



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP
NEW JERSEY SYNOD
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.
1930 Highway 33, Hamilton Square, NJ 08690

Ash Wednesday 2021

Dear Friends,

Today we begin the season of Lent with the observance of Ash Wednesday. In any other year, we would be gathering in person to listen to the invitation to Lenten observances, receive ashes on our forehead and be reminded of our own mortality, share in the Lord's supper, and leave worship ready to take on or give up something meaningful to help us keep the focus on Jesus' sacrifice for us. In any other year, we would be stationed at bus depots, train platforms, and outside on street corners ready to mark passers-by with an ashen cross and pray with them as they rush off to their day. In any other year...

But this is not any year, it is a continuation of our long year of COVID19 protocols, deep political divisions, and ramped up racial justice work. This year, it seems we've been reminded of our own mortality on a daily basis. This year, we've given up and taken on numerous practices – some willingly, others begrudgingly. This year, we don't dare mark strangers on their foreheads for fear of coming too close and spreading infection. As one of our pastors said to me recently, "This is the Lentiest Lent ever." Indeed, this year is already overwhelming us.

So how will we observe the Lenten season this year? What disciplines will we practice that keep us focused on Jesus and not on ourselves? How will we walk through these next 40 days?

We will do it with the cross of Christ before us – calling us forward into each new day. We will move through this Lenten season together, just as those who came before us have done – some days being held up by our neighbor and some days being the one doing the holding all the while knowing it is God who holds us all. Marked in baptism with the cross that never fades, we will give witness to the grace and mercy of the One who embraces us all.

*Lord Jesus, you shall be my song as I journey;
I'll tell everybody about you wherever I go:
You alone are our life and our peace and our love,
Lord Jesus, you shall be my song as I journey.*

*I fear in the dark and the doubt of my journey;
but courage will come with the sounds of your steps by my side.
And with all of the family you saved by your blood,
we'll sing to your dawn at the end of our journey. (ELW 808 vs. 1 and 4)*

Yours in Christ,

Bishop Tracie L. Bartholomew

A few reminders when making decisions to return to in-person, indoor worship:

- Observing protocols is essential – masks, physical distancing, and no singing or unison speaking, even for those who have been vaccinated.
- Less than 4 new cases per 100,000 people indicates a lower disease burden.
- Less than a 5% test positivity rate indicates it is safer to return in person.