

**SERMON Ash Wednesday (Imposition of Ashes) March 5th, 2025, Matthew 6: 1-6,
16-21, Emmanuel Lutheran in Lancaster, Pa. Rev. Timothy W. Sadler**

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.
Amen.*

This day, Ash Wednesday, marks the beginning of the forty-day journey of Lent. We've been on this journey before. We know what it's about because every year we gather, ---

To experience the words and actions of Jesus that will lead Him straight to the Cross.

It may seem like we're immersing ourselves in the same story over and over again. There's a danger we'll believe we can go through these days as we have before,---
But nothing could be further from the truth.

While the telling of the story may remain the same, it lives in our lives differently at different points in our own story. We ourselves have changed. We're not the same people we were even a year ago, so it's important to walk this journey as intentionally as we can.

Otherwise, we'll miss the deep significance of Lent and how it's speaking into our lives right now.

It's very easy to allow the rituals of faith to become so routine, we simply go through the motions. Jesus' words to us in Matthew remind us that we need--- to be clear about why we do what we do.

In this lesson from Matthew, Jesus talks about different spiritual practices and cautions that there are ways of going about things that bring renewal and deepening faith, ---and ways that actually block the spiritual journey.

Jesus describes the actions of those He calls hypocrites, those who consciously seek to elevate themselves by pretending to be spiritual. That is their reason for doing what they do, ---

so that's what they will receive—attention. But because they're operating at such a superficial level, there'll be no deepening of their spiritual life.

The spiritual journey contains many ups and downs. There are times when our faith is vibrantly alive, and our rituals are filled with meaning.

But there's also times when faith becomes routine, and we have no idea how to make it meaningful again.

If there's a lot going on in our lives and we're struggling to keep it all together, our attention can become so fragmented that the spiritual things of life become less real. We lose the connection between faith and day-to-day living.

If our lives are steeped in worry about loved ones, or, if we feel we don't have enough in our lives to make them meaningful, we can lose sight of the holy in our day-to-day experiences.

This feeling of being disconnected from the presence of God, is precisely what we need to take care to God. Anything that drains our spiritual life can actually be the very thing---that moves us beyond ourselves to the only One who can bring new life.

Why is it we do what we do?

What grounds our lives?

What anchors us through all the changes of life—that not only tells us who we are, but that our lives have purpose?

Nowhere are these questions more important than with our faith, because they help raise our awareness that we're accompanied by the Lord of Life.

That means everything in our lives has something to do with the spiritual journey. Nothing is truly separate from the spiritual.

Our spiritual practices are meant to help us remember this, to help us feel a connection to the Divine as we go through the experiences of each day.

When spiritual practices become duty, we lose the joy of what they create in our lives.

When we engage in spiritual practices because we think this is something we should do—

we block the powerful connection they create between our spirit and the Holy Spirit of God.

But when we consciously choose to engage in a spiritual practice because we recognize the need of our soul,--

When we go to God and admit, "I'm not really sure about this, but I know I want more of you in my life," That's the kind of prayer that opens doors.

When our intention is to become more fully aware of the connection that already exists between ourselves and God, it will come.

In God's good time and in God's good way.

And everything we do in our life together---

every ritual,

every prayer,

every outreach,

Must nourish this connection.

Let us pray,

Holy God, pour out your Spirit into our lives so we may receive these days of Lent as a powerful time of spiritual renewal and deepening faith. Help us walk this journey with trust and hope, open to receiving whatever is needed for new life. We praise You and honor You, In Jesus Name. AMEN