

## ASH WEDNESDAY



## CULTURAL RESOURCES

**Wednesday, February 13, 2013**

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**Lection – Daniel 1:8-20**

### **I. The History Section**

Ash Wednesday is a day on the Christian calendar that marks the first day of Lent. Lent begins 40 days before Easter. It is a time of repentance, fasting, spiritual reflection, and discipline. According to the Canonical Gospels, Jesus spent 40 days fasting in the desert before the beginning of his ministry.

Ash Wednesday was originally called *dies cinerum*, which means day of ashes. It is assumed to date back to the 8th Century. Ash Wednesday derives its name from the practice of placing ashes on the forehead as a sign of mourning and penitence to God.<sup>1</sup> Usually, the ashes used are the remnants of the burned palms from the previous year’s Palm Sunday. Ashes on the body are an ancient practice of mourning. Biblical examples of using ashes while mourning can be found in these Scriptures: Job 42:6; 2 Samuel 13:19; Esther 4:1, 3; Isaiah 61:3; Jeremiah 6:26; Ezekiel 27:30; Daniel 9:3; and Matthew 11:21.

On Ash Wednesday, in some communities of faith, congregants are invited to the altar to receive ashes before they partake of Holy Communion. The minister traces a cross of ashes on the

forehead and the recipient wears it until it fades away. For additional information on Ash Wednesday, see the cultural resource units of The African American Lectionary (Ash Wednesday) for 2008–2012.

## **II. A Prayer on Ash Wednesday**

Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing that you have made, and you forgive the sins of all who are penitent. Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain from you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let us pray that we may keep a true fast. Lord, protect us in our struggle against evil. Help us to honor you by our self-denial and make this season holy. Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever.

Gracious God, out of your love and mercy you breathed into dust the breath of life, creating us to serve you and one another. Call forth our penitence and acts of love, and strengthen us to face our mortality, so that we may look with confidence for your salvation; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.<sup>2</sup>

## **III. Songs That Speak to the Moment**

“Rain on Us” by Earnest Pugh evokes the cleansing power of God’s Spirit to rain upon his people and purify their hearts in order to be made new again. This song emphasizes the repentant heart and the desire to have a life that is pleasing to God, which is what Ash Wednesday embodies. This song is a plea for God to “Purify our hearts. Surround us in this place and breathe new life within us . . . saturate our hearts!”

### **Rain on Us**

by Earnest Pugh

*[Lead Verse:]*

Let your glory fill this place  
Let your all-consuming fire, fill this tabernacle  
Purify our hearts  
Surround us in this place  
And breathe new life within us  
Send a refreshing glory  
Purify our hearts

*[Choir:]*

Let your glory fill this place  
Let your all-consuming fire, fill this tabernacle  
And purify our hearts  
Surround us in this place  
And breathe new life within us

Send a refreshing glory  
Saturate our hearts

*[Chorus: x2]*

Rain on us, Breathe on us  
Shower down, Shower down  
Send your Spirit, Lord

*[Choir]<sup>3</sup>*

“Man in the Mirror,” performed by Michael Jackson, is a wonderful song to use as a reminder for Ash Wednesday. It asks for us to look at ourselves and make a change. It requires spiritual reflection and renewal of self. As we sing along we are reminded to look at the hurting world around us and to repent for our selfishness. Michael sings, “I’ve been a victim of a selfish kind of love. It’s time that I realize that there are some with no home, not a nickel to loan. Could it be really me, pretending that they’re not alone?” This song asks us to look at ourselves and make a change for the better. Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent, and fasting for spiritual change with a contrite heart a major reason of why we offer our supplications to God.

### **Man in the Mirror**

by Glen Ballard and Siedah Garrett  
Performed by Michael Jackson

Ooh ooh ooh aah  
Gotta make a change  
For once in my life  
It’s gonna feel real good  
Gonna make a difference  
Gonna make it right

As I turned up the collar on  
A favorite winter coat  
This wind is blowin’ my mind  
I see the kids in the street  
With not enough to eat  
Who am I to be blind  
Pretending not to see their needs

A summer’s disregard  
A broken bottle top  
And a one man’s soul  
They follow each other  
On the wind ya’ know  
‘Cause they got nowhere to go  
That’s why I want you to know

Chorus: I'm starting with the man in the mirror  
I'm asking him to change his ways  
And no message could have been any clearer  
If you wanna make the world a better place  
Take a look at yourself and then make a change, yey  
Na na na, na na na, na na na na oh ho

I've been a victim of  
A selfish kinda love  
It's time that I realize  
There are some with no home  
Not a nickel to loan  
Could it be really me pretending that they're not alone

A willow deeply scarred  
Somebody's broken heart  
And a washed out dream  
They follow the pattern of the wind ya' see  
'Cause they got no place to be  
That's why I'm starting with me

Chorus <sup>4</sup>

#### **IV. Cultural Response to Significant Aspects of the Text(s)**

##### **Historical Lesson**

People of African descent in America are the personification of what Ash Wednesday represents. We have journeyed through many trials and tribulations, successes and triumphs, and daily we become examples of self-renewal. We are a resilient people who fall at the feet of God and ask to be made whole. God sees our repentant hearts and renews us and makes us stronger.

Since Islam is the fastest-growing of the major religions of the world, I believe that Ash Wednesday can also speak to those who observe Ramadan as a tool of interfaith reflection. In their period of fasting, some faithful Muslims give up favorite foods like chocolate. However, most Muslims interpret the call to fasting as complete abstention from all food during daytime hours, but they also allow for a disciplined or restricted diet.

The focus of spiritual reflection by Christians during Lent is similar to that of Muslims during Ramadan. Prayer, penitence, almsgiving, and self-denial are stressed.

As we reflect on our mountain moving and mistakes, victories and vile setbacks, we must thank God for our journey. African Americans have journeyed from slavery to freedom, through emancipation, reconstruction, Jim Crow Laws, and the modern Civil Rights era, to become exceptionally educated citizens, entrepreneurs, entertainment moguls, business gurus, community activists, spiritual emancipators, and president of the United States. Black Americans

have proved unvanquishable and divinely favored. We see this same self-fortitude in Daniel 1:8-20, where God's provision is more than enough. As long as we humble ourselves and seek upright hearts, God's provision for us is abundant in love, forgiveness, mercy, and grace.

## **V. Audio Visual Aids**

To aid in helping hearers remember the morning sermon and the message of the text(s), one may want to put in the bulletin/order of service or use on screens in the church:

- A pictorial PowerPoint presentation of African Americans throughout history.
- A sample of sackcloth and ashes to pass around so that people can touch the material ancients used in their mourning rituals.
- Psalm 51 should be placed on the screen and have congregants recite it together.

## **VI. Poems, Illustrations, and Prose**

### **The Cycle**

by Violette L. Meier

all children are born in Eden  
innocent  
naked  
happy  
free  
ignorant of good and evil  
until  
serpentine parents offer apples of knowledge  
fruits of fruitless society  
and us babies gobble them up  
expecting  
infinite life  
sacred understanding  
but those apples of good intentions  
are always tinged with doom  
the descent from divinity begins  
and we all fall  
fall  
fall  
we all  
go  
tumbling down

### **A Ray of Light in Your Sky**

by Violette L. Meier

I thirst oh Lord  
drop wisdom down my throat  
let its cool nectar flow into my heart  
drenching my spirit with divine knowledge  
I will gladly choke down your heavenly awareness  
become a glutton of your splendid cultivation  
I hunger and thirst for righteousness  
fill me with your light  
pour your radiance into my hollow shell  
make me swell, burst into sunshine  
a ray of light in your sky

### **Bring Me to You**

by Violette L. Meier

Bring me to you Oh Christ  
I have been crucified by sin  
Hands nailed bloody by worldly men  
Brutally whipped with lack of love for myself and anyone else  
Crowned with thorns deflating my arrogant ego  
Forcing my haughty stance to knees bowed low  
Lord Oh Lord  
My feet have been spiked by a guilty conscious  
Paining me when I did wrong knowing what's right  
My side has been pierced with hellish fears so fierce  
I am weak and falling into oblivion  
Oh Messiah!  
Child of mighty God  
Lift me higher  
Do not break my legs  
I need to stand mighty after being resurrected  
From my life now dead  
Bring me to you!

### **The Power of Fasting and Prayer**

If you've ever watched the high jumpers in the Olympics, you will realize that there are two kinds. The regular high jumpers jump about seven feet. They run and throw their backs over the bar. But there is another kind of high jumper. They are called pole-vaulters. They jump about eighteen feet. They back up. They look down the runway. But they have that pole in their hand. They start running down the track, stick the pole in a hole in the ground, put all of their weight on that pole, and use the pole to lift them to a level that they could not lift themselves on their own.

Some of us have mountains. There is a crossbar and we have tried to high-jump it in the flesh. We have seen that mountain and we have backed up. We have said, “Mountain, you are not going to keep me down any longer.” We grit our teeth with the power of positive thinking and resolve not to repeat our mistakes.

Some of us have been jumping that same two feet for fifty years and the bar is still up there. In fact, it keeps going higher every year. Maybe what you need is a pole vault. You need something that you can lean on when you get to your problem so that you can go higher than you could ever lift yourself. Maybe you need a pole that will help you jump over the mountain. The pole vault for the bars in your life are fasting and prayer.

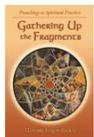
This illustration was taken from Tony Evans’ Book of Illustrations: Stories, Quotes, and Anecdotes from more than 30 years of preaching and public speaking. Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2009, illustration #293.

## **VII. Making It a Memorable Learning Moment**

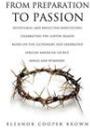
Keep in mind the following:

- Usually when priests or ministers place ashes on one’s forehead, they recite one or both of the following verses: “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3:19) and “Repent and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15).
- The use of ashes on Ash Wednesday is a sacramental act, not a sacrament.
- Ashes are usually mixed with holy water or oil and fumigated with incense.
- Ash Wednesday is observed by quite a few churches: the African Methodist Episcopal Church, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Anglican Communion, some Baptist churches, Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, some Church of the Nazarenes, the Church of God (Anderson), some Community of Christ churches, some Evangelical Covenant Churches, some Free Methodist Churches, the Roman Catholic Church, Lutheran Churches, some Mennonite Churches USA, the Presbyterian Church, the United Church of Christ, the Disciples of Christ Church, the United Methodist Church, and the Wesleyan Church.

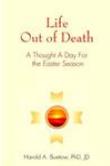
## **Books to Enhance Your Understanding of Ash Wednesday**



Budde, Mariann Edgar. Gathering up the Fragments: Preaching as Spiritual Practice. Lima, OH: CSS Publishing Company, Inc., 2009.



Brown, Eleanor Cooper. From Preparation to Passion: A Devotional and Reflective Meditations Celebrating the Lenten Season Based on the Revised Common Lectionary and Celebrated African American Sacred Songs and Hymnody. Xulon Press, 2010.



Buetow, Harold A. Life out of Death: A Thought a Day for the Easter Season. Staten Island, NY: St. Pauls/Alba House, 2005.

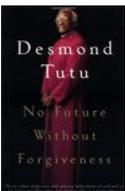


Collins, John J. Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel (part of the Hermeneia series). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994.

Manz, James G. The Call of Lent: Sermons for the Season. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1968.



McClain, William. Come Sunday: The Liturgy of Zion. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991.



Tutu, Desmond. No Future without Forgiveness. New York, NY: Doubleday Press, 1997.

Woods, Michael J. Cultivating Soil and Soul: Twentieth Century Catholic Agrarians Embrace the Liturgical Movement. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009.

\*Both of today's images are by Jan L. Richardson. You can visit her website at [PaintedPrayerbook.com](http://PaintedPrayerbook.com).

## Notes

1. Bucher, Dr. Richard P. "The History and Meaning of Ash Wednesday." Online location <http://www.orlutheran.com/html/ash.html>. accessed 11 October 2012.

2. Prayer from Lectionary Bible Studies and Sermons. Online location: [www.lectionarystudies.com](http://www.lectionarystudies.com) accessed 11 October 2012.

3. Pugh, Earnest. "Rain on Us." Online location: <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/earnestpugh/rainonus.html> accessed 11 October 2012.

4. Ballard, Glen and Siedah Garrett. "Man in the Mirror." Online location: <http://www.elyrics.net/read/m/michael-jackson-lyrics/man-in-the-mirror-lyrics.html> accessed 11 October 2012.