

*“You are Dust, and to Dust you shall Return.”
Lent: A Season That Teaches Us How to Prepare*

Ash Wednesday



*Dr. Stephen Kachappilly OFM. Cap
Director, Office of care, AVONA*



Every year, quietly and without spectacle, the season of Lent arrives. It does not shout. It does not entertain. Instead, it pauses the noise of ordinary life and invites reflection. Beginning with ashes and ending in resurrection, Lent is not merely a religious observance – It is a journey into the truth of what it means to be human.

At its heart lies a sentence both ancient and unsettling: “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.” These words, spoken on Ash Wednesday, frame the entire season. They remind us of our fragility, our limits, and our shared destiny. Yet Lent is not a season of despair. It is a season that uses honesty to lead us toward hope.

1. Ash Wednesday: The Courage to Remember

Lent begins with ashes placed on the forehead, visible to the world. The gesture is simple, yet deeply symbolic. Ashes come from burned palm branches – once signs of celebration, now reduced to dust. They speak of impermanence, humility, and truth. In a culture that values strength, youth, productivity, and success, Ash Wednesday offers a counter-message: you are finite. You are not self-made. You are not permanent. This reminder is not meant to humiliate, but to ground us. When we accept our mortality, we begin to live more honestly. We stop pretending that time is endless and that consequences can always be postponed.

2. “You Are Dust”: Fragility as a Teacher

To be called dust is not an insult. In the biblical imagination, dust is sacred – It is the material from

which humanity is formed. Remembering that we are dust reconnects us to the earth, to one another, and to God. Lent invites us to confront the fragility we often avoid: the fragility of our bodies, of relationships, and of peace, justice, and security.

Recent global events, such as pandemics, wars, and the climate crisis, have only reinforced what Lent has always known: life is vulnerable. Yet fragility, when acknowledged, has the power to transform us. It can soften our judgments, deepen our compassion, and awaken gratitude. When we realize how easily life can be lost, we begin to value it more fully.

3. Forty Days: A Biblical Journey

In Scripture, forty days is a time of testing, purification, and preparation. Lent mirrors this pattern. It is not an escape from life, but a season of learning how to live rightly within it. The

forty days of Lent echo many biblical moments: forty days of rain during the time of Noah, forty years in the desert, forty days Moses spent on the mountain, Jonah said “after 40 days, Nineveh will be destroyed, and forty days Jesus fasted in the wilderness.

Throughout Scripture, forty days often function as a time of inner formation, when transformation happens quietly before public renewal begins. Lent reflects this hidden work, shaping character, intention, and desire. It is a season not of escape, but of interior growth that prepares individuals to live more faithfully and consciously. The church also reminds us of the three pillars of Lent: Prayer, fasting, and Almsgiving.

4. Prayer: Relearning How to Listen

Lent places renewed emphasis on prayer, not as ritual repetition, but as a relationship. In prayer, we do not simply speak, but we listen. We allow silence to confront us with truths we normally drown out. In a fast-paced world, silence can feel uncomfortable. Yet Lent teaches that silence is necessary if we are to hear the deeper movements of the heart. Prayer during Lent becomes less about asking for things and more about allowing ourselves to be changed.

5. Fasting: Creating Space

Fasting is one of the most misunderstood practices of Lent. It is not about punishment or deprivation for its own sake. Rather, fasting is about making space. By stepping back from excess – food, screens, noise, consumption – we become aware of our dependencies. We learn how often we use distractions to avoid discomfort, loneliness, or self-examination. True fasting always points beyond itself. It is meant to open us to God and to others, reminding us of those who live with scarcity not by choice, but by circumstance.

6. Almsgiving: Faith That Moves Outward

Lent also calls us toward almsgiving, an outward expression of inward conversion. Remembering our own fragility makes us more sensitive to the suffering of others. Almsgiving is not limited to financial generosity. It includes generosity of time, attention, forgiveness, and advocacy. It asks us to look beyond ourselves and respond to the needs of the world with concrete action. Lent insists that spirituality without compassion is incomplete.

7. Repentance: The Courage to Change Direction

At its core, Lent is about repentance – a word that means “to turn around.” It is not about shame, but about honesty. It asks us to face the patterns that diminish life: resentment, pride, indifference, and injustice. Repentance requires courage. It involves admitting where we have failed to love, where we have harmed, and where we have settled for less than who we are called to be. Lent assures us that change is possible, but only if we are willing to take the first step.

8. Walking with Suffering

As Lent progresses, it draws us closer to the suffering of Christ. The season does not deny pain; it enters it. This makes Lent deeply relevant in a world marked by grief, illness, and loss. Lent teaches that suffering does not have the final word, but it also refuses to rush past it. It honors the reality of pain while holding space for hope.

9. Toward Easter: Hope Beyond the Ashes

Lent ends not in ashes, but in resurrection. The journey from Ash Wednesday to Easter mirrors the human journey –from dust to life, from loss to renewal. Easter hope is not naive optimism. It is hope born of honesty, sacrifice, and love. It is hope that has passed through the cross and emerged transformed.

Lent Still Matters Because

In a distracted, hurried, and anxious world, Lent offers something rare: depth. It calls us to slow down, to remember who we are, and to ask what truly matters. Lent reminds us that life is fragile, yet also meaningful. That time is limited – but also sacred. That we are dust – but dust loved, called, and destined for more.

Perhaps this is the quiet wisdom of Lent: when we learn to face our fragility, we finally learn how to live well.

At its heart lies a sentence both ancient and unsettling: “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Wishing you a blessed and reflective season of Lent: I will get up and go to my Father (Luke 15: 11-32). ■