Ash Wednesday Prayer Service

Preparation: Have on hand a larger bowl of water, a candle, a Bible, and a smaller bowl of bread crumbs mixed with salt. For each person, provide a copy of the prayer service. Arrange the group in such a way that all present can see and approach a table on which are placed the small bowl of water, candle, and the Bible. Ask someone to light the candle and then begin.

Introduction (This may be read by all quietly prior to beginning or by one aloud for the group)
This prayer service draws attention to the bondage of sin and our efforts during Lent to break that bondage. We cast the bondage of sin onto a bowl of water symbolizing the cleansing waters of our baptism, in which we remind ourselves that we all walk through Lent with those who are preparing for baptism at Easter. During Lent we will not find holy water at the normal places when we enter our churches, since this is a time of discipline of Lent—Prayer, Fasting or Penance, and Almsgiving or Service, so that we consider the cleansing waters of God's unconditional love that when we acknowledge our sins, we are forgiven and remade once again as New Creations.

Leader: Redeeming God, we begin our Lenten journey as sinners in your sight. We ask for the wisdom to know our sin and the grace to turn to you for healing, strength and guidance. (Pause for quiet reflection)

Opening Prayer (All):

Father in heaven, the light of your truth bestows sight to the darkness of sinful eyes. Protect us in our struggle against evil. As we begin today to the practice the disciplines of Lent, make these 40 days holy by your reception of our self-denial. May this season of repentance and prayer bring us the blessing of your forgiveness and the gift of your love alive in our hearts. Amen.

Liturgy of the Word (leader may choose to use one or more of the following readings)

First Reading: Joel 2:12-18

“Yet even now”, says the Lord, “return to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments”. Return to the Lord, your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repents of evil. Who knows whether He will not turn and repent, and leave a blessing behind Him, a cereal offering and a drink offering for the Lord, your God?

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her chamber.

Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord weep and say, “Spare thy people, O Lord, and make not thy heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’

Then the Lord became jealous for His land, and had pity on His people. The Lord answered and said to His people, “Behold, I am sending to you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied; and I will no more make you a reproach among the nations.

Second Reading: II Corinthians 5:20 - 6:2
So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. Working together with Him, then, we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain. For He says, “At the acceptable time I have listened to you, and helped you on the day of salvation.” Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

Gospel: Matthew 6:1-6; 16-18

“Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.” Thus, when you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you”.

Reflection time (Optional: leader may invite anyone who wishes to briefly share a thought from one of the readings that was significant for that person)

Leader: Let us pray…

All: Forgiving and Merciful God, we look deep in our hearts. We find there the sin that keeps us from the joy you meant for us. Only with your help can we break the bondage of that sin.

Ritual of Cleansing: Casting our Lives on God’s Mercy

Leader:
We gather around this simple sign of water, O God, reminder of your power to cleanse us from our bondage to sin. We cast the stuff of our daily lives, symbolized by these bread crumbs mixed with salt, upon this water, as we cast ourselves with all our sins and weakness upon your mercy. We trust in your guidance to make the days ahead a time of repentance, forgiveness, and holiness. I invite each of you to reflect upon these questions as we begin Lent together:

- What is the bondage to sin or weakness that I will cast upon the “cleansing waters” of God’s love?
- How does this area of sin keep my from knowing joy and goodness in my life?
- When has this particular sin of mine hurt others?
- When, how and with whom will I pray during Lent?
- What will I choose to do to serve my brothers and sisters in concrete ways this Lent?

(Pause for a moment of quiet reflection on these questions)
Leader: I now invite each one of you to approach the table with the bowl of water which symbolizes the cleansing and healing mercy of God, pick up some of the bread crumbs mixed with salt that symbolize the poverty of our lives, and then sprinkle the crumbs upon the water, while you say what is written on the card in front of the bowl: “I cast my bondage of sin upon these cleansing waters and ask for God’s mercy and guidance through these days of Lent.”

(Once all those who wish to participate in this ritual have done so, the leader concludes)

Concluding Prayer

Leader: We are sinners, yet you love us deeply, O God. Give us the courage to look at our own sinfulness. Give us the humility to ask for your help to repent, turn from our sins and toward you, and find new life again as we renew and refresh our relationships with you. Let us pray…

All: We are weak, O God, but our intentions are good. As you knew Peter in both his zeal for you and his denial of you, and still knew that he loved you, so too you know us, in our weakness and our goodness. Support us when we are tempted. Guide us into new pathways that will draw our hearts home to you. Amen.

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