

Ash Wednesday  
Isaiah 58.1-12

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### The Fast That I Choose

“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” Those are the words we hear standing at a graveside.

“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” Those are the words of Ash Wednesday as we remember our own finitude. None of us will live for ever. Each of us will die.

Perhaps this is the hardest day of the Christian Year because we are asked to admit our limitations and to face our own death. Just about everything else around us would like us to turn away from this reality of being limited and finite. Whether it’s botox or bleaching, a faster car or a younger partner, we’re seduced by the possibility of avoiding our own mortality.

And so today we’re reminded: Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

But the purpose of that reminder is not to make us depressed. It is to make us honest. And when we are honest we can live our true lives—the life of freedom and joy and love that God intends for us.

We began with baptism this evening because that is the first mark that is on our forehead. In the early church, after a child or adult was baptized they were anointed with oil—drawn in the shape of the cross on their forehead. We don’t typically use oil at Central but we do often use the waters of baptism to sign a cross on the forehead of the newly baptized and say,

“Child of the covenant,

you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism,  
and marked as Christ's own forever."

The story is told that Martin Luther, the Reformer, struggled with all kinds of anxieties and insecurities. And when he was afraid and uncertain, he would sign his forehead with the sign of the cross [DO THIS] and find strength in saying, "I am a child of God. I have been baptized."

Tonight, the smudge of the ashes rests on top of the water of baptism. In baptism we are united with Christ in Christ's death and resurrection. The ashes remind us that nothing in this life is permanent. And therefore, we are reminded of our dependence on God. We are reminded that what really matters is not the things around us that decay but God's love for us and our love for God and one another. In remembering our baptism, we remember that what really matters in life is that we are children of God.

If what is really most important about our lives is that we are children of God, then Lent is a time to say "no" to the clutter in our lives that crowds out room for God. It is a time to say "no" to what keeps us from receiving God's love and from loving others.

Sunday I quoted Eugene Peterson who says that Christian faith is a "two-beat rhythm"<sup>1</sup>—a yes and a no.

It is a time to say "yes" to changes that enable us to make more room for God in our lives. It is a time to say "yes" to letting God's love fill our hearts. It is a time to say "yes" to sharing the love we have received.

As we do each Lent, we invite you to make a commitment to something you will say "yes" to this Lent—or something you will say "no" to. Make it something more significant than chocolate or caffeine. Make it

something that really helps you say “no” to what crowds out room for God in your life. Make it something that really helps you say “yes” to letting God’s love fill your heart and spill out all around you.

Isaiah reminds us that the fast God chooses is not about giving up one food group. The fast that God chooses—what God says “no” to is injustice, oppression, speaking evil, hunger, homelessness.

Perhaps you saw Morgan Spurlock’s documentary “Supersize Me”—the stomach-turning story of a quest to see what would happen to one’s health if you ate at only at McDonald’s for a month. Morgan Spurlock also went on to have a fairly short-lived series on Fox called “30”—the story each week was someone did something for thirty days with the expectation that it would change their life.

Well, in Lent, we all get to star in the reality show called “40”—as in 40 days of Lent. For 40 days, we get to practice saying “yes” to something or “no” to something else—with the expectation that it really will change our lives. Because it will.

### Making Commitments

So let’s take some time tonight to consider what we need to say “no” to because it squeezes out room in our lives for God. Or what we need to say “yes” to in order to let God’s love fill and overflow our hearts.

In your bulletin is a piece of paper. I invite you to write down or draw your Lenten practice—what you will say “no” or “yes” to—what your intention is for these 40 days. You also may choose to fold the paper into a shape that will remind me of what your Lenten practice will be. Whether

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Villages*, p195.

you write, draw or fold your paper, carry it with you throughout Lent as a physical reminder of your intention.

Let us take some time in silence.

### Imposition of Ashes

The ashes of this day remind us that we are finite. No matter how competent and clever—no matter how smart and successful we are—we are dependent upon God’s grace and love.

And underneath the ashes we remember the waters of baptism and the promise of God’s forgiveness and love and new life that is for each and every one of us.

And so we start our journey from Ashes through Lent to the promise of Easter.

We invite you to receive the ashes and to hear again God’s word of forgiveness and hope.

## Remembering our Baptism

[pour water]

In our baptism, we are called by God's unending love into God's family and a life of discipleship. During Lent we follow Jesus into the wilderness, face temptation, fast, enter Jerusalem and encounter the cross. In remembering our baptism we remember that as we are baptized into Christ we are also baptized into Christ's death. To be raised with Christ means we must also die with Christ. New life requires letting go of our old life, so that we may embrace the new humanity Christ brings. In this font, we are plunged into the baptismal waters—waters that turn out to be not only a death tomb, but surprisingly, a womb of life.

[splash water]

[Let us pray with the psalmist:]

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## Blessing and Sending Forth

We travel in the power of love.

May we trust in the way of Christ

and walk in the Spirit's peace.

And may the blessing of God go with us.