

# Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ

## Ash Wednesday



**February 22, 2023**

**7:00 pm**

We Practice Just Peace: doing justice, seeking peace  
We are Open and Affirming: welcoming LGBTQ+ people  
    ) We Listen for the Still Speaking God  
    We are striving to be an Anti Racism church  
    Our faith is 2000 years old; our thinking isn't.

## Prelude

The prelude is an invitation to personal preparation for worship.

## For Reflection and Contemplation

The days are lengthening and we, as Christians, consider fasting and feasting:

Fast from bitterness ❖ Feast on forgiveness,  
Fast from self-concern ❖ Feast on compassion for others,  
Fast from personal anxiety ❖ Feast on Eternal Truth,  
Fast from discouragement ❖ Feast on hope,  
Fast from facts that depress ❖ Feast on truths that uplift,  
Fast from lethargy ❖ Feast on enthusiasm,  
Fast from suspicion ❖ Feast on truth,  
Fast from shadows of sorrow ❖ Feast on sunlight of serenity,  
Fast from idle gossip ❖ Feast on purposeful silence.

## Introit

Return to the Lord, Your God

Aaron David Miller

## Invitation to the Lenten Journey

Based on Psalm 51

Officiant: Have mercy on us O God in your great kindness: in the fullness of your mercy blot out our transgressions. Wash away our guilt: and cleanse us from our sin.

**Respondents: Create in us a clean heart, O God.**

Officiant: For we acknowledge our faults: and our sin is always before us. Against you only have we sinned and done evil in your sight.

**Respondents: Create in us a clean heart, O God.**

Officiant: Create in us a clean heart, O God: and renew a right spirit within us.

Do not cast us away from your presence; do not take your Holy Spirit from us.

**Respondents: Create in us a clean heart, O God.**

Officiant: Give us the joy of your help again; and strengthen us with a willing spirit. O Lord, open our lips, and our mouths shall proclaim your praise.

**Respondents: Create in us a clean heart, O God.**

Officiant: Tonight, we begin a sacred journey; a journey within. In Christ, God calls us toward authenticity and wholeness, toward honesty and love. Jesus' pathway to the cross invites us to a life of sacrifice, a life of self-giving, a

life of knowing what we truly need and do not need. This is a rocky road, an uphill excursion; our hope is in God, who makes all things new.

## **Silence for Personal Reflection and Confession**

*Some of our sin is known and some remains unknown and unseen.*

\*Those who are able may rise.

**\*Hymn**                      Dust and Ashes Touch Our Face                      NCH (black) #186

**Unison Prayer of Confession**                      NCH (black) #835

**Gentle and holy God, we acknowledge to you, to one another, and to ourselves that we are not what you have called us to be. We have stifled our gifts and wasted our time. We have avoided opportunities to offer kindness, but have been quick to take offense. We have pretended that we could make no contribution to peace and justice in our world and have excused ourselves from risk-taking in our own community. Have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and help us to live our lives differently, we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, whose call to follow haunts our every prayer. Amen.**

**Scripture**                      Joel 2:12-16a                      Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

## **Pastoral prayer of confession and hope**

**Anthem**                      Forgive Our Sins As We Forgive                      David Ashley White

**Reflection for Ash Wednesday**                      Rev. Holland

## **Invitation to Confession and Reconciliation**

Officiant: We are now at the beginning of our journey into the season of Lent; we are standing together on the edge of the wilderness. May the Spirit give us courage to name our shortcomings and honesty to face the falseness of what we have become.

**Respondents: This evening, we come back to God – the Genesis of our soul, the Giver of true life, our Companion on the journey of faith.**

**Sung Response**

Savior, When in Tears and Dust  
Verses 1 & 2

NCH (black) #185

## **Collective Movement to Reconciliation**

Officiant: Holy One, forgive us for we have worshipped you as a relic of the past, a religious phantom, a theological concept, but seldom as a Living God who created us, nurtures us, and releases us from the grip of hopelessness and disbelief.

**Respondents: As we seek to follow Christ into the wilderness of the world, may we have the courage to remain open and honest in our search to overcome our closeted prejudices and unspoken biases.**

Officiant: Reconciling God, give us wisdom to listen carefully to one another. Forgive us when the memory of hurts and insults drive us to lash out and strike back at those who challenge our opinions and way of life.

**Respondents: Tonight, as we set off on our Lenten journey with little certainty of our destination, let us carry God's welcoming Spirit with us.**

**Sung Response**

Savior, When in Tears and Dust  
Verse 3

NCH (black) #185

Officiant: God of all, we thank you for the great range of faiths and beliefs in the world. Forgive us when we feel threatened by people who worship, pray, and experience your truth in ways that differ from our own.

**Respondents: As the Spirit beckons us into the reality of our world, may we be thankful that we live in peace of body and mind.**

Officiant: Generous God, we know that our good life is not from our merit alone; we are part of the web of the world. Forgive us when narrow pride and nationalistic shortsightedness harden our hearts to the plight of refugees and migrant workers.

**Respondents: On this Ash Wednesday, God invites us back to the temple of our inner being and reminds us that we belong in the great sanctuary of the universe.**

Officiant: Eternal Creator, help us to notice the beauty of nature. Forgive us when we turn our backs to the cycles of life on our planet. Help us all to move from our old, destructive ways to a more sustainable lifestyle. God of new beginnings, help us to perceive new growth amid the ashes of the old. Forgive us when we fail to safeguard the dignity of every human being and

when we plunder and pillage the environment. Help us to protect life and work for the well-being of all people and living beings.

## Imposition of Ashes

Officiant: Ash Wednesday invites us to come back to the earth, and to wonder at the gift of life – your life, our lives together and the life of our planet.

These ashes were once trees and shrubs in places where life was lived to its fullest. Now they are dry, grey, and lifeless. But mixed with the waters of our baptism, they make good spiritual fertilizer, and will help the seeds of the Gospel to take deeper root in us, and bring forth fruits: the harvest of justice, peace, and new life. These are ashes worth wearing.

**Respondents: God, may we accept this gift of ashes and be blessed. We will be different at the end of this holy season, for from the burnt ashes shall spring the green shoots of true life. This is our hope and our prayer. Amen.**

*If you are present for in-person worship, you may come forward to receive ashes.*

*Pastor Holland will offer historic words from scripture when you receive ashes:*

***Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return.***

*We invite you to create a ritual that is meaningful for you and/ or your family unit if you are worshipping from home. Children might love to draw a cross on each other's foreheads. You might simply utilize a nice smelling oil or lotion. Remember that we exist with our Creator God, who holds all that we are, including our separations from ourselves, our neighbors, and Holy Spirit.*

*Ashes serve as a sign of human finitude and humility. Ashes remind us that by God's grace in Christ we received the gift of new life. Ashes are imposed with the words:*

*“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” – Genesis 3:19*

## Closing Prayer

**Sung Response**

Savior, When in Tears and Dust  
Verse 4

NCH (black) #185

## **Benediction**

### **Choral Benediction**

Open Your Doors of Mercy

Mark Sedio

## **Postlude**

*In the coming days and weeks, we invite you to consider fasting or feasting in some way, even if small. Remember that God is by your side. If you are able, hold a few moments of silence at the conclusion of this worship practice.*

## **What is Lent?**

Believed to have evolved from the Old English word lencten, Lent takes place during the time when days are lengthening in the northern hemisphere. Traditionally, the 40 days of Lent have been for Christians a time of repentance, sacrifice, and rededication to a faithful relationship with God. In Lent, we invite one another to a more thoughtful, inward spiritual experience. Study, quiet prayer, walking the labyrinth, additional worship experiences, and community service (as a positive form of sacrifice) are some of the ways you might observe Lent alongside other Christians.

## **What is Ash Wednesday?**

In the Hebrew Bible, ashes symbolize repentance, sorrow, and mortality. For many centuries, Christians have marked the beginning of Lent by receiving ashes on their foreheads at an Ash Wednesday service. This evening is one of repentance and re-orienting around the divine, revealed in Christ. Ash Wednesday services focus on our natural tendency as humans to lose track of our pathway toward our home in God. Given the fact of our mortality, it is important to find that pathway and to renew our relationship with God on a regular basis. This process of renewal includes being honest about our shortcomings and failures as well as celebrating the surprising grace of our forgiving and loving God. Tonight, we begin, once again, our journey with Jesus towards the cross.