

Why ashes on Ash Wednesday?



One Wednesday a year, sometime in February or March, you notice someone at work, school, or elsewhere with a smudge on her forehead. It looks as if she missed a spot when washing. Then you see another who looks as though he needs to glance in the mirror. By the time you see the third, you realize it is Ash Wednesday and these passersby must have received the imposition of ashes.

What do the ashes symbolize?

Remember that you are dust...

Ashes were an ancient symbol of our humanity. In Genesis, we read that God formed human beings out of the dust of the earth (Genesis 2:7). The Hebrew word that translates to

dust translates to ashes in other languages.

...and to dust you shall return

Our humanity also calls to mind our mortality. Receiving the imposition of ashes is a powerful way to confront our humanity and mortality. They remind us that we are not God, but God's good creation. In them we recognize that our bodies will not last forever, and come face-to-face with the reality of our eventual death.

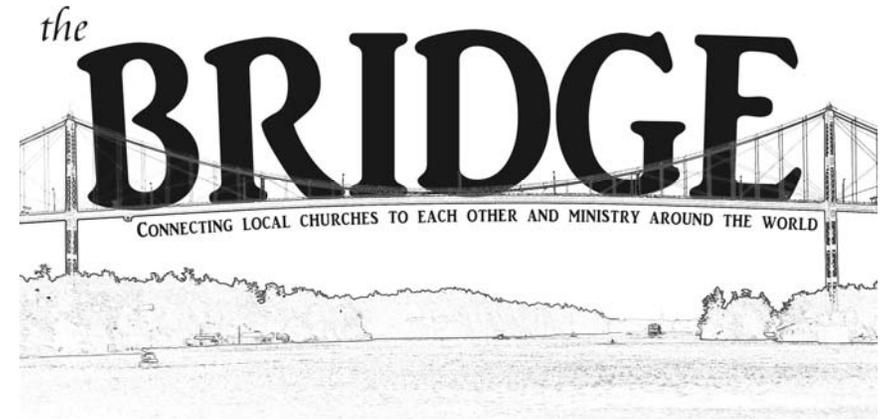
Repent...

Ashes also signify our sorrow for the mistakes we have made. People in ancient times wore sackcloth and ashes as a way of expressing their repentance of their sins.

*The **Bridge** is a Conference Communications Ministry tool that delivers to local churches news and stories of ministry from around the Upper New York Conference and the world.*

www.unyumc.org

To learn more about Lent and Easter visit: <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/faqs-lent-easter>



The Upper New York Conference's vision is to live the gospel of Jesus Christ and to be God's love with our neighbors in all places.

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A brief overview of Lent from The United Methodist Church



Lent is a season of 40 days, not counting Sundays, which begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Holy Saturday. Lent comes from the Anglo Saxon word *lencten*, which means "spring." The 40 days represents the time Jesus spent in the wilderness, enduring the temptation of Satan and preparing to begin his ministry.

Lent is a time of repentance, fasting, and preparation for the coming of Easter. It is a time of self-examination and reflection. In the early church, Lent was a time to prepare new converts for baptism. Today, Christians focus on their relationship with God, often choosing to give up something important to them or

to volunteer and give of themselves for others.

Sundays that take place during Lent are not counted in the 40 days because each Sunday represents a "mini-Easter" and the reverent spirit of Lent is tempered with joyful anticipation of the resurrection of Jesus.

40 Days of Lent: Find your own spiritual path

During Ash Wednesday services on the first day of Lent, many United Methodist pastors will invite their congregations "to observe a holy Lent: by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's Holy Word" (from the *United Methodist Book of Worship*). While you may be aware of this season leading up to Easter, you may wonder how you might "observe a holy Lent."

There is no one prescribed way. Instead, we are each encouraged to find our own method of confronting our sinfulness, remembering our mortality, and giving thanks for the gift of salvation we receive through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Fasting

One of the more common practices is to give something up for Lent. Some abstain from chocolate, social media, shopping, or something else through the season. This is a religious practice known as fasting. We fast to reorient ourselves away from the distraction of those

things, and back toward God.

Another way to reorient your life toward God, is to focus on devotional practices like Bible study and prayer during the season.

Bible reading

Many do not know where to begin when reading the Bible. The Upper Room Daily Devotional Guide (<http://bit.ly/URdevotions>) will help guide you in this pursuit. Each day they provide a scripture passage and wonderfully thought-provoking and spirit-enriching material to read and think about.

Prayer

In the busyness of our everyday lives, prayer can sometimes get squeezed out. Lent is a wonderful time to intentionally work toward finding more time in your life for prayer. You can experiment with different ways to pray during the season, or really delve into a new-to-you way of praying. Enriching your prayer life is a great way to spend Lent.

Service

Another way to observe a holy Lent



is to take on a new way of serving. Throughout the 40 days of the season you can adopt a new habit of volunteering in the community, making special financial gifts to service organizations, singing in the choir, or participating in a small group.

Rest

An important practice with which many of us struggle is the spiritual disci-

pline of rest or Sabbath. We don't have to rest on Saturday, the traditional Sabbath day, or even Sunday. You can instead find moments during an ordinary day to be still in God's presence. You might choose to spend a few minutes during lunch with a desktop meditation, listen to sermons on your commute, or read a poem that feeds your spirit. Each can be a great way of enriching your Lent.