

LCMS

Worship Library

Title: Remember, That You Are Dust

Category: Church Year

“Remember, That You Are Dust . . .”

Considering the Imposition of Ashes for Ash Wednesday

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

For nearly a thousand years, these words have been spoken to young and old alike as the sign of the cross is traced on their foreheads with ashes—the Imposition of Ashes, as it has come to be known. During the last half of the 20th century, Lutherans have also begun to make use of this ancient rite, and indeed, it has been approved for use in the forthcoming *Lutheran Service Book*. And so, as our catechism is prone to ask: “What does this mean?” Where did this rite come from, and how can it be used meaningfully in LCMS congregations today?

Ashes in the Bible

The Bible contains a number of references to ashes and dust (cf. Josh. 7:6; 1 Sam. 4:12; 2 Sam. 1:2, 15:32; Job 2:12, 16:15; Jer. 25:34; Lam. 2:10; Ezek. 27:30; Jonah 3:6). In fact, the Lord's curse on Adam, “*dust you are, and to dust you shall return*” (Gen. 3:19) is echoed in the Imposition of Ashes formula. In the New Testament, Jesus declares: “*Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes*” (Matt. 11:21). Thus, in the Bible, ashes carry a two-fold meaning: as a sign of human mortality (Gen. 3:19) and as a sign of public repentance (Matt. 11:21).

Ashes in Church History

This understanding carried over into the early and medieval church. Tertullian (ca. 160-225) describes the use of sackcloth and ashes in the penance of an adulterer before his pastor. Originally, ashes were reserved only for public penitents—i.e., murderers, adulterers and others who had fallen away from the church because of grave public sin but desired reconciliation. Such reconciliation could occur at a variety of times during the year, but by the medieval period, the beginning of Lent became a primary season of the church year for that reconciliation to take place.

By the 12th century, ashes became specifically associated with the beginning of Lent, thus providing the first day of Lent with its name, Ash Wednesday. However, by this time, everybody—pastors and people alike—had ashes either sprinkled on their head or traced on their foreheads in the sign of the cross. By the time of the Reformation, the imposition of ashes was a regular mainstay of Lenten piety and practice.

However, Lutherans at the time of the Reformation did not choose to retain the Imposition of Ashes. The reasons for this are not entirely clear since there is very little written for or against this practice by Luther and his colleagues. Thus, although Lutherans began Lent with Ash Wednesday, they did not retain the use of ashes as part of their Ash Wednesday order of service.

Ashes Today?

A contemporary Lutheran appropriation of the Imposition of Ashes should begin with the two-fold biblical understanding of ashes: as a sign of our mortality and as a sign of our repentance. Likewise, the traditional formula, *“Remember, you are dust, and to dust you shall return,”* is most appropriate, since it paraphrases the words of God in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:19). By receiving the ashes, the worshipper acknowledges that God's judgment against our sin is right and just. But the ashes are also made in the sign of the cross—the very instrument by which our Lord took upon himself the punishment for our sin, in our place. Thus, the cross of ashes serves to remind us that we are sinners, and that Christ died for us sinners. This is exactly what the rite in *Lutheran Service Book* calls for.

Imposition of Ashes in the LSB Agenda

The rite begins the service for Ash Wednesday, with the pastor calling the congregation to observe the holy season of Lent:

Dear brothers and sisters of our Lord Jesus Christ, on this day the Church begins a holy season of prayerful and penitential reflection. Our attention is especially directed to the holy sufferings and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. From ancient times the season of Lent has been kept as a time of special devotion, self-denial, and humble repentance born of a faithful heart that dwells confidently on His Word and draws from it life and hope. . . .

The congregation then joins in praying the ancient Litany, a responsive prayer for all sorts and conditions of humanity. The Litany concludes with an additional collect, then the pastor and assistants receive ashes first, followed by the congregation. Using the right thumb, the pastor or an assistant places the ashes on the forehead of each person, saying: *“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”* After receiving the ashes, each person returns to his place in silence. The hymn “Savior, When in Dust to Thee” or other appropriate hymns or Psalms (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143) may be sung during the imposition of ashes. After all have received the ashes, the service continues with the rite of Confession and Absolution or the rite of Corporate Confession and Absolution.

When considered in its larger liturgical context, the Imposition of Ashes could really be viewed as a special way to prepare for Confession and Absolution on Ash Wednesday. The ashes particularly remind us of our sin and mortality and of our need for our Savior, and the opportunity to confess our sins and receive absolution immediately following is a wonderful thing. One pastor writes:

On this past Ash Wednesday I imposed the ashes upon foreheads of all shapes and sizes, under gray, receding hair and on smooth baby skin. I saw how the ashes quieted the agitation of an older woman, her thin body hunched over in a wheelchair. My thumb painted the cross crudely upon the wrinkled forehead of a 100-year-old man. An 18-month-old baby clutched his mother's arm. “Remember you are dust,” I said. I moved aside the blonde bangs of a young girl just turning 13, her braces shining as she smiled at what she would later tell her parents was “a weird sensation.” The final couple had been married only a few years. “And to dust you shall return,” I said. (Brett Webb-Mitchell, “The Disturbing Ashes of Lent: Ash Wednesday Shatters Our Denial of Death,” Christian Ministry, March/April 1998).

So what happens after you leave Ash Wednesday with those ashes on your forehead? The first thing that happens is that you go out into the world where others will see that cross on your forehead. Although reactions may vary, your silent witness has been given: you have been marked as one redeemed by Christ the crucified!

But the other thing that happens is that you will eventually go home and wash those dirty ashes off your face once and for all. And doesn't that water also become a concrete, tactile reminder of the water of your baptism, where your sins were washed away forever? God's grace abounds!

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