

“Meeting God in the Ashes” *An Ash Wednesday 2025 message from Bishop Lanette Plambeck*

Grace and peace to you, my friends. I am Lanette Plambeck, resident bishop of the Dakotas-Minnesota Episcopal area.

As we enter the season of Lent, I invite you to take a deep breath and approach this sacred time with intention. Lent is a season of 40 days, mirroring Jesus' time in the wilderness. It is a time of reflection, repentance and renewal— a journey that leads us from ashes to resurrection.

There is hope in Lent because God is still at work in us and in the world. Even in our struggles, even in our wilderness moments, grace is leading us forward.

There is help in Lent, found in the spiritual practices that guide our steps— the means of grace, prayer, fasting, generosity, and acts of mercy. These aren't just traditions; these are ways we create space for God to move in our lives and through our lives. And at its core, Lent is about encountering the Holy even as we face our own humanity. In the quiet, in the sacrifice, in the seeking, throughout this season, we meet God in deeper ways.

So here we are at the beginning, Ash Wednesday. Can you hear the Spirit beckoning us— perhaps even chasing us, into this season?

Scripture

From Job 42:5-6 - “My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore, I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.

From Isaiah 61:1-3 - “The spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to comfort all who mourn, to provide for those who mourn in Zion, to give them a garland instead of ashes.”

On Ash Wednesday, we kneel before the cross, feeling the weight of the ashes placed on our foreheads. These ashes remind us of our frailty, our need for grace, and our dependence on God. They are the dust of mortality and the residue of all that has been broken in our lives and in our world. But these ashes also carry a deeper truth— one that Job knew well.

Remember when Job sat in the ash heap, scraping his wounds, lamenting all that he had lost. His suffering was raw, his questions unfiltered. Yet in the ashes, something happened. He encountered God— not just in ideas, but in reality. His words, “My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you,” Job confessed. His ashes were not just symbols of despair— they became the soil of revelation.

Friends, Lent invites us into that same space, to sit in the ashes honestly, to name our pain, our failure, our longing, our fears, our mortality. We do not rush past them, because it is in the ashes that we meet the presence of God.

But the story— our story, God's story, does not end there.

Isaiah gives us a vision beyond the ashes: “a crown of beauty instead of ashes.” The God who meets us in the dust also lifts us from it. The ashes of grief become the oil of joy. The ruins of despair are exchanged for garments of praise. The wilderness, well, it is not our final home. Friends, resurrection is coming.

So today, do not fear the ashes. Do not rush to wipe them away too quickly. Instead, enter the wilderness they mark. Let them be a place of deep encounter, where all that is false is stripped away, where we see God more clearly, where we see ourselves more clearly, and where transformation begins.

And when Easter dawns, we will not wear ashes, but laurels— the victory wreath of grace, given by the One who walked us through the dust and raised us into new life.

Benediction:

Go now into the wilderness of Lent,
marked by the dust of your humanity,
yet held in the mercy of God.

May the ashes upon your forehead
remind you of where you have been,
but not define where you are going.

For the One who calls you into repentance
also calls you into grace.
The One who meets you in the ashes
will one day crown you with joy.

Friends, go in the name of our Triune God.
May this season be holy as you journey
with the One who leads you
from dust to life everlasting.
Amen.