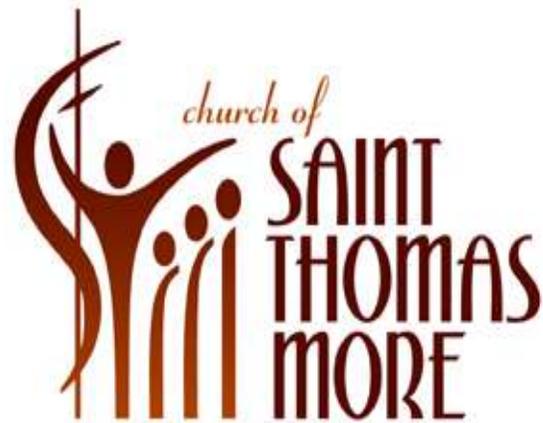


## Ash Wednesday

Ashes are a sign of repentance, a turning away from sin and evil—anything that goes against God's love.

In the early days of the church, persons who had committed serious sins wore ashes and spent time away from the community as a way to contemplate and heal the wound of their sin. In the Middle Ages, the tradition changed to include the whole community. This change recognized that all of us can forget God's love and make choices that turn us in a different direction, away from God.



In the Gospel of Ash Wednesday, Jesus reminds us that our signs of penance are not for making a big deal of our suffering. We put on signs of faith as an outward sign of our heart's commitment to grow, to love and share. The ashes we wear are meaningful only when they are linked to prayer and acts of love and service.

By wearing the dusty ashes, we actually recall the waters of our baptism, when we welcomed Christ into our lives. On Ash Wednesday, we will bless the ashes - the burnt remains of the palms from last year's Palm Sunday, when we celebrated the day that Jesus was welcomed into Jerusalem with waving palms. The ashes which remain remind us that even though we may have turned away from God and made choices that have broken our relationship, God welcomes us back—no matter how far we have wandered: "You can still return to me with all your heart..." (Joel 2:12, from the first reading of Ash Wednesday).

The seeds of our faith and love are sheltered beneath the ashes - much like a seedling in a forest. After a fire, the ashes may look dark and barren, but the ashen remains of the burnt trees serve as a blanket and a shield for the seeds buried beneath. Even after a fire, these seeds will sprout in the spring. "Lent" is the Old English word for "spring."

Ashes also symbolize death. Jesus turned death upside down by his resurrection. When we wear ashes, we remember the cycle of life and death and new life.

Wear your ashes with faith and confidence as you acknowledge the pilgrimage you are about to begin. You are marked with the sign of victory over sin—the cross.

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