

## Why Ashes on Ash Wednesday *by Pastor Ben Motz*

The putting on of ashes as a part of Ash Wednesday began in Germany in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The use of ashes then became widely used in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The ashes were from burning the palms from the previous Palm Sunday. Ashes were originally sprinkled over the head, rather than making a sign of the cross.

There were two primary reasons for using ashes on Ash Wednesday. The first is that Ash Wednesday is the beginning of 40 days of fasting during Lent. These 40 days end on Easter. The 40 days do not include Sundays, which are considered to be breaks in the fast. These 40 days are based on Jesus being tempted by the devil in the wilderness for 40 days before beginning his ministry (Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, & Luke 4:1-12). The story of his temptation is generally read on the First Sunday of Lent.

The second reason is that of the symbolism of Adam and Eve being kicked out of the Garden of Eden when they sinned (Genesis 3). After which, they became mortal and now would die and become dust, just as we will become dust. As the palm branches become dust, so too will we. As Paul writes, Jesus is the second Adam who returns us to immortality through his death on the cross to atone for our sins. The use of ashes is therefore a form of public penance - publicly showing that we acknowledge that we are sinful people in need of forgiveness through divine intervention. Fasting is an aspect of this penance, and continues throughout the 40 days of Lent. Penance itself continues until Maundy Thursday (the Thursday before Easter), when Jesus was crucified, taking upon himself our sin.

The use of ashes in our Judeo/Christian faith is much older than the 9<sup>th</sup> Century. The use of ashes dates all the way back to Old Testament times. One example is that from the book of Isaiah 58:1-12, which is another common Ash Wednesday scripture reading. In this passage, to show their repentance, people are wearing sackcloths and ashes. A sackcloth would be like wearing a burlap sack.

We also learn from Isaiah that fasting and wearing of ashes should not be just religious symbolism. It needs to also include the humbling yourself and doing more to serve others, such as feeding the hungry, releasing captives, giving shelter and clothing to the poor, and working towards justice & peace. It is better not to do it all, than it is to do it just as a religious ritual. Jesus also tells us in Matthew 6:1-21 that if our ashes and fasting is just about religious ritual and piety we should not be doing it at all, which is how the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur has become corrupted in that passage. Biblically, when fasting you are to give the food that you would normally eat to the poor, or give the money you would normally spend on that food in some way to serve God more fully by more fully serving your fellow humankind, in some way that gives God glory. One such way that the members of many Christian churches

do this is through a special Lenten offering envelope, coin envelopes, and/or coin boxes which goes to a mission effort to glorify God and serve others beyond their local congregation.

In the Old Testament, ashes are used primarily for two purposes: purification and penitence. An example of purification can be seen in the book of Numbers, where Moses tells the Israelites to use the ashes of a sacrificed heifer to designate a place for purification - to make that place holy for God. An example of penitence, can be seen in the book of Jonah, where the king of Nineveh took off his robe and put on a sackcloth and sat in ashes to demonstrate his repentance to God. Upon seeing the outward and inward repentance of their king, God spared the people of Nineveh from wrath.

Ashes continue to be used for both purposes today. In the Roman rite, when consecrating a new church, water, salt, wine, and ashes are mixed together and the sprinkled on the altar and walls of the building at various places to purify it and prepare for the consecration rite. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century ashes and sackcloth with ashes on it began to be commonly used by the church to show public discipline of a particular individual. During the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries such public discipline became obsolete, and it is during that time that Ash Wednesday became popular as a form of modified public discipline.

The ashes are meant to publicly show that you see yourself as a sinner in need of repentance. As part of that the person giving the ashes, which is generally a pastor or priest, is to verbally abase you with scripture to remind you that you are but a humble, mortal sinner. The most common scripture used for this is Genesis 3:19, "Remember that you are dust, & to dust you shall return," which is the scripture generally used in many UCC churches.

The use of ashes has come and gone over the years. During the 1500s most churches stopped using ashes. During the mid 1600s churches began using them again. In the 1970s it began to become more popular again in the U.S. and has been growing in use in the U.S. and in Europe again.

Most Protestant churches incorporate the ashes during the confession before the sermon to liturgically link it with penitence, which is the way it was originally done in Germany in 9<sup>th</sup> century. During the 1600s most Roman Catholic churches began having ashes at end of worship, so that it would be after the sermon and communion. The two reasons being was one, it had not been used for a period of time and it was easier to add it to the end of the service than to change the liturgy to incorporate it within the service. The second reason was to liturgically link the use of ashes with fasting, so that you do not eat communion after the fast has begun.

## Should I receive ashes?

You are certainly welcome to receive ashes here. You do not need to be a member of this congregation or a member of the United Church of Christ, you are welcome to receive the ashes. However, prayerfully ask yourself: What do the ashes mean to me? How will I use them?

If the ashes are for you a public sign that you see yourself as a humble sinner in need of discipline and forgiveness; that you need to be rebuked; that you need to be humble; that you need the sacrifice of Christ; that you are unworthy of that sacrifice; and that you intend to give even more of yourself to God during the next 40 days - then the wearing of ashes may be one way in which that can be demonstrated.

If you are wearing the ashes because it is a religious ritual; or so you can tell some relative or friend that you got your ashes and communion; or to show off your Christian faith and piety to others; or you are not planning to give more of yourself to God and in service to others during this Lenten season - then as Jesus instructs, you should probably keep yourself clean of ashes.

Perhaps a more important question from Micah 6:8 is: How will I work for justice, show kindness, and walk humbly with my Lord God throughout not only these 40 days of Lent, but each of the 365 days throughout the year?

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