



Why and how do we use ashes on Ash Wednesday?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.

Background: Why?

Ash Wednesday is the Wednesday of the seventh week before Easter and the first day of Lent. The day is named for the practice of imposing ashes, a practice that many Lutheran congregations have found to be a very meaningful part of the Ash Wednesday liturgy.

Using ashes as a sign of repentance is an ancient practice, often mentioned in the Bible (e.g., Jonah 3:5-9; Job 42:6; Jeremiah 6:26; Matthew 11:21). The early Christians adopted the use of ashes from Jewish practice as an external mark of penitence.

Ashes symbolize several aspects of our human existence:

- Ashes remind us of God's condemnation of sin, as God said to Adam, "Dust you are and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19).
- Ashes suggest cleansing and renewal. They were used anciently in the absence of soap. Even on Ash Wednesday, this most penitential day, we receive ashes in the form of the cross, the same symbol placed on our bodies with water in our baptism. Even in this ashen mark of death, we anticipate the new life of Easter.
- Ashes remind us of the shortness of human life, for it is said as we are buried into the ground or as ashes are placed in a columbarium ([see "What are columbaria and memorial gardens?"](#)). "We commit this body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 284).
- Ashes are a symbol of our need to repent, confess our sins, and return to God.

The liturgy for Ash Wednesday can be found in both the *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (p. 251) and *Leaders Desk Edition* (p. 615). In the liturgy, the confession and imposition of ashes follow the sermon and hymn of the day. Following an Invitation to Lent, confession marks the beginning of a season of penitence. The Maundy Thursday absolution is the structural response to the Ash Wednesday confession, marking off Lent as a penitential time. At the conclusion of the Ash Wednesday confession and imposition of ashes, a declaration of grace is used, coupled with a plea for mercy.

Practice: How?

Those who desire to receive ashes come forward and may stand/kneel. Ashes are applied with the minister's thumb in the form of a small cross on the forehead of each person with the words: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Pastors and one or more assisting ministers may impose ashes, depending up the size of your assembly and local practice. Several prie-dieu (kneelers) can be stationed in appropriate places for the imposition so that people can freely move to them as they choose. Ushering is not necessary, but a printed worship folder or verbal announcements prior to the service will assist the assembly in knowing where, when and how to come forward.

Silence ([see "What is the role of silence in worship?"](#)) may be kept or appropriate music can accompany the imposition of ashes. Music that can be easily memorized or unaccompanied works well when other action is taking place. Also, the musical leaders need to support but not obscure the actions and words of this time: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

Appropriate hymns or songs during the imposition of ashes include but are not limited to the following:

Evangelical Lutheran Worship

- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* under the index headings: Ash Wednesday, Confession/Forgiveness and Lent.
- Further suggestions can be found in the *Indexes to Evangelical Lutheran Worship* and *Sundays and Seasons*.
- Psalm 51 (Arrangements suggested in *Sundays and Seasons*)
- Create in me a clean heart (ELW 185-188)

Music Sourcebook for Lent and the Three Days

- Remember That You Are Dust (S412)
- Remember That You Are Dust (S413)
- Return to God (S414)
- Dust and Ashes (S415)

The music may continue until the ministers have cleansed their hands and all have returned to their places.

Making Your Own Ashes Ashes are made from the palms used to observe the Sunday of the Passion/Palm Sunday. You may encourage the congregation to save their palms on each Sunday of the Passion so they may bring them back the following Lent for making ashes. Cut the palms into small pieces with scissors.

1. Burn them in a brazier or steel bucket (Adding a little rubbing alcohol will make them burn faster).
2. Gently sift the ashes through a fine wire mesh sieve.
3. Store the ashes in a sealed plastic bag or container. They will last for years.

If you prefer, you can purchase [palm ash and ash vessels from Augsburg Fortress](#).

Preparing for the imposition of ashes

1. Mix the ashes with a few drops of olive or mineral oil until the ashes are just moist enough to bind together and will adhere to one's skin.
2. Place the ashes in a small bowl. The quantity of ash needed will not be large.
3. A lavabo bowl¹ and towel should be provided for cleansing the minister's hands after the imposition. Fresh lemon can be quartered and placed in bowl to help cut the oil down. Adding a few drops of liquid hand soap to the water in the bowl can also help.
4. Place the ashes, lavabo bowl and towel on a credence table.²

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- ↪ What are Columbaria and Memorial Gardens?
- ↪ What is the Role of Silence in Worship?

[Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:](#)

- 📖 *Evangelical Lutheran Worship, Leaders Desk Edition*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006.
- 📖 Ramshaw, Gail and Mons Teig. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Keeping Time, The Church's Years*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009.
- 📖 *Music Sourcebook for Lent and the Three Days*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2010.
- 📖 *Worship Guidebook for Lent and the Three Days*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009.
- 📖 Stauffer, S. Anita. *Altar Guild and Sacristy Handbook*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000.
- 📖 VanLoon, Ralph R. and S. Anita Stauffer. *Worship Wordbook: A Practical Guide for Parish Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995.
- 📖 *Indexes to Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007.
- 📖 *Sundays and Seasons*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, published annually.
📖 Also available as an on-line subscription, [Sundays and seasons.com](http://SundaysandSeasons.com).

Updated May 2018

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¹ Lavabo bowl: a bowl filled with water used for washing the presiding minister's hands either before Holy Communion or after the imposition of ashes or oil.

² Credence table: A side table or shelf near the altar on which the Holy Communion elements and the missal stand are kept until they are brought to the altar for the Eucharist itself. Sometimes, the credence is covered with a large white linen cloth. Some assemblies place the offering plates on the credence as well, depending on its size.