

THE LIVING
WORD
OF
LENT

A DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

February 18 - February 25



ASH WEDNESDAY & LENT

Ash Wednesday kicks off the season of Lent, the 40 days that lead up to Easter.

Ashes are used to symbolize death. They are a reminder that we are all going to die someday. On Ash Wednesday we reflect on our frailty, limitations, and weakness. When you receive the ashes, the church leader will say, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

We live in a culture of anti-aging creams, diets, botox, and biohacking your body to live forever, but Ash Wednesday reminds us that we are all going to die. Billionaires and doctors and fitness gurus and online influencers and parents and best friends and beloved pets and your favorite politician will all die.

I will. You will.

So, this season begins with a tangible mark of our mortality.

The ashes are also a public symbol of your repentance. They are a reminder that you are a sinner in need of repentance.



*Sin and death.
Not exactly the happiest
of Christian holidays.*





But sin and death are why Jesus came. We spend these 40 days leading up to Easter reflecting on our sin, fasting, and practicing confession. It's kind of a bummer of a season, but then, at the end, we celebrate Easter and remember that Jesus triumphed over sin and death. And that really is worthy of celebration.

Lent is also a season when we fast. As Christians, we have spiritual practices that help to grow our faith and our relationship with Jesus. Fasting is one of them. But you probably don't know many people who regularly fast.

Fasting is merely temporarily abstaining from food or other good things to fully focus on God. Pastor and writer Sharon Hodde Miller says it is trading the good things for the God things. In Matthew 6, Jesus is assuming that you will do these things. He does not say "if you fast" but instead says "when you fast."

Fasting helps us to reorder our lives so we can love the right things in the right way.

In 1944, a group of Christians at Park Street Church in Boston felt moved to respond to the plight of refugees in the wake of World War II. They chose to take the season of Lent and spend 40 days praying, fasting, and seeking God on how they could respond to the needs they saw in the world.

Out of that group, the Christian humanitarian agency World Relief was founded. For over 80 years, World Relief has been working in over 100 countries responding to the needs of people. And it was started because a group of people chose Lent to help reorder their love to focus on loving and serving their neighbor. Lent helped them to get their priorities straight.

What can God reorder in you this Lent?

ASH

WEDNESDAY

The readings for Ash Wednesday are pretty sobering. The overarching themes deal with the urgent and important need for repentance. How often do you consider the importance of repentance in your life? Followers of Jesus understand repentance to be core to discipleship—a vital changing of heart, mind, and will.

As Christians in the 21st century, we've inherited a grand Reformation tradition. When Martin Luther nailed the 95 theses to the wooden door of Wittenberg's Castle Church, the very first thesis read: "1. When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said 'repent,' he meant that the entire life of believers should be one of repentance." This is exactly right.

But why do God's people seem so reluctant to repent even when they know that blessings are waiting? Perhaps it's because repentance requires admission of guilt, admission of wrongness, and acknowledgment of the damage one has done. Individually or collectively, even people of faith would rather live in denial than have a contrite spirit and admit they are wrong.

The prophet Joel sounded the alarm for repentance for God's people (Joel 2:1-2). In Joel 2:12-17, the prophet gives a glimmer of hope. He says, "Even now," declares the Lord, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.' Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God..."

What does it mean to go beyond the external tearing of garments (which in scripture signified mourning) to an internal tearing of the heart?

The Isaiah reading (Is 58:1-12) also calls for deep heart-level repentance that leads to a different way of living—to a way of living marked by justice and compassion-in-action.



Psalm 51:1-17 is probably the clearest example of a prayer emanating from a broken and contrite heart. David begins the psalm asking for God’s mercy to come flowing into his life. And this whole prayer comes from a fully repentant heart, a heart that has been broken—torn in contrition.

The Apostle Paul tells us that because of the crucified and resurrected Jesus, we have been reconciled with the Father, we have been made new, and we have been given the ministry of reconciliation. Paul wants all to know that now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation (2 Cor 5:20b-6:10).

The readings for Ash Wednesday conclude with a word from Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 6:1-6, 16-21). It’s a call for deep humility. The way of living we have been called to and the ministry we have been given are to be lived out with a profound humility—a humility that emulates Jesus, the one who made both repentance and reconciliation possible through his sacrificial love and endless mercy poured out for you and for me.

FOR reflection

How can you strengthen your discipleship during this season of Lent? What will help you align your heart, mind, and will to God’s purposes for your life?





FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

The first Sunday in Lent comes days after the Church's celebration of Ash Wednesday, a day in which we become very aware of our mortality: "From dust you came, and to dust you shall return."

In the season of Lent, we journey with Jesus into the wilderness for 40 days. This Sunday's Gospel text, Matthew 4:1-11, describes that scene.

But before we go to the Gospel, let's take a glance at some key Daily Office readings that will help create context.

The readings from Genesis 2 and 3 recount the temptation of our first parents and their fall into sin. The Romans 5:12-19 reading is a reflection on their fall, through which sin came to all humanity.

Psalms 51 is one of King David's most famous psalms of repentance, a recounting of his own fall into lust and murder.

The readings from Jonah 3 and 4 provide a surprising response from a pagan city, Nineveh, to Jonah's message of judgment. Instead of rejoicing over their repentance, Jonah pouts, wishing for their destruction.

The reading from Isaiah 58:1-12 condemns Israel's fasting and chides the nation for the kind of fasting God desires: "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?"

With these Scripture texts as background, we return to Matthew 4:1-11. Full of the Holy Spirit, following his baptism in Matthew 3, Jesus is immediately taken by the Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days of temptation by Satan.

Unlike humanity's first parents, Jesus does not give in to the tempter's offers. Unlike Israel during its 40-year wandering in the wilderness following its exodus from Egypt, Jesus neither complains nor rebels.

Jesus is faithful and righteous in the face of the worst that hell throws at him. He does not sin. Where Adam chose disobedience, Jesus chooses righteousness. Where Israel was obstinate, Jesus is tender-hearted and Spirit-led. This is the righteousness revealed by faith that Paul references in our readings in Romans 1.

What hope would we have to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, as our Matthew 18 reading requires, were it not for the obedience of Jesus?

Take some time and pause on the readings from Hebrews 2 and 4. Marvel at the grace of the Father who chose to make Jesus like one of us, to be tempted in every way, and yet without sin.

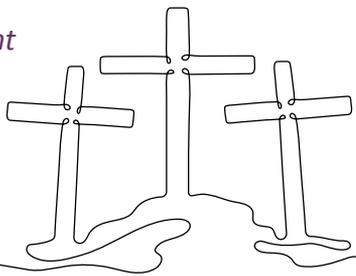
Receive the grace of Matthew 18:10-14 that reminds us that the Father is not willing that any of his children should perish.

The marvel, wonder, and mystery of God's grace will lead you in Lent to repentance. And what is repentance other than turning away from the empty promise of sin that offers to satisfy us but only betrays us? The repentance and fasting we choose in Lent are about offering space in our hearts for the God who loves us and fulfills us.

Take that reminder into your readings from Psalm 32 and 51, and remember that repentance is about returning to the heart of the Father who loves you and sent Jesus into the wilderness for your salvation.

FOR reflection

*What is God asking you to repent of during this season of Lent?
How can you help to "loose the chains of injustice" and "set the oppressed free"?*





SCRIPTURE

READINGS FOR THE WEEK

**Ash
Wednesday**

Psalm 51:1-17; Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 or Isaiah 58:1-12;
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Thursday

Psalm 51; Jonah 3:1-10; Romans 1:1-7

Friday

Psalm 51; Jonah 4:1-11; Romans 1:8-17

Saturday

Psalm 51; Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 18:1-7

Sunday

Psalm 32; Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

Monday

Psalm 32; 1 Kings 19:1-8; Hebrews 2:10-18

Tuesday

Psalm 32; Genesis 4:1-16; Hebrews 4:14-5:10

Wednesday

Psalm 32; Exodus 34:1-9, 27-28; Matthew 18:10-14

Why do the daily readings (usually) begin on Thursday?

The daily readings for each week begin on Thursday and end on the following Wednesday. The Thursday through Saturday readings prepare the reader for the Sunday ahead. The Monday through Wednesday readings reflect on what was presented on Sunday. This week is unique because Ash Wednesday starts the Lenten season.

The Morning Liturgy

Opening Scripture

Rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God; for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil.

Joel 2:13

Opening Prayer (based on Psalm 51)

Open my lips, O Lord, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Give me the joy of your saving help again and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit. Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. *Amen.*

Scripture Reading (read Psalm and Gospel text here)

Period of Silence

Confessing Our Faith (Apostles' Creed)

The Lord's Prayer

The Collect

Almighty God, whose blessed son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

A Midday Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, you said to your apostles, “Peace I give to you; my own peace I leave with you.” Regard not our sins, but the faith of your Church, and give to us the peace and unity of that heavenly City, where with the Father and the Holy Spirit you live and reign, now and forever. *Amen.*

An Early Evening Prayer

Lord Jesus, stay with us, for evening is at hand and the day is past; be our companion in the way, kindle our hearts, and awaken hope, that we may know you as you are revealed in Scripture and the breaking of bread. Grant this for the sake of your love. *Amen.*

A Bedtime Confession and Prayer

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep, we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts, we have offended against thy holy laws, we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, spare thou those who confess their faults, restore thou those who are penitent, according to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesus our Lord; and grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of thy holy Name. *Amen.*



Visit this place, O Lord, and drive far from it all snares of the enemy; let your holy angels dwell with us to preserve us in peace; and let your blessing be upon us always; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

