

# Ash Wednesday at Home

*By Kelly Ladd Bishop*

## **Supplies needed:**

- Fire proof container – a Dutch oven or cast iron pan works well. If you don't have one, an empty coffee can works. Just be sure not to touch the hot metal.
- Pot holder
- Metal tongs
- Matches or lighter
- Candle
- Paper
- Pencils
- Olive oil
- Bucket of water or extinguisher for fire safety

\*This should be done outside in a fire-safe space without much wind. Be sure to keep water or an extinguisher nearby. Use caution and be safe!\*

## **Set up:**

- In advance, cut or tear paper into small pieces, 2-3 inch squares
- Set up your fire proof container and your candle next to each other
- Keep your bucket of water or extinguisher nearby
- Be sure you have a pencil for each participant.

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Ash Wednesday begins the season of Lent. Traditionally, Ash Wednesday is a time in the church when we reflect on our mortality, which may feel especially relevant this year, or perhaps even especially difficult. But the beauty of Lent is that it ends with Easter and the undoing of sin and death. Through the season of Lent we prepare our hearts for Easter, which starts with the reminder that we are dust, and will return to dust. We are helpless on our own, and fully dependent on God's mercy.

And our God is merciful! Our God is gracious, loving, and forgiving. That is why, on Ash Wednesday, and on any day, we can turn to God and be forgiven and made whole. Lent is a time for refreshing and renewing our relationship with God.

Confession and repentance are important practices in the Christian life. When we repent of sin in our lives, we don't just ask forgiveness, but we turn away from sin, allowing Jesus to make us new, and to take us in a new direction.

## **Start with Prayer:**

Take a moment to prepare your hearts before God. If you are making ashes with children, you may want to say this:

*“Today is called Ash Wednesday, and we are going to make ashes today! These ashes are a reminder that God made us. God made you, and God made me. And God loves us and cares for us. To make these ashes we are going to burn some paper. But first, we are going to write on the paper.*

*Because God loves us, he will always forgive us when we make mistakes. He wants the best for us. So, we are going to write or draw on our papers things that we want to ask God to forgive or to change in us. We’re going to start by saying a prayer together.”*

### **Pray together:**

*“Dear God, you are the creator of all things, and you love what you have created. Thank you that you made us and you love us! We know that we don’t always do right. Help us to see the things in our lives that need your forgiveness. Amen.”*

## **Write:**

- Using the paper and pencils, take a few quiet moments to write or draw what you would like to ask God to forgive, or what you would like to give over to God to change or make new.
- If you are making ashes with children, words like sin and repent may not be helpful. You may want to ask young children to think about things they want to tell Jesus, things they want to say sorry for, or ways they want Jesus to help them grow. It will help children if you model this by suggesting some things YOU might write. You might say:

*“I’m going to ask God to forgive me for being impatient sometimes.”*

*“I’m going to ask God for help being kind to people.”*

- DO NOT make specific suggestions like, “You should ask God to forgive you for being mean to your sister.” Let children search their own hearts, and let them draw or write their own feelings and ideas. This is between them and God.
- Younger children should use the pencil to draw a picture of what they want to say to God.
- Give older children some time to think, and allow them to privately write down their thoughts.
- Prayerfully write your own confessions as well. Be honest. Ask God to help you.

## ***Making ashes:***

- Once everyone has drawn or written on their papers, fold the paper loosely for privacy - just one fold is best.
- Using the matches or lighter, light the candle.

### **For children say:**

*"We light candles to remind us of God's presence with us. The flame is a symbol of God's Spirit."*

### **Pray:**

*"God, we offer up these things to you. Take them from us, change our hearts, forgive us, renew us, and give us new life in Jesus' name. Amen."*

- Using the metal tongs, hold one side of a folded paper. Light the other side in the flame of the candle, and then immediately hold the burning paper in the fire proof container with the tongs. Let the burned pieces of paper fall into the container. It's okay if there are still bits of unburned paper.
- Drop the last bit of paper into the container as it finishes burning.
- Repeat this with each folded piece of paper.
- You only need a tiny bit of ash, so it's okay if bits of paper remain in the bottom of your container.
- Using the tongs, mix the ash, breaking up any larger pieces. Remember not to touch the hot metal with your hands, and do not let children touch the container!
- Once the ash has cooled, add small drops of oil to the ash, one drop at a time. You can dip your finger into a tiny bit of oil, and let it drip off your finger into the ashes. You only need the tiniest bit of oil to make the ash sticky enough to stick to your skin. The oil will prevent it from being too powdery, but too much oil will make it oily and messy, so be careful to only add a drop at a time.
- Stir the oil and ashes together until you have an even mixture.

## ***Imposing the ashes:***

### **Explain to children:**

*"These ashes are a symbol of the things we have given up to God. God forgives these things and they are gone from us! Just like the papers we wrote on are gone. On Ash Wednesday, we put these ashes on our foreheads as a visible sign that we need God, and that God has forgiven us. We say these words from the Bible, 'Dust you are, and to dust you shall return.' These are words that God says to Adam when he disobeys God. They remind Adam that he is only human and won't live forever. But remember God sent Jesus to forgive us so that we can live with him forever!"*

- If children do not want the ashes on their foreheads, offer to put them on their hands. Assure them that the ashes are no longer hot.
- Rub your thumb in the ashes
- Use the ash to make a cross shape on the child's forehead or hand saying, *"Dust you are, and to dust you shall return."*

## ***End with prayer:***

*“Dear God, thank you that you are faithful to always forgive us. The Bible says that if we confess to God, he is faithful and will forgive us and make us clean. (1 John 1:9) Thank you for making us clean and giving us a new life with you. Amen.”*

- Assure children that God loves them and forgives them!
- Don't forget to blow out the candle!