



Dancing  
with the  
Light

A Journey  
in Worship  
for Lent  
Year A

# Dancing with the Light

## A Worship Resource for Lent Year A

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## Introduction

Welcome to *Dancing with the Light* a Lenten journey in worship based on the Lectionary readings for Year A. This resource has been created with the intention to provide thoughtful reflection on the Gospel readings for this year, to offer a thematic way to use these readings in your Lenten worship gatherings, to provide some possibilities and ideas for how to approach each week in worship and preaching, and to offer some creative ideas and possibilities to make this season especially meaningful for you church. I pray that you find it helpful.

Each week offers the following elements. First, the readings are listed for easy reference. Then, a basic introduction to the theme and approach for the week is offered. This is followed by an in depth reflection on the Gospel reading, which is based on good contemporary scholarship and is intended to help you think about the readings both academically and narratively, catching the spirit of the Gospel writer's message, and applying this to the reality which worshipers face in their lives. The last two sections of each week's resources are the ideas for worship and preaching (which includes some thoughts about symbolism, decor, preaching approaches and possible sermon illustrations) and the Liturgy and Prayer section (which offers a skeleton order of service with prayers and hymn suggestions). The idea here is not to dictate how the services must run, but to offer ideas that will stimulate your own creativity. The suggestions offered can be incorporated into any format of service, from very liturgical to very unstructured.

I have left the hymn suggestions unlinked in this document. While I recognise that it can be helpful to have links to songs that are not known, my suspicion is that most churches won't put a lot of effort into learning a lot of new songs just for Lent. In fact, I would advise against such a practice. Rather, the titles that are familiar will be recognised and their place in the sample liturgy provided may be helpful. If you are interested in following up any of the songs you don't recognise, a quick Google search will often yield links to lyrics, and YouTube is a good source for listening to songs in order to learn how they go. For more traditional hymns, [Hymnsite.com](http://Hymnsite.com) and the [Oremus Hymnal](http://Oremus Hymnal) site are very helpful resources and offer either Midi or Mp3 listening facilities for most of their hymns. These sites may also be helpful to supplement the hymn suggestions I offer in this resource.

In addition to the prayers and order of service that are listed, there is also, at the end, a brief Liturgy of the Table for use on any week when Holy Communion is included in the service. This is not a complete liturgy, but consists only in the actual Eucharist itself. The idea is that the other prayers for the week can fill what is missing in the liturgy, and then the liturgy can be used when necessary. Because of this "modular" approach, it is possible to have communion every week and still have a different focus and feel for each service. I hope this works well for you, but if not, feel free to leave this out and use whatever liturgy you would usually use.

Finally, all the resources that are mentioned, but that are not part of this document itself (like video clips for example) are linked from within this document. The beauty of PDFs is the ability to embed links and have them accessible from within the document.

Thank you for making use of this resource. If you have any thoughts or feedback that would help me in the development of future resources like this, please don't hesitate to let me know. All of my contact details are listed on the "Contact" page of the the Sacredise web site.

May God challenge you and inspire you as you accept the invitation to join God in *Dancing with the Light*.

## Ash Wednesday - Learning the Moves

### Scripture Readings:

Main (Gospel) Reading: Matthew 6:1-6,16-21  
Old Testament Reading: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 OR Isaiah 58:1-12 (*Although, this reading has already been used in Epiphany 5A*)  
Psalm: Psalm 51:1-17  
Epistle Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

### Introduction:

Ash Wednesday begins the Lenten journey in an unusual way this year. The last few weeks of Epiphany have been leading us through the first sections of the Sermon on the Mount, which means that the usual Gospel reading for this day is brought into even sharper focus than normal. This is both a gift and a challenge. The gift is that the readings for this day are already in context for the hearers, if the lectionary has been the guide thus far. The challenge is to ensure that today's act of worship stands out as a transition point, and, while keeping the continuity, creates a new beginning for a new journey. This *Dancing with the Light* Lenten series should help you to do that.

### Listening to the Scriptures:

We all play to an audience. From the first moment when we are able to shout out "look at me, Mommy" we find ourselves trying to impress those around us. As we grow we are socialised so that we learn to behave in ways that gain the approval of those in authority over us, and avoid those that would bring punishment. But, soon we learn that what pleases our parents and teachers is not necessarily what gains applause from our peers. And so begins the dance of playing to the audience around us.

This is not all bad, of course. In the process we learn valuable lessons about ourselves and others. We learn the skills of listening, observing, interpreting and connecting with others in ways that they find helpful. And we learn how to 'work the system' in order to gain the respect, the love, the companionship and the financial reward we need in order to survive in this world. There is always a cost, though, when we play to the audience. And, for many of us, that cost is the loss of our own souls, our own identity and our own integrity. If this is a cost you're willing to pay, then Jesus' Sermon on the Mount probably has very little to say to you. But, if you long for a more authentic life, a more whole life, then we had better listen to what Jesus is saying here.

The Sermon on the Mount is probably not a single sermon, but a collection of sayings from various points in Jesus' ministry. Many of the sayings found here are placed in different settings in Luke and Mark. As such, Matthew is attempting to provide a "quick overview" of Jesus' teaching by way of this short summary. The overall goal, though, is probably to present Jesus as a new Moses bringing a "new" law for a new covenant. This idea is based on the fact that Matthew's Gospel is built around five discourses of Jesus (of which the Sermon on the Mount is the first) which are thought to evoke the five books of the *Torah*. The setting in Matthew's Gospel of this sermon is early in Jesus' ministry, either just before or just after Jesus chose the twelve, and this sermon is the manifesto which the disciples were

expected to adopt, and which Jesus lived and taught. A particular feature of this sermon is the contrast of Jesus' view of righteousness with that of the religious "elite". And the difference which stands out in the reading for Ash Wednesday is this: The 'hypocrites' (as Jesus calls them) are always playing to the crowd, always ensuring that someone is watching, and that their religious acts are noticed and applauded. His followers, in contrast, are called to "play" for a different "audience" - God - and to release the need to be noticed and approved of by others.

The common practices on which Jesus' builds his invitation to authentic living are those that have become central to the journey of Lent - fasting, praying and giving (which I like to extend to the giving of oneself in acts of service and compassion). The hypocrites - the word in Greek is *hupokrites* means a "pretender, stage player or actor" - turn their fasting into a public display of suffering and sacrifice, ensuring that they look suitably weak and unwell, in order to show off to anyone who may be watching how "spiritual" they are. They make their giving a demonstration of public generosity that cannot but be noticed and admired by onlookers. They make their prayer a show of pious elitism that forces others to bow to their superior religious achievement. It may have a sheen of spirituality, but it remains a case of playing to the wrong audience. The hypocrites only end up losing themselves in their quest to gain the applause of the crowds. And this applause is their fragile, temporary "reward". The words used for 'reward' (noun - *misthos*) and 'rewarded' (verb - *apodidomi*) here refer to a payment of what is due or a wage. In other words, what is received is the appropriate payment in return for what has been done or given. By dancing to win the approval of the crowds, the 'hypocrites' receive the appropriate wage - the fickle applause of their audience. This seems like small recompense for the loss of integrity, identity and one's own soul, and yet, people happily engage in this transaction all over Hollywood, and the world, every day.

For those who would seek to follow Jesus, though, there is a different dance to learn, and the moves are at first unfamiliar and strange, because they operate from a completely new paradigm. Here the reward that is sought is not applause or approval. The crowd, in fact, becomes irrelevant to this performance. Rather what is sought is only the attention of God, and not in order to placate or appease the Divine Audience, but to enter into a genuine, loving, wholehearted relationship with God. Prayer here is not a demonstration of piety, but an avenue into divine conversation. Fasting is not a display of extreme spiritual fitness, but a way to discipline the appetites in order to keep God as first in one's heart. Giving is not an attempt to win the admiration of others, but a way to keep our possessions from possessing us, so that we are only possessed by God. The reward we gain from participating in this private dance with God is God's loving applause and a deep connection with the God for whom our dance is an act of love. And, of course, it is in this divine connection that we find our true selves, our true identity and our true integrity. Our lives begin to be lived from this divine centre, and we are freed from the tyranny of the crowd's fickle approval. Augustine was right when he said that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God.

The other readings for today all support Jesus' call to learn the moves of God's life-dance. Joel calls God's people to turn back to God in worship, though they have obviously been experiencing some kind of calamity (the exact nature of which is uncertain, largely because dating Joel's book is so difficult). Isaiah describes the difference between religion (fasting) that is only an outward show, and true devotion to God. It is in genuine relationship with God, lived out in compassion and justice, that we receive God's strength and resources for life. In Corinthians, Paul describes how his life has been lived as a dance with God, and how he has refused to play to the crowd, in spite of the persecution he has suffered. And he pleads with

his readers to follow his example and make connection with God their first priority. Finally, in his famous Psalm of repentance, David returns to God after allowing his lust and greed to lead him into behaviour that has brought suffering and destruction on others, and on himself.

Today, as we receive again the sign of ash, let our repentance focus on this. We all feel the temptation to play to the crowd - and we have all fallen to it. We all have moments when our fears or dreams lead us to dance to the tune of others. But, we also all know, even if only in some small way, what it feels like to turn away from the need for applause and to dance only for God. We know the peace that comes from living with integrity and we know the life we find in deep connection with God. And so, as we receive the ashes, may they be the mark of our turning from the crowds demands, and of our commitment to join God's dance of life. May we take time this week to learn again - or for the first time - the strange and unfamiliar moves of this new dance that Jesus calls us to. Because, let's face it, the world desperately needs people who will dance like no one is watching - but God.

### Ideas for Worship and Preaching:

The metaphor of dance will flow throughout this Lenten series. Because of this, it might be helpful to create a space for people to 'see' the metaphor in action, either through a moment of live dance by a gifted dancer in your worship service, or through playing [a video of a beautiful dance](#). If neither of these options are available to you, you may want to include an image of dancers in your bulletin, or have one blown up and put on a wall in a prominent place. If all else fails, you could perhaps ask people to close their eyes and imagine watching a beautiful dance, or invite them to remember a dance that they saw or experienced that moved them. The idea is to try and touch people's hearts through this metaphor.

If you have the time and ability, it may also be helpful to decorate your sanctuary in ways that support the theme. Spotlights and/or Oscar statuettes can drive home the idea of playing to an audience. If the ashes are displayed prominently within a "Broadway stage" like tableau, the contrast can be a striking visual focus for the message of the worship.

It would also be good to connect this theme in your preaching with your own journey toward integrity. So any stories from your own life that demonstrate either the pain of "playing to the crowd" or the life and integrity that is found in "dancing" for God alone could be useful here. In addition, here is a story from Charles Colson's book *Loving God* which you may find helpful.

*In his book *Loving God*, Charles Colson draws attention to an incident involving an Indiana judge named William Bontrager. Bontrager had to pass sentence on Fred Palmer, a decorated Vietnam veteran who was found guilty of burglary. The crime was caused partly by involvement with drugs and alcohol. Indiana law required a sentence of ten to twenty years for Palmer's offense.*

*However, new regulations designating a lesser penalty had gone into effect eighteen days after Palmer's arrest. To complicate matters, Palmer had become a Christian in jail and seemed to have changed. Should the judge sentence Palmer, a man who had never been in jail, to ten years or more? Or should he declare the older statute in violation of Indiana's constitution and give him a lighter sentence? Bontrager did the latter. Fred Palmer was out of jail in seven months, had a job, and was paying back his former victims.*

*The events that followed received national attention. The Indiana Supreme Court reversed the judge's decision and ordered Fred Palmer sent back to prison. The judge's attempts to fight the court's decision during the next two years led to his own indictment for criminal contempt of court and, finally, his forced resignation. Fred Palmer was sent back to prison, only to be released twenty months later by the governor. Bontrager's convictions cost him his job, but not his integrity. (From Klyne Snodgrass, *Between Two Truths - Living with Biblical Tensions*, 1990, Zondervan Publishing House, p. 40.)*

### Liturgy and Prayer:

*The following liturgical outline is provided as a suggestion for how this service could be structured. You are, of course, free to use as much or as little of it as is helpful, and to lift any of the prayers and liturgies out of this outline to place within one of your own or your church's.*

Gathering: Psalm 51:1-17 (Responsive)

### Prayer: Invocation - *The Invitation to Dance*

When all seems lost and our hope is dying,  
**You invite us to dance, O God.**

When we have stumbled and our hearts are broken,  
**You invite us to dance, O God.**

When we have gone astray and we can't find our way home,  
**You invite us to dance, O God.**

Though we may not know the steps,  
    though our feet are heavy,  
    though the noise in our heads drowns out the music,  
**You invite us to dance, O God.**

So, here we gather, O God,  
    to listen to your song again,  
    to accept your invitation again,  
    to offer our hearts and lives in worship again,  
    and to learn again the moves of your life-giving dance.

**Amen.**

### **Hymn Suggestions: *Just As I Am, Without One Plea* *Search Me, O God***

### Prayer: Confession - *The Wrong Audience*

God of Life and Love,  
We've watched faithful dancers moving to your rhythms,  
    and our hearts have stirred,  
We've felt the joy and life that comes from learning your moves,  
    and we have longed for more,

But, then we have remembered others,  
who can't hear your music,  
who don't know the steps of your dance,  
who watch us,  
question us,  
expect things of us,  
and we have chosen to dance for them,  
to move to the beat of their drum,  
and to abandon the dance of life.

Our prayers have become repetitive and empty,  
our fasting has become a meaningless ritual,  
our giving has turned into an arrogant display,  
because we have chosen the wrong audience.

Forgive us for choosing a dance that is all about us,  
that makes us look good to others,  
but gives us no joy.

Teach us again to learn your moves,  
and to dance as if only you are watching.

In Jesus' Name  
Amen.

**Hymn Suggestions: *Be Thou My Vision*  
*Be Now My Vision* (A contemporary version of the old hymn)**

Scripture Reading(s)

Sermon

**Hymn Suggestions: *Dear Master In Whose Life I See* (Or "Dear Jesus...")  
*Come Let Us Sing Of A Wonderful Love*  
*Let Me Shine* (From my CD "Song for the Road" available at  
[sacredise.com](http://sacredise.com))  
*Lord, Make Me Like You* (From the musical "The Witness")**

Prayer: Intercession - *Following Your Lead*

We are amazed, Jesus,  
when we think about how you lived,  
always moving to the rhythms of love and grace,  
and we long to follow your lead.

When we pray may we not speak empty words,  
but may we embody the longings of your heart,  
become a living prayer,  
and bring life and welcome  
wherever death and division may reign.

When we give may we resist sharing only our excess,  
but may we offer ourselves as you always do,  
spreading abundance,  
and making our lives a conduit  
of overflowing life, goodness and enjoyment.

When we fast may we reject any form of arrogance or self-righteousness,  
but may we learn the art of sacrifice that you revealed,  
overcoming addiction and unnecessary consumption,  
embracing simplicity and humility  
for the sake of our world and your reign.

You have shown us the dance of life, Jesus,  
and our world needs us to learn the moves.  
Today we commit ourselves once again,  
sealing our promise with ash,  
to follow your life-giving lead.

Amen.

#### Liturgy of the Ashes

Now, at the beginning of our Lenten journey,  
we remember the life and work  
of the One we follow - Jesus Christ.

We remember his obedience to the purpose of God,  
and the testing which he embraced;  
We remember the discipline with which he lived,  
and the welcome and compassion he offered to all;  
We remember the courage with which he challenged  
both followers and opponents,  
and the willingness with which he suffered;  
We remember the hope he proclaimed,  
and the resurrection life which he won for all.

***We remember the dance of life  
expressed in his every word and action,  
and his invitation for us to learn the steps.***

So, today, as we hear his call again,  
we come with humility and repentance,  
acknowledging how deeply we need to learn  
this life-dance;  
we come offering our whole selves,  
holding nothing back;  
we come determined to follow  
wherever you may lead.

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**And we take upon our foreheads the sign of ash  
to remind us of the choice we make today  
of the choice you made for us  
before the foundation of the world.**

**Amen.**

*The people are invited to come forward and kneel to receive the sign of ash on their foreheads. As the mark is made on each head, the following words may be spoken:*

*"Though you come from dust and shall return to dust, Christ loves you and calls you to follow. Learn the steps of the dance of life."*

Prayer: Adoration - The Dance Of Life

**How are we to understand**

**that you would call us to dance, O God,**  
to rise with the ashes of grace on our heads,  
and the fire of love in our hearts,  
and move to the rhythm of your reign?

**How are we to express our thanks**

**for this joyful opportunity, O God,**  
to learn the steps of compassion,  
the choreography of the Spirit,  
the discipline of artful, vibrant living?

**What words are enough to praise you**

**for your activity within and among us, O God,**  
for the music of your presence,  
the place we find in your purpose,  
the growth that comes from dancing with you  
and all God-Beloved ones?

We praise you, O God, for your constant invitation  
to share in the dance of life.

**As we mark our heads with ash today,  
so we seek to mark our lives  
with the character of Christ,  
the creativity of the Spirit,  
and the commitment of God,  
so that all who see us dance  
may be inspired to join us.**

**Amen.**

**Hymn Suggestions: Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah  
Show Us The Ancient Paths  
I Give You My Heart**

Prayer: Benediction - Dancing For You

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As we leave this place we ask for the gifts of your grace:  
Ears to hear the music of God's reign,  
and hearts that are moved by it;  
Courage to dance  
even though we're still learning the steps;  
And humility to partner with anyone  
who wants to join us in dancing for you.

***We step out into our world,  
to pray with compassion  
and to live what we pray;  
to fast with joy,  
and to enjoy with mindful restraint;  
to give with freedom,  
and to receive with gratitude;***  
***We step out into our world,  
to dance the dance of life,  
and to embrace in every step  
the glory of eternity.***

***Amen.***

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