Devotion, Week of February 11, 2024
Rev. Jeanne Simpson

Ash Wednesday is this week. Christians have had ashes put on their forehead for about a thousand years. In the earliest Christian centuries – from A.D. 200 to 500 – those guilty of serious sins were excluded for a time from the Eucharist. If they desired to be received back into full communion with the church, they would do acts of penance, like praying and fasting, and some would put on "sackcloth" and coat themselves with ashes, as an outward action expressing interior sorrow and repentance. The customary time to welcome them back to the Eucharist was at the end of Lent, during Holy Week.

As centuries went on, the church's public prayer at the beginning of Lent added a phrase, "Let us change our garments to sackcloth and ashes," as a way to call the whole community, not just the most serious sinners, to repentance. Around the 10th century, the practice arose of acting out those words about ashes by actually marking the foreheads of those taking part in the ritual. The practice caught on and spread, and in 1091 Pope Urban II decreed that "on Ash Wednesday everyone, clergy and laity, men and women, will receive ashes." It's been going on ever since. As ashes are placed on the forehead, the minister often says, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." The phrase echoes God's words of reproach after Adam disobeyed God's command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden. In more recent times, some ministers add the words "Repent, and believe in the Good News." These were Jesus's words at the beginning of his public ministry in Mark.

Each phrase in its own way serves to call us to live our Christian lives more deeply. The words from Genesis remind us that life is short and death imminent, urging us to focus on what is essential. The words of Jesus are a direct call to follow him by turning away from sin and doing what he says. As we begin Lent this week, let us remember Jesus' sacrifice or us and our call to follow his path.

Jeanne