

## A Lenten meditation

*Ring around the rosey  
A pocket full of posies  
Ashes, ashes  
We all fall down*

Ash Wednesday is laden with meaning. A seemingly innocent nursery rhyme that is also a children's playground game gets at the dreadful essence of the day, by some accounts at any rate. The rhyme may reference the Black Death in medieval Europe, thought by many to be a combination of three types of plague, or the later outbreak of plague in 17<sup>th</sup>-century London. Victims sometimes developed a ring-shaped rash, often around boils. Sweet-smelling posies might have been carried by those who tended the sick in order to ward off the horrific stench of the disease or to cleanse the bad air that many thought transmitted the lethal illness. Ashes could betoken the mass cremations of bodies that were done in an effort to stem the further spread of plague. Not everyone fell down in premature death, but estimates run as high as 60% for the segment of the European population that died from plague.

The season of Lent thus does not have an auspicious beginning. We are reminded on its first Wednesday, by the ashes imposed on our foreheads, of our vulnerability and mortality: that we all, indeed, will fall down in death. And Lent ends even worse: with our remembrance of Jesus' precipitous fall into unimaginable suffering that concluded with a cruel and painful state-imposed execution. It is a season that advocates of positive thinking (such as Norman Vincent Peale), possibility thinking (such as Robert Schuller), and prosperity thinking (such as Joel Osteen) might well prefer to ignore. But we need the reminder and the remembrance. Easter is bright Good News only on the dark canvas of Lent, only in lush contrast to the arid reality of our human condition.

Let us pray:

*Gracious God, out of your love and mercy you have breathed into dust the breath of life, creating us to serve you and our neighbors. Call forth our prayers and acts of kindness, and strengthen us to face our mortality with confidence in the mercy of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

(Collect for Ash Wednesday, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 26)