

ASH WEDNESDAY, YEAR A, FEBRUARY 18, 2026

As we begin the Lenten season tonight, I am reminded of the hymns that shape these forty days which are usually solemn and searching. But there is another song, written in 1973, that strangely preaches the truth of this night.

It begins: *Every time that I look in the mirror All these lines on my face getting clearer The past is gone...*

Ash Wednesday is a mirror. Not the flattering mirror of filtered images and curated lives. Not the mirror that tells us we are successful, productive or relevant. It is the mirror that tells the truth: we are dust. And not just someday or in theory. We are dust now.

The world we inhabit runs from that truth. It sells us youth, distraction, denial. It promises that with enough money, enough discipline, enough technology, enough faith even, we can outmaneuver mortality. We live in a culture that baptizes denial and calls it optimism. But tonight the Church smudges our foreheads and says what no corporation, no politician, no influencer dares to say: Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

The song continues: *It went by like dusk to dawn. Isn't that the way? Everybody's got their dues in life to pay.*

"Everybody's got their dues in life to pay." That is one of the great lies we carry into Lent — that we owe God something. That suffering pays God back. That fasting balances the scales. That if we are serious enough, sorry enough, disciplined enough, we might earn our keep in God's kingdom. And so we perform piety. We compare what we sacrifice. We measure our devotion.

Jesus confronts that lie head-on in tonight's Gospel. "Do not look dismal when you fast." "Do not practice your righteousness before others." Jesus is not condemning devotion. He is exposing performance. Lent is not about proving we are good enough. The ashes on our foreheads are not a spiritual achievement badge. They are a public confession: we cannot save ourselves. And yet here is the paradox — we wear those ashes in public. Not to show off our holiness. But to expose our fragility.

In a culture obsessed with strength, we confess weakness. In a world addicted to image, we admit we are dust. In a society divided by pride and fear, we kneel side by side — rich and poor, powerful and powerless — and receive the same mark. Dust levels us.

The song goes on: *Half my life's in books' written pages, Live and learn from fools and from sages...All the things come back to you...*

Yes. They do come back to us. Our violence comes back as war. Our greed comes back as inequality. Our indifference comes back as suffering. Our silence comes back as injustice. Ash Wednesday is not only about personal mortality; it is about collective accountability. We are not just individual dust. We are a dusty people who have forgotten who breathed life into us.

Lent calls us to repentance — not as private guilt management, but as a turning of our lives toward God. It calls us to examine not only our tempers and appetites, but our complicity. Our fear. Our refusal to love our enemies. Our addiction to our lies, even when the truth stands before us, clear and undeniable.

And then the chorus: *Sing with me, sing for the year, Sing for the laughter, and sing for the tear...Maybe tomorrow, the good Lord will take you away.*

There it is again — mortality. If tomorrow is not promised, what are we doing today? How are we loving the people made from the same dust? Anyone know what song these words are from? You may have recognized the song — “*Dream On*” by Aerosmith. It is not sacred music. It was written by Steven Tyler when he was 17 before Aerosmith was formed. But on this night, it tells the truth: life is fleeting, and striving to be “good enough” is exhausting and futile

We are not here to pay dues. We are not here to impress God. We are not here to secure our immortality. We are here because we are dust — and because this dust, our dust is beloved. That is the scandal of the Gospel. God does not wait for perfection. God stoops to the dirt and breathes into it. God takes on flesh. God goes to the cross. Not because we paid. Not because we earned it. But because love does not keep score.

For two thousand years the Church has kept telling this story — through empires rising and falling, through plagues and persecutions, through wars and divisions. Not as escapism. Not as nostalgia. But as resistance.

To tell the story of Jesus crucified and risen is to declare that death does not have the last word. To wear ashes is to confess the truth about ourselves. To walk through Lent is to trust the truth about God. We are dust. But we are God’s beloved dust.

So yes — dream on. Not the dream of self-made salvation. Not the dream of power or perfection. But the dream of resurrection. Dream of a world where enemies are forgiven. Dream of a church that loves without fear. Dream of justice that rolls down like waters. Dream because the God who formed humanity from the earth is not finished with dust yet.

We begin tonight in ashes. We will end at an empty tomb 40 days from now. Remember that you are dust. And remember whose breath fills your lungs. Thanks be to God — the keeper of promises and the lover of dust. Amen.