

Ash Wed Sermon—Invitation to Lent February 26, 2020

Today is the *first day of Lent*, -- the **40** days when we prepare our hearts for the cross and the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The *Ashes* tonight remind us of the Jewish practice of applying ashes when making a **confession**. It was a sign that they admitted their sin, and were committed to new life.

Early Christians began applying ashes during Lent to *prepare* believers for a season of fasting, prayer and repentance.

We observe 40 days because *Jesus himself* began his ministry by going to the desert for 40 days, without food, drink, or companionship. It was there that he was tested by the Devil.

Many periods of testing and faithfulness are marked by the number 40, including the 40 day flood, and 40 years of Israelites wandering in wilderness.

During Lent we enter our own *desert*.

And we are reminded of our *dependence* upon God.

We did not create ourselves,

but from *dust* we came and to dust we shall return.

We must die to self, and die to sin, to be alive in Christ Jesus.

As we receive the **sign of the cross in ashes** we remember this,
And we prepare our hearts to be true followers of Jesus.

Our Lenten theme this year is **WALKING WITH JESUS**.

This idea of walking alongside Jesus is central to the Gospels.

When Jesus says ‘follow me’,

the Greek word for that sounds like

someone saying “I call, you follow”—*akalutheo*.

The word means to walk alongside,

or go on a journey with someone.

We are called during this season of Lent, to *walk alongside Jesus*,

To go on a journey with him---

through a time of preparation and reflection—

to the cross---and finally to the empty tomb of Easter.

This Lenten season we will have *special scriptures and questions to reflect* on in prayer each day, just as we did during February, when our focus was loving God and neighbor with healthy hearts.

But this Lenten focus means
we are taking our desire to love God and neighbor,
and putting it into action.
We are not just talking the talk,
we are walking the WALK.

One of the books that I'll be mentioning throughout Lent is
The Walk: Five Essential Practices of the Christian Life, by Adam Hamilton.
He uses this book to talk about 5 things:
worship, study, service, giving, and sharing our faith—
and how important each of these spiritual practices is for a vibrant Christian life.

All five of these things are essential to Christian life:
We are made to **WORSHIP**—not just in community, but as individuals.

We are also designed to **STUDY** God—
through the different revelations of the Holy spirit,
but especially through the study of scripture.

We are called to **SERVE**.
This is who Jesus was, and it's who we are as His followers.

We are called to **GIVE**.
Our God is a giver, it's the character of God.
Ideally generosity is part of our character as well, as we grow in Christian faith.

We are called to **SHARE the faith**.
Jesus didn't just share faith with those around him,
he sent all his disciples out to make more disciples, by sharing their faith!

Some Christians choose to '*give up*' something during Lent.
This is powerful because we find out just how broken we are,
and how much we depend on whatever we are giving up.
Whether it's television or social media, shopping, or junk food,—
we all have things we use to try and feel good—
instead of our relationship with God.

During Lent, each time we find ourselves going to that substitute instead of God, we can take a moment to pray.
And those prayers help us grow in faith.

So, this year—what if we gave up our **SELF-RELIANCE**?
What if we gave up that idea that we are going to pull ourselves up,
by our bootstraps, in every trial and challenge?
What if we decided to just *be real—and surrender* to God—
The ONLY one who can actually help us!

What if we realized, as we walk through Lent with Jesus,
That we are **totally dependent** upon God?
It is God—not us—who gives us everything we need!
We need to walk with Jesus,
because Jesus is our Lord, and our Savior.
Jesus is the one who cares for us,
more than we could ever ask or imagine.

Friends, I *invite you*, in the name of Jesus Christ, to observe a holy Lent,
40 days of walking with our Savior Jesus.
May we wake up each day, and go to bed each night,
Knowing we are not alone, and we are not on our own.
He calls, and we follow.

Let us pray, Spirit of the Living God, send us now into those places where we can count on nothing but your grace. Drive us to our knees; teach us to trust, shape us into your faithful disciples, and make us new creations. In Jesus' name, Amen.

I invite you now to the **Lord's Table**, to partake of spiritual food and drink for your Lenten journey.

WORDS OF INSTITUTION

Please come forward to the table, receiving the **bread and cup** by intinction,
then receiving the sign of the cross upon your forehead in **ashes**.
Afterwards you can **nail the small paper** containing your confession to the cross.
These are the gifts of God for the people of God, the signs of Lent for our journey.

“Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return, repent and walk with Jesus”