

Ash Wednesday 2026

Dear people of God in the Episcopal Church,

When God told Moses to lead the ancient Israelites out of slavery in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh stood in his way. Pharaoh wanted power and control over God's people, and [Exodus](#) tells us that the more serious the situation got, the more hardened his heart became. Despite locusts and frogs and all manner of chaos in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh remained trapped by his view of the world, which had himself and his power at the center. He could not see that God's imagination was far bigger and more expansive than his. He could not imagine liberation for God's people—or for himself.

Today, in the opening collect of our [Ash Wednesday service](#), we ask God to “create and make in us new and contrite hearts.” I think of Pharaoh's hard heart, and sometimes my own, when I say that prayer, and never more so than this year.

These days, it can seem as if we are living in a wasteland of Pharaoh's imagination. We see the principalities and powers promulgating violence, dehumanization and injustice on our streets, and it seems nearly impossible not to react along the lines of the divisions and polarization that our political leaders have championed. It is easy to have a hardened heart. It is tempting to get angry and be governed by outrage, or to grow cold and indifferent.

If we turn from Pharaoh's imagination toward God's imagination, however, we find a different path. Jesus tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves. With that great commandment, he is teaching us that we are all one, all part of God's chosen people, and when we hate and revile each other, we are actually destroying ourselves. Theologian Howard Thurman, whose thinking helped shape the Civil Rights movement, put it like this in [“Jesus and the Disinherited”](#): “The logic of the development of hatred is death to the spirit and disintegration of ethical and moral values.”

It is not easy to leave behind Pharaoh's imagination and its toxic drip of polarization that hardens our hearts and minds. The liberation we seek requires the conversion—the turning—of our hearts. We can begin that process anytime, but Lent gives us an opportunity to undertake the work together.

In the old 1928 Book of Common Prayer Ash Wednesday service, we called on the book of Lamentations: “Turn thou us unto thee, O Lord, and we shall be turned.” I believe that as we Episcopalians turn, as we fast and pray for the conversion of our hearts, we can make a great witness to a world that has been brought to its knees by the power of hatred and division.

On Monday of Holy Week, a number of my bishop colleagues will hold public liturgies or prayer services to lament the violence and hatred that has come to define our common life and to witness to our conviction that Christians must come together across our unholy divisions. I hope that if you can attend a service nearby, you will.

I will also host a service on Zoom on **Palm Sunday, March 29 at 8 p.m. Eastern** so that we can pray together for God's blessing on our witness. Look for more information coming soon.

Like the apostle Paul, the conversion of the heart that we must undertake may start with a blinding light, but the ongoing change it requires is the work of a lifetime, and may require everything we have. This Lent, I pray that God might create and make in us new and contrite hearts that will sustain us as we make our witness to the world.

Faithfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sean".

The Most Rev. Sean W. Rowe
Presiding Bishop