“Would you like to receive ashes today?”
There are just some stories worth retelling again and again. This one, by Rev. Jennifer Brownell, Pastor of First Congregational Church in Vancouver, Washington, will challenge and inspire you into Ash Wednesday...

"Is not this the fast I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?" - Isaiah 58:6-7

"Would you like to receive ashes today?" We asked one person after another. Our strategy was to ask them just as they exited the coffee shop, theorizing that people are generally more likely to say "yes" to something after they’ve gotten their coffee than before. Most said no, politely enough but firmly. A very few said "yes!" immediately. And one asked, "Why? What is this?"

"We are from the United Church of Christ up the street," we explained.

"Today is Ash Wednesday. On the first day of Lent, some Christians make a visible sign of repentance, which means to turn toward God. Would you like to receive ashes on your hand or forehead?" "Um, ok."
And the person held out a hand, received a cross and a blessing and then walked away, a cross visible on the hand clutching the paper coffee cup.

After we heard about Ashes to Go on some website or other, our little church decided to try it – heading out in the streets during morning coffee rush and offering ashes to our neighbors.

When I told friends and colleagues about Ashes to Go, the reaction from quite a few was the same. "Oh my God, I would never do that." These are brave, justice-loving people I’m talking about. People who would never hesitate to clothe the naked, share bread with the hungry or bring the homeless indoors. All of those can seem easy compared to revealing ourselves to our kin, our neighbors, those people walking out of the coffee shop next door right now. And yet, God calls us to that fast, too.

- William P. Worley, PSE Conference Minister