

Why Ash Wednesday? By Tim Vande Griend

On Wednesday, February 14, we will be offering our first ever Ash Wednesday service here at CrossPoint. Some may wonder, “Why are we doing an Ash Wednesday service?” There are a variety of good reasons, and I’d like to share some of them with you in this brief article by connecting Ash Wednesday to the vision, mission, and values of CrossPoint.

CrossPoint’s vision is to see “Communities renewed through the love of Jesus.” Our mission, therefore, is to “Equip and send passionate followers of Jesus to renew our community and the world for Christ.” We carry this out by living into our RENEWED values: Rooted in Scripture, Earnestly Seeking God, Natural Outreach, Engaging Relationship, Wholehearted Generosity, Equipped for Ministry, and Diverse Unity. Ash Wednesday is one way in which we, as a community, can strive to live out these values as we pursue our mission and vision.

Renewal is a central aim of Ash Wednesday. That’s because Ash Wednesday is fundamentally about the Gospel, which is the foundation of our renewal. Ash Wednesday fits within a larger framework of the Christian calendar that centers on the heart of the Gospel, the death and resurrection of Christ, celebrated on Easter weekend. Ash Wednesday marks the first day of Lent, a season of spiritual renewal and preparation for the celebration of Easter. The events celebrated on Easter weekend are the climax of God’s story of redemption. The Apostles’ Creed says, “[Jesus Christ] suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to hell. The third day he rose again from the dead.” Christ’s resurrection declared the victory over sin and death, a passage from death to life that is now available to all who put their faith in him. After ascending to heaven, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to the church to continue the work of renewal on earth and to be present with us forever. Remembering and celebrating the story of God is a primary means of grace through which we are renewed. Ash Wednesday helps us enact, remember, and believe that story.

Ash Wednesday’s aim of renewal also happens through specific actions of worship. In the Ash Wednesday service, we focus on the depth of our sin and the ultimate consequence of our human rebellion, death. How can focusing on sin and death help renew us? By helping us remember our helplessness and hopelessness apart from God’s intervention. The point of remembering our mortality and confessing our sin isn’t to make us feel worthless, depressed, and guilty. For Christians, it’s the exact opposite because of what Christ has done to rescue us from sin and death. The problem we have as humans is that we are forgetful. We take for granted the great treasure we possess because we are so used to possessing it. By analogy, we cherish food and drink after we’ve been hungry and thirsty. We are more grateful for health when we experience sickness. Similarly, we experience more joy in our redemption in Christ when we spend time reflecting on our misery without him. This counterintuitive practice doesn’t happen on Ash Wednesday alone. As Christians, we regularly examine ourselves, confess our sins, and repent, knowing that our heavenly Father’s unconditional love is the source of our turning to him. These practices are vital to the process of being renewed in Christ. Ash Wednesday is a day of intensified focus on these elements.

In addition to our vision and mission, here are some ways in which Ash Wednesday connects to CrossPoint’s core values:

Rooted in Scripture

Although Ash Wednesday is not found in the Bible, its themes and practices are thoroughly biblical. The Scriptures tell God's story, and Ash Wednesday participates in remembering and celebrating that story. It marks the beginning of preparation for Easter, the climax of God's story. It focuses on the reality of death, the ultimate consequence of our rebellion, brought about by our first parents in the Garden of Eden. It focuses on our need of a Savior, joining together with the people of God over millennia in voicing our confession of sin. It calls the church to repentance, speaking words from the prophets and from Jesus himself. Ash Wednesday's primary symbol is the cross of ash placed on the forehead of worshipers. Throughout the Bible, ash and dust are used as symbols of death, mourning, grief of sin, and repentance. The ash placed on the forehead of worshipers on Ash Wednesday is in the sign of the cross, symbolically expressing Christ's victory over death, our identification as those united to him in his death and resurrection in baptism, and our call to take up our own cross and follow him. The call to remember our death, confess our sin, and turn to Christ in repentance, is all done in the assurance that God loves us, has forgiven us, and desires to transform us more and more into the likeness of his Son through the power of his Spirit. Ash Wednesday is thoroughly rooted in Scripture.

Earnestly Seeking God

This value would be a fitting title for the Ash Wednesday service. James 4:8 says, "Come near to God and he will come near to you." How do we come near to God? James continues, "Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up." On Ash Wednesday, we seek God through humbling ourselves, asking for his mercy and grace to wash us and purify us, all the while trusting in his steadfast love for us.

Natural Outreach

Ash Wednesday equips people to reach those who need to know Jesus as their Savior. One way it does this is through its focus on death. When we learn to face death well as Christians, we become a powerful witness to those around us. Ash Wednesday is an opportunity to look death square in the face, acknowledge its sting, and then ground ourselves even further in the truth of Christ's victory over death. Ash Wednesday is a bold proclamation of the Gospel.

Engaging Relationships

As we strive to be a community filled with authentic relationships, services like Ash Wednesday remind us that we all need God's grace. We all have areas of our hearts and lives that need transformation. Confession is a powerful expression of our common need for grace. Together we confess our sin with words such as Psalm 51. Individually, we sit in silence before God and name those areas of failure. This shared experience in worship helps to shape a church culture of honesty and authenticity with one another as we practice this honesty before and God and one another in worship.

Wholehearted Generosity

Generosity begins with God's generosity toward us. "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). For us to grow in generosity, we must regularly reflect on God's incredible generosity for us, shown most fully in the giving of his Son. Generosity also takes practice. Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent, a season of intensified spiritual focus. Along with prayer and fasting,

generosity (almsgiving) is traditionally a focus of this season. We intensify our practice of denying ourselves and giving to others. We engage in spiritual battle against the powers of greed, covetousness, and pride. In the Ash Wednesday service, worshipers are given a specific invitation and encouragement to participate in spiritual disciplines during Lent.

Equipped for Ministry

God equips people for ministry in many ways, and worship is certainly one of them. Ash Wednesday's focus on the Gospel, confession, repentance, and mortality, contribute toward equipping the people of God to minister in the world. Ash Wednesday enacts the story of God in a way that is distinct from a typical Sunday morning worship service. In this way, it teaches Christians another way of telling the central Gospel message in a world that needs to hear it.

Diverse Unity

Regardless of background, culture, personality, or opinions, we all share the reality that we are human. We all were born, and we all will die. Every person on earth shares this experience. As Christians, we are united to one another by Christ through the Holy Spirit. We acknowledge that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Ephesians 3:23), and we are bound together by the Gospel. Ash Wednesday not only expresses this unity within a congregation, it also unites us with Christians across the centuries and around the world through the common worship of Ash Wednesday.

Although there are many other ways to describe how Ash Wednesday expresses our core values and contributes toward our mission and vision, I hope it is evident why we want to offer an Ash Wednesday worship service at CrossPoint. May God use it for his glory and for the building up of his church.