

**UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST in SIMI VALLEY**

**Ash Wednesday - February 25, 2004 – 7:00 p.m.**

**Anne G. Cohen**

**Isaiah 58:1-12**

**Matthew 6:1, 16-18**

**For Our Reflection**

**ASH WEDNESDAY begins the season of LENT for many in the Christian Church. The forty days of fasting or self-denial (not counting Sundays) may begin with the imposition of the ashes on the foreheads of the faithful. During the moving, ancient ceremony, the ashes were placed on the forehead with the words from Genesis:**

**“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”**

**While this service was widely used after the seventh century, there is evidence that such a service originated in Gaul in the sixth century and was at first “confined to public penitents doing penance for grave and notorious sin, whom the clergy tried to comfort and encourage by submitting themselves to the same public humiliation.”**

Note: Dom Gregory Dix, The Shape of the Liturgy,  
Westminster: Dacre Press 1954, p.356

From: The Book of Worship: United Church of Christ (1986)

**The Slow Fast**

Religious people – those of us who practice A religion, ANY religion – are consciously PEOPLE of RITUAL.

Human Beings as a species are ritualistic to the core. We perform rituals without knowing what we are engaged in: monthly lunches with friends, weekly telephone calls to parents or children, daily bathing and other ablutions. We have rituals around family reunions and school reunions; birth rituals and death rituals; marriage and divorce rituals; bedtime stories and nightcaps; graduation and retirement practices. Folding laundry, writing a postcard, visiting the place you were born, keeping a diary, folk dancing are all rituals that we perform – usually without being conscious of their ritualistic nature.

These rituals serve a variety of purposes:

They strengthen or maintain or mend relationships...

They soothe and calm us in times of danger or general anxiety...

They mark transitions, passages, endings, beginnings, and times of growth...

They stimulate and organize our memories through the telling of stories  
and the lifting up of images...

They enhance the MEANING of life...

As religious people we seek out rituals that will do these things – with the additional intention of recognizing God or The Divine or Our Spiritual Nature as an essential presence and participant with us. Each religion has its own particular rituals – along with practices that all major religions tend to hold in common.

Buddhists ring bells and chant.  
Hindus make altars and offerings.  
Muslims bow to the rising sun and go on pilgrimage.  
Australian Aboriginines go on Walkabout.  
Wiccans light candles and bless the seasons of Earth.  
Native Americans sweat and seek visions through individual challenge  
or Vision Quest.  
Jews study Torah and plant trees.  
Christians pray and sing.  
We ALL seek ways to practice compassion and righteousness.  
And we ALL participate in fasting and feasting.

Lent is a Christian time of fasting. All fatty foods are used up on Fat Tuesday (Mardi Gras) so that, for 40 days (excepting Sundays) we may eat sparingly, frugally, self-sacrificially, if at all. This historical ritual of fasting has numerous aims:

To clarify our minds and cleanse our bodies – purifying ourselves for the sacred opportunity to communicate with God...

To remember, commemorate and imitate the story of Jesus' time in the wilderness preparing himself for his ministry...

To prepare ourselves for an Easter rebirth of faith and purpose – in service to God...

To focus our time and energy on self-reflection – so that we might hear our calling, make choices about our “right” vocation, find ways to live according to our values in partnership with God...

And, perhaps most of all, to strengthen our awareness that ALL is ONE, we have “Interbeing” with everything else in the Universe – and to act accordingly...

Fasting also places us in solidarity with those who never have enough to eat. It allows us to “consume” a mild form of their suffering – so that we can integrate the wisdom that comes with suffering into our very bodies.

Fasting is a form of Voluntary Simplicity or Poverty that allows us to share what we have with those who need it more than we do. And it is this Voluntary Simplicity in partnership with generosity that prophets have insisted that God prefers. The rituals are fine – they serve a purpose for us as mortal creatures seeking the guidance of the immortal. But the true fast from God's point of view seems to be the tangible assistance we offer to those in need.

Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free  
and to break every yoke?  
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not hide yourself from your own kin?  
(Isaiah 58:6-7, NRSV)

God's fast is a SLOW FAST. It is a lifetime accumulation of compassionate deeds. It is the slow pressure on those in power to change unjust economic structures – to reshape them into the Beloved Community. God's fast is a SLOW FAST – made up of lifetimes of mercy and sacrifice, generosity and joy – slow, steady pressure on social systems. Like the formation of diamonds in the earth, God's fast is slow and incremental and cumulative and unrelenting.

And this is what is asked of us.  
This is the most important, most meaningful ritual of our short lives.  
And the only way to accomplish this is – together – practicing the rituals that keep us mindful and accountable and focused on the Vision.

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**Bulletin**

**ASH WEDNESDAY**  
**February 25, 2004 \* 7:00 p.m.**  
**United Church of Christ**

**SILENCE**

**ASKING HYMN** #211 (NCH) *Lord Jesus, Who through Forty Days*

**ASKING PRAYER** # 863 (NCH) Cheral Stewart

**INVITATION TO MEDITATE ON GOD –FOLLOWED BY SILENCE**

**O God, you have made us for yourself,  
and against your longing there is no defense.  
Mark us with your love, and release in us a passion  
for your justice in our disfigured world;  
that we may turn from our guilt and face you, our heart's desire.  
(Janet Morley, All Desires Known p. 10)**

**PROPHETIC WORDS**

Isaiah 58:1-12

Cheral Stewart

**HYMN of PENITENCE #202 (NCH) *O God, How We Have Wandered***

**HOW TO FAST**

Matthew 6:1, 16-18

Cheral Stewart

**ASH WEDNESDAY \* Page Two**

**February 25, 2004 \* 7:00 p.m.**

**PASTORAL MEDITATION**

The Slow Fast

Anne Cohen

**PERSONAL MEDITATION AND IMPOSITION OF ASHES**

*All are invited to come forward, if you so desire, for the imposition of ashes.  
Traditionally, ashes are placed on the forehead. You may also have them placed on the  
back of your hand or on your wrist.*

*Please indicate your desire when you come forward.*

**BENEDICTION**

Anne Cohen

May the God who shakes Heaven and Earth,  
whom death could not contain,  
who lives to disturb and heal us,  
bless you with power to go forth and proclaim the gospel. Amen.

# 872 (NCH)

**SENDING HYMN # 98 (NCH)**

*Now the Day is Over*

**YOU MAY DEPART IN QUIET AND IN THE PEACE  
OF THE NIGHT**