

## Ash Wednesday Service of Covenant Renewal

Compiled by Susan Armstrong

from adaptations by George Lyons and Jeren Rowel of John Wesley's Covenant Renewal Service. Ash Wednesday excerpts taken from Dennis Bratcher's adaptation of Ash Wednesday Service of Worship from *The Book of Common Prayer*.

**Pastor:** "Come, let us join ourselves to the Lord in an everlasting covenant which will never be forgotten." (Jer. 50:5)

**Pastor prays:** Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden; cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name through Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Pastor:** Please stand for the reading of the Gospel.

**Gospel Reading:** Luke 18:9-14

**Pastor:** This is the word of the Lord to you.

**People:** Thanks be to God.

**Pastor:** Today we begin a spiritual journey that will span forty days, from Ash Wednesday until Holy Saturday before Easter Sunday. In the early days of the Church, the season of Lent was a time of preparation for new converts as they readied their hearts to enter into Christian Baptism on Easter Sunday. Since these new members were to be received into a living community of Faith, the entire community was called to preparation. Also, this was the time when those who had been separated from the Church because of explicit sin would prepare to rejoin the community of Faith.

Today, the season of Lent is a time of prayer, fasting, self-examination, and penitence for all Christians as we prepare to celebrate Easter. Through this forty-day journey, we are reminded that we are totally unworthy before God, that we have nothing with which we can obtain salvation, and that our best efforts at being righteous fall far short. This season reminds us how much we need grace in our lives in order to live a transformed life that reflects God's love. We are called to renew our commitments and our faith as we continually acknowledge our need of God's transforming presence with us.

I invite you to the observance of 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 repentance, and as a mark of our mortal nature, let us now invite God to examine our hearts.

*Pass Me Not*

Hymnal #346

**Meditation**

**Epistle:** Hebrews 12:1-14

**Pastor:** We come together on this Ash Wednesday to join in a covenant service. Our purpose is to be reminded of our deep need of God's grace. Every person must recognize their sinful condition and remember that they cannot experience forgiveness outside the grace of God.

Then we must acknowledge that our need of his grace is deeper than forgiveness for wrong acts, but goes to the cleansing work of his Spirit at the very core of our beings. So we embrace, tonight, an opportunity for a fresh experience of his grace. Let us rededicate ourselves to the covenant relationship provided for us through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Much of this service comes to us through John Wesley, the forefather of our theological tradition. For him what it meant to be a mature disciple of Christ was the joining of believers in a covenant "to serve God with all our heart and with all our soul." He urged his Methodist followers to renew, "at every point, our covenant, that the Lord should be our God."

It is important that we recognize our continuing need for confession. We have tended to connect confession only to the moment of turning to Christ for the first time. But scripture validates, and Wesley affirmed, even the Christian's need for a periodic prayer of confession as well. In Wesley's own words: "the most holy among us is subject to a thousand infirmities which spring from our fallenness." Our shortcomings and human failings need the atoning blood of Christ as well as our "properly so-called" sins.

### **Confession**

**Pastor:** We come to Christ as our great high priest. And by this we now renounce our own righteousness. Do you deeply sense your need of God's grace in Christ?

**People:** We acknowledge a deep sense of our need. We see ourselves as sinners in need of a Savior. The Spirit of God has awakened us; for we have cried out, "Lord, where are we? Is there no hope of escaping out of this wretched state? We are but dead, if we continue as we are. What may we do to be saved?"

**Pastor:** Being made aware of our sin and its danger, we look for help and deliverance, but we often look everywhere else before looking unto Christ. Nothing will bring us to Christ but absolute necessity. We try to forsake our sins through prayers, and sermons, and sacraments, searching for salvation.

But all of these, though they are needed in their places, cannot save in and of themselves. Our determination cannot help us; in fact, it may reflect the source of our sin. Ritual alone cannot help; these are but empty vessels. They tell us, "You knock at a wrong door; salvation is not in us." Can we now utterly despair of our own goodness, or do we trust in anything but Christ?

### **Supplication**

**People:** Lord, be merciful to us. What shall we do? We dare not abide as we are, and we are weary of trying to do it alone.

Our praying alone will not help us. Our hearing alone will not help us. If we give everything we have to the poor, or give up our bodies to be burned, all this would not save our souls. Woe is us. What shall we do?

**Pastor:** We must let our sins go. We must let our righteousness go. Christ came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. He came to seek and to save them that are lost.

Friends, will you now trust Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life, and has provided everything needed for our forgiveness? You have this threefold assurance:

*First*, God's initiative. He has taken the first move. God the Father has appointed and sent Christ into the world to save sinners. Jesus Christ is the One whom God the Father has made our Savior. He is redeeming and reconciling the world to himself.

*Second*, God's command. This is His commandment, that we should believe on the name of His Son, Jesus Christ.

*Third*, God's promise. "Behold, I lay in Zion a chief cornerstone, elect, precious; and whoever believes on him shall not be disappointed." (Isa. 28:16)

Now, because we have this threefold assurance of God's initiative, command, and promise, we may be bold to risk everything for Christ and to make ourselves totally available to Him.

**Pastor:** Please stand for the reading of the Psalm.

### **Psalm 130**

**Pastor:** This is the word of the Lord to you.

**People:** Thanks be to God.

**Pastor:** Those who desire may now come forward and receive the ashes on their forehead and then return to their seats.

### **Imposition of Ashes**

#### **Prayer**

*The leader and people shall pray together:*

**Pastor and People:** Lord Jesus, here we are, lost creatures, and enemies to God, under his wrath and curse. Lord, undertake for us, reconcile us to God, and save our souls.

You have promised not to refuse us, for we have nowhere else to go. If we had come in our own righteousness, you may well have sent us away; but since we come at the command of the Father, and because of your great love, we know you will not reject us.

We come, Lord. We believe, Lord. We throw ourselves upon your grace and mercy. We cast ourselves upon your blood. On you we will trust, and rest. On you we lay our hope for pardon, for life, and for salvation. If we perish, we perish on your shoulders. If we sink, we sink in your ship. If we die, we die at your door. Do not bid us to go away, for we will not go.

"Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil; for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen."

### **Commitment**

**Pastor:** We now yield ourselves to the Lord. As his servants, we must give up the dominion and control of ourselves to Christ.

"Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law but under grace." (Rom. 6:12-14)

**People:** We are yours, Lord. We reverence you. We dedicate ourselves to your service.

**Pastor:** In so giving ourselves to the Lord, we affirm that we will heartily embrace what he has appointed us to do, both corporately and personally.

Let him appoint you to your work. Christ has many services to be done; some are more easy and honorable, others more difficult and menial. Some are suitable to our inclinations and interest; others are contrary to both. In some we may please Christ and please ourselves, as when he requires us to feed and clothe ourselves.

Indeed, there are some spiritual duties that are more pleasing than others: to rejoice in the Lord, to be a blessing, and praising God. These are the sweet works of a Christian.

But then there are other works, where pleasing Christ is to deny ourselves, as in enduring the sins and shortcomings of others or correcting others in their sins. Confessing Christ and His name is never easy when it costs us shame and ridicule. It is never easy to sail against the wind, swim against the tide, or surrender our rights and privileges because Jesus Christ is our Lord.

Find what it is that Christ expects of you and then give yourselves totally to his will, without bargaining and without reservation.

*Pastor and people will pray together:*

**Pastor and People:** Make us what you will, Lord, and send us where we are to go. Let us be vessels of silver or gold, or vessels of wood or stone; as long as we are vessels of honor we are

content. If we are not the head, or the eye, or the ear, one of the nobler and more honorable instruments, then let us be the hands, or the feet, as one of the lowest and least esteemed of all the servants of our Lord.

**Pastor:** Lord, place us in your kingdom in the roles you have designed for us.

**People:** Lord, make all of us your servants.

**Pastor:** Let us be employed for you, or laid aside for you, exalted for you, or trodden under foot for you.

**People:** Let us be full; let us be empty.

**Pastor:** Let us have all things; let us have nothing.

**People:** We freely and gladly embrace our places in your kingdom. Amen.

### **Covenant Requirements**

**Pastor:** Friends, the commitment to Christ we have just expressed is the essence of discipleship. When we have laid all our hopes upon Christ, casting ourselves wholly upon the merits of his righteousness; when we have with understanding, given ourselves to him; then we are Christians indeed, and not until then. His people are a willing people. He will be all in all, or he will be nothing.

### **Covenant**

**Pastor:** And now let us confirm our commitment by a solemn covenant, beginning with the singing of a covenant hymn.

*Be Thou My Vision*

Hymnal #460

**Pastor:** We must search our hearts to see whether we either have already, or can now freely, make this commitment to God in Christ.

*First*, we must consider what our sins are and examine whether we can resolve to let go of them all. We must consider what His laws are — how holy, strict, and spiritual, and whether we can, upon deliberation, choose them all as the rule of our whole life.

*Second*, we must place our spirits into the most serious frame possible, suitable to a commitment of such high importance.

*Third*, we must trust the covenant of God and rely upon His promise of giving grace and strength, for only through these will we be enabled to keep our promise. We cannot trust our own strength, but take hold of His strength.

*Fourth*, we must resolve to be faithful. Resolve in His strength never to go back.

*Fifth* and last, being prepared, in the most solemn manner possible, as if the Lord were visibly present before our eyes, we must humbly open our hearts to the Lord.

*The Pastor and people will pray together.*

**Pastor and People:** O most holy God, we humbly beg you, accept the poor prodigals at your door. All of us were once, or are even now, far from you because of our sins. We are all by nature worthy of death, and we made ourselves a thousand times worse by our wicked practices. But out of your infinite grace you have promised mercy to us in Christ, if we will only turn to you with all our heart. Therefore, since we have heard the call of the gospel, we now come, throw down our weapons, and submit ourselves to your mercy.

And because you require, as the condition of our peace with you, that we should put away our idols, we here and now from the bottom of our hearts renounce them all. We firmly covenant with you not to allow ourselves to continue in any known sin. We will, instead, conscientiously use all the means that we know you have prescribed, for the death and utter destruction of everything that corrupts us.

We humbly affirm before your glorious Majesty that it is the firm resolution of our hearts to forsake all that is dear unto us in this world, rather than to turn from you to the ways of sin. We will guard ourselves against all temptations, whether from prosperity or poverty, pleasure or pain, so that they may never draw our hearts away from you.

And since you have, out of your boundless mercy, offered graciously, to be our God through Christ, we call heaven and earth to record this day, that we do here solemnly acknowledge you as the Lord our God.

And now, speaking not only as one in this sacred assembly, but speaking for myself alone, I do take You, O Eternal God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to be my God. Be my portion. I do give up myself, body and soul, to be your servant, promising and vowing to serve you in holiness and righteousness all the days of my life.

I renounce my own wisdom and do here take you for my only Guide. I renounce my own will and take your will for my law. And since your word has told me that I must suffer with you if I am to reign with you, I do here covenant with you to accept my lot, as it falls, with you and by your grace to risk everything for you. It is my purpose that neither life nor death shall part you and me.

Now, Almighty God, Searcher of Hearts, you know that I make this covenant with you this day, without any known deception or reservation. I humbly beg you that if you see any flaw or falsehood in me, reveal it to me and help me to put it right.

*All stand and say in unison:*

**Pastor and People:** And now, I praise you, O Father God, whom I shall be bold from this day forward to look upon as my God and Father. Glory be to you, Lord Jesus, O God the Son, who loved me and washed me from my sins by your death and resurrection and who are now my Savior and Redeemer. Glory be to you, O God the Holy Spirit, who by your almighty power and inescapable presence have turned my heart from sin to God.

O eternal, almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, You are now my Covenant-Friend, and I, through your infinite grace, am your Covenant-Servant. And the Covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.

*It is Well with My Soul*

Hymnal #554

**The Lord's Supper**

### **Benediction**

**Pastor:** May the covenant we have made on earth be sealed in heaven. And may God enable us to live faithfully before him. Amen.

### **Passing of the Peace**

**Pastor:** Since we are reconciled to God and accepted into his household, we have his peace as brothers and sisters in Christ. Offer the Peace of Christ to one another as brothers and sisters. The peace of Christ be with you all.

**People:** And also with you.