

Holiday Handout: Ash Wednesday

What is Ash Wednesday?

Ash Wednesday is one of the most popular and important holy days in the liturgical calendar. It marks the beginning of Lent, a 40-day season (not counting Sundays) of penance, reflection, fasting, and ultimately celebration, which prepares us for Christ's Resurrection on Easter Sunday, through which we attain redemption.

The 40-day season represents Christ's time of temptation in the wilderness, where he fasted and where Satan tempted him. Lent asks believers to set aside a time each year for similar fasting, marking an intentional season of focus on Christ's life, ministry, sacrifice and resurrection. The practice includes the wearing of ashes on the forehead, which symbolizes repentance and mourning for believers' sins.

When is Ash Wednesday celebrated?

Ash Wednesday occurs every year and is always 46 days before Easter Sunday.

How is Ash Wednesday Celebrated?

During Mass (for Catholics) or worship service (for Protestants), the priest or pastor will usually share a penitential and reflective sermon. The mood is solemn – many services will have long periods of silence, and worshippers will often leave the service in silence.

Usually, there is a responsive passage of Scripture centered around confession, which is read aloud. Attendees will experience communal confession, as well as moments where they are prompted to silently confess sins and pray.

Afterward, the congregation will be invited to receive ashes on their foreheads. The priest or pastor will dip their finger into the ashes, spread them in a cross pattern on the forehead, and say, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Where do the Ashes Come From?

Traditionally, ashes used on Ash Wednesday are gathered up after palms from the previous year's Palm Sunday (the Sunday before Easter) are burned. They are then blessed before being used in the ceremony.

Palms are used on Palm Sunday to symbolize Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem on the Sunday before his crucifixion. Residents of Jerusalem are said to have waved palm fronds to celebrate his arrival.

Who celebrates Ash Wednesday?

Ash Wednesday is observed by individuals from various sectors of Christianity, including Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans and Methodists.

Sources:

<https://www.catholic.org/lent/ashwed.php>

https://www.christianity.com/church/church-life/what-is-ash-wednesday-why-do-christians-celebrate-it.html#who_celebrates

<https://www.indystar.com/story/news/2019/03/05/ash-wednesday-why-christians-wear-ashes-fast-and-give-things-up/3054204002/>