*Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your steadfast love; according to Your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against You, You alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are justified in Your sentence and blameless when You pass judgment. Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me. You desire truth in the inward being; therefore, teach me wisdom in my secret heart. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that You have crushed rejoice. Hide Your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and sustain in me a willing spirit. Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners will return to You. Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of Your deliverance. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare Your praise. For You have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, You would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.* Psalm 51:1-17

*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward He was famished. Then Jesus said to him: “Away with you, Satan! for it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve only Him.’” Then the devil left Him, and suddenly angels came and waited on Him.* Matthew 4:1-2, 10-11

“Why Ashes?”

1. Growing up in Poland as a Baptist, I was aware of the *“Ash Wednesday,”* but in our church we did not celebrate the *“Ash Wednesday Service.”* It was an important festival in the Roman Catholic Church, but the first mass with the imposition of ashes was held at midnight on Wednesday. I also remember the *“Ash Wednesday”* because of the *“Fat Tuesday.”* On that day, traditionally, the *“paczki”* the Polish version of the donuts were fried and served as the official *“Carnival,”* which started with the New Years Eve dance, was officially coming to an end. The festivities of what we called the *“Carnival”* in Poland were to stop that evening and a midnight mass was to be celebrated by the Roman Catholic majority of Polish people, preparing them for the time of Lent, the somber time of reflection. Eating the *“paczki,”* which are quite rich in taste as well as calories, was to prepare people for the lean times of Lent. The idea of eating such a *“calorie rich food,”* was dictated by the need of disposing of all the fats, oils, butter, lard, found at home and in a sense was a form of reminiscence of the unleavened breads idea of the Passover celebration.

2. Ash Wednesday evolved into a solemn celebration, when Christians were to begin to reflect on the need for fasting in the time of Lent. The *“Fat Tuesday”* was to indicate a time of preparation to eradicate of all the sinful desires and actions in life, just before the Lent would began. I believe that the theological interpretation of the festivities ending on *“Fat Tuesday,”* were to remined Christians of the importance of celebration of the Lord through the time of reflection, prayer and fasting. Tonight, as we gather here to celebrate this service with the imposition of ashes, marks the beginning of such preparation. For the next 40 days leading up to the Easter Sunday, we are encouraged by the Scriptures and the tradition, to remember the suffering and the sacrifice Jesus experienced on our behalf. When Jesus Christ began His ministry, Matthew tells us that He walked into the desert and for 40 days He prayed and fasted to prepare Himself for the next three years of ministry and although tempted by Satan, to remain victorious.

3. These 40 days were His time of contemplation, reflection, and preparation. By observing Lent, we chose to join with Him on the journey, facing temptations. We may not go into the desert to fast and to pray, but we may choose to give something up, to sacrifice something and to deprive ourselves of some of the life’s pleasures, so that we can consider the meaning of Lent, Christ’s sacrifice, and eventually prepare ourselves to witness Christ’s death. Yet, at the same time, we also may remember the joy of the Resurrection and the power of Easter. Lent is the time when our mindset is on understanding of how much we need Jesus Christ in our life. Even though the modern society often mocks Him through their actions, in reality, we must recognize our own sinfulness, and flaws, as we are indeed broken are hopeless without Jesus in our lives. It is not by chance that tonight with the imposition of ashes on our foreheads or on the palms of our hands, we need to find the answer to the question posed in the title of my message tonight: “Why Ashes?”

4. In a Jewish tradition, ashes became a sign of remorse, of repentance, and of mourning. In the old days, I remember all of us wearing a black armband while attending a funeral, to signify the mourning and the respect for the deceased. Wearing black clothes signified the same. Today, many of these traditions disappeared and placing the ashes on our heads takes us back to the days when the ashes were placed on people’s heads for the purpose I mentioned before. As a matter of fact not that long ago, the Roman Catholic tradition called for placing the ashes on *“Ash Wednesday”* not on a forehead but to actually sprinkle them directly on people’s heads. It the ancient times it was a common practice to cover oneself with ashes while fasting or express remorse or sorrow. After learning the lesson God’s taught him Job replied to God: *“I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”* Knowing the Kingdom of Judah will be conquered by the Babylonians Jeremiah wrote: *“O my people, put on sackcloth and roll in ashes; make mourning as for an only child, most bitter lamentation, for suddenly the destroyer will come upon us.”* Hoping to be liberated from the Babylonian Exile, Daniel prepared himself by saying: *“I turned to the Lord God to seek an answer by prayer and supplication with fasting and sackcloth and ashes.”*

5. These are just a few examples from the Jewish tradition, but there are many more in the Scriptures. As the Church of Jesus Christ we embraced this old tradition as a part of our common, Judeo-Christian tradition and we cannot forget about the commonality of the Old and the New Testaments. As we begin our 40 days journey through Lent, we too must include prayer, some sort of fasting as a form of sacrifice, and reflection on the state of our spiritual condition and our relationship with Jesus Christ. All these begin tonight with the imposition of ashes symbolizing our grief and our fears, yet, also indicating our penitence, and turning wholeheartedly to the Lord! Now, someone may say that we actually have 46 days until Easter Sunday, and this is true, but since every Sunday reminds us of the Day of Resurrection, when we exclude the six Sundays until Easter, we come up exactly with 40 days of Lent. Once upon a time the Ash Wednesday, Lent and Maundy Thursday were not a part of my celebration, but today, I see them as an integral part of living a life of dedication to Christ and learning from Him not only about the good times but also about the bad ones as well.

6. Over the centuries the traditions changed, some were forgotten, other deemed not really important or becoming irrelevant, but in reality, there is a lot we may learn from the traditions if we understand the people who kept them and the reasons why they exercised them. As we are invited tonight to have the ashes placed on our foreheads or hands, and as we hear these words: *“from dust you come, to dust you shall return,”* we mourn, but we also see the ray of hope, the light of life on the horizon, the light of the Easter Sunday. For some tonight may sounds dreadful and lonely, but we are not alone. Jesus Christ is with us, and He was once there where we are. Remember, He too fasted for the 40 days in the desert and then He was tempted. Only if we understand and embrace the times of darkness, the times of suffering, the times of the great discomfort, as the moments when and where Christ is with us and carry us through, we may truly understand the good, joyful ,and happy experiences in life, knowing that He is with us in the thin and the thick of life. The joy of Easter morning is still to come in some seven weeks, but with tonight’s imposition of ashes, we may also rejoice because we understand the need for, and the meaning of the sacrifice Jesus experienced in His time of preparation. Let us celebrate the time of Lent.