

DAILY REFLECTIONS FOR LENT 2021

Words for the Weary

*Embracing the Lenten Season
after a Challenging Pandemic Year*



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A Year Later

Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. —Joel 2:12-13

Beginning Lent with its call to fasting, weeping, and mourning may not sound at all appealing to us this year. Since the coronavirus began sweeping across our country almost exactly a year ago, haven't we done enough of that? Perhaps never in our lives have we fasted so much from hugging family members and physically touching our friends, from gathering together in book clubs, choirs, sports arenas, restaurants, and churches. Maybe you have lost a loved one, and you still can't stop weeping. Even if you haven't lost someone you know, our country and world are collectively mourning the pandemic's death toll, the economic devastation it has created, and the political divisiveness it has spawned. Our hearts have been broken in so many ways this past year that perhaps God isn't calling us to *more* mourning, weeping, and fasting this Lent. Maybe instead the invitation is to merely return to God with our entire hurting, weary selves.

FOR PRAYER: Take a few minutes today to imagine yourself simply being in God's presence in whatever state you find yourself in. Allow God to be with you no matter what you are feeling.

Unexpected Graces

What does it profit them if they gain the whole world but lose or forfeit themselves? —Luke 9:25

Even though this past year has been difficult, it has also offered many graces. One grace I've noticed is how the pandemic has reminded us what is most important in life. I know of one couple who, before the pandemic, worked more than full-time jobs making big money. Each of them had a two+ hour round trip commute to the office. Typically, they only saw their children for about 30 minutes of waking time Monday through Friday.

Once they couldn't go to the office anymore and they rediscovered how much they enjoyed being with their kids, this couple realized they would rather make less money but have more time at home as a family. They realized that when they had a house cleaner, a gardener, and a nanny, they had "the whole world," but they had forfeited their family. The pandemic showed them what they had lost and wanted to regain.

FOR REFLECTION: Have you found new life in any way in this past year, as difficult as it may have been?

FEBRUARY 19 ■ FRIDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

Fasting in Perspective

Is not this the fast that 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?
—Isaiah 58:6

We have had to fast from so many things this past year that we had always taken for granted before: physical touch, travel, and large group gatherings, to name a few. How many of the things we have fasted from are actually luxuries, not necessities? Fasting from eating out in a restaurant, getting our hair cut whenever we want, flying across the country to see the grandkids, or going on a mid-winter cruise are all things you may have given up to stay safe. Isaiah reminds us today to put these sacrifices in perspective. Millions of people in our country don't have access to these luxuries in the first place because of poverty, injustice, and oppression. How has this pandemic created further injustice and burdens for the most vulnerable, and how might God want us to address these?

FOR ACTION: What decision(s) can you make to use your time, money, or energy in the service of justice this week?

All Prayers Allowed

Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer; listen to my cry of supplication.

—Psalm 86:6

There is so much we may be asking from God: huge things like healing for those sick with the coronavirus, safety for those exposed to it, unity for a country divided, a chance for kids to go back to school, a return to “normal” life. Then there are the many smaller things we may be praying for: patience with family members in a crowded house, a break in the weather so we can get outside for a bit, a respite during a hectic day, or something different to occupy our time during a day with nothing much to do. However big or small our “asks” may be, the psalmist today reminds us that we can bring anything and everything before God in prayer. Nothing is off-limits with God.

FOR PRAYER: Speak to God about what you most desire right now, knowing that God is present and attentive to you.

Angels Tending

He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him. —Mark 1:13

A year into the worldwide pandemic now, it may seem like we live in a wilderness with the beasts of fear, discouragement, grief, depression, and weariness all around us. It is easy to notice these “beasts” that have become such a present reality for so many of us, but have we also noticed the angels tending to us at the same time? Who are the people who have shared their strength with us, consoled us, or encouraged us during these challenging times? What have been some gifts of this time? Perhaps you have discovered creative ways to connect with distant family members. Maybe you have enjoyed more homemade meals or had time to learn a new hobby or finish a big project. Perhaps you’ve been hearing how the earth is healing

as the air and water is spared further pollution. Yes, there are beasts in our wilderness, but angels are tending us too.

FOR REFLECTION: Take some time to name the people who have been angels to you this past year. Name some gifts that have come out of this disruptive time “in the wilderness.”

FEBRUARY 22 ■ MONDAY, FIRST WEEK OF LENT

Who Here Needs Your Help?

Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. —Matthew 25:40

My parents lived 2,000 miles away when I had my first child. My baby Madeleine spent her days and nights screaming with colic while I suffered from postpartum depression. My friends Sharon and Randall checked in on me every day, cooked food, took Madeleine out for walks so I could nap, and bought her cute clothes and hair bows. As they cared for us, I was aware they were not with their daughter and first grandchild who lived out-of-state. When I commented on it once, Sharon replied, “If I can’t be with my daughter and grandchild there, I can help the daughter and grandchild who is here right now.”

Maybe we can’t physically be with all of our loved ones right now. Perhaps we can’t visit our children or grandchildren, or we don’t see our co-workers in person anymore. Maybe we can’t get together with our friends and other parishioners. If we can’t be Christ in person for them, who are the people in our daily lives right now whom God is calling us to feed, clothe, welcome, visit, or heal?

FOR ACTION: What tangible thing can you do today to be Christ for someone who is struggling right now?

Enough for Each Day

Give us this day our daily bread. —Matthew 6:11

Jesus knew the story of his ancestors, the Israelites, who wandered in the desert for 40 years. He knew God fed them with manna each day. He also knew that if they tried to gather extra and save it up (except for the Sabbath), it attracted worms and became inedible. The Israelites learned to trust that God would feed them each day, but not ahead of time. Jesus' disciples would have had that story in mind when Jesus taught them to ask for what they needed each day. We also are invited to ask for the same, trusting that God will provide for us daily, but not necessarily ahead of time.

FOR REFLECTION: Looking back on this past year, what form has your daily bread come in some days? How has God been feeding you?

Always a Good Prayer

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and steadfast spirit within me. —Psalm 51:10

We could recite this verse from the psalms every day of the year, not just during Lent, and it alone would serve us well. We may or may not have a grievous offense on our hearts that we need washed away, but there will always be other shadows in our hearts that God can cleanse us of: discouragement, irritation, impatience, or cynicism, to name a few. Likewise, we know that some days our spirits falter, and we are shaky with fear or worry. Yet even on our strongest days when we are fortunate enough to be graced with a solid sense of faith and trust, God can always strengthen our spirits even more.

FOR PRAYER: Repeat this verse mindfully for a few minutes, trusting that God will do what you ask.

Good Things

Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you... how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him? —Matthew 7:7

Jesus teaches that *it's okay* to ask for what we want and need! Not only is it okay, he encourages us to ask because, like any loving parent, God wants to give us good things. Notice that it is “good” things that God wants to provide for us. Maybe a brand-spanking-new sports car isn't the “good” thing God wants to give because there is something better God wants us to have, something that will be more life-giving or deep-down fulfilling than that car.

Believing that God wants to give us good things might be an impetus to listen to our hearts for the desires beneath our desires when we are praying. For example, maybe someone is praying to lose ten pounds. Jesus doesn't find fault with that prayer but insists that God wants to give us something *good*, and even *better*. Maybe what God wants to offer is something deeper than the desire to weigh less: better health, more energy, a great sense of self-acceptance, and belief that we are beautifully and wonderfully made as we are.

We don't need to split hairs to decide what it is okay or not okay to ask of God. It is not selfish to ask for healing for ourselves or our loved ones. We're not out of bounds when we ask to find work, a new place to live, or the healthcare we need. Jesus teaches very clearly that it's even okay to ask for the sports car or the weight loss. After that, our job is to look for what good thing comes of our asking, even if it's not in the form that we imagined.

FOR PRAYER: Take some time to listen deeply in your heart for what you most desire right now, then ask God for it with boldness and trust.

Priorities

Leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. —Matthew 5:24

Perhaps more than any time in recent history, our society is being reminded that none of us is guaranteed a tomorrow. As we've watched the coronavirus death toll rise into the hundreds of thousands, just in the United States, it has gotten harder and harder to ignore this truth. As author and hospice expert Stephen Jenkinson writes, so many of us want "More Time" yet don't use our "More Time" to live any differently. What does it matter if we continue going to church (in person or virtually) and giving our weekly offering but we don't make use of our remaining time to reconcile with a family member we've been estranged from, or from someone else we had a falling out with? There is such a thing as "too late," and Jesus suggests we keep our priorities straight and reach out to others when we still have the chance.

FOR ACTION: Is there someone you need to reconcile yourself with? Make a plan to reach out to that person this week.

Don't Wait to Feel Loving

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. —Matthew 5:43-44

In a period of such political, economic, and racial divisiveness, there are plenty of opportunities to practice Jesus' teaching. Some people might easily be able to name individuals or groups they feel hatred toward, in which case, Jesus' words are clear. Jesus calls them to love and pray for those they hate, even if it means treating them lovingly and praying for them before they *feel* a sense of love for them. On the other hand, many of us can name individuals or groups we wouldn't necessarily label as "enemies" but with

whom we have deep disagreements and can't seem to get along with or understand their points of view. Just because we don't have anyone we would label as "enemies" doesn't let us off the hook in loving and praying for those people, whether they are on the other side of the political spectrum, a member of another race or ethnicity, or a different gender or sexual identity than us.

FOR REFLECTION: Who in our lives are we finding it hard to love and pray for these days? Ask God for the desire *to have the desire* to begin praying for them, no matter how much you may resist it now.

FEBRUARY 28 ■ SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

Listening to the Beloved

Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" —Mark 9:7

In the Transfiguration story, God speaks to Jesus' apostles with words that are still directed to us today. God didn't threaten them with punishment or try to enforce obedience as to a military commander. God invited them to listen to one called the "Beloved." If you think of someone "beloved" in your life, aren't you more willing to listen to them, watch how they act, and try to live as they do than someone whom you fear?

FOR REFLECTION: What words of Jesus from the Gospels are you invited to listen to or pay attention to today?

Good Advice

Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. —Luke 6:37-38

In this season of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, today's Gospel gives us ideas of what we might fast from besides the traditional chocolate, coffee, or alcohol. We can fast from judging others ("That mom doesn't have her act together—her son's shirts are always stained" or "How ignorant is he that he voted for X candidate?"). We can pray for the freedom to forgive others who have hurt our loved ones or us. Finally, we can take opportunities to give to others with more generosity and freedom. We might do it spontaneously ("We've got extra pie, let's share with our neighbor.") or intentionally (buy gift cards to a fast food restaurant to give out to panhandlers).

FOR ACTION: What can you commit to doing this week to heed Jesus' words in the passage above?

Changing for the Good

Cease to do evil, learn to do good. —Isaiah 1:16-17

As much as the coronavirus has caused tremendous disruptions to our lives, it has also given us the chance to take stock of how we live, as individuals and as a society. Last spring, coal plants shuttered, airlines grounded their planes, and millions of cars stayed parked. Almost immediately air and water pollution levels dropped dramatically across the globe. Health experts believe that the reduction of smog in China alone saved more lives than the virus caused deaths there. It may be easy to overlook or rationalize the damage that modern life is inflicting on our planet. Coal is a cheap energy source, some people need to fly to New York for business, and often driving to work is quicker than public transportation. The fact is, those

rationalizations allow us to “do evil” to the earth. When the coronavirus forced us to reconsider how we do things, we learned to do good in ways we might never have otherwise.

FOR REFLECTION: In what other ways has the pandemic led to changes that are good for us individually, as a society, or the earth?

MARCH 3 ■ WEDNESDAY, SECOND WEEK OF LENT

Surrendering

Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God. —Psalm 31:5

Americans in the year 2021 like to be in control; we are not people who naturally surrender our lives to God. It has not been easy to give up control over so many aspects of our lives this past year: when our children can go back to school, when we can visit family members across the country, when we can open our business again, or even when we can get together with friends in person and inside again. Maybe we have been too busy chafing about not being in control to surrender ourselves more freely to God and how God is working among us in this time of a worldwide pandemic. God IS redeeming us, even amidst the inconveniences and heartache of this year. More home-cooked family meals, less hectic schedules, deeper connections to neighbors and local friends, the discovery of a new hobby or time to pursue an old one—all of these might be ways that God is redeeming us.

FOR PRAYER: Pray for deeper freedom to commit your spirit fully to God, and pray for the ability to see all the ways God is gracing you in your surrender.

Deeply Rooted

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream.

—Jeremiah 17:7-8

If ever there has been a time for us to focus on trusting and being deeply rooted in the Lord, it has been this past year. A tree needs to be deeply rooted to tap into a source of life-sustaining water if it is to survive storms, drought, fire, and pest infestations. Of course, being deeply rooted doesn't mean the tree will avoid these threats, nor does it guarantee that it won't endure some damage over the years. The same can be said for all of God's faithful.

Jesus never promised to shield us from hardship, just as trees planted near water aren't shielded from acts of nature. Maybe you have known times when you thought you might topple from the weight of pain, loss, anxiety, sickness, or loneliness. Yet you didn't. You are still here, and now your rootedness in God is deeper than ever. If bad weather threatens you now, continue trusting in the Lord and trusting in your rootedness to Jesus.

FOR ACTION: Do something physical today to symbolize rooting yourself in God. Sit on the bare earth for prayer time. Walk barefoot under a tree, reflecting on its rootedness. Get down on the ground to play with a child. Prepare a meal that includes root vegetables (carrots, potatoes, yams, beets, etc). Thank God for the rootedness that keeps you connected to our Creator.

A Cornerstone

The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes. —Matthew 21:42

Scripture is filled with stories of God using someone or something seemingly ordinary or insignificant to do great things: little David defeating Go-

liath, Moses' mother weaving a bushel basket to save his life, a boy with five loaves and two fish that fed a crowd, an ardent Jew and persecutor of Christians named Paul who ended up spreading the Gospel across the Mediterranean.

FOR REFLECTION: What seemingly ordinary or insignificant thing in these past few months has God grown into something meaningful, amazing, or vital in your life now?

MARCH 6 ■ SATURDAY, SECOND WEEK OF LENT

A Change in Prayer Habits

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me. —Psalm 103:1

I can easily fall into the habit of asking God for more than I thank God for, or of sharing my litany of woes with God (read: complaining to God) rather than focusing on all that is good in my life. Basically, I am asking God to bless me, rather than blessing the Lord myself. Psalms like this one remind me to practice different kinds of prayer, like blessing and praising God for who God is and what God has given me.

FOR PRAYER: Read Psalm 103 and take some time to list—in your mind or on paper—reasons you have for blessing and praising the Lord.

What Angers Jesus?

Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple. —John 2:15

Whoever said that anger is a sin? It certainly isn't in this passage when Jesus shows his infuriation at the businessmen, the bankers, the religious leaders, and the traders who turned religious devotion into a money-making proposition. In Jesus' day, Jewish laws required Jews to offer animal sacrifices as atonement for their sins—the bigger the sin, the bigger the offering, from pigeons and turtledoves to sheep, goats, and cattle. Jews also had to offer sacrifices of thanksgiving and dedication (as Mary and Joseph offered two turtledoves after Jesus' birth), or offerings to mark their cleansing after illnesses or blood loss. It quickly added up to a heavy burden for poor people.

For families who didn't own the required animal(s) called for by the law, they had to buy them at the Temple, most likely at an inflated price because once there, they had no other recourse. Most peasants did business with Roman coins, but they needed Jewish coins to pay a Temple tax, which is why moneychangers were on hand too. Of course, the visitors probably lost money in that exchange as well. Given Jesus' lifelong demands for economic, social, and racial justice, is it any wonder that he is furious about this profiteering, especially within a religious context?

Such religious exploitation may seem primitive to us, but sadly it still plays out in our churches today. Isn't it true that those who have the money get their names inscribed on the stained glass windows, the building bricks, or the pews, or the ones with professional power more often get seats at the decision-making tables?

FOR REFLECTION: What might anger Jesus within our church laws and structures today?

Who Is our Leader?

O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me. —Psalm 43:3

In a country where government leaders and those in positions of authority cannot always be trusted to tell the truth or guide the nation in the ways of justice and peace, we need this prayer more than ever now. As Christians, our responsibility is to first look to *God's* light and truth and to how and where *God* is leading. The challenge is that some leaders fool us by equating their ways with *God's* ways, and they want us to conflate their wishes with *God's* desires for us as a people or a country.

How will we know if we are following *God's* truth as opposed to human truth? We won't get an answer written in the sky, but we have some tools for discernment. St. Ignatius taught that following *God's* voice leads us to experience greater love, peace, strength, and consolation, while the "evil spirit" nurses experiences of hatred, vengeance, shame, and despair. Similarly, Catholic teaching on interpreting scripture emphasizes that the goal of scripture is to know how much we are all loved by *God* and how we are to love others. So as we think about how our leaders lead (in government, at work, and in the church), we should ask ourselves if their example results in expressions of greater love, mercy, compassion, and justice. If they don't, let us keep praying for *God* to lead us.

FOR REFLECTION: In what ways is *God* leading you to live more lovingly? Do you see examples around you of people in power leading others away from love and compassion?

A Hard Teaching

“How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” —Matthew 18:21-22

I know a 73 year old woman who decided to give up her grudges for Lent. She said she had nursed a couple of them for decades but realized that she finally wanted to be free of them. She figured Lent was as good a time as any to practice forgiveness. She made that the focus of her Lenten prayer and repeatedly asked God to relieve her from the ill-will, resentment, anger, and bitterness she experienced when she thought of particular people. Come Easter Day, she truly felt free from any lingering hurt from the others in her life. She told me she learned the truth of Jesus’ point—forgiving someone seven times isn’t always enough. It’s not a “one-and-done” or even “seven-and-done” deal. She had to practice continually forgiving others until God finished the healing within her.

FOR PRAYER: What person(s) have you not been able to forgive yet? Spend some time now asking God to give you freedom from the anger or pain you feel. If you can’t bring yourself to want to forgive someone, tell God that in honesty, and ask for the desire to have the desire to forgive.

Past Blessings

But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life. —Deuteronomy 4:9

In this passage, Moses implores the Israelites always to remember and pass onto their children and their grandchildren stories of the wonderful things God has done for them. This speech comes after God freed them from slavery in Egypt and sustained them on their 40-year journey in the wilderness. Moses’ advice is still good instruction today, especially when things look bleak and we despair that some difficulty might never end.

Remembering—and telling others—what God has done for you in the past can strengthen your trust and their trust that God will continue to do great things in the present and future.

FOR ACTION: Find a way to share with someone today a story of at least one way God has blessed you. Invite them to share one or more past blessings with you.

MARCH 11 ■ THURSDAY, THIRD WEEK OF LENT

From Passive to Active

Whoever is not with me is against me. —Luke 11:23

This quote in Luke’s Gospel is more challenging than the parallel passage in Mark in which Jesus said, “Whoever is not against us is for us” (Mk 9:40). Ignoring the question of which version is historically accurate, what might be the message for us in today’s verse? This version asks for an active commitment on our part; it requires more than avoiding doing harm. For some, going through the day without lying, stealing, or murdering isn’t hard to do. Does that mean we get to pat ourselves on the back for being good disciples? No. According to this version, Jesus says that’s not enough. If we want to be Jesus’ disciples, we must *actively* choose to do good, not just avoid doing evil. For example, beyond not stealing from the hungry, we are challenged to *feed* the hungry, whether with a granola bar from our purse, volunteering for Meals-on-Wheels, donating to a charitable organization, taking a meal to a shut-in, or advocating for laws that support the most vulnerable in our society.

FOR ACTION: What can you proactively do today to demonstrate your commitment to Jesus?

Snacks, Anyone?

You shall love your neighbor as yourself. —Mark 12:31

This past year, the Advent calendar our family used suggested, “Make a blanket fort today. Invite in an imaginary enemy. Circle each other... and then offer them snacks.” My daughters LOVED that idea. Upon first reading, the younger one was quiet for a moment, then laughed out loud. “I just imagined (the presidential candidate we *didn’t* vote for) in my blanket fort, and I asked if he wanted to share my Doritos.” That, my friends, is how a child teaches us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

It’s easier to think of some people as my neighbors than others. I wouldn’t have put that candidate in the “enemy” category, but he certainly doesn’t come to mind as my neighbor either. When a man asked Jesus to define who is included under the heading of “neighbor,” Jesus answered with the story of the Good Samaritan. That answer widened the definition far beyond someone who lives by me, or thinks as I do, or even someone whom I know personally. That means that besides my *daughter* sharing Doritos with that particular candidate, Jesus asks *me* to extend the same goodwill to him.

FOR REFLECTION: Which “neighbors” (those whom you have met and those you may never meet) are easier for you to love and to extend goodwill toward, and which are harder to love? How might you metaphorically offer to share Doritos with someone in the latter category?

Returning

Come, let us return to the Lord. —Hosea 6:1

Thinking back to a year ago, where did your faith stand then compared to now? For many of us, this year has resulted in a “return to the Lord” that might not have happened if it weren’t for the pandemic. It has stripped us of so many luxuries and things we took for granted that we have been left

to re-embrace the essentials in life. Deeper connections with those close to us, rootedness in our locality (we can't go far), the beauty in simplicity (homemade dinner, again), and more hours to rest, reflect, and pray have come to the forefront. We might not have even noticed that we had strayed from God and God's desires for how we live until the virus reminded us that we don't have control over our lives.

There have been some hard and painful lessons this past year, and we are still learning them. We join with people of faith down through all the ages, including those in Hosea's time, who might not have remembered how much we need the Lord if a disaster hadn't befallen them. Let's be grateful that the wake-up call of the virus has reoriented us toward God and others.

FOR REFLECTION: Has the pandemic helped you to "return to the Lord"? If so, how? If not, what might be the invitation in it for you?

MARCH 14 ■ FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Modern-Day Messengers

Early and often did the Lord, the God of their ancestors, send his messengers to them, for he had compassion on his people. —2 Chronicles 36:15

What messengers has God sent you recently—and with what messages? If God is consistent, God still uses all manner of people to be messengers, just as God used a diverse cast of characters to get people's attention in Bible times. Back then, God used children (like Samuel), refugees Naomi and Ruth, educated scholars from another land (the magi), loud-mouthed folks who appeared mentally unstable (John the Baptist), and the bold Mary who anointed Jesus' feet with nard to call people's attention to something important. As Chronicles tells us, God sends us messengers *because God has compassion on us*. God wants us to have life and to have it in its fullness, and the messengers are sent to help us see that. God doesn't send messengers to make our lives miserable or to ask the impossible of us. They come with a life-giving message, which, if we heed it, will lead to a greater fullness of life, a richer life, which is not necessarily the same as an easier life.

FOR PRAYER: Ask God to open your eyes and ears to recognize the messengers and the messages God is sending with compassion for you.

If Gets Better

*No more shall the sound of weeping be heard, or the cry of distress.
—Isaiah 65:19*

A friend of mine committed suicide recently. His wife, his two daughters, and different friends and family members haven't been able to stop crying. I keep wondering about his sixth-grader and his third-grader. If I were to read them this passage from Isaiah, would they be able to believe that someday they won't weep or be distressed by their father's death anymore? Probably not, because as humans it is hard for us to believe something that is so different from what we are currently feeling and experiencing.

We can't fault others for not believing things will get better or criticize ourselves when we can't feel such hope. Jesus' friends and followers wept after his death, even though he had told them he would rise again. But hopefully, we have all experienced goodness, joy, and new life after our darkest days, and perhaps those memories will console us when we can't stop crying now. If we are not the ones mourning now, maybe we can hold out hope for others who can't see or trust in a time when things will be better.

FOR ACTION: If you are struggling to believe that things will get better, tell someone that today and let them share their conviction with you. If you know someone struggling now, do something to reach out to them today to offer them hope.

Fake-It-Till-You-Make-It

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea. —Psalm 46:2

My personality type tends toward worry and fear more than most. (For any Enneagram enthusiasts out there, I'm a Six.) Maybe that's the reason I love the Bible passages where angels (or Jesus) tell people, "Do not be afraid." I could use that reminder pretty much every day of my life, and even more so

now that I have children and my heart is walking around outside of myself in the two of them. I would love to get to a place where I could say as confidently as the psalmist that I will not fear a virus anymore, or the effects of our country's shutdown on our mental, social, and economic health, or how much more life on earth will be lost due to climate change, etc.

I'm not there yet, but I do think there's something to the fake-it-till-you-make-it philosophy. I assume I will continue to worry, but I want to choose intentionally to act out of trust rather than fear, even if I'm not feeling particularly trusting. My prayer is that in consciously acting with hope and confidence in God, those traits will grow in me. Then, as I practice trusting more, I will project more trust and hope to my children and others who might also be tempted to live in worry and fear.

FOR PRAYER: What are you fearful about? Take some time now to pray that God removes your fear or gives you grace to act with trust despite the fear.

MARCH 17 ■ WEDNESDAY, FOURTH WEEK OF LENT

Commas, Not Periods

My Father is still working, and I also am working. —John 5:17

A couple of times a week, I bike past a church in town whose marquee says, "Don't put a period where God has placed a comma. God is still speaking." It reminds me of this verse from John's Gospel. Jesus' work didn't end 2,000 years ago when he ascended into heaven, and God didn't quit communicating with us after the Bible was written. No matter how troubling things may be, God is still active here and now. God is still sending angels and allies. God is still speaking words of comfort and strength and love to us today. We just have to attune our eyes and our ears to how Jesus is working today.

FOR REFLECTION: Who has said something to you or done something for you in the past week that has been a blessing? How does that reveal to you that God is still working and speaking in the year 2021?

Idolatry Today

They have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it. —Exodus 32:8

The thing about idols is that those worshiping them don't think they are idols—they believe they are the real thing. We might wonder how in the world the Israelites convinced themselves that the golden calf was their god. Then again, people outside of our culture might wonder how we have let ourselves get sucked into worshiping the things we do: wealth accumulation, work-aholism, personal achievement, professional sports, “perfect” parenting, a social media presence, “perfect” bodies, etc. Although idolatry seems like a thing of the past—something primitive peoples did—it is alive and well today, in different forms than molten statues. Whatever we turn to for stimulation or escape from boredom, longing, suffering, or any other form of discomfort has the potential to become an idol if we turn to it instead of God. This doesn't mean that if we enjoy a glass of wine to help unwind at the end of a stressful day that alcohol has become our idol/savior. The question is, where does my mind turn when I need comfort or escape? Does it turn to God and the life-giving things God offers us (healthy relationships, beauty, simplicity, nature), or does it turn to something that makes me less able to be present to myself and to others?

FOR REFLECTION: What do you turn to when you are feeling restless, empty, bored, or otherwise unfulfilled? Does that person, place, or thing replace God in any way?

Jesus Has Been There

*The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit.
—Psalm 34:18*

Given the choice, I would prefer to follow a God who would protect me

from ever having a broken heart. Short of that, I'm grateful that I was born into a religion in which God became fully human and knows first-hand our experience. Scripture tells us Jesus was brokenhearted when his good friend Lazarus died. His spirit was crushed as he hung on the cross ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"). We can presume he also knew what it felt like to lose his father Joseph, to move away from home, to watch humans do violence to each other, and to witness so much physical and mental illness, pain, and suffering. Because Jesus experienced these things and didn't run away from them, I can trust more readily that the Lord is near me and others when we are brokenhearted too. If I have to experience what every other human can't escape, at least I don't have to do it alone.

FOR PRAYER: If you feel brokenhearted in any way, take some time today to allow yourself to imagine God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit physically near you and speak to them about what is on your heart, as you would to a friend.

MARCH 20 ■ SATURDAY, FOURTH WEEK OF LENT

How Is Your Lent Going?

Now that we are at the end of the fourth week of Lent, this is an excellent time to review the past few weeks. How has this season been for you? Have you felt yourself in a desert wilderness? How so? Has it felt like a desert because it has been a time of dryness and thirsting? Or has it been a period in the wilderness when you have been able to more easily hear God's voice because of the quiet and stillness? Does that image resonate with how this past year has been as we have lived through a worldwide pandemic?

If you committed to any particular prayer, fasting, and almsgiving practice for this season, how has that been going? Have you been able to maintain your commitments? Have you changed them? Do you feel the need to re-commit to anything, or make any shift going forward for the last two weeks of Lent? What have the graces been so far?

FOR ACTION: Share with someone else how your Lenten commitment(s) have been going and what you would like to commit to for the last two weeks of Lent. Ask them about their Lenten experience so far.

Following Your Conscience

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. —Jeremiah 31:33

As an RCIA Director, I have the privilege of teaching incoming Catholics about our Church's understanding of conscience. As far back as the time of Jeremiah, hundreds of years before Jesus lived, our ancestors in faith understood that we all have access to God's truth in our deepest core. Like us, the Jews at that time understood that rules written for the public are necessary for keeping society running smoothly, but ultimately we have the responsibility first and foremost to follow the laws God has written on our hearts.

This teaching is so important that the Catholic Church has a term for it: it's called the "primacy of conscience." It means that whether we are the pope, a bishop, or a layperson who has never taken a single class in theology, we can "listen in" to the deepest place in our hearts, our inner core and sanctuary. There we can discover what God wants of us and wants for us. What is written on our hearts may or may not be the same as what human authorities are telling us, in which case, we are obliged to follow God's laws. Even very young children can quickly grasp this idea of listening to their consciences. The thing is, it takes some effort to notice what God's law on our heart is leading us to do or not do, and sometimes it takes more courage to follow God's law than civil laws.

FOR REFLECTION: Can you think of a time when you followed your conscience instead of what someone else told you to do? How did it feel to do that? What might God be inviting you to do or not do, despite outside pressure, these days?

Invitation to Rest

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. —Psalm 23:1-3

When I was a kid, I didn't understand why people seemed to like Psalm 23 so much. I thought it meant "I shouldn't want anything," and so I felt guilty when I did. Also, I thought it meant that God was trying to get me to nap outside when what I really wanted to do was play. It took me a long time to understand that "I shall not want" really meant that God would care for me so that I wouldn't lack anything that I needed.

Years later, when I was on a retreat during graduate school, I found myself sitting on a log next to a stream after reading this Psalm. Suddenly "He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul" sounded so much more appealing to me than it had when I was a child.

In the course of this past year, which has been so bone-wearying for some and so mind-numbingly boring for others, God's invitation to rest and restoration still stands. Maybe we'll have to search out our own version of green pastures and still waters to sit with God: a quiet spot in a nearby park, a patio chair on a porch, or underneath a beautiful tree in the neighborhood could work. A mom of three young children I know cleared out a small place on her closet floor where she can crawl in and close the door for a few quiet minutes each morning before she begins her day. Wherever we can go to be alone with the Shepherd who wants to give us rest can be our place of green pasture.

FOR REFLECTION: How do you make time to "lie down in green pastures" or let yourself be led "beside still waters"? If you don't make time for it, how might you start building it into your days? Where could you go to find some quiet, peaceful time for yourself and God?

Worn out by the Journey

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but with their patience worn out by the journey, the people complained against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” —Numbers 21:4-5

In this passage, the Israelites had escaped slavery in Egypt and thought they were headed quickly for the Promised Land where they would settle in peace with plenty to eat. Little did they know that escaping from slavery wouldn't make their lives smooth and easy instantaneously (as African Americans in the United States know so well). The Israelites had a much longer road in front of them than they imagined. They had 40 years in the wilderness before they reached the Promised Land, and for much of that time, food and water were scarce. Some of them never made it to their new land. Is it surprising then that they had periods of impatience and complaining against God and their leader, Moses?

So if you are worn out now, impatient with government (or church) leaders, and you find yourself complaining to God about this wilderness time, you are not alone. You are in good company because millions of our ancestors in faith have had their patience worn thin during challenging times. Like them, may we come to recognize that all of our normal, human emotions are permissible before God and that God will not abandon us, even if we complain about the food God provides.

FOR PRAYER: Turning to God as if to a friend, be as open and honest as possible about what you are feeling and thinking now. Then allow some quiet to see how God wants to respond.

Choosing Truth

You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free. —John 8:31-32

My husband and I promised ourselves when our daughters were young that we would never lie to them. That has meant not lying when my vegetarian daughter asks if I've put fish sauce in the dish I'm making for dinner — even though I still sometimes want to think that a “little white lie” won't do any harm. It has also meant that we've had some difficult conversations with our kids earlier than we would have liked, for instance when one of them asked, “How did Lynn's dad die?” (by suicide).

I'm sometimes struck that Jesus said, “The truth will make/set you free” instead of “The truth will make things easier.” We've discovered that telling the truth is sometimes more painful than telling a lie, at least initially. Explaining suicide to an 11-year-old was definitely harder than pretending that he was killed in a car crash.

At the same time, we've learned that once we are in the habit of telling the truth, we are all much freer to trust and be trusting. We aren't imprisoned by suspicion or second-guessing someone else, and we don't have to spend any energy trying to hide the truth from each other. It really is freeing to know that we can presume honesty and truthfulness in our household, even though it will sometimes bring with it pain.

FOR ACTION: Is there any situation in which you need to share the truth with someone else so that you can both be freer? Pray for the courage and insight for how to do that, and commit to doing it this week.

When Do I Seek Strength?

Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually. —Psalm 105:4

Theoretically, I want to follow this entreaty all the time. Realistically, I find that more often than not, I make time to seek the Lord's presence when things are difficult. When I beg for God's help, I promise that I'll keep praying just as much when things get easier. It reminds me of when I had a debilitating back injury, and I promised God that I would do core exercises every day for the rest of my life if I recovered. Guess what? I don't do them every day.

Why am I wired like this? I suppose it has something to do with the trap of thinking that I operate under my own strength and that my strength is sufficient. It's humbling to admit when I need help, and I don't like feeling "weak." But the truth is that when I continually seek God's presence, whether my days are hard or easy, I benefit from God's strength, my family benefits from me having God's strength, and my friends, neighbors, and the wider community benefit from me having God's strength. Why shouldn't I want that?

FOR REFLECTION: How can you make a more conscious effort to "seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually"?

Listen to Someone Else

For I hear many whispering: 'Terror is all around!' ... But the Lord is with me like a dread warrior. —Jeremiah 20:10-11

Forget about whispering; we hear much of the media and plenty of individual cynics shouting, “terror is all around!” Between the terror of the COVID-19 pandemic, the violence and injustice perpetrated against black and brown people in this country, and extreme weather events, reading the news can be very terrifying these days. Jeremiah had reason to be afraid when he heard the whisperings of his powerful enemies. He also discovered that the best way he could continue doing the work God wanted him to do was to remember God’s presence with him as a “dread warrior.”

As Christians, we are not meant to bury our heads in the sand when things get frightening around us. On the other hand, when the news is particularly scary and anxiety-provoking, God just might be calling us to quit exposing ourselves to the whispers and shouts of terror. We may need to *stop* reading the newspaper for awhile, *stop* checking social media, and *stop* refreshing the news website, so that we can listen to Someone Else who will speak words of hope, comfort, and assurance.

FOR ACTION: What and who are the sources of your worries, anxieties, and fears these days? Decide how you can turn them off or at least turn them down some today.

Preparing for Next Week

Has Lent felt long for you this year, or has it gone by quickly? What have been the graces for you? Do you feel more grounded or closer to God? What prayer, fasting, or almsgiving disciplines have been fruitful for you this season?

Tomorrow is Palm Sunday, the beginning of the holiest week of the year for Christians. As a kid, I only thought of this period as “the week before Easter,” and I looked forward to finding our Easter baskets full of candy the next Sunday. I was oblivious to the week’s religious underpinnings and especially unaware of the emotional intensity of the scripture readings and the commemoration of Jesus’ passion and death.

After what has been an intense year on so many other levels, the prospect of moving into an emotional Holy Week might tempt us to skip right over it to Easter Sunday. God understands our weariness and has compassion for us in whatever state we find ourselves in now. At the same time, gifts and graces are waiting for us if we are willing to pray and reflect on Jesus’ time of suffering this coming week.

FOR ACTION: Do what you need to do today to find a bit of rest or to nourish yourself in a special way before entering into Holy Week tomorrow. Perhaps you’ll want to take a nap, or enjoy a cup of your favorite tea, or go for a walk with a loved one. Whatever feels appealing to you might just be how God wants to offer you special care today.

Jesus Felt Everything

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” —Mark 15:34

Mark’s Gospel makes it very clear that Jesus suffered intensely, and that he experienced deep human emotions. Mark does not want us to think that Jesus was God just “dressed up in a human costume” who didn’t suffer when the soldiers hammered the nails into his hands and feet. Jesus was just like one of us in his experience of pain and despair, even to the point of wondering why God had abandoned him.

Looking back on Jesus’ death, we know that God didn’t abandon Jesus. We can see now how God brought him through death into new life. Yet Jesus *felt* abandoned just before he died. This point can remind us that our feelings do not make up all of reality. If we feel despairing or hopeless or that all is lost, we can remember that Jesus felt the same. If we are terrified of death, or we can’t feel any sense of God’s presence with us in our suffering, we can be assured that God has not abandoned us, just as God did not abandon Jesus. Sometimes all we can do is to stay the course, remembering that God found a way to bring life out of death, even when Jesus and the others around him could not see it in the moment.

FOR ACTION: Think of people in your life now who are suffering or despairing for any reason. How might you make yourself available to them this week so that they will know they are not alone?

Starved for Touch

Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. —John 12:3

She doesn't get credit for it, but Jesus' friend Mary of Bethany (the sister of Martha and Lazarus, not Mary Magdalene) might very well be the person who gave Jesus the idea of washing his apostles' feet. It was just a few days after she performed this loving act for him that he did something similar for his apostles.

There is a group in my area called the Care Through Touch Institute which offers massages to homeless people throughout the year and does foot-washings and foot massages in particular on Holy Thursday. One of their volunteers told me how holy and sacramental it is to wash feet, clip toenails, and give massages to people whom our society usually ignores. She talks of how most recipients are so starved of physical touch that they break down and weep when touched respectfully and lovingly. I can easily imagine modern-day Judases finding fault with the special care and attention given to these "outcasts." I can also easily imagine Jesus reminding anyone who protests, "Leave them alone ... Whatever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters you do for me."

FOR ACTION: After a year of practicing social distancing, many more people are isolated and starved of physical touch. Even if you can't be in physical contact with a person in need today, how might you shower him/her with an extravagant gift like Mary did for Jesus?

God Needs Us to be a Light

I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth. —Isaiah 49:6b

When I was a child growing up Catholic, I bristled a little at the concept

of Jews being God's "Chosen Ones." Having three siblings, I was well-acquainted with their charges of favoritism against my parents, so to me that sure sounded like God showing favoritism. When I was older, a Jewish friend explained that being the "Chosen People" doesn't mean that God has favorites or that God loves Jews any more than God loves Christians, Muslims, Hindus, etc. Being the Chosen People meant that God gave Jews the responsibility of being "a light to the nations" so that others would come to know God. As a people, they were called to be a beacon of justice and compassion in a world that is so often unjust and cruel.

As Christians, we now have inherited that same responsibility—to be a light to the nations, a light in our communities, a light in our work worlds, in our neighborhoods, and our families. When it is so easy to see the darkness in the world, God asks us to be a light that shines so that others will want to know about the God we worship.

FOR PRAYER: Ask the Holy Spirit to inspire you today to be a light to others in whatever way the Spirit wants to use you, even if you never find out how you brought light into someone's darkness.

MARCH 31 ■ WEDNESDAY OF HOLY WEEK

Sometimes We're Judas, Too

When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve; and while they were eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me."

—Matthew 26:20-21

I can pretty quickly disassociate myself from Judas and his betrayal of Jesus. Maybe I've been like Peter sometimes, denying Jesus. But betraying him? I don't want to believe that. The truth is, if whatever we do to the least of our brothers and sisters we do to Jesus, I think all of us have done both some betraying and some denying of Jesus throughout our lives. I don't like thinking about it much, but I have used my words, my actions, and my inactions to betray family members, friends, and strangers at various times, intentionally or not.

FOR REFLECTION: How do you sometimes betray or deny Jesus with your actions or your inaction?

The Intimacy of Washing

Jesus got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

—John 13:4-5

One of my favorite liturgies of the year is the Holy Thursday Mass, when all are welcome to come forward to get their feet washed and wash the feet of another person. I know not all churches invite everyone in the pews to do this, and I'm convinced they miss out on a powerful ritual.

As an RCIA Director, it falls to me to invite, encourage, and sometimes give a little push to the candidates, catechumans, and their sponsors to come forward to be a part of this ritual. If you have ever washed the feet of small children, an elderly parent, a partner, a patient, or a stranger at Mass, you know what an intimate act it can be. Every year there are people in my RCIA group who are hesitant to do this, and every year they are all touched by the beauty and simplicity of this reenactment. One year, a sponsor who had attended Holy Thursday mass for *decades* without ever getting her feet washed finally worked up her courage to go forward. She came back to the pew beaming, nudged her candidate and said loud enough for many to hear, "Now we're foot buddies!" I don't think she quit smiling until after communion. The foot washing service is one of those sacramental rituals whose power can't be described in words. That's why Jesus did it—instead of only telling the disciples to do it. It gets its power from the doing.

FOR ACTION: If your church offers foot washing for all, screw up your courage and go for it! If they don't offer it, consider creating your own foot washing service at home tonight. Get a bowl of warm water and a towel. Read John 13:1-15 aloud and then take turns washing each others' feet. If you have children, by all means, include them. Children naturally grasp the beauty and reverence of this act.

Standing as a Witness

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary, the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.
—John 19:25-27

Jesus' Passion and death are still playing out in our world today. Two thousand years after Jesus suffered in that way, innocent people in 2021 are still sometimes arrested and unfairly convicted. Some people in power allow others to do violence in the name of law and order, just as Pontius Pilate did. Some people deny their connections with friends out of fear for their own safety. Law enforcement officers sometimes strike, mock, or even kill those in their custody.

Amidst the terror of these modern-day Passions stand other people — like the women at the foot of the cross — who are faithful witnesses to those in pain and stand willing to care for the bereaved.

FOR REFLECTION: When you have experienced a personal "passion," who stood by you as a witness and to offer compassion? To whom might God be calling you to stand alongside in their pain now?

The Longest Sabbath

Since we know the ending to the story of Jesus' Passion and death, we often don't give much thought to what it was like for Jesus' family and friends on the day between the Crucifixion and his resurrection. That day was a Sabbath day for them. They had no work to do, no shopping or cooking or cleaning—nothing to distract them from what just happened. Their only activities of the day would have been grieving, sleeping, eating, praying, and replaying the story of Jesus' death, maybe out loud with each other, or maybe over and over in their own minds. For those of you who have lost loved ones, you know the experience of that terrible first day after a death.

FOR PRAYER: Today, do what Jesus' friends and family did after he died. They rested. They prayed, probably reading the scriptures, looking for comfort and hope. They told stories of their loved ones. They grieved. Perhaps today is a day to visit the burial site of your loved ones or remember them in a special way.

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