



## Why do we use ashes on Ash Wednesday?

By Julie McCarty

When I think of fire, I think of celebrations: birthday candles, marshmallows toasting over a campfire, or firecrackers on the Fourth of July.

But for ancient peoples, fire was a basic element of survival. Without fire, there would be no baked bread, cooked meat, clay dishes, or protection from winter cold. Without fire, humans could not have developed better tools or weapons.

People of old also knew the dangerous side of fire: it could destroy your home, kill your child, or utterly devastate an entire village when in the hands of enemy tribes.

Because of this, Old Testament peoples used ashes as a sign of the fleetingness of life, mourning, repentance, and humility before God. When Jeremiah proclaims God's displeasure with sin, he tells the people to dress in sackcloth and roll in ashes, as if mourning over the death of an only child (Jer. 6:26). In the midst of intense suffering, Job cries out "I am leveled with the dust and ashes" (Job 30:19), and also, later, repents of his attitudes "in dust and ashes" (42:6).

Modern Christians place ashes on their foreheads at the start of Lent to express that we, too, are sinners. Our sins bring various types of destruction to ourselves and others. We ask God to purify our hearts, as gold is purified by fire. We beg the "fire" of the Holy Spirit to transform us more fully into the image and likeness of Christ, who died on the cross to give us new life.

