

Ashes, ashes we all... are forgiven

By Pastor Nancy Larson
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We once again approach the season of Lent, which begins with Ash Wednesday, Feb. 13. This day is set aside as the beginning of the Lenten journey of repentance, humility and sacrifice. It sets a somber tone with its invitation to believers to be smudged with ashes from last year's burnt Palm Sunday palm branches mixed with oil. The words "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return" accompany the marking with ash and are a verbal reminder of the symbolism of this day on the church year calendar. This is a powerful contrast to the joyous celebration of Jesus' birth and the great light of epiphany that exposes God's great work of salvation in Jesus.

In this season we turn our attention to our sinfulness and rebellion against God. We are prodded forward into the dark realities of human sin and why it is that we have a need for God's grace and mercy. This season of Lent puts things into perspective for us, or rather puts us into proper perspective with God. The call back to the creation story in Genesis 1 reminds us that it is God that is the creator of all that we are, and we are a result of God's great and amazing power. The mark of the cross on our forehead tells us that we are sinful and unclean; God invites us into a time of repentance that leads us into God's arms of forgiveness and forgetting what has been. Through the ashes of Ash Wednesday

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God is our creator and

redeemer and we live in that promise even as we live in our sin and self-absorption. We are the recipients of generous forgiveness and grace from God's own hand. The door is once again opened for our response of gratitude not only in our words, but also in our behaviors. Generous love begets generous love, expansive mercy begets expansive forgiveness, and generous gifts received beget generous giving.

Yes, we begin in dust and on Ash Wednesday we are reminded of who we are in ashes. We are then reminded whose we are as we are blessed by God. In common bread and wine, the body and blood of Jesus, we are lifted out of the dirt and ashes to a new and glorious life. This life is ours today and will be again tomorrow and the next day and on into eternity. Thanks be to God that we are dust and ashes, and God is God of abundant and never failing grace. May you experience a blessed Ash Wednesday and Lent!

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Region 5 coordinator retires

Best wishes to The Rev. Carl Richard Evenson who has retired after nearly four decades in ordained ministry, the last 17 years as Region Five Coordinator for the ELCA. As Region Five Coordinator, Evenson served 1,700 ELCA congregations, nearly 3,000 rostered leaders, and a million Lutherans in Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois and Upper Michigan.

Evenson said that regional coordinators are like the connective tissue in the church, bringing communication, collaboration and mutual ministry between synods and the churchwide office in the areas

of candidacy, assignment of seminarians for call to congregations, campus ministry, mobility of pastors in the region, and nurturing church leadership.

"I've worked with 29 bishops in the region's 12 synods," Evenson said. "And I have worked under all three Presiding Bishops and with so many wonderful synod staff, assistant to the bishops, and churchwide personnel. It has been my joy to serve as regional coordinator to the people, pastors, and synods of Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin and Upper Michigan."