

Awaken To God's Presence | Ashes

Key Words: Lent, Ash Wednesday, repentance, transformation, tradition, spiritual practice.

Speaker: Blake Smith

00:04

A gift of peace in the midst of troubling times. Project Zion Podcast offers this series of guided practices to help you connect with the divine no matter where you are or what's going on around you, take a deep breath and allow your spirit to find calm in the storm of life.

00:28

Welcome to Awaken to God's presence and this time of meditation. This is Blake Smith, Community of Christ minister, and your companion for today's spiritual practice.

As we approach the season of Lent, we are reminded of the spiritual significance of ashes. Throughout the Old Testament, ashes are used to symbolize repentance and mourning. For thousands of years, many cultures and traditions around the world have used ashes for similar symbolic purposes. In various cultures, ashes play a central role in rituals, symbolizing different aspects, like protection, renewal, and connection with the earth or with the ancestral world. In meditation, ashes can represent unresolved issues, transformation, or even rebirth.

In the Christian context of Ash Wednesday, the ashes remind us of our mortality and our need for self-reflection and repentance. We are reminded as were Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:19, "by the sweat of your face, you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken. You were dust, and to dust you shall return."

Traditionally, palm branches used to welcome Christ during the previous year's Palm Sunday observance are burned, and the resulting ashes are blessed and kept for Ash Wednesday. By allowing the ashes to be placed on our forehead, we are reminded of the ways in which we have fallen short of welcoming Christ into our own lives.

For the purposes of this spiritual practice, I invite you to focus your attention on the ashes, allowing them to symbolize for you in this moment, whatever it is you need to open yourself to greater connection with the Divine.

If possible, you may want to make a mark on the back of your hand using a small amount of ashes mixed with oil or water ... maybe a cross, or a heart, or some other symbol. Or, perhaps you might hold some ashes in your hand. If you don't have ashes available, you may want to print a picture of ashes and focus your attention on the picture as you hear the words, or simply imagine a smoldering campfire, again focusing on the ashes that remain.

Pause the recording if necessary, while you prepare, and start again when you are ready.

For our meditation today, I want to share a prayer and a poem, but before I do, I invite you to pause.
Find a comfortable place to sit.
If you are able, settle in and let your shoulders relax.
Close your eyes and simply breathe.
Listen to the rhythm of your breath.

What do ashes represent for you where you are in your life today?

The prayer is called, "A Prayer for Ash Wednesday," and the author is Cameron Bellm.

We forget sometimes that ashes come from fire,
that the soft black powder was once a firm green frond,
bright and vibrant before it became dry and brittle,
stiff and fibrous before a flame transformed it into dust.
Every living thing submits to change.

Let's not fear it.

From seed to plant, palm to ash.

This bit of the earth smudge on our foreheads today
was carried lovingly in the hands of the Creator.

What fires will we step into this Lent?

What new forms will our souls take when we encounter the holy blaze of the living God?

We are -- it is true -- ash to ash and dust to dust,
but whether in youth or old age, in life or in death,
let us be assured we are held, and we are Gods. Amen.

Take a moment to consider the questions asked in this prayer: What fires will you step into this Lent?
And, what new forms will your soul take when you encounter the holy blaze of the living God?

I leave you now with this poem titled, "Blessing the Dust," and written by Jan Richardson.

All those days
you felt like dust,
like dirt,
as if all you had to do
was to turn your face
toward the wind
and be scattered
to the four corners

or swept away by the smallest breath,
as insubstantial...

Did you know
what the Holy One

can do with dust?

This is the day
we freely say
we are scorched.
This is the hour
we are marked
by what has made it
through the burning.

This is the moment
we ask for the blessing
that lives within
the ancient ashes
that makes its home
inside the soil of
this sacred earth.

So let us be marked
not for sorrow,
and let us be marked
not for shame,
and let us be marked
not for false humility
or for thinking
we are less
than we are,

but for claiming
what God can do
within the dust,
within the dirt,
within the stuff
of which the world
is made,
and the stars that blaze
in our bones
and the galaxies
that spiral inside
the smudge we bear.
Amen,