



"Ash" by Mike Moyers.

Christ Church UNITED CHURCH
OF CHRIST



**Milwaukee Metropolitan
Community Church**

a Vibrant ~ Inclusive ~ Progressive Community of Faith

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In the Australian Bush, fire often consumes the trees and grass, which leaves the landscape charred. Several days after the fire, shoots sprout from the grass roots as well as the stumps and branches. This new life makes a brilliant cover of green over the fire-blackened bark and earth. Tonight, we come to be united with the blackened earth as we receive the mark of ash on our skin. Just as new growth surely follows the fire so new things await us as we make this journey of repentance. You are invited to think of something you would like to leave behind or let go on your Lenten journey. It will be turned to ash in a burning ritual and used for next year's ashes.

Prelude

Words of Welcome

Opening Song

Opening Litany

Because we have covered ourselves with pride and arrogance:

Cleanse and set us free.

Since we have been content with the empty and the superficial:

Fill us from the depths of love.

When we become trapped in old patterns and struggles:

Lift our eyes in hope.

Even though we are broken and far short of perfection:

Form us for loving service.

After our best efforts have met with rejection and discouragement:

Encourage us still to trust.

Opening Prayer

So we bring before God all that is in our life, knowing that we can hold nothing back from the fire of love which consumes even those faults which we dearly cherish. Let us then share these ashes from each other's hands and know that God will surely fulfill the promise of newness within our life.

Old Testament

Joel 2:12-17 (The Inclusive Bible)

¹²"But know this," says Yahweh: "Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, weeping, and mourning. ¹³Tear open your heart, not your clothes!" Return to Yahweh your God, who is gracious and deeply loving as a mother, and relents from inflicting disaster. ¹⁴Who knows? God may come back, relent, and leave a blessing behind – grain and drink offerings for Yahweh your God.

¹⁵Sound the shofar (trumpet) in Zion! Order a fast! Proclaim the solemn assembly! ¹⁶Gather the people! Purify the community! Assemble the elders! Gather the children – even infants at the breast! Let the bridegroom leave his bedroom and the bride her canopied bed! ¹⁷Let the priest, the ministers of Yahweh, stand weeping between the portico and the altar and say, "Spare your people, Yahweh! Don't let your heritage become an object of ridicule, a byword for the nations! Don't let the peoples say, "Where is their God?"

¹Beware of practicing your piety before others to attract their attention; if you do this, you will have no reward from your Abba God in heaven. ²When you do acts of charity, for example, don't have it trumpeted before you; that is what hypocrites do in the synagogues and the streets, that they may be praised by others. The truth is, they've already received their reward in full. ³But when you do acts of charity, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing; ⁴your good deeds must be done in secret, and your Abba God – who sees all that is done in secret – will repay you. ⁵And when you pray, don't behave like the hypocrites; they love to pray standing up in the synagogues and on street corners for people to see them. The truth is, they have received their rewards in full. ⁶But when you pray, go to your room, shut the door, and pray to God who is in that secret place, and your Abba God – who sees all that is done in secret – will reward you. ¹⁶And when you fast, don't look depressed like the hypocrites. They deliberately neglect their appearance to let everyone know that they are fasting. The truth is, they have already received their reward. ¹⁷But when you fast, brush your hair and wash your face. ¹⁸Don't let anyone know you're fasting except your Abba God, who sees all that is done in secret. And Abba God – who sees everything that is done in secret – will reward you. ¹⁹Don't store up earthly treasures for yourselves, which moths and rust destroy, and thieves can break in and steal. ²⁰But store up treasures for yourselves in heaven, where neither moth nor rust can destroy them, and thieves cannot break in and steal them. ²¹For where your treasure is, there will your heart be as well.

Song

The Message

Pastor Dan Stark

Song of Response

[HOLY COMMUNION AND IMPOSITION OF ASHES](#)

Blessing of Ashes

The Rite of Imposition of Ashes for which this day of the liturgical year is named is a ritual with a lot of different symbolism. Ash has been a symbol of grief and mourning (the wearing of sackcloth and ashes was part of the grieving process for people of Jewish and other faith traditions). It has been a symbol of the frailty and finitude of human life (summed up perhaps best in the phrase, 'Ashes and ashes; dust to dust'). Ash has also symbolized the possibility of transformation and new life (it was from the ashes that the mythical phoenix was reborn ... fields that are burned become the most fertile ground for new growth). Tonight, the ash also reminds us of our offering ... the letting go of the things or activities or habits in our lives that may keep us from being ready for the journey ahead or from being open to the transformation that awaits us on this journey.

As we receive the imposition of ashes tonight, it marks the beginning of the next leg of our journey and is a sign of our desire to be fully open to the Spirit in our lives.

Blessing of the Ashes

Gracious God, just yesterday it seems, the palms were fresh and green, held tight in hands as we reenacted Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. But then they dried, shriveled, became almost too fragile to touch, until we burned them into the ashes for tonight. Yet, by the grace of our God, with the Spirit resting upon them, they are mixed with oil and placed on our heads or hands, the dust of life resting upon us as a sign that by sharing the gifts of peace, reconciliation, justice, and generosity, we will live into the people we long to become.

As we are touched with this mark, God of all moments, remind us that just as you shaped humanity from earth's dust, so, from the ashes of repentance and denial, that grace which is gifted to us through Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, will shape us into faithful followers. Amen.

Sacrament of Communion

Consecration of the Elements

Gracious God, pour out your Holy Spirit upon us, and upon these gifts you provide of bread and the fruit of the vine. Let the bread we break and the cup we bless speak to us of the presence of Christ. By your Spirit, unite us with the living Christ and with all who follow Christ's way, that we may be one in ministry in every place. As this bread is Christ's body for us, send us out to be the body of Christ in the world.

On the night that Jesus was to be taken from us, he gathered his disciples. Taking bread from the Table, giving thanks, blessing it, broke it and said: *"Take and eat, as this is my body given for you, and as often as you eat this, do this in remembrance of me."*

Likewise, following the meal, he took a cup from the Table; blessed it and said, *"This cup is the new covenant of my life, poured out for you and all people for the forgiveness of sin. Drink of this often and when you do, do it in remembrance of me."*

Consecration Prayer

Here at this Table of life and longing, pour out your Spirit on us, and on the gifts offered to us. May the bread which is broken strengthen us so nothing can separate us from those who struggle with life; from those who mourn a death; from those who have no power or voice.

May the cup which overflows with grace nourish us so we pick up those who have been

trampled by misery; those who are trapped by injustice; those who are pushed aside by the privileged.

And when neither death nor life, neither time nor history can keep us apart from you as you gather us around your Table with our sisters and brothers, we will sing your glory and praise forever and ever, God in Community, Holy in One. Amen.

Burning Ritual

We have taken the time tonight to think a little bit about our life journeys ... and we have identified some things that we think we might need to leave behind or let go of to be more open to transformation in the coming season. What we would like to invite you to do now is to symbolically do that...by thinking about the things you have identified that you would like to let go of this Lenten season.

Tonight, we will symbolically burn them in a fire, that they may become a burnt offering to God. May this ritual be move us towards a commitment to try to do the work of freeing ourselves in this season of Lent to be more open and to listen more closely to the voice of God, the One who knows you better than anyone and loves you exactly as you are.

Sending Blessing

The ash that marks us, O God, marks us as ready and open for the journey of Lent, a journey of transformation. May your presence in our lives at this time be a constant source of inspiration and strength. Keep our highest hopes before us. Grant us traveling mercies and send us with your peace. Amen.

Postlude

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**If you should need to contact Pastor Stark, please email pastor@uccmke.org.
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We are currently worshiping online-only. Learn more here.

<https://www.uccmke.org/covid-advent>

You can make your offering to Christ Church at www.uccmke.org/donate or by mailing a check to Christ Church, 915 East Oklahoma Ave, Milwaukee, WI, 53207.

