

## *Setting the Course*

### *Welcome*

Welcome to our Ash Wednesday service. My name is Randy Quinn, and I am the interim pastor here at Hope Mennonite Church. (You already know that, but I want to make sure I don't lose my habit of beginning a service by introducing myself!)

For those who are joining us online this evening, welcome. As we gather this evening, in person, or online, I am struck by three different things.

1. It's strange to gather for what is typically a somber service on Valentine's Day, especially since this is also my wedding anniversary. It feels odd to speak of our mortality on a day when I am also remembering and celebrating what I think of as an eternal kind of love.
2. This is also the beginning of Lent, a season typically used to focus on spiritual disciplines; a season of intentional prayer and study that often includes fasting. So I guess that means no Valentine's chocolates until we get to Easter.
3. Less strange, but no less remarkable, I think of Ash Wednesday as the beginning of a journey, a journey we will walk together as we head toward Easter. In the scripture we will hear this evening, Jesus sets the course for that journey. He invites us to join him on the path toward the cross. And in the end, that is the focus of our service this evening.

### *Opening Prayer*

**O God,  
maker of everything and judge of all that you have made,  
from the dust of the earth you have formed us  
and from the dust of death you would raise us up.  
By the redemptive power of the cross,  
create in us clean hearts  
and put within us a new spirit,  
that we may repent of our sins  
and lead lives worthy of your calling;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

### *Hymn*

“Sign Us with Ashes, Merciful God”

#304 A

From there Jesus and his followers went through Galilee, but he didn't want anyone to know it. This was because he was teaching his disciples, “The Human One will be delivered into human hands. They will kill him. Three days after he is killed he will rise up.” But they didn't understand this kind of talk, and they were afraid to ask him. They entered Capernaum. When they had come into a house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about during the journey?” They didn't respond, since on the way they had been debating with each other about who was the greatest. He sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be least of all and the servant of all.” Jesus reached for a little child, placed him among the Twelve, and embraced him. Then he said, “Whoever welcomes one of these children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me isn't actually welcoming me but rather the one who sent me.”

Mk. 9:30-37 (C.E.B.)

As I said earlier, I think of Lent as a Journey. It's a journey through time, a journey of forty days. Forty days to remind us of the forty years in the wilderness. Forty days to remind us of the forty days and forty nights that it rained while Noah was in the ark. Forty days to remind us of the forty days and forty nights when Jesus fasted in the wilderness.

I've been asked many times why 40 days. I think the best answer is because it was a long time, more than a month, but not so long that we don't get caught thinking it is an eternity. It is a long time without being an impossibly long time. God doesn't want us to travel this road so long that we become like so many children and ask, "Are we there yet?"

The important thing to hear in our text for this evening is that Jesus is leading us on this journey, and more importantly, he knows where he is going. The journey ends when Jesus willingly hands himself over to be crucified. It is a journey not many of us would choose for ourselves, but we follow anyway because we trust our guide.

In other places Jesus invites us to take up our own crosses as we walk this journey toward his death.

His disciples are confused by his intent focus on his death. So, Jesus explains that his kingdom is one where greatness is being redefined. It isn't about having vast amounts of wealth. It isn't about having numerous servants. It isn't even about being granted special access.

It's about an inverted sense of hierarchy, where the last in line become the most important, where the one with the least to offer is seen as the most valuable member of the team.

We will impose ashes on our foreheads this evening as a reminder that we are human, that we are mortal. It is also a way of joining Jesus as we remember that he, too, was human. He too was mortal.

The difference is that he was convinced Good Friday will not be the end of the story. He is willing to suffer and die, trusting God to raise him from the dead.

The question we need to ask ourselves during Lent is if we would be – if we are – willing to sacrifice our all, to follow Jesus on a journey of servanthood, a journey toward a different kind of a world, a world in which the least become the greatest and the last become first.

### *Hymn*

"Stay with Me, The Night Has Come" #319

Psalm 51:1-3, 10-12 #889

Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your great compassion,  
blot out my transgressions.

**Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin.**

**For I know my transgressions,**

**and my sin is ever before me.**

Create in me a pure heart, O God,  
and put a new and steadfast spirit within me.

Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.

**Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.**

### *Hymn*

“Jesus, Remember Me” (3 times)

#327

### *Prayer of Pardon*

May the Almighty and merciful God, who desires not the death of a sinner but that we turn from wickedness and live, accept your repentance, forgive your sins, and restore you by the Holy Spirit to newness of life. Amen.

### *Invitation to Lenten Disciplines*

Early in the history of the church, Christians set aside a season of great devotion as they prepared to celebrate the passion of Jesus and the story of Easter. It became the custom of the Church to set aside forty days for this time of spiritual preparation. This season of Lent, as it became known, was forty days long, not counting Sundays, since Sunday is always a celebration of the resurrection.

During this season converts to the faith were prepared for Holy Baptism, and persons who had committed serious sins and had separated themselves from the community of faith were reconciled by penitence and forgiveness, and eventually restored to participation in the life of the Church.

In this way the whole congregation was reminded of the mercy and forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel of Jesus Christ and the need we all have to renew our faith.

I invite you, therefore, in honor of that tradition to observe a holy Lent:

- by self-examination and repentance;
- by prayer, fasting, and self-denial;
- and by reading and meditating on God's Holy Word.

To make a right beginning of this season, and as a reminder of our mortal nature, we will use ashes. The ashes are to remind us that we were created from the dust and we will return to the dust. By tradition, the ashes from last year's Palm branches are used, reminding us of the fickle crowd that turned from joyous celebrations at the beginning of holy week to calling for Jesus to be crucified on Friday.

It is a reminder of our own sin and need for repentance.

In that spirit, let us bow before our Creator and Redeemer.

### *Silent Prayer*

*Thanksgiving over the Ashes*

**Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth.  
Grant that these ashes may be to us a sign of our mortality and penitence,  
so that we may remember that only by your gracious gift  
are we given everlasting life;  
through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.**

After you have been marked with ashes, you are invited to light a candle and reflect at the cross. It is a time to both repent of our sin and to claim our belief in the gospel. We have sinned. And we are forgiven.

*Imposition of Ashes*

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

Or:

Repent, and believe the gospel.

*Prayers at the Cross*

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Selected Bibliography

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