



Celebrate

Ash Wednesday
February 18, 2026

On Ash Wednesday we begin our forty-day journey toward Easter with a day of fasting and repentance. Marking our foreheads with dust, we acknowledge that we die and return to the earth. At the same time, the dust traces the life-giving cross indelibly marked on our foreheads at baptism. While we journey through Lent to return to God, we have already been reconciled to God through Christ. We humbly pray for God to make our hearts clean while we rejoice that “now is the day of salvation.” Returning to our baptismal call, we more intentionally bear the fruits of mercy and justice in the world.

Prayer of the Day

Almighty and ever-living God, you hate nothing you have made, and you forgive the sins of all who are penitent. Create in us new and honest hearts, so that, truly repenting of our sins, we may receive from you, the God of all mercy, full pardon and forgiveness through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

First Reading

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Because of the coming day of the LORD, the prophet Joel calls the people to a community lament. The repentant community declares that God is gracious and asks God to spare the people lest the nations doubt God's power to save.

Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
 for the day of the LORD is coming, it is
 near—
²a day of darkness and gloom,
 a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Like blackness spread upon the mountains,
 a great and powerful army comes;
their like has never been from of old,
 nor will be again after them
 in ages to come.

¹²Yet even now, says the LORD,
 return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with
 mourning;
¹³rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to the LORD your God,
 for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love,
 and relenting from punishment.
¹⁴Who knows whether he will not turn and
 relent
 and leave a blessing behind him,

a grain offering and a drink offering
 for the LORD your God?

¹⁵Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 consecrate a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
¹⁶gather the people.

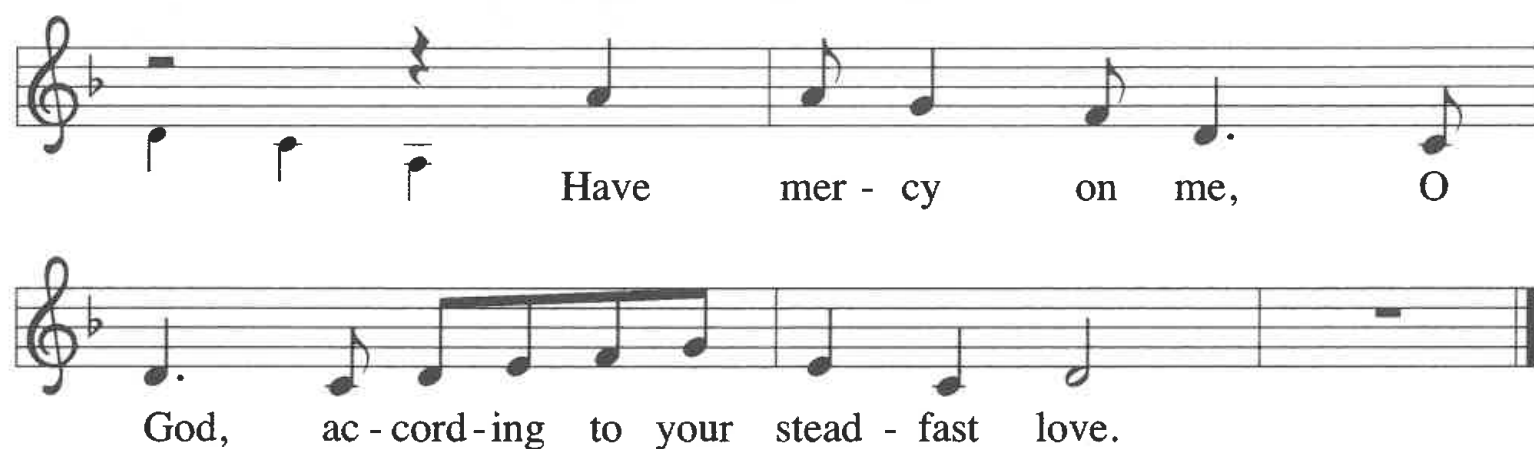
Consecrate the congregation;
 assemble the aged;
gather the children,
 even infants at the breast.

Let the bridegroom leave his room
 and the bride her canopy.

¹⁷Between the vestibule and the altar,
 let the priests, the ministers of the
 LORD, weep.

Let them say, “Spare your people, O LORD,
 and do not make your heritage a
 mockery,

 a byword among the nations.
Why should it be said among the peoples,
 ‘Where is their God?’



Have mercy on me, O God, according to your ¹steadfast love;
in your great compassion blot out ¹my offenses.

²**Wash me through and through ¹from my wickedness,
and cleanse me ¹from my sin.**

³For I know ¹my offenses,
and my sin is ev- ¹er before me.

⁴**Against you only have I sinned and done what is evil ¹in your sight;
so you are justified when you speak and right ¹in your judgment. R**

⁵Indeed, I was born ¹steeped in wickedness,
a sinner from my ¹mother's womb.

⁶**Indeed, you delight in truth ¹deep within me,
and would have me know wisdom ¹deep within.**

⁷Remove my sins with hyssop, and I ¹shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be pur- ¹er than snow.

⁸**Let me hear ¹joy and gladness,
that the body you have broken ¹may rejoice. R**

⁹Hide your face ¹from my sins,
and blot out ¹all my wickedness.

¹⁰**Create in me a clean ¹heart, O God,
and renew a right spir- ¹it within me.**

¹¹Cast me not away ¹from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spir- ¹it from me.

¹²**Restore to me the joy of ¹your salvation
and sustain me with your boun- ¹tiful Spirit. R**

¹³Let me teach your ways ¹to offenders,
and sinners shall be re- ¹stored to you.

¹⁴**Rescue me from bloodshed, O God of ¹my salvation,
and my tongue shall sing ¹of your righteousness.**

¹⁵O Lord, o- ¹pen my lips,
and my mouth shall pro- ¹claim your praise.

¹⁶**For you take no delight in sacrifice, or ¹I would give it.
You are not pleased ¹with burnt offering.**

¹⁷The sacrifice of God is a ¹troubled spirit;
a troubled and broken heart, O God, you will ¹not despise. R

Shortly after the return of Israel from exile in Babylon, the people were troubled by the ineffectiveness of their fasts. God reminds them that outward observance is no substitute for genuine fasting that results in acts of justice, such as feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, and clothing the naked. Sincere repentance will lead to a dramatic improvement of their condition.

Second Reading

2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10

The ministry of the gospel endures many challenges and hardships. Through this ministry, God's reconciling activity in the death of Christ reaches into the depths of our lives to bring us into a right relationship with God. In this way, God accepts us into the reality of divine salvation.

We entreat you on behalf of Christ: be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake God made the one who knew no sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

^{6:1}As we work together with him, we entreat you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. ²For he says,

“At an acceptable time I have listened to you,
and on a day of salvation I have helped you.”

Look, now is the acceptable time; look, now is the day of salvation! ³We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴but as servants of

God we have commended ourselves in every way: in great endurance, afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶in purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, ⁷truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors and yet are true, ⁹as unknown and yet are well known, as dying and look—we are alive, as punished and yet not killed, ¹⁰as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing and yet possessing everything.

Gospel

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus commends almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, but emphasizes that spiritual devotion must not be done for show.

[Jesus said to the disciples:] “Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

²“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you pray, go into your

room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

¹⁶“And whenever you fast, do not look somber, like the hypocrites, for they mark their faces to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

¹⁹“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Prayers of Intercession

The prayers are prepared locally for each occasion. The following examples may be adapted or used as appropriate.

Reconciled by God’s mercy and sustained by God’s presence, let us pray for the world and its needs.

A brief silence.

Guide your church, O God. Accompany all Christians in this season of repentance, and renew our faith in the riches of grace you give to us in baptism. Hear us, O God.
Your mercy is great.

Heal this earth, O God. Satisfy the needs of every parched place, every diverse ecosystem, every suffering creature. Though all return to dust, grant beauty and purpose to each living thing. Hear us, O God.
Your mercy is great.

Restore the nations, O God. Let your healing spring up quickly across the world (*places may be named*). Give all in authority the will to loose the bonds of injustice and let any who are oppressed go free. Hear us, O God.
Your mercy is great.

Deliver your people, O God. Comfort any whose hearts are rent by grief, uphold any who are sick, bring food to those who hunger, and give housing to all without shelter. Hear us, O God.
Your mercy is great.

Bless this assembly, O God. Reconcile us to one another and to you. Strengthen our resolve to fast from evil, open our hands in sharing, and quicken our prayer. Hear us, O God.
Your mercy is great.

Here other intercessions may be offered.

Hold us forever, O God. We thank you for all who now know their treasure in heaven, and for (*Martin Luther and*) all who on earth proclaimed your abounding, steadfast love. Hear us, O God.
Your mercy is great.

Receive our prayers, O God, through Jesus Christ, our strength and salvation.
Amen.

Preparing for Next Week

Thursday Psalm 51. **Friday** Jonah 4:1-11. **Saturday** Isaiah 58:1-12. **First Sunday in Lent** Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11.

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