

## **Where Two or Three are Gathered Together**

### **Ash Wednesday, Lent and The Three Days**

#### **Year 'C'**

Welcome to the great season which follows the Epiphany season, culminating in the Transfiguration. With Ash Wednesday (March 5) we enter the season of Lent, taking us to Holy Week and The Three Days and, ultimately, to the most important feast of the year, The Day of Resurrection!

A great development in our liturgical lives over the last couple of generations has been a focus on 'seasonality'. It is not all that many years ago that the changes from season to season involved, oftentimes, nothing more than perhaps a change in colour and other somewhat 'cosmetic' changes. It seems to me, now, that congregations across our church are making many more significant, meaningful, and thoughtful changes, from space configuration, to the arrangement of furniture, to the basic shape and components of Sunday liturgies, to deeply contextual preaching, and life-giving music. Each season of the church year gives us an opportunity to distinguish, to amplify, to demonstrate - all ways and tools to help us to signify what is 'going on' and how we might be part of that.

I encourage you to take risks, to try some new things, actually to experiment, knowing that not everything will work as intended and that congregants and others will react sometimes with joy; sometimes with suspicion (*what are they up to now??*), still others with a hunger for more. Enjoy the great gift that this work gives us all!

I will make some suggestions about space, about music, about preaching, and some other things... These are simply my 'musings'; they are absolutely not definitive nor prescriptive. The much more important piece of this is that you ask the questions, and delve deeply into the riches that this season offers.

Please take note of the excellent introductory material and liturgical advice in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, beginning on p. 247. The preparatory material and suggestions for Ash Wednesday, The Sunday of the Passion, and The Three Days is excellent and helpful.

#### **A General Word on Liturgical Space and Practices:**

If you have moveable furniture, try moving it around. If your pews and/or chairs move, try putting them in a different configuration. For example, if your congregational sitting is in the 'normal' configuration, try putting it in collegiate style - ie - across from each other - imagine: congregants actually looking at each other's faces rather than at the backs of their heads! If your communion table/altar is portable, consider placing it in the nave; perhaps with the congregation surrounding it. You may wish to have a large, plain cross present for Ash Wednesday, at least; perhaps for all of Lent. That same cross can be used on Good Friday, and then draped in white for Easter Day!

The traditional colour for Lent is, of course, violet or purple. In some cases, unbleached linen is used, keeping things very plain and unadorned. Some communities keep Ash Wednesday without purple vesture, honouring its very special 'feel'.

While it is probably appropriate to refrain from including any 'Alleluias' in Lent, there are any number of other traditions which may or may not be helpful to particular congregations and gatherings. In some places, flowers are eschewed during Lent. I don't know that I agree - I think flowers are appropriate at any time. Usually the 'Gloria in excelsis' is also withdrawn. The Patterns for Worship (ELW, p. 247 ff.) are helpful in keeping the Sunday liturgy simple and effective. I would urge everyone to remember that Lent is **not** sad; it is solemn and serious. Sundays are still Feasts of the Lord and need to be appropriately 'celebrated'. The scripture passages for Lent are all rich and powerful; our various hymn and music resources (ELW, Common Praise, All Creation Sings, Sing a New Creation) all contain materials which are eminently suitable - prayerful and joyful - for the season.

As I outline each Sunday and special Day, I will offer alternate 'Prayers of the Day' (Collects) which have been developed in Canada and authorized for use in both the ELCIC and the ACC. I will also suggest possible hymns as well as ideas to ponder for prayer and preaching.

Some paragraphs at the end are about The Three Days.

Big or small; great crowds or humble numbers, grand or simple, clergy or lay lead: may this holy season be meaningful for you and your community.

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**NOTE: Hymn references:**

*Suggestions are made, by hymn number. These are simply ideas; local communities may have their own choices and traditions. Try some new hymns; walk (a little...) on the wild side!! These suggestions are made primarily from a text basis.*

**ELW - Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELCIC)**

**ACS - All Creation Sings (ELCIC)**

**SNC - Sing a NEw Creation (Anglican Church of Canada - ACC)**

**CP - Common Praise (ACC)**

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**Ash Wednesday:**

Suggest that the form for Ash Wednesday (ELW p.251) most appropriate

While a sermon/homily is called for, a simple time of silence for reflection, an appropriate poem or other reading may also be most fitting.

**Two examples (please acknowledge the author if printing):**

*Ash Wednesday (a poem)*

*Ash Wednesday, the day to confess and repent  
As we enter the solemn season of Lent  
The ashes remind us that "Dust thou art"  
And one day from this world we will depart.*

*Worldwide, the faithful honor this tradition  
With devotional hearts and sincere contrition  
But, sadly, some people are not so disposed  
To "Love thy neighbor" their hearts are closed.*

*Thus, the Russian leader is attacking Ukraine  
Causing destruction and inflicting pain  
Amidst the bombings and rocket flashes  
Businesses and dwellings are reduced to ashes.*

*Today sacred ashes we wear on our forehead  
But whose soul will bear the ashes of the dead?  
The guilt of this burden to the tyrant is given  
In the eternity to come can he ever be shriven?*

*Molly Moore*

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A sonnet for Ash Wednesday by Malcolm Guite

Receive this cross of ash upon your brow,  
Brought from the burning of Palm Sunday's cross.  
The forests of the world are burning now  
And you make late repentance for the loss.  
But all the trees of God would clap their hands  
The very stones themselves would shout and sing  
If you could covenant to love these lands  
And recognise in Christ their Lord and king.

He sees the slow destruction of those trees,  
He weeps to see the ancient places burn,  
And still you make what purchases you please,  
And still to dust and ashes you return.  
But Hope could rise from ashes even now  
Beginning with this sign upon your brow.

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**Prayer of the Day:** ELW, p. 26

*An alternate Prayer of the Day:*

O God, you delight not in pomp and show,  
but in a humble and contrite heart.  
Overturn our love of worldly possessions  
and fix our hearts more firmly on you,  
so that, having nothing, we may yet possess everything,  
a treasure stored up for us in heaven. **Amen.**

**Readings:**

Joel 2.1-3,12-17 **or** Isaiah 58.1-12 (if you have not so before, try the Isaiah alternate...well worth it!)

Psalms 51.1-17

2 Corinthians 5.20b-6.10

Matthew 6.1-6,16-21

**Hymns and Music:**

**ELW: 793, 328**

**ACS: 919, 920, 1034**

**SNC: 45**

**CP: 174 (text is at ELW #321; more interesting tune in CP)**

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**Lent One:**

Here is where a Lenten configuration (if different from Ash Wednesday) should be implemented - moving chairs, altars, crosses, etc - as much as can be done. Simple is always best!

**Prayer of the Day:** ELW. p.27

*An alternate Prayer of the Day:*

O God, you delight not in pomp and show,  
but in a humble and contrite heart.  
Overturn our love of worldly possessions  
and fix our hearts more firmly on you,  
so that, having nothing,  
we may yet possess everything,  
a treasure stored up for us in heaven. **Amen.**

**Readings:**

Deut. 26.1-11;

Psalm 91.1-2,9-16  
Romans 10.8b-13  
Matthew 4.1-11

**Hymns and Music:**

**ELW: 727, 602, 618**

**ACS: 980 (could be used with varying verses each Sunday in Lent)**

**SNC: 34, 46**

**CP: 175, 176**

**Questions for reflection:**

- *What can you or could you present as the first fruit of your harvest?*
- *What bounty in your lives can you celebrate?*
- *How do we, in our diversity, call 'upon the name of the Lord'?*
- *What tempts you? What does 'temptation' mean?*
- *What does the wilderness of our time feel like? How do we comprehend it?*

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**Lent Two:**

**Prayer of the Day:** ELW, p.27

*An alternate Prayer of the Day:*

Brooding Spirit,  
beneath your wings there is creation and life:  
accompany us on the difficult path  
with the disappeared, the broken and the fearful,  
so that we find the way to the city of our peace  
where we are all accepted as your beloved;  
through the cross of Jesus Christ, our only Lord. **Amen.**

**Readings:**

Genesis 15.1-12,17-18

Psalm 27

Philippians 3.17-4.1

Luke 13.31-35

**Hymns and Music:**

**ELW: 608,510,447**

**ACS: 926**

**SNC: 21**

**CP: 455**

### Questions for reflection:

- *The Lord made a covenant with Abram. What does that covenant say, if anything, to us today?*
- *What does 'standing firm in the Lord' mean to you? To this community?*
- *What demons need to be cast out from our midst? What cures do we most earnestly need?*

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### Lent Three:

**Prayer of the Day:** ELW, p. 28

*An alternate Prayer of the Day:*

Eternal God,  
give us insight to discern your will for us,  
to give up what harms us,  
and to seek the perfection  
we are promised;  
through Jesus Christ our Saviour. **Amen.**

### **Readings:**

Is. 55.1-9;  
Psalm 63.1-8  
1 Cor. 10.1-13  
Luke 13.1-9

### **Hymns and Music:**

**ELW: 791,777,857, 531**

**ACS: 921, 1009**

**SNC: 6**

**CP: 177,662**

### Questions for reflection:

- *God will not let us be tested beyond our strength. Really??*
- *How do we 'seek the Lord', here and now?*
- *Is the church in good soil? Is it bearing fruit?*

### Lent Four:

**Prayer of the Day:** ELW, p.28

*An alternate Prayer of the Day:*

Eternal Lover of our wayward race,  
you open your arms to accept us  
even before we turn to meet your welcome;  
you invite us to forgiveness  
even before our hearts are softened to repentance.  
Hold before us the image of our humanity made new,  
so that we may live in Jesus Christ, your new creation. **Amen.**

**Readings:**

Joshua 5.9-12

Psalm 32

2 Cor. 5.16-21

Luke 15.1-3; 11b-32

**Hymns and Music:**

**ELW: 502,588,592,606,816**

**ACS: 1082**

**CP: 500**

**Questions for reflection:**

- *We are a new creation*
- *A powerful parable: who are you in the story?*
- *God's love is prodigal (recklessly extravagant.....).....how does that love change the characters in Luke's story; how does it change us?*
- *What is it like to be prodigiously generous??*

**Lent Five:**

**Prayer of the Day:** ELW, p.29

*An alternate Prayer of the Day:*

Extravagant God,  
lavishing your love on our poverty of heart:  
inspire us to give with generosity,  
to love life so that we may find it again,  
and thus the world will be filled

with the fragrance of your love;  
through Jesus Christ, who offers himself for us. Amen.

**Readings:**

Isaiah 43.16-21

Psalm 126

Phil. 3.4b-14

John 12.1-8

**Hymns and Music:**

**ELW: 808,862,591**

**SNC: 93**

**ACS: 1002**

**CP: 235,463**

**Questions for reflection:**

- *A sensuous, overwhelmingly extravagant gift*
- *Judas: true to form, but doesn't he say just what we would have said?*
- *Good old Martha - doing all the work; good old Mary, having all the fun....*
- *The poor we will always have with us.....what does that call us to?*

**Sunday of the Passion:**

A wonderful Sunday which combines **two** significant pieces: the Procession and Blessing of the Palms (remembering Jesus' triumphal entry in Jerusalem, **and** the important transition into Holy Week with the recitation of the Passion (this year, of course from Luke's gospel). While not all congregations/parishes will include both, it really makes for a superb beginning of this important week to do both pieces. They are very different - the service begins triumphantly with everyone shouting their hosannas and then makes a dramatic shift into the solemnity of the Passion.

The guide in **ELW** is a valuable assistant. Please note that the '*Gospel*' of the day is the Gospel of the Palms. The (often dramatic and responsive) reading of the Passion takes place at the time of the normal gospel reading, it should *not* be preceded with the normal Gospel acclamation but simply with the announcement; 'The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Luke'

So, the Gospel of the Palms is: **Luke 19.28-40** and is traditionally paired with the hymn 'All Glory, Laud, and Honour' (**ELW 344**).

**Prayer of the Day:** ELW, p. 29

*An alternate Prayer of the Day:*

Holy and immortal God,



open our hearts to the Blessed One,  
so that we may enter the gates of your justice,  
confessing in our words  
and in our deeds that  
Jesus is Lord, now and for ever. **Amen.**

**Readings for the Eucharist:**

Isaiah 50.4-9a

Psalm 31.9-16

Philippians 2.5-11

The Passion of Luke: (longer): 22.14-23.56; (shorter): 23.1-49

**Hymns and Music:**

**ELW: 346,347,348,349,351, 473,476**

**ACS: 928,929**

**SNC: 47**

**Questions for reflection:**

- We are the people who both shouted Hosanna **and** shouted Crucify him.....
- How do this morning's amazing words and sense launch us into this holiest of weeks?
- Can we live our lives this week in liminal space?
- It may not be enough simply to be here this morning and then return next Sunday morning in our 'best' .....we need to walk this way with Christ through liturgies this week.

**The Three Days:**

Welcome to what, for many of us, is the highlight of our liturgical year and our annual worship life: **The Three Days**, also called **The Triduum**.

Essentially, **one** service (thankfully, with breaks!) it begins on **Maundy Thursday** and ends with the **Vigil of the Resurrection** (the first Eucharist of Easter) on Saturday evening.

Worship leaders are strongly encouraged to consult both with the *Patterns for Worship* suggestions on **ELW pp.249-250** and also with the outlines of the service **ELW pp. 258-270**.

These are complex but wonderful liturgies - not simple and not following our 'normal' patterns but so rich in imagery and feeling. They require careful planning and thought, but are so very much worth it.

The **readings** and Prayers of the Day are all included in **ELW p. 30-31**. Hymns appropriate to the days can be found in **ELW 345-359** and in **ACS 930-932**. Local communities will also have their own musical traditions and 'favourite' hymns for these special days.

*Some thoughts, day by day...*

***Maundy Thursday:*** This day is all about servanthood, waiting, watching, receiving and practising. As well as the rich description of the Passover in the first reading, there is Paul's excellent description of the institution of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11) and John's amazing discourse on both the washing of feet by Jesus, and the giving of the new commandment. These three very distinct 'moments'; could give rise to three short reflections, perhaps by both clergy and laity, rather than *one* sermon.

Give careful attention to the Foot Washing - it is an intensely personal and sensuous act, often difficult and tender to introduce and yet so very moving and transformative. Because of its 'hard' nature, some are moving away from washing feet to washing hands. I would strongly advise resisting this trend. Jesus did **not** wash hands - He washed feet. (Also, in Matthew's Passion, there is reference to another 'handwashing' by Pilate - washing his hands of 'this man's innocent blood' - I think that we want to avoid confusion of the two acts.) I would also advise against 'appointing' those having their feet washed. Invite anyone who wishes to come forward. Similarly, make sure that the Pastor both washes and *is washed!*

The rite also includes the possibility of 'Stripping of the Altar'. Again, a most moving and engrossing act, that removes, with deep symbolic nuance, the Christian symbols from the sanctuary/nave - taking us into the next 'instalment' of this Three Day drama - Good Friday.

***Good Friday:*** The most solemn day of our church's year. Again try to include all the 'rites' suggested. The recitation of John's Passion could be sung or said; it needs to involve the congregation in its dramatic moments.

The 'Bidding Prayer' so importantly urges us to pray for all of God's children - all faiths and all people; for elected officials; for all of God's creation.

The Veneration of the Cross again calls us to acknowledge our own vulnerability and to express our own deeply personal piety as we come forward to mark the Cross in our own lives.

While it is a mostly silent and solemn day, it is not a 'sad' day; rather it is a day which brings us before the victory of the cross. Hymns such as **EWL 324,500,803** and **ACS 1040,1041** might be considered.

***The Vigil of the Resurrection:*** The most wonderful night of the year! Darkness to light! The Passover of the Lord! A party!

Enjoy all the bits - a BIG fire, preferably outside (showing the world our light!). Candles for all participants. All of the Easter flowers, glory, best vestments, etc. While Easter Day marks The Day of Resurrection, this night remembers and celebrates Christ's passage from death to life! Have fun - do some different things. Move seamlessly, in the worship space if possible, from the meal of the Eucharist to a party!

Start in the dark - all lights off! Use candle light only for as much of the first part of the service as is possible and safe. At the conclusion of the Vigil readings (I would suggest **not** all twelve!!) ring bells and turn on lights. Invite congregants to bring bells from home and to ring them at this moment of re-birth (*'Rejouissance'*). The Zephaniah reading is a most appropriate one with

which to end the prophetic readings; the Ezekiel 37 should always be included, as should the Creation, Flood, and Deliverance accounts from Genesis.

Easter Eve was THE time for baptism in the ancient church; it is so important for our contemporary celebrations to include Baptism if it be so, or, at the very least, an Affirmation of Baptism for those gathered.

This service will, in all likelihood, be attended by the most faithful of the community. Have fun - dare to be different and bold!

A very Happy and Blessed Easter to all!

Peter Wall  
2025