

What is Lent, what is Ash Wednesday and what are those ashes about?

Wednesday, February 22 is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. The season of Lent is 40 days – recalling the 40 day fast of Jesus in the wilderness after his baptism (Matthew 4:2, Luke 4:1-2) and Moses' 40 day fast on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:28). It is a time of repentance – that is, we acknowledge the ways we have turned away from God in our lives and have lost our grounding, and we focus on turning those lives back toward God.

The three pillars of Lent – prayer, fasting and almsgiving, or service, can help focus us in our desire to turn our hearts and minds toward God. A renewed emphasis on prayer and devotions, making a commitment to reading the Bible daily, strengthens our communication with God. Many people give up something for Lent, which can be a form of fasting, remembering the sacrifice of Christ. Others decide to give something for Lent as a way to turn their lives toward God: taking on a special outreach project, for example, or giving extra gifts to ELCA world hunger; thinking about that person at school who nobody talks to or making amends with someone in your family. These can be ways we turn our attention away from ourselves and toward others.

We make the sign of the cross on people's foreheads with ashes during the services on Wednesday. Ashes, used anciently in the absence of soap, suggest cleansing and renewal. Ashes are also a sign of repentance, mentioned often in the Bible. They remind us of the shortness of life, of all the empty ways we try to fill ourselves, and they remind us that one day we will return to dust. It is only the Word of the Lord that can truly give us what we long for in our lives – grounding and rootedness, peace and well being that come from a life lived in the Lord.

~ Pastor Debra Samuelson