

Ash Wednesday

February 18, 2026

INTRODUCTION

Today Lent begins, the time to put off our masks and to turn our face and heart to God and to people. In this holy season, we reflect on the true meaning of our lives. Who am I and what am I living for? Am I living for God and the community? We shall be invited to receive ashes on our foreheads with the invitation, "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel." Away, then, with all masks and return to God, to your true self and to one another as God's people.

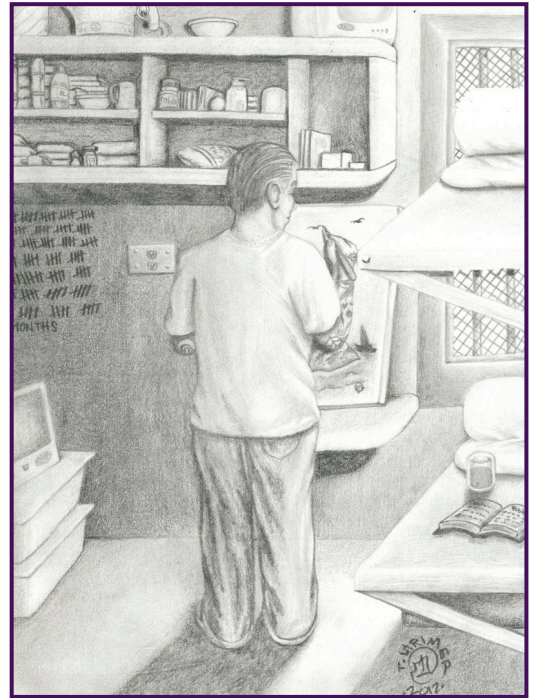
OPENING PRAYER

Let us pray together:

LORD,

As we enter the Lenten Season, help us change the things in our life that lead us to death and darkness. Help us see your light through those around us and forgive those who have hurt us.

We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen.



"Marking the days of Lent"
by T. Larimer.

WISDOM FROM THE CELLS

I remember when I decided to change my path. I grew tired of my old criminal beliefs and chose to change. I prayed to our Lord and asked Him to help me. The help came, but it was a slow transformation period. It came in the form of people (other inmates) who were well ahead in self-help rehabilitation and cognitive growth. In every opportunity I was given, I always knew it was the Lord who sent each and every one of them to help me walk a different path. I kept my faith in Him and knew the Lord was with me. I began going to church and attending the JRJI retreats and programs. I found a lot of peace and wisdom during our meditations. Transformation has been a long process, but it has happened faster than it took for evil to erode my life for twenty-four years. In three years, the Lord has worked on me and it is shining forth as a new creation that He has fashioned for the whole world to see and know. If He can change me, He can change anybody. I remember when the Lord became my advocate, I decided to change my path.

- Ruhani, who is in a California State Prison.



LITURGY OF THE WORD

First Reading: Joel 2:12-18

Even now, says the LORD, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning; Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the LORD, your God. For gracious and merciful is he, slow to anger, rich in kindness, and relenting in punishment. Perhaps he will again relent and leave behind him a blessing, Offerings and libations for the LORD, your God. Blow the trumpet in Zion! proclaim a fast, call an assembly; Gather the people, notify the congregation; Assemble the elders, gather the children and the infants at the breast; Let the bridegroom quit his room and the bride her chamber. Between the porch and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep, And say, "Spare, O LORD, your people, and make not your heritage a reproach, with the nations ruling over them! Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'" Then the LORD was stirred to concern for his land and took pity on his people.

The Word of the Lord.



Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 51:3-4, 5-6ab, 12-13

R. Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness; in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense.

Thoroughly wash me from my guilt and of my sin cleanse me.

R. Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

For I acknowledge my offense, and my sin is before me always: "Against you only have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight."

R. Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

A clean heart create for me, O God, and a steadfast spirit renew within me. Cast me not out from your presence, and your Holy Spirit take not from me.

R. Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

Gospel: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Jesus said to his disciples: "Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them; otherwise, you will have no recompense from your heavenly Father. When you give alms, do not blow a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets to win the praise of others. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing, so that your almsgiving may be secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you. "When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on street corners so that others may see them. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you. "When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites. They neglect their appearance, so that they may appear to others to be fasting. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you may not appear to be fasting, except to your Father who is hidden. And your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you."

The Gospel of the Lord.

R. Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.



MEDITATION: CHANGE

(From the eyes of Peter)

it was a hot day
sweat was pouring
down my face
so many people
had traveled
to the flowing river
the jordan was ready
to receive so many

i was watching
so many people
waiting to enter
the water
looking at
what happens
when the people
leave the water
was does it mean
to be transformed
to change?
what happens
within any of us
who want to live
a new life?

i was listening to
what john was saying
to the crowds:
if you use violence
in words or in acts
change

some will go home
transformed
while others will
remain the same
what is it that
makes us change?

do we decide to change
with the mind?
do we one day
wake up and change?
is it when we see
what we have done

by our actions?
is it when we have
nowhere else to turn?
john continued to
speak to the crowds:
change your ways
look at your life
how do you need
to change?
do not change
for one day because
you are suffering
change your ways

jesus was showing me
a young girl who
was walking alone
to the river
all her life
she had been abused
and suffered greatly
for a long time
but one day
she was walking
under the stars
late at night and
a presence
overtook her
she knew she was
in the presence of god
her whole being
felt this

the following week
she began to open up
her heart
to pray deeply

today she is walking
to the river to tell god
that she really wants
to change
change really has
something to do
with a relationship
with the connection
and love that is birthed

from the relationship
this is what lets us
change

listening to john again:
open your hearts
do not be afraid
if you are attached
to any darkness
let go
change your behavior
if you are not walking
in the light
change your ways

listening to john's voice
getting louder:
don't sell your souls
be careful with
who you are following
do not be slaves
to darkness
you need to be freed
it will not be easy

seeing this
from the hillside
i watched the girl
jesus pointed out to me
i could hear her saying
jesus
i will change
i will no longer dedicate
my life to acts of death
for revenge and hate
i choose life
and she walked to
the middle of the river
where john
immersed her
when she emerged
her face was radiant
she had made
the decision to change
never again
would she return
to her old ways

with this attitude
she could find real
genuine love in her
life

and i too was ready
to free myself of
ways of darkness
after that afternoon
being with jesus
and listening to john
talk about change
i needed to stop
judging others by race
by the color of their
skin
i do not want to
make fun of
another person

i realized
we are equally loved
by our god
how wrong it is to
look down on another
because of their
race or class
i realized how
i needed to never
again
be violent against
others

i know that by
having this
relationship
with jesus
it was giving me
the strength
to change
at my deepest center



REFLECTION: Lent is a time for change. A time when we look closely at our life and choose the things that give us life rather than the things that destroy us. What are the things that I want to change in my life over the next 40 days? Jesus, during Lent, I promise to...

BLESSING OF THE ASHES

The ashes used today come from the branches blessed last year for Palm Sunday -- palms that were waved in victory and praise.

LORD,

Bless these ashes by which we show that we are dust. Pardon our sins and keep us faithful to the journey of Lent.

Let this sign that we place on our foreheads open our hearts and heal our broken relationships. Amen.

CLOSING PRAYER

Let us pray together:

LORD,

Change is hard.

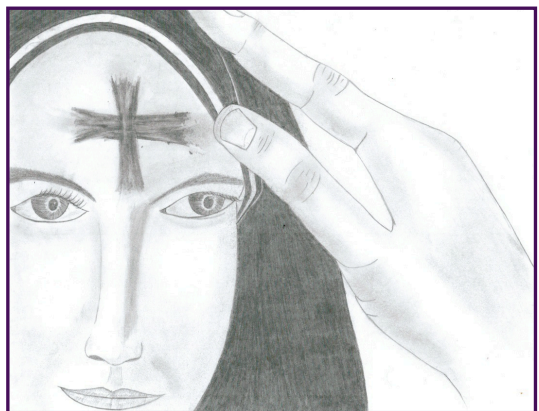
Give us the courage and strength to resist temptation as we walk with you during the next forty days.

We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

DISPOSITION OF ASHES

Remember God's love and change your ways.

We leave the ashes on our foreheads until they wear off naturally. They are a public witness to those things our society does not wish to embrace: the reality of death, penance for sin, and the hope of resurrection in Our Lord, Jesus Christ.



*"Ash Wednesday" by José
who is in juvenile hall.*

