**March 1, 2017**

**The ashes and water are placed on the table**

**The candles are lit**

*Ash Wednesday begins the Christian season of Lent. We will spend the coming days journeying with Jesus toward the cross; toward the death that ultimately brings resurrection life. Many of us will spend these coming days practicing a new spiritual discipline or giving up something that seems to be getting in the way of the life we long to live. And tonight, we come together to mark the beginning of this Lenten journey.*

*We come together to acknowledge our sin, to acknowledge our mortality. We come to glimpse the Christ who offers forgiveness, who offers everlasting life.*

*As part of tonight’s gathering, the imposition of ashes will be offered. This practice may not be familiar to everyone. Ashes have been used in Christian churches to mark the beginning of Lent since at least the 10th Century, and ashes are mentioned in scripture as a symbol of purification and repentance.*

*We offer the imposition of ashes tonight as a physical reminder of our mortality and sin; an assurance of God’s forgiveness and salvation. For those who come forward, the mark of ashes will be placed on your forehead or, if you prefer, the back of your hand (simply hold your hand out).*

*Let us begin our time of worship by focusing our minds and hearts on God’s presence with us.*

**The gong is sounded three times**

From our homes you draw us to this sacred time and space, O Holy One.

We come to dwell in your presence, for you are

the source of our being. *(Silence)*

God calls us to renew ourselves and our life’s purpose,

as we gather with others who are searching for meaning.

Let us be in silence together *(JHuggett).*

*(Silence)*
**Prayer of Releasing**

We place ourselves in your presence, O God; we rest in the promise of your grace.
Our minds and our spirits are cluttered with many thoughts and feelings that threaten to pull our attention away from you.

**Wash hands invitation**We release all that we have done today - whether for good or for ill.

We release all that we feel like we should have done today, but did not do.

We release all that we need to do tomorrow.

We release our fear. We release our anxiety. We release our impatience. We release our pride.

All of the thoughts, all of the feelings that pull us away from you, O God, we release. (*silence)*

Return to the Lord your God, for the Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love... Joel 2:13

Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Matt 11:28

Fill us now, O God, with the joy and the peace of your deep, abiding presence. **Amen**

*Silence*

**Readings from our broad Religious Tradition**Let us listen to some stories of faith.

**Hebrew Scriptures:** Isaiah 58 (selected verses)

Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,

to undo the thongs of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free,

and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,

and bring the homeless poor into your house;

when you see the naked, to cover them,

and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn...

The Lord will guide you continually,

and satisfy your needs in parched places,

and make your bones strong;

and you shall be like a watered garden,

like a spring of water,

whose waters never fail.

“Ash Wednesday” *by Jim Burklo*

On my forehead,

A sign of the cross,

Smudged in ash from the fire

That burned down the McMansion of my hubris,

And, with it,

The money I should have given away,

The television I used to numb my senses,

The carpet I should have been called on,

The doors I should have opened to others,

The envelopes I should have used

To send letters of love,

The wise books I shelved prominently

So that others would think I had read them,

The blank places in my photo albums

Where my darker moments should have been remembered,

The calendars where visits with the people who needed me most

Should have been scheduled,

The couch of my complacency,

The lounge-chair of my laziness,

The shirts I stuffed with my pride,

The moccasins I should have traded with others

So we could have walked miles in them.

On my forehead,

A sign of the crossroad

Where I can turn from the way of ruin

To the way of life. *(2012)*

**Christian Scriptures**:  Mark 2: 18-22

Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to Jesus,

"Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?”
Jesus said to them, ”The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they?  As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.

"No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made.

“And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins."

 *Silence*

**SERVICE OF THE ASHES**

We pray:

O Source of life and love, torn by desires to sit back

and to enjoy the beauty of the world -

to savour the blue skies and gentle days -

and by desires to recast the world and to fight its evils - to save the world...

Torn by all those things that hurt and confuse

and make no sense amid beauty -

yet supported by all those things that heal and hold us -

smiles, kisses, mountain vistas

and gentle waves, warm words...

We live in mystery.

We live torn apart at times:

so much glory,

so much pain.

We live in faith:

faith in ourselves and each other,

faith that we can create bonds of the spirit that proclaim we are not alone.

We have much health within us;

we can live through the heartache to new life.

So, for the grace of the world and all the tumble, too,

this day we give thanks… *(BSouthworth)*

*Silence*

**The Letting Go**

We lay down what is past...
**We lay down what is past** **and look to the future.
We take into our daily life signs of hope and healing.
We reach beyond ourselves to share the lives of others
and touch a wider world.**

**The Ashes**Ash Wednesday invites us to come back to earth.

To wonder at the gift of life,

my life

our life

with the earth, the shared body of our existence.

These ashes are the burnt palm fronds from Easter.

Once they were full of life.

Now they are black and grey.

Dry.

Lifeless.

But mixed with the waters of our baptism make good fertiliser:

it will help the seeds of the gospel take deeper root in us

and bring forth the fruits,

the harvest of justice, peace, and generosity.

These are ashes worth wearing.

May we accept this gift. And be blessed.

And be assured we will be different at the end of this season.

For from the burnt ashes will spring the green shoot of life

and the purple flower of attentiveness to God.

**Blessing**

May these ashes be blessed.

May they be for us a symbol of our return to the earth.

May we be blessed.

May we be earthed in your everlasting love,

as forgiven and forgiving people.

**Distribution***Those who wish to be marked are invited to come forward, and then return to their seats.*“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 2:7)

*Centering Silence*

*I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you*

*Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre,*

*The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed*

*With a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of darkness on darkness,*

*I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope*

*For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,*

*For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith*

*But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.*

*Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:*

*So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.* (From TS Eliot, “East Coker”)

**Affirmation**
God is with us. The Word is in our midst, seen as forgiveness, known as costly love. In the light of Christ, in the hope of Christ, our mortality is not something to be feared or denied. Our mortality, with its inevitable suffering, is something we share with every one of our human brothers and sisters. While we might think of mortality in connection with the isolation of loss, the dust we share can be a point of connection.

Together, let us pray for wisdom to as we travel on this Lenten journey, for ears to hear words of truth, and wisdom to store our treasure in our relationship with God, so that our hearts may abide in perfect peace. The blessing of the God of life, love and grace be with you always. **Amen. May it be so.**

**Sharing 'The Peace'**

The peace of God is here... to stay. *(Iona)*

**Thanks be to God!**

*You are invited to share the peace with your neighbours*