

Central Lutheran Church
Are You Ready?
February 15, 2026
Psalm 51:1-17 and Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Grief is difficult and deeply personal. In our culture, grief is something we tend to experience privately. When we are grieving, we are cautious about who we are real with, and most folks become skilled at putting on a show around everyone else, or at least doing so when we feel it's needed.

Imagine how awkward a grieving person might appear if they were completely transparent about their grief in every setting. Imagine if they told every passerby exactly how they felt, sparing no detail. That kind of raw honesty would be overwhelming for the one in grief and for all the people they encounter.

As a pastor, I have walked alongside many people through grief. I've thought about it more than most. And recently I've been reflecting on it quite often after being elected to serve on the Board of Directors of Faith and Grief Ministries, an organization devoted to supporting people as they journey through grief.¹

Radical transparency about grief is a lot to process. But tonight, we face something even more challenging. We gather to recognize our mortality. Many will soon come forward to receive ashes hearing the familiar words, "Remember you are dust, and unto dust you shall return."

We have already joined our voices with the psalmist and with Christians far beyond these walls and across the centuries when we said together, "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me."²

Ash Wednesday feels a lot different than it did when we gathered here just a few days ago and that is by design. Tonight is

¹ See the organization's website to learn more: <https://www.faithandgrief.org/>

² Psalm 51:3, NRSV.

authentic, real, and raw. This service recalibrates us and readies us for the Lenten journey.

This is why so few come. That statement isn't a commentary about Central Lutheran Church; it is an observation about the broader practices in American Christianity. Very few people show up on Ash Wednesday and that the percentage continues to decline year after year. In my experience, attendance on this day is often half of what it is the Sunday before or the Sunday following and, in some churches, it is much, much smaller.

Tonight is about an authentic encounter with God. It is not about looking faithful, but rather about being honest.

In our reading from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus names several practices central to religious life: giving, praying, fasting. These are good. Jesus, however, recognizes they are distorted when performed to seek recognition rather than build relationship.

Jesus directs us inward. He tells us to go to the quiet room and even instructs us to shut the door. We are told to offer our prayers in a place where no one sees us.

Ash Wednesday offers a similar invitation. The ashes placed on our foreheads or the back of our hands are visible to others, but their purpose is not public display.

No one has come tonight in hopes of receiving the picture-perfect cross on their forehead as a tool to attract more followers on TikTok or Instagram. Hopefully everyone has come knowing that the ashes signify repentance and mortality.

Psalm 51 belongs to a small group of seven psalms we call penitential.³ That fancy religious term should lead us to think about penance, confession, and forgiveness. And we should be aware that this group of psalms has historically been prayed together during Lent.

³ The penitential psalms are Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143.

Of the seven, the one we know best is Psalm 51 – tonight’s psalm. You could argue we know it best because we hear it every year on Ash Wednesday.

According to tradition, Psalm 51 is King David’s response to being confronted by the prophet Nathan about his abuse of his power – an overreach that led him to commit adultery and arrange a murder.

Remarkably, David doesn’t attempt to provide justification or explain away his sin. Instead, he begins with confession: “My sin is ever before me.”⁴ And, then continues, “Against you, you alone, have I sinned.”⁵

These words are not meant to diminish or dismiss harm to others. Rather, they recognize that sin ultimately disrupts relationship with God.

Importantly, Psalm 51 does not stop at confession. It moves toward transformation. David prays, “Create in me a clean heart, O God.”⁶

This is the language of divine action, not human striving. The psalmist does not say, “I will fix myself.” He recognizes that true restoration comes from God. He trusts that God can reshape what we cannot.

Jesus’ teaching in Matthew supplements this lesson. Authentic spiritual practice is not about showcasing righteousness in front of other people. It is about opening ourselves so that God can act within us. Prayer, fasting, and generosity are some of the many ways we exercise our faith.

So now, on Ash Wednesday, we are ready to begin. This is the one day of the year we come to church to be told we are mortal – to be reminded we started as dust and some day will return to it.

⁴ Psalm 51:3, NRSV.

⁵ Psalm 51:4, NRSV.

⁶ Psalm 51:10, NRSV.

Fully aware of who we are, we pray with the Psalmist inviting God to "Restore to me the joy of your salvation."⁷

The psalm has taken us from lament to trust. And trust offers a firm foundation to begin moving forward.

In a few moments, I will invite you to literally come forward to receive ashes. Before you do, I want to put everything in context.

Listen to this helpful summary from New Testament scholar and popular author Marcus Borg who writes:

Ash Wednesday, Lent, Holy Week and Christianity itself are about following Jesus on the path that leads through death to resurrection. They are about dying and rising with Christ. We are to follow him to Jerusalem, the place of death and resurrection. That is what the journey of Lent is about.

That journey intrinsically involves repentance. But repentance is not primarily about feeling guilty about our sins, or about doing penance . . . The biblical meanings of repenting are primarily twofold. On the one hand, it means to "return" to God, to "reconnect" with God. On the other hand, it means "to go beyond the mind that we have" – minds shaped by our socialization and enculturation.

The result: dying to an old way of seeing and being and living and identity, and being born, raised, into a new way of seeing and being and living and identity. Ash Wednesday, as we are marked for death, is the annual ritual enactment of the beginning of that journey.⁸

Siblings in Christ, let us begin the journey. Amen.

⁷ Psalm 51:12 NRSV.

⁸ Marcus Borg. "Ash Wednesday: Death and Repentance." Available from <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/marcusborg/2014/03/ash-wednesday-death-and-repentance/>