

Write on Our Hearts

A Service for Ash Wednesday

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Notes for Leaders

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the 40-day season of Lent, a time of repentance and preparation for the great celebration of Easter. Though Ash Wednesday has not traditionally been observed among Mennonites, spring revival meetings or renewal services filled a similar function in congregational life. They provided a time and place for people to reflect honestly about their relationship with God and others, confess their sins, receive forgiveness and cleansing, and commit themselves to walk in newness of life. In recent years, revival meetings have occurred less often — and perhaps with their demise, the church has paid less attention to repentance and conversion. Observing Ash Wednesday and the Lenten season can be one way of restoring the important practices of confession and renewal in the church.

The visual symbol at the center of Ash Wednesday is, of course, ashes. Marked on the forehead of worshipers, ashes are a sign of mortality. They remind us that we must call upon the Lord for our salvation and the gift of new life.

Theme Song Choices

A small ensemble might present the Lent 2006 theme song, “God will write upon our hearts” (available online at www.leaderonline.org) as part of this service. Two options for singing it might be immediately prior to the Imposition of Ashes as a time of reflection, or as a second song following the singing of “Guide my feet.”

Another song that might be included is a setting of Psalm 51, “Create in me a clean heart.” Since many versions of this psalm are available (from chant styles to scripture choruses), choose one that your congregation knows well.

Words of Imposition

Several different phrases have been used in the ritual of imposing ashes. Some use the phrase/s: “Remember that you are dust” or “Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return.”

Another set of expressions may seem more appropriate with this year’s focus. While making the horizontal mark of the cross with the ashes, say: **“God meets your sin with forgiving grace.”** When making the vertical mark of the cross, say: **“God meets your mortality with eternal life.”**

The Service

As we enter the season of Lent, we acknowledge that our hearts may be unsuitable surfaces on which our Lord may write. Our “hard-heartedness” may include lethargy, anxiety, numbness, indifference, simple distractedness and lack of concern, self-absorption or any number of other deficiencies. An Ash Wednesday service provides an opportunity for softening our hardness, cleansing the waxy oils of self-absorption, experiencing release from the absorbing forces of anxiety and fear, and deliverance into a welcoming

confidence in the Spirit's purifying power. As we worship together on Ash Wednesday, we take the first steps toward conversion and renewal of our faith during the journey of Lent.

Opening Litany

Leader 1 Beloved, as we gather on this Ash Wednesday evening, standing before the gate leading down the pathway of our Lenten pilgrimage, let us hear again the words of Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew

Leader 2 Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. (Matt. 7:13-14).

Leader 1 Beloved, too often and too long we have wandered the wide road where we are lost among those who know not of the narrow gate and the narrow path of our Lord Jesus. Do you wish to come again to the narrow gate and to join our Lord Jesus on the narrow road in his journey toward life?

People *Yes. We wish to join our Lord on his journey. Yet so often we hardly know how.*

Leader 2 Sisters and brothers, let us join together to seek this gate and to find anew this narrow road. Let us begin this night to travel with Jesus the road of servanthood and sacrifice.

People *Yes. Let us tonight seek together the narrow gate.*

Song "My Jesus, I love thee" HWB # 522
(Sing vs. 1 & 2, then alternate verses, then repeat vs. 1-- See Alternate Verses*)

Alternate Verses 3 & 4 for "My Jesus, I love thee"

On pathways so lonely, weighed down by our load,
We'll search for you only while following your road.
We'll search for your foot steps,
In dust on the trail,
And trust on this journey,
Your Spirit ne'er will fail.

O Jesus, draw near us,
Though this journey grows long.
And grant peace within us
To still fears so strong.
Renew in us your courage,
Your joy on us bestow,
And teach us in dying
Your life, Lord, to know
(To end repeat verse 1)

Pastoral Prayer

Scripture Reading

Jeremiah 31:31-34

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt-- a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Prayer of Confession

Leader 1 God says, "I will write on their hearts..." How, O Lord, can this be true?
 Leader 2 You might well write on sheets of glass or slabs of granite, our hearts are so hard.
 Leader 1 You might well write on bowls of jello, our hearts are so weak.
All ***We confess our hearts are unprepared for your writing.***
 Men Our hearts are hardened with arrogance and self-concern.
 Women Our hearts are weak with anxiety and disappointment.
All ***Our hearts are numb with busyness and self-striving.***
 Leaders 1&2 Renew our hearts, O Lord, that they can receive your writing.
 Women Soften our hardness.
 Men Strengthen our weakness.
 Women Wake us from lethargy and indifference.
 Men Release us from anxiety and fear.
All ***Break away the crusty shells of self-protection and withdrawal.***
 Leaders 1&2 Deliver us into a welcoming confidence in your Spirit's cleansing power.
All ***We desire, O Lord, that our hearts will receive your writing.***
 Men Through your Spirit's cleansing presence, bring our desire to fulfillment.
 Women By your grace and the friendship of Jesus,
 set us on the road with hearts sensitive to your touch.
All ***Write on our hearts, dear God, that you might be our God,
 and that we might be your people. Amen***

Theme Song Alt. 1 "God will write upon our hearts" by Will Ortman Small Ensemble

Imposition of Ashes

[Those who wish to participate in the time of the imposition of ashes are invited to come forward. During most of this time, the hymn will continue to be played. After people receive the ashes upon their forehead or back of hands, they return to their seats and wait for the conclusion of the service.]

Song "Guide my feet" HWB# 546
[Worshipers are invited to sing verses 1 thru 6 as persons come forward for the imposition of ashes.
After all verses, the accompanist can continue playing until all who so desire have come, or go to Theme song.]

Theme Song Alt. 2 "God will write upon our hearts" by Will Ortman Small Ensemble

Litany of Benediction - Write on our hearts

Leader 1: God, even though we have taken our first faltering steps down the pathway of this Lenten season, we hear echoing in our minds the words of Jeremiah declaring your relentless love for us. We wonder if these words can be true for us.

Leader 2: "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people." (Jeremiah 31:33)

All: *How, O Lord, can you write on our hearts?*

Men: Lord, we suspect you must first write the pain of Lent before you can write the joy of Easter.

Women: We worry you must first write the confusion of crucifixion before you can write the confidence of resurrection.

All: *We fear you must first write the despair of burial before you can write the freedom of new life.*

Leader: Even so, Lord, we call to you and say:

Women: Write on our hearts, O Lord.

Men: Write on our hearts, our God.

All: *Write on our hearts in your relentless love.*

Leader: Guide us through this Lenten season, softening our hearts toward your writing.

All: *Cause us to embrace this pathway of turmoil as the doorway to peace.*

Leader: Write on our hearts so we can say again with confidence:

Men: We are the Lord's people.

Women: We are the Lord's people.

All: *And God the Lord is our God. Amen.*