
Fire and Ashes

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa**

The penitential season of Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, which falls this year on February 17. However, many of us feel like we have been in a kind of Lent for the last eleven months! The Ash Wednesday liturgy expresses and contains some of the holy questions, longings, and realities of this last year—and of our lives. In this penitential service, after hearing the Word of God, we are invited “to the observance of a holy Lent.” Then, as a mark of our repentance and our mortal nature, we kneel before God, receive ashes on our foreheads, and pray together the Litany of Penitence.

This year, we will hold this liturgy outdoors, in person, as well as online. All winter, we have been worshipping outdoors around a fire. Fire is not only a source of warmth and light; it is also a powerful image in scripture and in our liturgy. God encountered Moses in a burning bush, led the Israelites through wilderness nights with a pillar of fire, swept Elijah up to heaven in a chariot of fire, and delivered Daniel’s friends from a fiery furnace. In the New Testament, Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire; precious things like gold and faith are “tried” in fire; and chaff is burned in fire, making way for new life.

The story of fire continues in our liturgical year. Lent ends with the new fire of Easter and the Paschal candle, from which light spreads through the entire congregation. The light of Christ burns through the Easter season and at every baptism and funeral. It descends in tongues of fire at Pentecost. And it flickers tenaciously throughout what we call “ordinary time.” It shines light into the darkness in Advent and Christmas, and it shines into the world—we carry it out into the world—throughout Epiphany. Then, Ash Wednesday comes around again, and we enter into another Lent.

Therefore, it seems especially appropriate to remember this year, in our minds and bodies, where ashes come from: fire. To that end, I encourage you to make your own ashes to bring to whichever Ash Wednesday service you attend! Traditionally, ashes are made from palms from the previous year’s Palm Sunday. But you can make ashes from anything, including the fires we have been gathering around in this pandemic.

We will be distributing containers for them at our Koinonia services on Sunday, February 14, and at our Shrove Tuesday celebration on February 16. That evening, we will gather in the parking lot to pick up to-go meals and decorate our cars for a vivacious parade around the neighborhood! [Click here](#) for registration and more details about Shrove Tuesday.

Containers for ashes will also be available for pick-up at other in-person gatherings and at the Information Desk. If you prefer not to make your own ashes for the online service, you can pick up ashes at the Information Desk, too.

In our online and in-person Ash Wednesday services, the celebrant will bless all the ashes and guide you as you impose ashes on one another or on yourself. It is a powerful experience, and I trust that it will lead you to hear the words and experience the ritual in a new and profound way.