

Ash Wednesday



# Forgiveness

*"... forgive them;  
for they know not what they do."*  
Luke 23:34

## Opening Prayer (based on Psalm 51)

God, of grace,  
generous in love,  
filled with mercy,  
I am aware of my sins;  
erase them and wash away my guilt.  
And God, start in me a new way. Amen

## Thoughts to Ponder...

When was the last time you needed to ask for forgiveness? What happened? What was that experience like? When were you last asked to forgive someone? What was that like? What did you struggle with about forgiving someone?

## Practicing Jesus' 7 Last Words

Choose one (or more) of the following activity options to do this week as you consider forgiveness.

**Confession:** Confession is a term that means admitting to wrongdoing. Sometimes we need to confess the ways we have done something wrong, and sometimes we need to confess the ways we failed to do something right. Spend some time alone or with your household praying prayers of confession to God.

**Hand washing:** We wash our hands to protect against germs, but hand washing can also be a ritual (or spiritual practice) where we remember how God has cleansed us of our sins and made us white as snow. Fill a bowl with warm water and take turns washing each other's hands. While you do, you can read Psalm 51:7. Then, dry each other's hands with a clean white towel.

**Meditative music:** Listen to the song "Refiner's Fire"<sup>1</sup> or "Create in Me a Clean Heart."<sup>2</sup> While you listen, sit somewhere comfortable, close your eyes, and let the music be a prayer from your heart.

## Forgiveness

Forgiveness is a difficult topic. Some people are challenged by forgiving others; some do not believe they themselves deserve forgiveness. But God, who is rich in mercy, forgives all ... yes, ALL. The Bible teaches that forgiveness can happen not because we make amends or attain goodness ourselves but because Jesus did that for us so that we can be reconciled to God. But in the Christian calendar, Ash Wednesday precedes Easter, a reminder of our brokenness before Jesus' coming, life, death, and resurrection.

On Ash Wednesday, we celebrate the ritual of ashes. Many people attend services where they receive the sign of the cross on their forehead with ashes, and they leave it there all day. Ashes have been used for thousands of years to represent grief and sorrow, but the sign of the cross is a relatively recent ritual which reminds us of the funeral passage "ashes to ashes and dust to dust." We come from ash and dust and will return to that ... we are mortal, fallible humans capable of both good and evil. But the cross represents Christ Jesus, who took on humanity so that we may be reconciled with God. But a person is not only a sinner. A person is also someone who has been sinned against and in need of reconciliation, peace and grace. The ashen cross represents both our brokenness and God's grace.

You may also consider attending an Ash Wednesday service if this devotion is not used as part of the service at your congregation.

**Read the Story:** Luke 23:32-34

## Questions for Reflection

1. What does it mean to forgive?
2. What feelings surface when you think of forgiving someone who has hurt you?
3. How can we forgive and still see that justice is done?
4. What does it mean to be forgiven by God? How does this make you feel?
5. Are there any particular areas of your life where you need to seek out God's forgiveness?

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### Closing Prayer (from Psalm 51:10-12)

Holy God, create in me a pure heart, O God,  
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.  
Do not cast me from your presence or  
take your Holy Spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation  
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Amen.



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1 Purify My Heart (Refiner's Fire), Jeremy Riddle Version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ayH5iV5zmrl>

2 Create in Me a Clean Heart, God's Amazing Grace Christian Fellowship: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b7Hk3WFUMvo>

# First Sunday of Lent



## A new heaven and a new earth

***"Today you shall be with me in paradise."***

Luke 23:43

### Opening Prayer

Lord, give me the grace to labor with you  
without seeking myself—  
to live the Kingdom  
in its full reality.  
Amen

(John Futrell, SJ)<sup>3</sup>

### Thoughts to Ponder ...

What do you currently believe about heaven? What do you picture when you hear words like "Heaven"? How do you get there? How do you feel about heaven (hopeful, anxious, worried, confused, etc.)? What is the difference in your mind between "Heaven" and the "Kingdom of Heaven"?


### Heaven

We often think of heaven as an escape from reality or as the bliss that can be realized only after death—a glittery realm located in the clouds. Yet that is not what scripture teaches us. The promise of eternity with God is an earthly proposition. In the Book of Revelation, the prophecy of John describes a new heaven and a new earth, where people do not ascend into the clouds to be with God. Rather, God comes to the new Earth, the holy city, to be in and amongst the people. This new earth is, in part, a fulfillment of the biblical vision of *shalom*—peace and justice—a state of personal and societal integrity where all things work together harmoniously for the good of the whole.

The writer, C.S. Lewis, known for his imagination, conveys the concept of heaven through story in the last book of the Narnia series, called, *The Last Battle*. As the children approach heaven, they see

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<sup>3</sup> Hearts on Fire, 91. Harter, Michael SJ, ed. *Hearts on Fire: Praying with Jesuits*. Chicago: Loyola Press, 2004.



this sparkling light, and a scene of mountains, waterfalls, orchards, and the face of Aslan (the God character). Lewis writes, "And as [God] spoke ... the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them."<sup>4</sup>

Heaven is not imaginary. It is real—perhaps more real than the realities we experience today. But heaven is an exercise of the imagination. When Jesus says, "Today you shall be with me in paradise," we cannot even begin to wrap our minds around the goodness and love and warmth which we will experience on the other side of eternity.

Yet, that does not mean it is otherworldly ... it is a perfect manifestation of the world we live in, so great that we cannot even begin to imagine it. As we get older, we lose our ability to imagine worlds beyond our own. One of my favourite authors says, "Children are made of awe,"<sup>5</sup> and that is the kind of approach to life we must live into if we are to experience even a glimpse of paradise in the here-and-now. Jesus calls us to experience the eternal now, today, and to live lives which point heavenward. When we wrap our minds up in the Spirit of God, we might glimpse paradise. And when we open our lives to the work of Jesus, he can enable us to live into the realities of the kingdom of God here and now.

**Read the Story:** Luke 23:39-43 and Revelation 21:1-5 (optional)<sup>6</sup>

## Practicing Jesus' 7 Last Words

Choose one (or more) of the following activity options to do this week as you consider the topic of heaven. Cole Arthur Riley writes, "Awe is not a lens through which to see the world but our sole path to seeing. Any other lens is not a lens but a veil. And I've come to believe that our beholding—seeing the veils of this world peeled back again and again, if only for a moment—is no small form of salvation."<sup>7</sup> As you practice these activities, embrace AWE.


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<sup>4</sup> Lewis, *The Last Battle*, 228. Lewis, C. S. *The Last Battle*, New York: HarperTrophy, 1956.

<sup>5</sup> Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh*, 29. Riley, Cole Arthur. *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Make Us*. New York: Convergent, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Revelation is a prophetic text, written in a genre which is closer to poetry than prose. As you read it, try to open your imagination to the possibilities of God's Spirit, rather than trying to examine the text literally.

<sup>7</sup> Riley, *This Here Flesh*, 31. Riley, Cole Arthur. *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Make Us*. New York: Convergent, 2022.





**Worship:** Sing a song of praise like the Doxology (“Praise God from whom all blessings flow.”) As you sing, make harmonies, add instruments, or simply listen to the words fall off of your lips. Grab some pots and pans, boxed food, or coffee bean containers to add percussion! Sing it multiple times or in rounds and see how your voices come together and trail apart until it comes to a natural close.

**Wonder walk:** Go for a walk in your neighbourhood or a local park. It does not need to be a new place but try to see things as if for the very first time. What do you notice? What can you hear and smell? What do you see that you have never seen before? What sparks curiosity for you on this walk?

**Taste and see:** Scripture says, “taste and see that the Lord is good.” Bake a loaf of bread alone or in a group. As you add the ingredients and take turns kneading the dough, comment on the smell, the sight of bread rising, and the feel of the dough. After it has baked, eat it warm with melted butter and read Psalm 34:8.

**Art:** Spend some time engaging in creating some art. This can be drawing, painting, sculpting, or another medium. Some may opt to do this work outdoors. As you create, allow the environment around you to shape your artwork. What inspires your art? How do you see the Spirit at work in the world? What makes you pause in wonderment or takes your breath away?

**Reading allegory:** Read a chapter in a children’s book out loud together. Imagine yourself in the story, picturing the other characters, examining the world through the wonder only allegory can provide. Consider reading *The Secret Garden*, by Frances Hodgson Burnett, chapter 26, “It’s Mother,” or *The Last Battle*, by C.S. Lewis, chapter 16, “Farewell to Shadowlands.”

## Closing Prayer

“Earth’s crammed with heaven.  
And every common bush afire with God,  
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;  
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.”

(Elizabeth Barrett Browning)

Creator God,  
Incarnate One,  
Spirit of Life,  
stir in us the awareness of you,  
in everything and everyone we encounter.  
May the veil that divides heaven and Earth  
be torn open so that we might experience your grace and joy  
in abundance here in this life. Amen.

