

The Readings on This Day

****Click on the links for the Bible Verse(s)*

Ash Wednesday

The Old Testament tells of a ritual in which persons in great sorrow sat in ashes or poured them on their head. Since early medieval times, ashes were distributed on the fortieth day before Easter as a sign of individual and communal penitence, and at the Synod of Benevento in 1091, the ritual was recommended for all Western Christians. The twin emphases of the day are sin and death: in sorrow for sin, we join with ancient peoples to put ashes on our head; and in honesty about death, we remember that, like Adam, we are made of dust and will return to dust. Acknowledging our sin and death readies the assembly for its annual baptismal journey to the resurrection.



[Joel 2:1-2, 12-17](#)

The reading from Joel begins Lent with the stark call to repentance. The community is to meet together to weep and fast and pray. At the conclusion of this long season of Lent and Easter, the lectionary returns to a quote from Joel in Peter's sermon on Pentecost that promises the coming of the Spirit.

or

[Isaiah 58:1-12](#)

This option for an Old Testament reading alludes to the ashes by which the day takes its name. Isaiah's call to social justice accompanies the church through Lent, and the promise in the reading of God's watered garden beckons us toward Easter.

[The Psalm for the Day](#)

[Psalm 51:1-17](#) is a penitential psalm that the Hebrew Bible puts in the mouth of King David when he repented of adultery and murder. This magnificent prayer for forgiveness is filled with body imagery and is appropriate for a day in which ashes

are placed on our foreheads. Psalm 51 can be sung either at the outset of the service or after the first reading.

2 Corinthians [5:20b—6:10](#)

Ash Wednesday begins Lent as the acceptable time, the day of salvation, the time to be reconciled to God. During these weeks, the church meditates on what it means that God made Christ to be sin, that we might become the righteousness of God.

[Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21](#)

Since the Middle Ages, this text was proclaimed on Ash Wednesday, and its call for almsgiving, prayer, and fasting lays out what have been called the three disciplines of Lent. The discipline of fasting means not to denigrate the human body, but to symbolize the turn from self-indulgence to care for the neighbor and reliance on God. In the surprise of faith, we discover that these disciplines can accompany us to the alternative treasures that come from God alone.