

Ash Wednesday Evening Song and Prayer

O Saviour, Call Us Back Again!

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Preparation:

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.

Visual Environment:

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.

A spare, simple visual center best represents the spirit of Ash Wednesday. A rough gray or brown cloth, a clay container filled with ashes, perhaps a few bare branches, and several lit candles are all that is needed to evoke a sense of solemnity. You may also want to place a cross in a location where people can come to kneel around it.

Imposition of Ashes:

Not all congregations will be comfortable using the symbol of placing ashes on people's foreheads. Others will want to participate in this ritual which is practiced by Christians all over the world. A simple way to institute the practice is to have a leader stand at each entrance to the sanctuary with a bowl of ashes in the form of a cross and repeat, "Remember that you are dust" (or "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return"). Worshipers then enter the place of worship in silence.

The imposition of ashes can also occur during the service at the time of the prayer of confession. Many people who have participated in this annual service report that it has been very meaningful. Though we don't like to consider our mortality, it is a valuable experience to stop once a year to ponder this sobering reality and also to remember the promise of eternal life through Christ.

Scripture Readings:

Ask a variety of persons in the congregation – old, young, newcomers, etc. – to prepare the scripture readings. Readers should speak simply and clearly. Where readings include musical responses, these may be practiced in advance.

Music and Prayer:

Though the Ash Wednesday service is sombre, it is not meant to be joyless. The suggested hymns encourage us to repent and confess our sins; they also remind us of God's lavish grace and desire to cleanse and forgive.

The service begins with a penitential hymn, "In the stillness of the evening." An effective way to use this hymn is to ask members of a quartet to stand at four corners of the room. A soprano sings stanza one as a solo, a tenor joins on stanza two, an alto joins on stanza three, and all four parts sing stanza four (stanza five may be omitted).

"Come, ye disconsolate" is best sung in unison, using the accompaniment in "Hymnal: Accompaniment Handbook".

A vigorous "Guide my feet" is meant to conclude the service with strength and hope.

The spoken prayers of intercession may be offered by a leader or may be freely spoken by the congregation. If these are offered by a leader, the intercessions can be grouped together with a sung response, "Kyrie eleison," after each set of prayers (see HWB #720 for an example of this kind of prayer of intercession).

Silent prayers for reconciliation among God's people and the world can be offered in a variety of ways. People can remain in their seats and pray as the congregation sings. Or people may be invited to come forward and kneel at the foot of a cross and then return to their seats when they have concluded. Throughout this time of prayer, the congregation continues to sing softly.

A suggested length of time for the periods of silence is 2-3 minutes each.

Worship Leading:

The reflective spirit of this service will be aided by worship leaders who use a minimum of words. Instructions for the times of prayer may be printed in a bulletin, or leaders may choose to make a brief announcement at the time of prayer. Let the service proceed in a leisurely manner, leaving room and space for the spirit to move within people's hearts.

Order of Worship

Gathering

Silence

Imposition of ashes

Opening Hymn – HWB #551 “In the stillness of the evening” (stanzas 1-4; sung by solo voices)

Silence

Opening Words – based on Joel 2:12-13; Ps. 34-17

Hymn – HWB #497 “Come, ye disconsolate”

Hearing the Word

Scripture – Isaiah 58:1-12

Hymn – HWB #514 “Lord, I am fondly, earnestly longing”

Scripture – Matthew 6:1-6; 16-21

Silence

Making our Confession and Receiving Grace

Prayer of approach

*The Lord my Creator took me as dust from the earth,
and formed me into a living being,
breathing into me the breath of life.*

God honoured me,

*setting me as ruler upon earth over all things visible,
and made me companion of the angels.*

But Satan the deceiver

using the serpent as instrument,

enticed me by food –

parted me from the glory of God,

and gave me over to the earth and to the lowest depths of the earth.

But in compassion, O Saviour, call me back again! (Byzantine Vespers)

Scripture – Psalm 51:1-12

Hymn of Confession – HWB #141 “The sacrifice you accept, O God”

or HWB #128 “Create in me a clean heart”

Scripture – Psalm 103:8-18

Hymns of Grace – HWB #80 “O bless the Lord, my soul”

HWB #145 “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy”

HWB #149 “Great God of wonders”

Responding in Prayer

Prayers of intercession – with sung response, “Kyrie eleison” (HWB #152)

The Lord’s prayer – HWB #554 “Our Father, who art in heaven”

Silent prayers around the cross (for reconciliation, with sung response, HWB #113)

Sending

Words of blessing

Closing hymn – HWB #546 “Guide my feet”