

ASH WEDNESDAY, THE DAY OF ATONEMENT

by June Todd



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Ash Wednesday, the Day of Atonement

A dramatized worship service serving
as the gateway to Lent

by JUNE TODD

PRODUCTION NOTES SUGGESTIONS

Two alternatives for symbolic use of ashes:

1. At the time of assembly of the congregation, paper and pencil can be handed out. The congregation may be requested to think of things/acts/attitudes in their lives which they would like to see improved, or eliminated. (Not requests for help unless help to overcome a failing, because the importance of Ash Wednesday lies in the act of repentance.) These problem areas are written out and the unsigned papers collected. During the Ash Wednesday service, these papers are burned somewhere outside the building. The ashes are ground into powder by working them through a wire mesh sieve with a spoon, and then mixing the ashes with a little oil. The mixture is placed in a small vessel, a glass bowl is suitable.
2. Ashes can be prepared for Ash Wednesday service by burning the palm branches from the previous Palm Sunday. Palms should be cut into short pieces to facilitate burning. After burning the palm, the same procedure as above applies.

COSTUMING

Narrators: Need to be dressed in contrast to Penitents. They can also be dressed in suit and tie for men; something similar for women (skirt is preferred).

Penitents: The tone of repentance is what is desired. All black: turtleneck and trousers for men; turtleneck and skirt (long skirt) for women. Possible to dye old sheets black, cut holes for head and arms. If using black choir robes, black turtleneck under the robe is effective. Women should use no make-up, and have a very simply styled hairdo.

Musical Effects: The dirge note indicated in the script may be any musical note or a simple combination of notes which induces a somber mood. It can be struck on organ, piano, guitar; or a deep-toned bell may be used.

Production Notes (contd)

Props for Penitents: If Penitents carry scripts up the aisle, they need a dark-colored solid carrier, much like those carried by choirs for holding music. If Penitents can walk without carrying scripts, it is suggested they carry lighted candles. The candles should be white, and should be about $\frac{1}{4}$ burned down to give a used look. If the service is at night, the church may be darkened for effect. At the time of entrance, lights come up when Penitents have taken their places.

Scriptnote: "The ashes we wear" or "of Ash Wednesday" on page 10 are interchangeable, depending on whether or not an application of ashes is to take place.

MUSIC

Inasmuch as an Ash Wednesday does not follow the usual **Order for Worship** you may use congregational singing of hymns at your own discretion. Some hymn possibilities include: "Alone Thou Goest Forth, O Lord," "When I Survey The Wondrous Cross" or "Beneath The Cross of Jesus."

A hymn at the end of the service is not appropriate in most churches. The traditional Ash Wednesday service ends in silence.

You may decide, however, to have some quiet instrumental organ music as the penitents leave.

"Thanks to the Rev. Richard Lewis of the St. Mark United Church of Christ of Flossmoor, Illinois for suggesting this presentation."

MUSICAL PRELUDE
PREAMBLE

1

2

3

(NARRATORS enter, quietly.)

4

5

NAR. #1: A reading from Psalm 51:

6

Be merciful to me, O God, because of your
constant love.

7

8

Because of your great mercy, wipe away my sins.

9

NAR. #2: Wash away all my evil, and make me clean from
my sin.

10

11

NAR. #1: I recognize my faults; I am always conscious of
my sins.

12

13

I have sinned against you — only against you — and
have done what you consider evil.

14

15

So you are right in judging me; you are justified in
condemning me.

16

17

NAR. #2: I have been evil from the time I was born; from the
day of my birth I have been sinful.

18

19

NAR. #1: Sincerity and truth are what you require; fill my
mind with your wisdom.

20

21

NAR. #2: Remove my sin, and I will be clean; wash me, and
I will be whiter than snow.

22

23

NAR. #1: Let me hear the sounds of joy and gladness; and
though you have crushed me and broken me, I
will be happy once again.

24

25

26

NAR. #2: Close your eyes to my sins and wipe out all my evil.

27

28

NAR. #1: Create a pure heart in me, O God, and put a new
and loyal spirit in me.

29

30

NAR. #2: Do not banish me from your presence; do not
take your holy spirit from me.

31

32

NAR. #1: Give me again the joy that comes from your
salvation, and make me willing to obey you.

33

34

NAR. #2: Then I will teach sinners your commands, and
they will turn back to you.

35

(Pause)

- 1 NAR. #1: This day is the Day of Ashes.
 2 NAR. #2: The day we don the spiritual clothing of the
 3 penitent . . .
 4 NAR. #1: . . . Sackcloth . . .
 5 NAR. #2: And sprinkle our hearts with ashes . . .
 6 NAR. #1: To humble ourselves . . . to say . . .
 7 NAR. #2: We are failed, Lord.
 8 NAR. #1: We are unworthy.
 9 *(Penitents enter from rear coming up Center aisle.*
 10 *The dirge-note sounds. There is a cadence to the*
 11 *following: It is like a chant.)*
 12 PEN. #1: Remember, O Man . . .
 13 PEN. #2: . . . Remember . . .
 14 PEN. #1: Thou art dust . . .
 15 PEN. #2: . . . Remember, O Man . . .
 16 PEN. #1: And unto dust . . .
 17 PEN. #2: . . . Remember . . .
 18 PEN. #1: Unto dust shalt thou return.
 19 PEN. #1 &
 20 PEN. #2: *(In unison.)* Mercy, Lord. Mercy.
 21 *(Repeat above in entirety until PENITENTS are*
 22 *in place. End with the unison saying.)*
 23 *(PENITENTS enter from elsewhere, if possible.*
 24 *The dirge-note sounds again.)*
 25 PEN. #3: Ashes to ashes . . .
 26 PEN. #4: This is the day of ashes . . .
 27 PEN. #3: Dust to dust, O Man . . .
 28 PEN. #4: Remember . . .
 29 PEN. #3&
 30 PEN. #4: *(In unison)* Mercy, Lord. Mercy.
 31 *(Repeat above in entirety until in places. End with*
 32 *the unison saying. Pause.)*
 33 NAR. #1: Oh, Lord, Heavenly Father . . . As Christians,
 34 NAR. #2: As your people . . .
 35 NAR. #1: We have fallen short again and again of your glory.

- 1 PEN. #3: With your blinding radiance before us,
 2 We lose sight of you.
- 3 PEN. #1: With your unfailing promises in our ears,
 4 We forget you.
- 5 PEN. #4: With your proven truth in our minds,
 6 We turn away from you.
- 7 PEN. #2: We are the fools and failures of our age.
 8 All sinners in sackcloth and ashes.
- 9 NAR. #1: From Psalm 90:
 10 O Lord, you have always been our home.
 11 Before you created the hills or brought the
 12 world into being.
 13 You were eternally God,
 14 And will be God forever.
- 15 NAR. #2: You tell man to return to what he was;
 16 You change him back to dust.
 17 A thousand years to you are like one day;
 18 They are like yesterday, already gone,
 19 Like a short hour in the night.
- 20 NAR. #1: You carry us away like a flood;
 21 We last no longer than a dream.
 22 We are like weeds that sprout in the morning,
 23 That grow and burst into bloom,
 24 Then dry up and die in the evening.
- 25 NAR. #2: Who has felt the full power of your anger?
 26 Who knows what fear your fury can bring?
 27 Teach us how short our life is,
 28 So that we may become wise.
 29 *(Pause)*
- 30 NAR. #1: In the earliest years of the Christian church,
 31 the days before Easter, was the time when
 32 converts to Christianity received instructions in
 33 their new faith. Those 40 hours before Easter,
 34 symbolic of the hours Christ spent in the tomb,
 35 were an intense period of fasting, silence, rigorous

1 contemplation of the Savior's life and death. There
 2 was instruction, meditation, concentration upon
 3 Christ's teachings for those who were about to
 4 become Christians. Then, at midnight, in the first
 5 moments of Easter morn, these converts received
 6 their baptism.

7 *(Pause)*

8 NAR. #2: In later years, the 40 days before Easter became
 9 a period of deep penance. Penitents took it upon
 10 themselves to dress in sackcloth with ashes
 11 sprinkled over their heads to indicate profound
 12 mourning. They stood outside the church doors on
 13 Lenten Sunday mornings, petitioning those who
 14 were entering. *(Penitents face the congregation*
 15 *directly. They stretch out their arms and act in a*
 16 *beseeking manner.)*

17 PEN. #1: Pray for me, good person, I beg you.

18 PEN. #4: Pray for me, a sinner, a grievous sinner.

19 PEN. #3: Name my name in your prayers that I may be
 20 forgiven.

21 PEN. #2: Ask the Lord to have mercy upon me.

22 PEN. #1: Pray for me . . .

23 PEN. #4: I beg you, pray for me.

24 NAR. #2: And they were outcast from the community of
 25 Christians until their period of expiation had
 26 ended.

27 *(Pause)*

28 NAR. #1: Ashes . . . sackcloth . . . the external trappings of
 29 the penitent heart. They mark this solemn day —
 30 Ash Wednesday — set it apart as a day of
 31 atonement, a day especially to acknowledge our
 32 individual failings and pray forgiveness for our sins.

33 NAR. #2: It is, as well, the day we begin our Lenten journey
 34 into the time of Christ's passion. For all might
 35 wear sackcloth and ashes to honor the man of

- 1 sorrows as he faces rejection and betrayal,
 2 scourgings and humiliation — and finally, the
 3 bitter agony of the cross.
- 4 NAR. #1: Ash Wednesday is the gateway to the Lenten
 5 journey.
- 6 NAR. #2: Ash Wednesday . . . we sinners enter the gateway
 7 (Pause) and learn from our Saviour to face
 8 temptation.
- 9 PEN. #1: From Matthew 3:13-17 and Matthew 4:1-11.
 10 (With joy) Jesus was baptized by the prophet
 11 John in the river Jordan. And as he came up out
 12 of the water, the clouds parted and the spirit of
 13 God like a dove descended, lighting on him as a
 14 voice from heaven said, "This is my own dear
 15 son with whom I am pleased."
- 16 PEN. #2: And Jesus went then alone into the wilderness . . .
- 17 PEN. #4: There the Devil came to him . . . and the Devil
 18 said . . .
- 19 PEN. #3: (In a seductive, evil manner.) If you are God's
 20 son . . . order these stones to turn into bread.
- 21 PEN. #2: For Jesus had been 40 days without food, and the
 22 Devil knew he was hungry.
- 23 PEN. #1: But Jesus answered, "The Scripture says man
 24 cannot live on bread alone, but needs every word
 25 that God speaks."
- 26 PEN. #2: Then the Devil took Jesus to Jerusalem, set him on
 27 the highest point of the temple and said to him . . .
- 28 PEN. #3: (In the same seductive manner.) "If you are God's
 29 son, throw yourself down . . . for the Scripture
 30 says God will give orders to his angels about you ...
 31 They will hold you up with their hands so that not
 32 even your feet will be hurt on the stones."
- 33 PEN. #1: Jesus answered, "The Scripture also says, 'Do not
 34 put the Lord your God to the test.' "
- 35 PEN. #2: Then the Devil took Jesus to a very high mountain,

- 1 and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in
 2 all their greatness.
- 3 PEN. #3: *(Also seductively evil)* All this I will give you if you
 4 kneel down and worship me.
- 5 PEN. #1: Jesus answered, "Go away, Satan! The Scripture
 6 says, 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him
 7 only!'"
- 8 PEN. #2: Then the Devil left Jesus, and angels came and
 9 helped him.
- 10 NAR. #1: Thus began the ministry of Jesus Christ on earth —
 11 his first act, to face the ultimate Temptor and to
 12 deny each and every temptation.
- 13 ALL
- 14 PEN.: *(In unison.)* Sinners here in sackcloth and ashes,
 15 we have each of us failed to resist temptation.
 16 *(Pause)*
- 17 NAR. #2: Ash Wednesday is the gateway to the Lenten
 18 journey.
- 19 NAR. #1: We sinners enter the gateway *(Pause)* and learn
 20 from our Saviour to face the world's betrayal.
- 21 PEN. #3: *(Said in a conniving manner)* Then one of the
 22 twelve disciples — the one named Judas Iscariot
 23 went to the chief priests and asked, "What will
 24 you give me if I betray Jesus to you?" They
 25 counted out thirty silver coins and gave them to
 26 him. From then on Judas was looking for a good
 27 chance to hand Jesus over to them. *(Matthew 26:*
 28 *14-16)*
- 29 PEN. #4: The day came during the Festival of Unleavened
 30 Bread when the lambs for the Passover meal were
 31 to be killed. Jesus sent Peter and John with these
 32 instructions: "Go and get the Passover meal ready
 33 for us to eat." *(Luke 22:7-8)*
- 34 PEN. #1: When the hour came, Jesus took his place at the
 35 table with the Apostles. He said to them, "I have

- 1 wanted so much to eat this Passover meal with
 2 you before I suffer! For I tell you, I will never eat
 3 it until it is given its full meaning in the Kingdom
 4 of God.”
- 5 PEN. #2: Then Jesus took a cup, gave thanks to God and
 6 said, “Take this and share it among yourselves. I
 7 tell you that from now on I will not drink this
 8 wine until the Kingdom of God comes.”
- 9 PEN. #1: Then he took a piece of bread, gave thanks to
 10 God, broke it, and gave it to them saying, “This
 11 is my body, which is given for you. Do this in
 12 memory of me.” In the same way He gave them
 13 the cup saying, “This cup is God’s new covenant,
 14 sealed with my blood, which is poured out for
 15 you.” (*Luke 22: 7-20*)
- 16 PEN. #2: During the meal Jesus said, “I tell you, one of you
 17 will betray me.” The disciples were very upset
 18 and began to ask him, one after the other,
 19 “Surely, Lord, you don’t mean me?”
- 20 PEN. #1: Jesus answered, “One who dips his bread in the
 21 dish with me will betray me. The Son of Man will
 22 die as the Scriptures say he will, but how terrible
 23 for that man who will betray the Son of Man!
 24 It would have been better for that man if he had
 25 never been born!”
- 26 PEN. #3: Judas the traitor spoke up. (*Feigned innocence.*)
 27 “Surely, Teacher, you don’t mean me?” he asked.
- 28 PEN. #1: Jesus answered, “So you say.” (*Matthew 26:21-25*)
- 29 PEN. #1: Then Jesus said to them, “This very night all of
 30 you will run away and leave me, for the Scripture
 31 says, ‘God will kill the shepherd, and the sheep of
 32 the flock will be scattered.’ ” (*Matthew 26:31*)
- 33 NAR. #2: In the face of mankind’s betrayal and rejection,
 34 Jesus gave us the supper of the spirit that we
 35 might come to the table and be nourished in our

- 1 hearts for our lives.
- 2 PEN. *(In unison)* Sinners here in sackcloth and ashes.
- 3 We have each of us betrayed the Lord's trust.
- 4 *(Pause)*
- 5 NAR. #1: Ash Wednesday is the gateway to the Lenten
- 6 journey.
- 7 NAR. #2: We sinners enter the gateway *(Pause)*, and learn of
- 8 sacrifice from our Saviour.
- 9 PEN. #4: They arrested Jesus and took him away into the
- 10 house of the High Priest. *(Luke 22:54)*
- 11 PEN. #3: *(Pompously)* The High Priest spoke to him, "In
- 12 the name of the living God I now put you under
- 13 oath: tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of
- 14 God."
- 15 PEN. #1: Jesus answered, "So you say." *(Matthew 26:*
- 16 *63-64 partial)*
- 17 PEN. #3: At this the High Priest tore his clothes and said
- 18 "Blasphemy! We don't need any more witnesses!
- 19 You have heard his blasphemy!"
- 20 PEN. #4: Then they spat in his face and beat him and
- 21 those who slapped him said, "Prophecy for us,
- 22 Messiah! Guess who hit you!" *(Matthew 26:65-67*
- 23 *partial)*
- 24 PEN. # 2: Then, Pilate's soldiers took Jesus into the governor's
- 25 palace, and the whole company gathered
- 26 around him. They stripped off his clothes and put
- 27 a scarlet robe upon him.
- 28 PEN. #4: Then they made a crown out of thorny branches,
- 29 and placed it on his head, and put a stick in his
- 30 right hand. Then they knelt before him.
- 31 PEN. #3: *(Derisively)* "Long live the King of the Jews!",
- 32 they said. They spat on him, and took the stick
- 33 and hit him over the head. When they had
- 34 finished making fun of him . . . they led him out
- 35 to crucify him. *(Matthew 27:27-31 partial)*

- 1 **PEN. #2:** When they came to the place called "The Skull,"
 2 they crucified Jesus there and two criminals, one
 3 on his right and the other on his left.
- 4 **PEN. #1:** Jesus said, "Forgive them, Father. They don't
 5 know what they are doing."
- 6 **PEN. #4:** They divided his clothes among themselves by
 7 throwing dice. The people stood there watching
 8 while the Jewish leaders made fun of him.
- 9 **PEN. #3:** (*Scornful*) "He saved others; let him save himself
 10 if he is the Messiah whom God has chosen!" The
 11 soldiers also made fun of him. They came up to
 12 him and offered him cheap wine and said, "Save
 13 yourself if you are the King of the Jews!"
- 14 **PEN. #2:** Above him were written these words: "This is
 15 the King of the Jews."
- 16 **PEN. #3:** (*Scornful*) One of the criminals hanging there
 17 hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah?
 18 Save yourself and us!" (*Luke 23: 33-39*)
- 19 **PEN. #1:** It was about twelve o'clock when the sun stopped
 20 shining, and darkness covered the whole country
 21 until three o'clock; and the curtain hanging in the
 22 Temple was torn in two. Jesus cried out in a loud
 23 voice, "Father into your hands I place my spirit!"
 24 He said this and died. (*Luke 23:44-46*)
- 25 **NAR. #1:** The supreme lesson of sacrifice has been taught to
 26 us by our Lord for, "Greater love hath no man than
 27 to lay down his life for his friends."
- 28 **NAR. #2:** His flesh tormented, his spirit anguished, Jesus
 29 suffered death on the cross at the hands of the
 30 people he sought to teach, to heal and to befriend.
- 31 **ALL**
- 32 **PEN.:** Sinners here in sackcloth and ashes,
 33 Who has followed Christ to the cross?
 34 Suggested Hymn: "O Lord Throughout These
 35 Forty Days"



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