

**Ash Wednesday**  
**February 18, 2026**  
**Rev Lisa Hackler**  
**American Lutheran Church**

**Joel 2:1-2, 12-17**  
**2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10**  
**Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**

It is an interesting thing we do today on Ash Wednesday. We come forward and someone puts ashes on our forehead. Publicly.

Which seems almost strange when you hear Jesus say in our gospel text for today,

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them...”

And yet... here we are.

But maybe Jesus is not warning us about being seen. Maybe he is warning us about why we want to be seen.

There is something deep in the human heart that wants to say “Look at me.” When I used to go to the park with my grandson Rex and granddaughter Georgia when they were 5 and 3 years old, it meant hours of watching them attempt wondrous feats. Georgia would slide down the slide with her hands in the air “Bamba, Bamba look what I can do!” Rex would stand on his swing and shout, “Bamba, Bamba look at me.” And at first it wasn’t hard to enthusiastically applaud them or yell out great job! But as the hours wore on I have to admit I was having to fake enthusiasm as they showed me how they could do a variation of the same thing over and over. But they never tired of trying to impress, “Bamba, Bamba. Watch this!” This is kind of

normal kid behavior. They were so proud of their growing set of skills. They wanted to be seen.

Adults are not so different. We just get more subtle. In different ways adults often want to be seen by others in a certain way. They want to send a message...

Look at my success.

Look at how smart I am.

Look at my goodness.

Look at my faith.

Look at my strength. Look at how well I am holding everything together.

And sometimes — if we are honest — we even want God to notice. We want God to see us.

God, look how hard I am trying. Look how faithful I am. Look how much I am doing.

But Jesus says something astonishing: God already sees you. You do not have to perform for God. You do not have to prove anything to God. Your Father sees.

And that is where the ashes come in. Because tonight the church tells a truth many of us try not to think about. We hear the words: Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Those are not easy words but they are honest words. They cut through illusions we spend most of our lives maintaining:

That we are in control.

That we are permanent.

That time is unlimited.

That our strength will last forever.

The Ashes remind us:

We are creatures.

We are mortal.

We are fragile.

In Lutheran theology we would say this is the Law — the truth about ourselves we cannot escape. Now, you might ask, given where we live, do we really need to be reminded of their mortality? But the ashes are not only about death.

Because notice what shape they take on your forehead. A cross. We are Dust — marked with the cross.

Which means something extraordinary: Christ has entered this dust. He has taken on mortality. He has taken on suffering. Christ has taken on death itself.

So the ashes say two things at once: You are dust. And Christ who has joined you in that dust, has a project to redeem you.

Martin Luther said the whole Christian life is a return to baptism — a daily dying and rising.

Tonight we emphasize the dying part. But our baptism also promises rising from this death in Christ. And the simple fact is, if we can't get the message of Ash Wednesday, we can't grasp the fullness of Easter.

So ashes are not a threat. They are a promise.

They say:

You do not have to save yourself.

You cannot save yourself.

And you do not need to.

Christ has claimed you.

The prophet Joel says: "Return to me with all your heart."

That word "return" is important. It does not mean earn your way back to God. It does not mean fix yourself first. And it means come home.

So, Ash Wednesday is not about impressing God.

It is about coming home to God's mercy and grace. And maybe that is what Jesus means when he says:

Your Father sees in secret.

God sees the grief you do not talk about, the fears you carry quietly, the regrets that linger, God sees the loneliness, and the prayers you cannot even form into words.

God sees you more clearly than you can see yourself and calls you beloved in Jesus' name.

So tonight we come forward. Not to show others how great we are, how strong we are, how skillful we are. But to admit we are mortal and completely reliant on the grace of God.

Not to prove our devotion. But to receive mercy.

Not because we are strong. But because we all desperately need a Savior.

And the beautiful thing is this: We come as dust. And we leave marked with the cross of Jesus. We leave this church as mortals who are seen and redeemed by God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.