

Ash Wednesday service:

We pour out our brokenness

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Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the 40-day season of Lent, a time of repentance and preparation for the great celebration of Easter. Observing Ash Wednesday and the Lenten season can be a way of restoring the important practices of confession and renewal in the church. The following 40-45 minute service offers an extended time for confession, focusing on what have been called “the seven deadly sins” (in both their active and passive forms).

The visual environment for this service could include the following:

- a table draped in a neutral-colored cloth (could be gray, tan, off-white, or a mixture of these colors);
- seven clear glass containers of varied shapes, filled about 2/3 full of sand (a different color in each);
- a tall, clear glass container large enough to hold all or most of the sand in the seven containers;
- a large, beautifully-shaped clear glass bowl;
- small votive candle holders with white or off-white candles.

The empty bowl is placed at one end of the table, with lit candles arranged near it. At the other end of the table is a tall, empty, clear glass container. In between are arranged the seven clear glass containers filled with sand.

All music suggestions are from *Hymnal: A Worship Book*.

Gathering

As worshipers arrive, they are met at the doors of the sanctuary by leaders who are holding small clay containers filled with ashes. Leaders mark the foreheads of those who choose to participate with a smudge of ashes in the form of a cross and repeat, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return.” Worshipers then enter the sanctuary in silence.

After all have arrived, a single flute (or other instrument) plays a minor melody (e.g., “Out of the depths I cry to you” [133] or “From the depths of sin” [136]).

Call to worship: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Opening prayer

Confessing our Sins

Scripture reading: Psalm 51:1-9 (read antiphonally by congregation)

Confession: Ritual of pouring out our sins (see pages 2-4), followed by silence

Receiving assurance of God’s forgiveness

- Scripture reading: Psalm 51:10-12 (read by congregation)
- Songs of assurance: “Amazing grace” [143] and “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy” [145]

Sending

Confession: Ritual of Pouring Out Our Sins

Two readers stand at a microphone (if amplification is needed), reading the following prayer antiphonally. A third person stands behind the table, ready to pour sand with each confession.

Both voices: **Forgive me my sins, O Lord.**

1: Forgive me the sins of my youth
2: and the sins of my age,
1: the sins of my soul
2: and the sins of my body,
1: my secret and my whispering sins,
2: the sins I have done to please myself
1: and the sins I have done to please others.
2: Forgive those sins which I know
1: and those sins which I do not know.

Both voices: **Forgive them, Lord;
 forgive them all in your great goodness. [698]**

(Pause)

1: I pour out my sins of pride,
 unbending, unyielding arrogance,
 self-righteous zeal for perfection,
 damning judgements,
 vicious grasp of my own destiny.
2: I pour out my sins of refusal to take my place,
 covering fear,
 spineless accommodation,
 failure to speak,
 unwillingness to be counted.

Ritual of pouring: Sand is slowly poured from small container into large container.
The congregation sings a "Kyrie" (e.g., "Kyrie eleison" [144], "Kyrie" [152], or "O Christ, the Lamb of God" [153]).

1: I pour out my sins of envy,
 harboring desires for another's ill,
 coveting another's gifts or call,
 betraying confidences,
 giving way to spasms of jealousy.
2: I pour out my sins of lack of desire,
 not yearning for what is good, what is better,
 too self-absorbed to care,
 succumbing to distraction,
 drifting in oblivion.

Ritual of pouring is repeated, followed by "Kyrie."

1: I pour out my sins of anger,
 hostile words,
 sullen silence,
 fuming impatience,
 vicious retaliation.
2: I pour out my sins of apathy,
 callous indifference,
 shriveling submission,
 failure to protest injustice
 or to rage against the dying of the light.

Ritual of pouring is repeated, followed by "Kyrie."

- 1: I pour out my sins of lust,
exploiting another,
gorging my own satisfaction,
grasping at passion,
careless disregard for boundaries.
- 2: I pour out my sins of passivity,
ignoring my body,
rejecting my senses,
turning away from touch,
refusing connection.

Ritual of pouring is repeated, followed by "Kyrie."

- 1: I pour out my sins of greed,
devouring the inheritance of others,
filling my closets,
giving only what I can spare,
hoarding smiles or love or mercy.
- 2: I pour out my sins of hesitation,
satisfied with monotony,
content with shallowness,
not opening my hands to receive,
giving without joy.

Ritual of pouring is repeated, followed by "Kyrie."

- 1: I pour out my sins of gluttony
demanding more than my share,
wasting food and people and time,
grasping achievement,
consuming beauty or freedom or love.
- 2: I pour out my sins of refusing pleasure,
disregarding my hungers,
staying utterly sober,
never smacking my lips at a feast
or laughing uncontrollably.

Ritual of pouring is repeated, followed by "Kyrie."

- 1: I pour out my sins of sloth,
failure of purpose,
weak tolerance,
easy distraction,
sliding into dullness.
- 2: I pour out my sins of overwork,
cramming one more task into the day,
ignoring my family,
abusing my body,
forgetting God.

Ritual of pouring is repeated, followed by "Kyrie" (if some sand overflows the container by this time, it can symbolize the extent of our sinning).

**Both voices: We pour out the sand of our brokenness,
as we wait upon your grace.**

(Pause)

While the next lines of the prayer for mercy are offered, the person who has been pouring sand lifts the large sand-filled container and slowly pours all the sand into the large bowl.)

1: Pour out cleansing mercy;
 let it wash over me
 and scrub away my iniquity.

2: Pour out forgiving love;
 let it come down upon my head
 and rinse me clean.

Both voices: **Pour out renewing grace;**
1: make me holy;
2: make me whole.

Both voices: **Through Jesus Christ, we pray. AMEN**

The ritual of confession concludes with an extended time of silence. If people choose, they may want to come forward and “wash” their hands in the sand-filled container, letting the sand flow through their fingers. They return to their seats in silence.

This ritual was inspired by the Prayer and Ritual of Confession developed for the churchwide Lenten worship resources for 2005, “Marvelous in our eyes,” published in Leader magazine (Winter 2004/05).

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