.
Perhaps this Lent,
we can give up our way
and give ourselves to Your way for us.

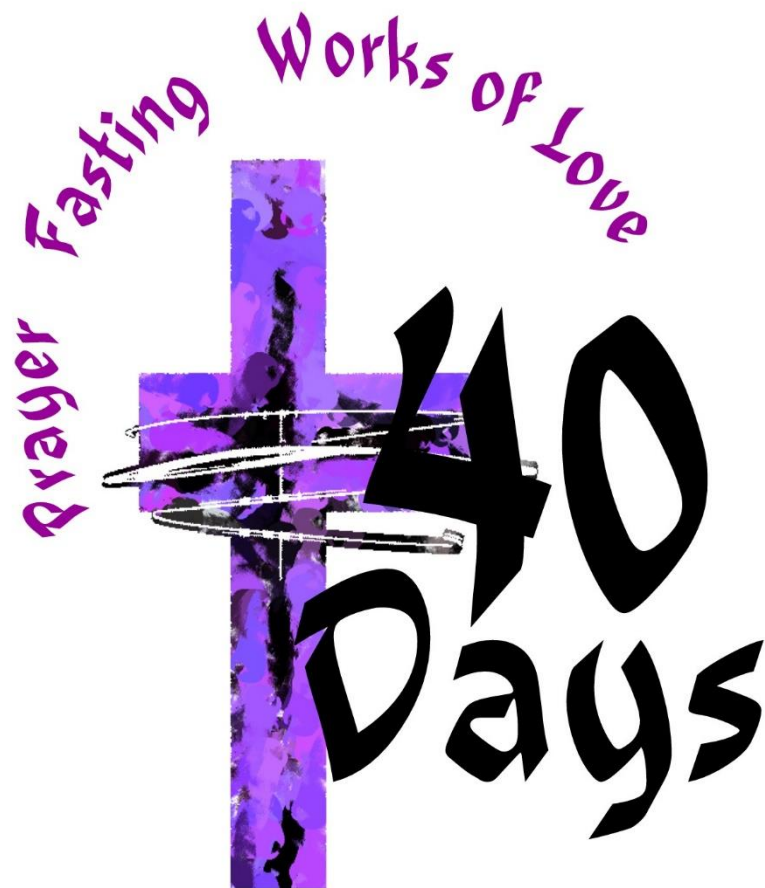
So, lead and guide us on this Lenten way.
May we walk with Jesus toward the hill just outside of Jerusalem.
May we like Him take up our cross and follow,
spending each moment of our lives living responsively to You,
just as Christ Himself did.
For that is the faithful way. Amen.

Blessing

May God create in you a clean heart,
a transformed heart,
a heart that knows and seeks and loves
the justice and mercy of the Lord.

May you accept the gift of salvation –
not your personal possession to be coveted,
but His work, accomplished in the destruction of Sin
on the cross of Jesus Christ.

And may you humble yourself before the Lord,
coming before Him with a broken spirit,
a contrite heart
receiving from His hand
great compassion
and unfailing love.



Sources:

- Confession {adapted}, Ashes {adapted} and Reflection from “Ash Wednesday” (*Spill the Beans Issue 38*)
- Closing Prayer written by Patrick Ryan, Pastor at Kuhn Memorial Presbyterian Church in Barboursville, West Virginia.
- Blessing from Jeff’s Blog. <https://blog.wisch.org/category/benedictions-and-prayers/>