

Journey Forward Addendum: Ash Wednesday Guidelines February 4, 2021

The realities of the severity of the ongoing pandemic and New Jersey's COVID health restrictions continue to challenge our liturgical practices and gathering for worship. Ash Wednesday in this year of 2021 is no different.

Here is a quick recap of the history and purpose of Ash Wednesday, followed by practical guidelines for observing this day this year.

History

Historically the first day of Lent was the time when those who were to be baptized at Easter entered their final intense period of preparation. It was also the day when those who had fallen away from Christian faith and practice but wished to be restored to full fellowship entered a period of penitential preparation.

The use of ashes as part of the service began in the tenth century. They were sprinkled on the heads of worshippers (on penitents at first, and then later on the people in general). Sprinkling of ashes is a reminder of "the dirt that is cast upon our mortal remains at the time of our burial."¹ Eventually the practice of imposing an ash cross on a person's forehead, resonating with the cross made with chrism at baptism, became generally accepted in many Western churches.

In the Anglican tradition, imposition of ashes was explicitly included for the first time since the Reformation in the 1979 Prayer Book. There was no mention of this in prior prayer books. Our current rubrics say, "If ashes are to be imposed..." (page 265). They are not required by the rite, and ashes are not a sacrament.

Purpose

The purpose of Ash Wednesday is to call us to prepare for Easter by the observance of a holy Lent through a number of different important Christian practices. It is customary to begin the season by declaring to ourselves and to each other these truths about our human nature: our mortality and our human propensity to sin.

By acknowledging our need of God's grace, forgiveness, and aid, we strive to come to a more honest relationship with God and a fuller and more joyful celebration of Christ's defeat of death and his resurrection.

Guidelines

Here are some practical considerations for marking Ash Wednesday in pandemic.

The COVID Risk Level at https://covidactnow.org/us/new_jersey-nj/?s=1522471 will determine whether on-line or in-person worship is indicated for the day.

Whether on-line or in-person worship is indicated, Bishop Hughes asks us to remember that the imposition of ashes is not a requirement of our worship on Ash Wednesday. ***The Bishop***

¹ "Note on Ash Wednesday and the Imposition of Ashes in a Time of Pandemic", page 4 by the Rt. Rev. J. Neil Alexander, January 13, 2021 (www.anglicanmusicians.org)

encourages all in the Diocese of Newark to consider signs of repentance and mortality in other ways and asks that all forgo imposition of ashes this year.

Ashes to Go – Bishop Hughes has indicated that congregations should omit “Ashes to Go” this year.

Online services – Most services will be online on Ash Wednesday; **no imposition of ashes is the preferred recommendation.** Consider alternative ways to focus on repentance and mortality. If you must use ashes, a small packet of ashes may be made available for pick up at the church or delivered to the home. **Ashes will not be sent through the mail.**

If you are on-line you could consider one of the following:

- **No ashes** - use the BCP service omitting the prayer and sentence at the bottom of page 265.
- **Prepare and package ashes** to be distributed ahead of time (picked up from church or delivered to homes) – worshipers at home will impose ashes on themselves or one another within the household.
- **Encourage and instruct parishioners to make their own** ashes from prior years’ palms or any other source – worshipers at home will impose ashes on themselves or on one another within the household.

Any ashes remaining afterwards can simply be returned to the earth.

In-person services – In the event in-person gathering is possible, then **no imposition of ashes remains the preferred choice.** Consider alternative ways to focus on repentance and mortality. If you must use ashes, follow guidelines for sprinkling ashes below (in fact, sprinkling ashes is what our Roman Catholic friends are being counselled to do).

Bishop Hughes has asked that there be **no imposition of ashes on the forehead for any reason**, whether by hand or using a q-tip, swab, or any other form (using a q-tip or swab signals an antiseptic feeling which is antithetical to the purpose of marking our mortality and our connection to the earth).

If you are in-person, you could consider one of the following, remembering that it is still important to maintain a distance of at least 6’, to wear a mask at all times, and not to touch:

- **No ashes** - use the BCP service omitting the prayer and sentence at the bottom of page 265.
- **Indoors** - individuals kneel in place at their pew (socially distanced) and the presider comes to the person (so the faces of presider and person are not on the same level) and sprinkle ashes on the person’s head. Dry ashes (not mixed with oil) will be important here.
- **Outdoors** – individuals come to presider/officiant who is standing on a step or platform. The person receiving ashes bows (so the faces of presider and person are not on the same level) and ashes are sprinkled on the person’s head. Dry ashes (not mixed with oil) will be important here.

Whatever decisions are made at the local level, it important to keep in mind and highlight the nature and purpose of the Ash Wednesday rite. The ashes are not the most important aspect. The commitment to preparing for Easter by penitence, prayer, fasting, and reading and meditating on God’s holy Word is paramount.