

Daily Reflections for Lent and Easter 2024
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Introduction

God is eager for us to be with him. He desires to rest with us, hear how we're doing, and give us love and peace to make our lives better. That gives us delight. It is truly joyful to be around someone who loves us and receives us as we are, and who doesn't make any burdensome demands on us in return. That is the life of prayer, and that is the invitation that lays before us now.

Throughout these next two months, give yourself the time and space to be with Jesus. It will do you good. You will be like Vincent Van Gogh's painting below, *Iris*. You will gain fresh insights on life, you will be healed and made righteous, and you will experience a love that fills your heart like flowers in a vase. Yes, a part of your old way of thinking will be deconstructed, like those blue petals in the center of the painting, which have melded together like the sea. But God, who is the true gardener, will order it all so that you are a source of grace to those around you.

That is the true genius of God. The more time we spend alone with him, the more he sends us out to serve others. We will show the people around us, by our own deep peace, that being with God is the best way to live.

LENT



Irises, Vincent Van Gogh, 1890

Ash Wednesday

"Rend your hearts, not your garments."
Joel 2:13

Today the date in the year 2024 is February 14th, making this day a confluence of seemingly polar-opposite celebrations: Ash Wednesday and St. Valentine's Day. It is a wonderful occurrence, for both days are about rending the heart.

Garments are rended to see and access. When a drape is "rended" open in the morning, we look outside and let light in the room to commence our day. A paramedic rends the shirt of a bleeding person to tend to the wound. A curtain is rended to start the performance.

On Valentine's Day, lovers rend their hearts to show once again their commitment to each other. Though the fire of marriage might not be as strong as it was on the day of the wedding, the flame is still there. On Ash Wednesday, Christians rend their hearts to show God that, no matter what they've done or not done in their faith lives, they still love God.

It's not a proper Lenten hymn, but we might make one of our prayers to God today the lyrics from Arlo and Woodie Guthrie's song, "Mail Myself to You"...

I'm a-gonna wrap myself in paper,
I'm gonna daub myself with glue,
Stick some stamps on top of my head;
I'm gonna mail myself to you.

I'm a gonna tie me up in a red string,
I'm gonna tie blue ribbons too,
I'm a-gonna climb up in my mail box;
I'm gonna mail myself to you.

When you see me in your mail box,
Cut the string and let me out;
Wash the glue off my fingers,
Stick some bubble gum in my mouth.

Take me out of my wrapping paper,
Wash the stamps off my head;
Pour me full of ice cream sodies,
Put me in my nice warm bed.

Directed Prayer: Lord, I am eager to be with you for these next forty days. There is so much I want to do, so much I want to see. I surrender all of that. Please lead me to a place of trust and stillness. May this Lent be a blessed time for all of us.



Thursday after Ash Wednesday

"What profit is there for one to gain the whole world yet lose or forfeit himself?"
Luke 9:25

Lent is a time to examine your activities and ask, 'does this give me life?' Every activity. Everything from your job to your smallest idiosyncratic routine ask--does it bring you fulfillment and true joy? Or is it a burden?

If the activity is heavy for you, chances are you are losing your soul around it. You've become slave-driven. You've lost your purpose or your sense of mission around that activity. You do it for the wrong reasons. You do it mechanically. You, in a perfect world, would not do it.

Today is the time to ask for the grace to let it go. Can you trust? Can you believe that if you do let that detrimental activity go, Jesus will be there to provide for you?

Now, don't rush off to quit your job, leave your spouse, or move to a warmer climate. Sometimes the cross is our vocation. The cross is not a comfortable affair, and we are not always meant to be comfortable.

But we are meant to be fulfilled. Life is too short to do something that doesn't fill us. Let God fill you with his peace.

Directed Prayer: Lord, I open my heart as wide as possible to you. Holy Spirit, help me to assess my life honestly. I know there are things I do that aren't fulfilling. I sense they are not part of your will, God. Please give me the grace to let them go and trust in you.



Friday after Ash Wednesday

"Lo, on your fast day you carry out your own pursuits, and drive all your laborers."
Isaiah 58:3

The Israelites fasted and were still conquered. So they asked God why their fasting didn't "work." God responded to them simply: *I didn't ask you to fast.*

Like the husband who buys his wife Sunday NFL Ticket for her birthday, the Israelites' "gift" wasn't truly for God. God, through Isaiah, informed the Israelites what kind of gift he wanted. Not sackcloth, ashes, or a drooping head. He wanted the Israelites to end oppression, false accusation, and malicious speech.

We can sometimes be like the Israelites in how we approach Lent. We give up or do what we want, and we see no improvement. Not only do we not grow in holiness, we harm the people around us! Why give up coffee if it will make us and those around us more miserable? God doesn't want that.

Perhaps we could try asking God what he wants from us for Lent. Or, even bolder, we could ask someone we know what they think we should do for Lent. This person might see a blind spot of ours; something for us to work on we had no idea was an issue. They might see a talent in us that can be drawn out even more. They might, then, in turn, ask the same thing of us, and then we'll have participated in someone else's sanctification.

Directed Prayer: God, I lay aside my own plans for holiness. I am open to you. Please show me what I can do this Lent. If I have judged or gossiped about someone, I repent. May I build up and encourage others through my actions this season.



Saturday after Ash Wednesday

"Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were at table with them."

Luke 5:29

Italian artist Paolo Veronese on July 18, 1573 was brought before the inquisition in Venice. The tribunal questioned him about the historical inaccuracy of his painting of the Last Supper located in the basilica of Saints Giovanni and Paolo in the same city. Veronese, as he had done in his other religious paintings, had included a number of characters in the scene for which Sacred Scripture did not account. Here is a selected exchange from the transcript:

Inquisitor: Who do you really believe was present at that Supper?

Veronese: I believe one would find Christ with His Apostles. But if in a picture there is some space to spare I enrich it with figures according to the stories.

Inquisitor: Does it seem fitting at the Last Supper of the Lord to paint buffoons, drunkards, Germans, dwarfs, and similar vulgarities?

Veronese: Illustrious Lords, I do not want to defend it, but I thought I was doing right. I did not consider so many things and I did not intend to confuse anyone, the more so as those figures of buffoons are outside of the place in a picture where our Lord is presented.

As the painting was already in place and could not be altered, the solution was to change the title of the painting. "The Last Supper" became "Supper in the House of Levi" (see image below). Veronese was not convicted. His work was considered a masterpiece by the Church and can be seen today in the Accademia in Venice.

Directed Prayer: Lord, you receive me and others as we are. Sinners were present at Matthew's house and at the Last Supper. May I give the same mercy and compassion to others as you give to me. Sometimes we do not need to scrap the entire painting. We just need to change the title.



Supper in the House of Levi, Paolo Veronese, 1573

The First Sunday of Lent

"At that time Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil."
Matthew 4:1

The quote above is phrased in such way that would lead one to think Jesus went to the desert specifically to encounter the devil. Sure, he wanted to be alone with God. Sure, he wanted to pray and ground himself before his three-year ministry, just like we all should pray before we get to work. Sure, he wanted to make an offering by his penance for all the people past, present, and future. But, at the end of the day, at least in Matthew's Gospel version, Jesus' mission was to face the devil and draw him into the light.

Pope Francis frequently speaks about the devil. "We should not think of the devil as a myth, a representation, a symbol, a figure of speech or an idea," he writes. "This mistake would lead us to let down our guard, to grow careless and end up more vulnerable. The devil does not need to possess us. He poisons us with the venom of hatred, desolation, envy and vice."

There needs to be an opponent in life. Solitaire isn't all that fun. Well, on this earth, Satan is our opponent. He won the first set against Adam and Eve. He lost the second match against Jesus. How is he doing in the third match against you?

Directed Prayer: Father, deliver me from evil. Give me the ability to see where the devil is discouraging me and how he is lying to me. I consecrate my life to you. I may fall occasionally into the devil's traps, but he will never have my soul. It is yours forever.



Monday of the First Week of Lent

"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me."

Matthew 25:36-36

We are on both sides of the aisle in our Lord's parable about the sheep and goats. Thus it is both a challenging and comforting Gospel passage.

Challenging because of the prospect of hell. "Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire." If we don't serve the least of our brothers and sisters, we are a goat. And we all have "goat-like" tendencies in us. Not goat as in "greatest of all time," but goat as in selfish and myopic.

Comforting because we too are the least. Each one of us is hungry, lonely, naked, hurting, and imprisoned. Someone is coming for us. We are not alone in our suffering.

The parable isn't meant to make us conceited or self-righteous, like, *I served the poor today, so I'm good now for heaven*. No, it's meant, rather, to make us inclined outwards. If we are in a position of poverty, then the invitation is to turn to God for help. Or, to turn to another for help. If we are in a position of wealth, then the invitation is to take that poor person into our hearts. Then we will be like the Trinity, which is never self-centered, but always self-giving. That is the inheritance prepared for us from the foundation of the world.

Directed Prayer: Jesus, I call to mind someone I know who is hungry, lonely, naked, ill, or bound. I offer my life for them. Please provide for them. And please come to me also.



Tuesday of the First Week of Lent

"In praying, do not babble like the pagans, who think that they will be heard because of their many words."
Matthew 6:7

When a child drones on and on about what they want--*I want a cheeseburger, I want a hotdog, I want an ice cream cone, I want the iPad*--the parent usually tunes them out. If the barrage doesn't desist, the parent may eventually just say no. Or, worse, "you'll get nothing and like it!"

But the child who is silent and poised, and after a while simply says, "Mom? Dad?" is the one who receives the favorable response. "Yes, dear?"

Babbling in prayer stems from a lack of trust, from a need for control. Insecure and fearful about what we will receive from God the Father, we think that the more we talk and the more we analyze, the surer we are to receive our desired outcome. We strain to name every single person who is on our prayer list; fight to finish all our Hail Marys, rosaries, and other devotionals; list every single sin in the confessional. It gives us a sense of assurance that we are achieving grace by our work.

But that is not how grace works.

The invitation might be to take all of the vocal prayers we offer daily and replace it with a simple Our Father. All the petitions and intentions we have--wrap them up into one Our Father and then let it go. Spend the rest of the time in silence. Use that mental energy to remain still and receive what God wants to give you.

Directed Prayer: Lord, I will stop thinking, stop ruminating, stop analyzing, stop requesting. You know my heart. You know what I need. You know all the people who need prayers. I love you and open my heart to be with you right now.



Wednesday of the First Week of Lent

"Jonah began his journey through the city, and had gone but a single day's walk announcing, 'Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed,' when the people of Nineveh believed God"
Jonah 3:4-5

Openness is the virtue the city of Ninevah has going for it. It is a sinful city--it is about to be destroyed--but it is not stubborn. The Ninevites are receptive, malleable, and willing. They hear Jonah's message for only one day when they completely reform their ways. Humility is a remarkable attribute, and one that, surprisingly, does not come easily.

Jonah was reluctant to take up the mission because he may have thought the Ninevites were like his own people: proud and determined. He presumed they would not convert. Our Lord encountered a similar resistance in his countryfolk. "At the judgment the men of Nineveh will arise with this generation and condemn it," he informed them, "because at the preaching of Jonah they repented, and there is something greater than Jonah here."

We don't need to have it all figured out. We don't need to be handsome, eloquent, connected. We don't need the best college degree or resume. We simply need to be open to learning. That is what our Lord looks for in his disciples, and discipleship is the group into which we ultimately want to be accepted.

Directed Prayer: Lord, I know there are areas where I am headstrong and unyielding. There are things I need to control. Please give me humility, openness, and trust. You let go of all control on the cross, and that was your most glorious moment.



Thursday of the First Week of Lent

"Queen Esther, seized with mortal anguish, had recourse to the LORD."
Esther C:12

Everyone of us has had at least one individual who has had a profound impact on our lives. Who is that individual for you? It may have been a friend in high school or college, a coworker, your sibling or spouse. What did that person do for you specifically? Certainly their own witness of goodness and love influenced you. Perhaps they also listened to you in a way others hadn't. They were the best teacher you've had in the school of love. They were a star in your life.

Queen Esther was the Jewish wife of the Persian King in 479BC. Her name derives from the old Persian word *stāra*, meaning "star." She literally saved her people from extinction when she courageously approached her husband, the king, to countermand the order of genocide that he had signed. Esther was a heroine.

This Old Testament female gained her strength from the Lord. Esther's influential words and example stemmed from her own prayer and profound spiritual life. The stars in our life were gifts from God to us.

If we're lucky, these stars in our life remain with us and continue to inspire us. But for most of us, the changing circumstances of our life means we fall out of regular contact with these stars. It did the Israelites well to remember Esther long after her life, and to recall the graces she gave the people. It can do us well likewise to remember fondly these people God gave us.

Directed Prayer: Lord, I call to mind this/these individual(s) who were stars for me. They were so good and kind. I laughed and cried with them. I saw your face in them. Please bless them wherever they may be. And may I be a star for someone some day.



Friday of the First Week of Lent

"I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the Kingdom of heaven."
Matthew 5:20

The scribes and Pharisees lived out of the head. They rationalized and planned and strategized and analyzed and judged and memorized and determined. Now, the brain and the mental thought-processes are part of who we are. We cannot disregard our minds. We are a thinking species. But if we live too much out of the head and not enough out of the heart, then our righteousness is stunted, and we are not fit for the Kingdom.

The Kingdom is a place of the heart. In the depths of our heart God speaks to us. He implants desires, feelings, a sense of what is right and wrong, who we are and how we should live. The mind will always come into play to extinguish the heart. Weighing the pros and cons prevent us from doing what our heart tells us we should do. Analyzing the possible results stifles

the joy in the moment of hearing God speak in our heart. We become like Saint Thomas who, living out of the head, was unable to accept the resurrection.

Jesus appeared to Thomas and intentionally brought Thomas' hand into his side; into his heart. Thomas was confirmed that moment. He could trust his heart and live out of it. He could now enter the Kingdom of heaven.

Directed Prayer: It sounds wishy-washy, but, Jesus, I want to act out of my heart. I want love to be my motivation. I want to trust that you've put good desires in me and that my personality is one that you forged. I don't have to be a cookie-cutter Catholic. May I be unique and joyful



Saturday of the First Week of Lent

"But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you."

Matthew 5:44

Love is more than tolerating. It is deeper than just "be kind" and it is certainly not "don't hate." Love is something positive. We choose the other individual. We want them in our lives. We need them in our lives. We will them to be part of us, and we desire their own well-being. Without the beloved, our lives are incomplete.

When Jesus tells us to love our enemies, he's giving more than an instruction to not react in kind; to not fight fire with fire. He's telling us to actually desire to have an enemy. We are to will that person who challenges us into our life. We need the hater. We choose the hater to be around us.

Our Lord isn't out to make us suffer. This isn't the ultimate lesson in humility or masochism. The enemy is a source of blessing because the enemy puts us in touch with God. We reach out to God when we are hurt by the enemy. We rely on God and not our own anger for any sort of resolution. And ultimately we lose our ego and become a reflection of Christ himself, who loved and died for those who hated him.

Directed Prayer: Lord, I know there are people who don't like me, who may even despise or hate me. I call them to mind now. I want to retaliate or think negatively about them, but I let that go. I love them. Please take my life as an offering for them.



The Second Sunday of Lent

"Then Peter said to Jesus in reply, 'Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.'"

Matthew 17:4

Peter generally gets a bad rap in the Gospel accounts, especially in the season of Lent. *No such thing will ever happen to you...Get behind me Satan. I will die with you...you will deny me three times. No one will arrest you...sheathe your sword!*

The Transfiguration is not, in my mind, one of those lowlights. True, Jesus doesn't respond to Peter's comment about making three tents, but he also doesn't rebuke him. There is a desire in Peter to savor the glorious moment, to remain atop Tabor. How many of us, with a beautiful experience, race on to the next thing? The invitation is to enjoy what is before us.

Peter also says something many of us struggle to say: "It is good that we are here." How many of us feel cursed in our job, in our marriage, in our body, in our city, in our life? We are not

happy and we wish we weren't here. But it is not true. We are blessed. We should be here. Even though we may not instinctively feel it, if we pray what Peter said, we will see God's blessing in our lives. The darkness in our minds will break through like that radiance from the Lord atop Tabor broke through sleepy eyes of the apostles.

Directed Prayer: Lord, it is good that I am here. It is good that we are here. Yes, this life has its pains. But I choose to focus on the beauty. I choose to believe that you are by my side. And with you by my side, all is well.



Monday of the Second Week of Lent

"Stop judging and you will not be judged."
Luke 6:37

We as humans make temporary judgments all the time: messages to answer, particular items to buy, proposals to accept or reject. The judgment to which our Lord is referring when he says 'stop judging' is *final judgment*. This is the type of judgment that concludes and decides the person or situation irrevocably. The verdict, so to speak, has been established, the sentence imposed, and the guilty is ushered away.

When we make a final judgment on a person, we cut them off in our mind. They cannot be redeemed. They have offended us and there is nothing good we can receive from them. They are weird, we think, and cannot offer us anything.

But this is a mistaken approach. That person is still a son or daughter of God. They can still be a grace to us. We are called not to judge them, but to help and love them.

If we are struggling with final judgment, then perhaps we can say the opening prayer from today's Mass: *O God, who have taught us to chasten our bodies for the healing of our souls, enable us, we pray, to abstain from all sins, and strengthen our hearts to carry out your loving commands.*

Directed Prayer: Come, Holy Spirit, give me love. Give me a heroic charity to not judge this person who has hurt me or who is different from me. This person is good. This person, like me, is an imperfect individual who can and will grow. Please heal and help both of us.



Tuesday of the Second Week of Lent

"Do and observe all things whatsoever the Pharisees tell you, but do not follow their example."
Matthew 23:4

Jesus challenged the Pharisees, but he wasn't 'anti-institution.' He recognized the authenticity of the "chair of Moses" upon which the Pharisees sat, hence the people were to follow their instruction. It was the personal witness of the Pharisees that the people were not to heed. The Pharisees did not practice what they preached. They looked for honor. They did not assist the needy.

Christ has replaced the chair of Moses with the chair of Peter. We are to listen to what the occupants of that chair tell us. But we are also to scrutinize carefully their behavior--how they follow the message they preach. This is why the personal life of the preacher is essential to the faith. A public defendant or prosecutor might not believe personally in what they are

litigating. It cannot be so with the preacher. The effectiveness of our words depends on our character.

There might be a principal chair of Peter, but there are also many chairs around the table. The laity sit on those chairs. The priest must be holy; the layperson, also called to preach, must be holy as well. When we give our exhortations, we must be ready to help those fulfill the commands. We must carry the burdens for our loved ones.

Directed Prayer: Jesus, you have called me to preach. I accept this humbly, for I know I am a sinner and I don't have it all figured out. All I can do is pray for assistance and trust in the Holy Spirit speaking through me. May my words help others know you and love you.



Wednesday of the Second Week of Lent

"Command that these two sons of mine sit, one at your right and the other at your left, in your kingdom."

Matthew 20:21

Command. The mother of the sons of Zebedee uses the same word as Satan did in the desert: "Command these stones unto bread." Jesus had the ability to do the things Mrs. Zebedee and Satan asked. He multiplied the loaves and fishes miraculously and he gave Peter the keys to the Kingdom. But what he could not do was separate himself from God the Father. This was the temptation in both instances: not the action per se, but for Jesus to act independently of the Father. Jesus acted when the Father drew him, not when someone drove him.

Are we driven by the enemy to our actions? Or are we drawn by God the Father? God is not a slave-driver. He is gentle. We should follow God's voice, not the devil's.

Do we drive God to actions or do we gently invite him? We can be very much like the mother of James and John. We plead forcefully with Jesus for something. We bargain with him and perhaps even threaten him. Recall Mary's approach at the Wedding at Cana. She simply stated the situation. She trusted Jesus would do what was right. May we have our Blessed Mother's approach.

Directed Prayer: Lord, there is so much I want. I am not satisfied in my life. Please give me joy. And if you fulfill some or all of my desires, may it be only so that I can serve others more effectively.



Thursday of the Second Week of Lent

"If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone should rise from the dead."

Luke 16:31

Obliviousness is the vice for the day to ponder. The rich man in the parable was oblivious of Lazarus begging outside of his home. He was oblivious to love and the meaning of heaven.

Pieter Brueghel's 1564 painting, *Christ Carrying the Cross* shows the scene from the average spectator's perspective. It is what the oblivious person would have seen on Good Friday. In the painting, people flock to Calvary to witness the spectacle. They seek entertainment the way the Romans flocked to the Coliseum or Americans to a stadium. The

Savior of the World undergoes the greatest act of love for all mankind and meanwhile people come and go, children play and dogs run, business is exchanged.

Twentieth century author Aldous Huxley appreciated Brueghel's depiction of Calvary because other depictions, he remarked, "erase the brutishness and stupidity of the crowd." Classical illustrations of Calvary, with Christ gloriously in the center as divine hero of the tragedy, "affect and transform all the other facts, justifying, in a sense, the horror of the drama and ranging all that surrounds the central figure in an ordered hierarchy of good and evil."

Brueghel's painting can serve as the reminder for us to care; to love our God who loved us.

Directed Prayer: Lord, show me who I have been ignoring lately. Show me who is silently reaching out for love and attention. I first give you my love and attention, and then I ask to be able to love this person in my life.



Pieter Brueghel, *Christ Carrying the Cross*, 1564



Friday of the Second Week of Lent

"The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone."

Matthew 21:42

Hitting rock-bottom is a blessing. One cannot go any lower, by definition, and so death or conversion are the two paths forward. It is the descent to rock-bottom that is hell.

The situation with Jacob's sons had hit rock bottom. The brothers of Joseph were envious, hateful, and greedy. When they attempt to kill the dreamer by throwing him into the cistern--where he literally hits rock-bottom--and then sell him as a slave, they have turned the corner. It will take many years, but the family will be restored. The brothers, by the time they

encounter Joseph in Egypt, are changed men. No longer angry or bitter, they show compassion and love. All because of the rock-bottom.

In the parable of the wicked tenants, the vineyard hits rock-bottom when the son of the owner is finally killed, after all the other servants had been rejected and killed. Now the master will intervene and restore the vineyard, making it fruitful and productive once more.

The enemy tells us not to hit rock-bottom. He tells us the slow movement of descent into further sin is much better than the stagnation of rock-bottom. But this is a lie. For in this lowest of places we encounter the stone that the builders rejected. He will raise us up and construct a new edifice for us.

Directed Prayer: Lord, I am weak and lowly. There are things I just cannot handle on my own will-power. You are all powerful. You can perform the miraculous. You can help me and others. I surrender to you. And I surrender the people I know to you.



Saturday of the Second Week of Lent

"Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock of your inheritance, that dwells apart in a woodland, in the midst of Carmel."

Micah 7:14

Carmel and the area in Israel along the Mediterranean coast to the north, towards Lebanon, was considered beautiful countryside. The woodland, the beautiful green mountains, the verdant pastures in between, all made this a desirable location. Micah the prophet was told by the Lord to take the people to this beautiful area. Not necessarily literally, but spiritually.

Our current setting might be drab, but when we pray and enter our souls in union with God, it can be as if we are in the delightful locale.

The prodigal son wondered off to a distant country. He did not go westward to Carmel. He went east into the desert. He wanted more than his home had to offer and choose only greater bleakness in looking for an actual material comfort. Beauty was to be had in Carmel--the Carmel of the heart. That hill can be climbed when we pray.

St. John the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, and so many other Carmelites went into this woodland. That is, they went into the depths of prayer. They didn't travel physically far, especially Thérèse, but they went somewhere incredible.

Directed Prayer: Jesus, I breathe deeply, close my eyes, and imagine myself in the most beautiful setting. It is the woods, a mountain, the desert, a beach. You are by my side. I open my heart. Please allow me to accept that heaven is not a place, but you.



The Third Sunday of Lent

"I tell you, look up and see the fields ripe for the harvest."

John 4:35

The Samaritan woman at the well first experiences a personal conversion and then goes out and shares her story with the town. The residents, because of her, experience their own conversion. Sychar in Samaria thus becomes the first city in the Kingdom of God. And it all happened because of authentic dialogue.

Jesus and the Samaritan woman speak. Jesus tells the woman she is thirsting and that he has the water that will quench her thirst; a kind of water greater than H₂O. They then discuss her marital history. This is the pivotal point in the conversation. Mentioning the five husbands unlocks the woman's heart. No longer speaking in theory about water, the woman is vulnerable before Christ and is able to be touched by his compassion. She is healed. She experiences real love for Jesus. And this is what she went and shared with the people, who, in turn, would be healed and fall in love.

We are called to speak about Christ to others. We can't speak unless we've first had that authentic conversation with Jesus. It is a conversation where we are vulnerable before the Lord and bring to him our most acute struggle. Healed and in love with Christ, we will then naturally reflect him to others.

Directed Prayer: Lord, authentic conversation is a lost art in our age. I choose, at least for this day, to put away the meaningless conversation through text messages, email, and social media. Please put someone on my heart with whom I should speak. Give me the grace to call them and love them.



Monday of the Third Week of Lent

"Amen, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own native place."

Luke 4:24

Confidence is an essential characteristic in the prophet. He has to preach a difficult message and he can only do so if he is assured the message is God's. If the prophet doubts God, doubts himself, or doubts the efficacy of the mission, he will not undergo his task. The people will miss out on hearing the Word of God. They will continue in their ways and fall farther away from salvation.

A small ego is another characteristic of the prophet. If the prophet is seeking to be popular, seeking to make friends, seeking to feel good about himself, he is in the wrong line of work. The message of God will often run contrary to the will of the people, and the prophet will find himself in a position of unpopularity. Yes, the messenger will be shot. But the prophet still needs to convey the message.

Priests are meant to be prophets. So too are parents, politicians, and any other individual in some position of authority. All are called to be self-dispossessed. All are called to a level of confidence so they can assist God in serving his flock.

Directed Prayer: Jesus, I thank you for the prophets in my life, the prophets in our church and in our age. They have challenged me and I didn't appreciate it at first, but I am grateful for them now. Please help me be like them and inspire others to love you and one another.



Tuesday of the Third Week of Lent

"With contrite heart and humble spirit let us be received; as though it were burnt offerings of rams and bullocks, or thousands of fat lambs, so let our sacrifice be in your presence today as we follow you unreservedly."

Daniel 3:39-40

The Jews, in the time of the prophet Daniel, were scattered throughout the Mediterranean. The nation of Israel had been conquered and the city of Jerusalem, along with the temple, destroyed. There was a dilemma, thus, of how the people were to offer worship to God. Worship had been based around sacrificing animals, burning incense, and making monetary offerings in the temple, and now there was no temple to do all of this.

Azariah, a companion of Daniel living in Babylon, proposed that worship of God could still take place. It wouldn't be on the external level of actual offerings, but on the internal level of a contrite heart.

Christ supported this proposal. He affirmed it when he said, "So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart." No more sacrifice of rams. Just forgiveness, mercy, charity.

External worship ceased when churches were closed during the COVID-19 shutdown several years ago. But there wasn't a general dispensation from being a Christian. To love God we had to move to the level of the heart. We've returned to church. Hopefully we're still in the heart.

Directed Prayer: Jesus, I worship you and adore you. You are all good and deserving of all my love. You don't require me to do anything or even to say this. I choose now to ask for the grace to forgive someone who has hurt me. May I love them as you love them, and cherish their existence.



Wednesday of the Third Week of Lent

"Whoever obeys and teaches these commandments will be called greatest in the Kingdom of heaven."

Matthew 5:19

The law is not meant to stifle us, but to aid our flourishing. We could act arbitrarily and do whatever we want, but we will be miserable. The natural law is such that we are designed a specific way and following that design means we function well. Law leads to happiness. This is why Moses remarked before the people, "what great nation has statutes and decrees that are as just as this whole law which I am setting before you today?" The law is a gift. Christ has come "not to abolish the law and prophets, but to fulfill."

The law also serves us by putting us in relationship to one another. To disregard the law and do whatever we want is to make ourselves independent, an island unto ourselves. In determining our path we are isolated and self-reliant. In following the law of another, we are bound to the society. The law fosters communion. Hell is isolation. Heaven is relationship.

Saint Patrick's Day fell on a Friday in Lent in 2023. In the Archdiocese of Chicago a dispensation from meat was not granted. Corned-beef could not be consumed. This was not an attempt of the Church to exude power or stifle joy, but to break people out of a hellish individualism. Heaven is far better than corned beef. Saint Patrick would have agreed.

Directed Prayer: Lord, I claim to be an obedient Christian, but I know there are areas where I cut corners, where I make myself the legislator. Little lies, small acts of the theft, speeding, arriving late or leaving early. I repent of this. Help me die to my ego and live only for you.



Thursday of the Third Week of Lent

"This is the nation that does not listen to the voice of the LORD, its God, or take correction."
Jeremiah 7:28

The call isn't to be perfect. The call is to be able to be corrected. We all sin and we all make mistakes. We fall short. That is fine. The Lord doesn't demand absolute flawlessness from us. The question is how we react when we do fall short and are made aware of it. Do we justify our behavior? Do we grow angry at the prophet who corrected us? Do we ignore the wisdom and double-down on our errors? Or, do we take our broken heart to the Lord and place it in his hands?

Notice also with this last option (the correct one), we don't ask the Lord to fix us. We simply put ourselves before God. We simply pray. The Lord will correct us in his way and in his time, which is always more gentle than our way. It is also more deliberate and takes longer than our way too.

It is painful to be made aware of our faults and be corrected. It is humbling. But it is a grace if it puts us in touch with God. If we stay in our heads and take the correction as a way to improve ourselves, then we are not in touch with God. The cycle of shame and ignorance and poor behavior will continue. But if we can sit still before the Lord in our sackcloth, we will be healed.

Directed Prayer: Jesus, don't let me be arrogant or intractable. I've made mistakes. I'm human and weak. I choose not to feel shame. I choose instead to unite myself to you, who were made weak. I choose to love and serve others.



Friday of the Third Week of Lent

"One of the scribes came to Jesus and asked him, "Which is the first of all the commandments?"
Mark 12:28

This scribe wasn't trying to trap Jesus as the others were. He had no ill intent with his question. This scribe had been listening to the dialogue between the Lord and the elders in the temple. Mark notes the man "saw how well Jesus answered them." And so the scribe asked this softball question. He wanted Jesus to not just answer a question, but to preach the truth. Jesus delivered.

The scribe had witnessed Jesus' character in dealing with the other scribes and Pharisees in the temple. He could see holiness and goodness in the man. The simple question, which anyone could have answered, even a child, allowed the goodness and holiness to come out. The scribe truly had understanding.

If we're looking for answers from our Lord, we might start with a "softball question" and not something more complicated. For instance, if we are struggling to pray and want more out of our spiritual life, we might simply ask the Lord, as the disciples did, "teach me to pray." If we are struggling with a sin or with a sense of low self-worth, instead of asking "why would you make me this or allow such suffering in my life?" we might just say, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

The goal isn't to get answers. The goal is to be with Jesus. That's why this scribe "was not far from the kingdom."

Directed Prayer: Jesus, the party has run out of wine. Jesus, the crowd is in a deserted place with no food. Jesus, my servant is suffering dreadfully. Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.



Saturday of the Third Week of Lent

"But the tax collector stood off at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and prayed, 'O God, be merciful to me a sinner.'"

Luke 18:13

We are at or just past the half-way point of Lent. How has it been going for you so far? Has it been prayerful and have you been keeping up with your disciplines? Or has it been a struggle?

If it's been a struggle, then let the image of the tax collector who beat his breast in the temple be your guide. The tax collector had slipped up in his life. He was like the Catholic who ate meat on a Friday or indulged the chocolate he had forsaken. But he didn't continue on sinning. He moved himself to the temple, and he repented. He started anew. He began a fresh second half. For those watching basketball these days in 'March Madness', the second half is always more exciting than the first half.

Don't throw up your hands and wait until next Lent to once again try praying more or practicing the discipline. Start again today. Make this Saturday your new Ash Wednesday. Not everyone can fast and not everyone can tithe, like the Pharisee in the temple did. But everyone can beat their breast and pray for help.

We'll see, then, that our slip-ups are actually tremendous graces, for they put us back in touch with God and allow us to beg for the mercy he is only too eager to give.

Directed Prayer: Lord, Lent has been beautiful thus far. Or, it has been a struggle. If it has been beautiful, I thank and beg you humbly to help me go deeper. If it has been rough, please, with your grace, may I start anew today. I don't judge myself. I trust in your mercy.

EXCURSUS: Saint Joseph

"Isn't this the carpenter's son?"

Matthew 13:55

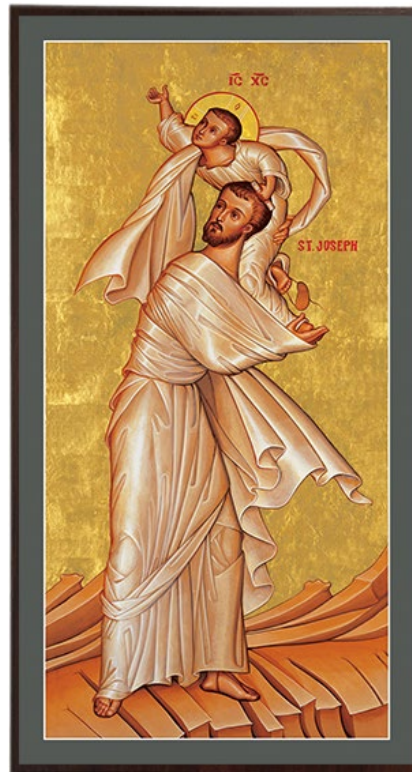
Icons of Saint Joseph typically portray him holding a lily, carpentry tools, or the child Jesus in his lap. This icon has Joseph raising the child on his shoulders. Jesus reaches up for something.

The first image we can recall is that of Adam. Adam reached upwards, grasping at the fruit. It was not meant for him to have. He reached out by himself, with no help, and apart from God. Jesus, with the assistance of his father, does not cling to what is inessential. He reaches up for the real fruit: union with God the Father. When we find ourselves grasping at knowledge, comfort, power, honor, may Joseph redirect our efforts and take us upward to God.

The second image the icon evokes is the temptation by Satan in the desert. When a child is in a crowd and unable to see, the father will put the child on his shoulders. Held up by Joseph, Jesus is able to see over the noise, the distractions, the pollution. Satan lifted Jesus up to see all the kingdoms of the world so as to possess and control them. Joseph raises the Lord to see the souls in the world, and the beauty in each soul.

If you struggle to see beauty in yourself or in another, may Joseph raise you up.

Directed Prayer: Jesus, raise me up as you raised your son. May I be obedient and trusting as you were. May I be calm and strong as you were. May I be a father and a saint as you were.



The Fourth Sunday of Lent

"He spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva, and smeared the clay on his eyes, and said to him, 'Go wash in the Pool of Siloam.'"

John 9:6-7

Siloam was one of the best things the city of Jerusalem had going for it. Fed by the Spring of Gihon outside the city walls, this was the only fresh-water source in the entire city. It had allowed the Israelites to withstand a siege against the Assyrians in the 700 BC, which was why King Hezekiah had built the tunnel to feed the pool, and it allowed the Israelites in Christ's day to bathe and draw water. This was a simple source of relief and salvation for them.

So when Jesus tells the man to wash the mud off into the pool, defiling it, he is indicating that *he*, Jesus, is the best thing going for the city and for the people. As he had told the Samaritan woman earlier, he himself is the real water for which people thirst.

The man born blind accepts this truth. He knows Christ is his salvation and he worships him. His life has meaning now. Not because he can literally see with his eyes, but because he has the Lord in his soul.

The world will always try to tell us Christ is not enough; that we need more, that we need a better home, a better car, a better job, a better body, a better reputation. We look for these things that will fill us. Let Christ rub mud all over those false eyes. Let him confirm in your soul that he is enough, and then follow him.

Directed Prayer: Lord, show me where doubts arise in my heart. Allow me to be honest before you. Please rub the mud of your love over these wounded parts of me. I trust that you are enough.



Monday of the Fourth Week of Lent

"When he came into Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, since they had seen all he had done in Jerusalem at the feast."

John 4:45

What Jesus had "done in Jerusalem at the feast" was cleanse the temple. This was still early on in Christ's ministry. The miracles of the man born blind and Lazarus, as well as the woman caught in adultery, would come later. The Galileans did not need these miracles to believe. They were moved to faith by a display of Jesus' anger.

Just as today there is plenty to be angry about regarding the state of affairs, so too back then. Even more so. This was a world of malnourishment, slavery, injustice, oppression, racism, and clerical abuse, just to name a few. The temple in Jerusalem was viewed as a microcosm of the cosmos, which meant not just the beauty of the world was present, but also the ugliness. Christ entered and cleansed the ugliness. He did not preach about it. He did not make statements with empty rhetoric. He acted. And he went right at the heart of the ugliness: spiritual depravity. For when religion is corrupted, the soul and the world will follow suit.

The people wanted a better world. They realized that a better religion had to come first. When Christ reformed their religion, they believed. May he reform our temples too.

Directed Prayer: Christ, I give you permission to cleanse the temple of my soul. Make a whip of cords and drive out what should not be there. Please also cleanse our church, our city, our country, and our world. May your kingdom come.



Tuesday of the Fourth Week of Lent

"Rise, take up your mat, and walk."

John 5:8

The man had been sitting by his mat for 38 years. The mat was his sole possession, his one piece of comfort, his only guarantee. In a life marked by slavery, the mat gave him assurance. And yet it was also his greatest hindrance. Why could he not make his way down to the pool of Bethesda only yards away? Because he was afraid to leave his mat. He was afraid to surrender and possibly lose the one thing he had. He believed the risk was not worth the reward.

Christ healed the man. He was finally able to stand upright and move on his own. He did not go down to the pool at which he had been staring for 38 years. He walked out of the city. He walked out into his life. And he took the mat with him.

He no longer needed the mat. Able and free, he could now own other possessions, live in an actual house, be secure with other people. Yet Christ wanted the man to keep the mat, at least for the time being. Perhaps as a reminder of his slavery, of his crippling fear, of his inability to surrender and trust. Whenever he saw that mat he would call to mind Christ, the miracle-worker.

One can only imagine the man was one day able to finally relinquish the mat. He may have burned it for fuel. He may have thrown into the garbage heap in Gehenna. He may have simply left it on the side of the road or back at the pool of Bethesda for another person. When that day came, Christ was imprinted on his soul.

Directed Prayer: I imagine my mat--my possession that enslaves me. Jesus, with you I can let go of that mat and walk. You always offer me something better.



Wednesday of the Fourth Week of Lent

"Do not be amazed at this, because the hour is coming in which all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and will come out."

John 5:28-29

The confessionals inside the church of Saint Paul of the Cross in Park Ridge have wood carvings. The middle door, where the priest sits, displays dragons. The side doors, where the penitent sits, displays peacocks. The dragon represents sin; the peacock beauty. We enter confession with the dragon on our hearts. The priest takes the dragon upon himself, slays it with the sword of Christ's grace, and the penitent emerges a colorful peacock. The feathers are fanned out, ready to mesmerize the world.

Entering confession and praying with our sins is an experience of the tomb. We own the darkness and nothingness of our sins. If we try to race through the confession by reciting our sins in kind and number in a rote way, we are missing the graced experience. We need to really think how weak we are; how, in this life before heaven, we are a shadow of what our glorious selves are meant to be. That weakness is what we bring before the priest. And so, before we enter the tomb, we should place ourselves in a sort of "hospice care" situation. We should comfortably pray before the Lord's mercy about the person we hope to be in heaven and who we are not right now. If we can do that, when we emerge from the tomb another feather in our coat will have turned a beautiful color.

Directed Prayer: Jesus, I look deep into my being and see the person you created in Heaven before I was placed in my mother's womb. I see the pure beauty and joy and light. That seed has been buried in the earth but it will soon emerge.



Thursday of the Fourth Week of Lent

"There is another who testifies on my behalf."

John 5:32

Much energy is spent defending ourselves. Sometimes in front of others; most of the times in our own head. We sin and fall short, we hear the accuser's voice, and we speak up. Though our defense usually doesn't come in the form of speech. It comes, rather, in the form of shame. We slink back into ourselves. We feel terrible and a darkness covers us like a funeral pall. A subconscious lie tells us that if we are dead the accuser's voice will silence.

"I do not accept human testimony," said our Lord. "I say this so that you may be saved." We do not need to defend ourselves. No testimony--either from ourselves or from another--will take away the pain of the accusation. Instead, the Father speaks for us. And his voice is the

only one that matters. He silences the accuser. He assures us we are good and worthwhile and wanted. He speaks a truth that boggles the mind: that it is precisely our sin and weakness that make us good.

Moses and the Lord saw a stubborn characteristic in the Israelite people. "Stiff-necked" is what they called the nation. Such a person is stuck in his way. He refuses to look up to heaven for relief. He refuses to look down in humility. He stares blankly straight ahead, never relinquishing his defense. It is for us to be limber-necked. The rest of our body will follow in relaxation.

Directed Prayer: Lord, I place my hands on my knees in a comfortable sitting position. I loosen my neck and breathe deeply. Father, you speak words of love and encouragement and affirmation to me. I love you in return. I reject shame and choose your mercy.



Friday of the Fourth Week of Lent

"With revilement and torture let us put him to the test that we may have proof of his gentleness and try his patience."

Wisdom 2:19

One of the reasons Christ chose to suffer and die was to show to us God's faithfulness. Going to torture, Jesus knew the Father would provide for him. He knew he would be raised from the dead and that good would come forth from his suffering. We too can accept the cross, for we know God will be there for us. Even the wicked in the Book of Wisdom acknowledge this. "For if the just one be the son of God," they say to themselves in deciding to kill the just man, "God will defend him and deliver him from the hand of his foes."

Christ also chose to suffer in order to reveal God's gentleness and patience. This was, as the above quote indicates, what people were looking for in a Messiah: proof of his gentleness and patience. Christ did not lash out at his foes. He did not summon the legion of angels as he said he could. Nor did give up on the world and wash it away, as in the days of Noah.

If we know our God is gentle and patient, all the more we should be towards ourselves. We tend to harshness. We condemn and belittle ourselves. We grow frustrated that we are not holier; impatient that our desires haven't come to fruition. That impatience and harshness then bleeds into how we view others. If we can receive God's gentleness and patience, then the ethos of the Messiah will have spread.

Directed Prayer: Lord, I let go of the harshness towards myself. It will not make me smarter or better or whatever. It will only bring me down. You love me and are fine with me. I accept that truth.



Saturday of the Fourth Week of Lent

"So a division occurred in the crowd because of him."

John 7:43

Some people thought Jesus was the Messiah because of the miracles he had performed. Some thought he was just a prophet. Some thought he was indeed the Christ, but not the Son of God. Others thought he was nothing. Because, they thought, he had not been born in Bethlehem, and

the Messiah was supposed to be born in Bethlehem, where David was born. (They thought, erroneously, Jesus was from Galilee, since that was where he was living at the time.)

Where is Christ from? Bethlehem (birth)? Nazareth (upbringing)? Galilee (career)? Jerusalem (retirement and death)?

None. He is from your heart.

The Pharisees instruct Nicodemus to make sure "no prophet arises from Galilee." That is, they want to suppress Jesus. Nicodemus follows orders. No prophet indeed arises from Galilee. For Christ is more than a prophet, and he did not arise from that location. He is God, and he arises from our hearts.

Directed Prayer: Jesus, bind the wounds and divisions that are in my family. Heal the wounds in our church and in our country. Heal the wounds in my soul. May we be united as you are in the Trinity.



The Fifth Sunday of Lent

"Our friend Lazarus is asleep, but I am going to awaken him."

John 11:11

Lazarus was a close friend of Jesus. Our Lord loved him. He also loved Martha and Mary. And he lets them all suffer. Some friend, huh?

Suffering is the way to resurrection; the way to a newer and better reality. The friendship and affection between Jesus, Martha and family was a good and holy one. But there was something more Jesus wanted to give them. There was a deeper kind of love to experience. This new love--a love in the spirit--would make the old love look like nothing. It would make Lazarus appear to be "sleeping." Friends love each other and see each other as an essential part of their life. 'Part' is the key word, however. A 'part of their life,' not their *whole* life. The deepest love for our Lord is more than friendship. It is an all-consuming, fundamentally identifying kind of love.

"Roll away the stone," instructed our Lord. Yes, roll away the stone that keeps you back from that deepest love. Roll away the stone that keeps you stuck in the comfortable relationship you have with Jesus now. Let God bring you to the tomb to raise you.

Directed Prayer: Jesus, I am a field of dry bones, as the Prophet Ezekiel saw. I lack creativity, energy, passion. Put flesh on those bones. Give me blood. Breathe life into me. Make me into your disciple who will go out and set the world on fire.



Monday of the Fifth Week of Lent

"Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin any more."

John 8:11

Today's two readings connect two women: Susanna from the Old Testament and the woman caught in adultery in the New Testament. They are both saved, but both, on the surface, do not appear to have the same level of guilt. Susanna was objectively innocent. She resisted the lustful advances of the two elders and is falsely accused. The woman caught in adultery was

objectively guilty. She was "caught in the very act of committing adultery." And yet both are innocent. Why? Because their hearts are pure.

Susanna shows the purity of her heart when she prays to God in the midst of her entrapment. "Yet it is better for me to fall into your power without guilt than to sin before the Lord," she says.

As for the woman caught in adultery, we can presume her pure heart. When the crowd disperses, "she stands before the Lord." Only the pure of heart will see God. Christ wasn't in the business of pardoning everyone. He condemns Bethsaida, Chorazin, Capernaum, the Pharisees, Herod, and many others. They are guilty because their hearts are not pure. Not external perfection, but a humble and contrite heart is what our Lord desires.

Directed Prayer: Jesus, I expose my heart to you. Yes, I am a sinner, but I desire to be pure. I desire to be all yours. Please bend down to me and write with your finger upon my heart. Please write your poetry of love.



Tuesday of the Fifth Week of Lent

"We are disgusted with this wretched food!"

Numbers 21:5

My father had two words he would say often to us children. They were very powerful and formative. "Stop whining."

We'd be complaining about our mom's dinner, that the TV remote wasn't being shared, that we had to do chores, that the referees were unfair, that our clothes were out of style. *Stop whining*. Those two words broke me out of the spirit of entitlement, control, and pride that fostered negativity. It broke me out of myself. It helped me appreciate what I did have and not what I didn't. And 'stop whining' had credibility when it came from my parents, who actually had something legitimately to whine about, as their upbringing was much more difficult than ours.

The Israelites whined against God and Moses in the desert. There's no water, there's no food, we're tired of the stale water, we're tired of the manna, we're tired of the quail. The bronze serpent upon the pole was Moses' version of "stop whining." Just look at this object. Broken from their navel-gazing, they could now be healed.

Lent is a breeding ground for whining...no meat on Friday, no sweets, no alcohol, no TV, more prayer, more charitable giving, longer Gospels at Mass. And so Lent is the best opportunity to look upon Christ and be saved.

Directed Prayer: Lord, I acknowledge that I whine and I want more. I surrender those complaints. I trust that you are enough. Please show me how I can serve you and serve others.



Wednesday of the Fifth Week of Lent

"Nebuchadnezzar ordered the furnace to be heated seven times more than usual and had some of the strongest men in his army bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and cast them into the white-hot furnace."

Daniel 3:19

The evil king of Babylon is an unwitting means of grace for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, a conduit of the Holy Spirit. The sevenfold, white-hot fire purifies the three young men and allows them to see the "Son of Man," who appears miraculously in the cauldron. Seven, of course, could be seen as a reference to the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the white is of God (think of the blinding white of Jesus at the Transfiguration). The three Jews are strengthened in their resolve to be faithful to their God by this experience. They then go on to serve as conduits of grace themselves, as Nebuchadnezzar, witnessing their preservation, is converted.

We need purification. Let us pray to be plunged into the fire of the Holy Spirit. We want to see Jesus more clearly and be intimate with him. Let us pray the Holy Spirit surround us. We want to help others be converted. Let us pray the fire will remain in us to warm the icy hearts of others.

Directed Prayer: Come, fire of love, fire of Holy Spirit, fire of Tabor, fire of Hermon, and melt the ice around my heart. Blaze passionately within me. Shine out through my eyes, my hands, my feet. May your warmth pour forth from me and out into others.



Thursday of the Fifth Week of Lent

"I will maintain my covenant with you and your descendants after you throughout the ages as an everlasting pact, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you."

Genesis 17:7

As the season of Lent goes on, the focus becomes less on ourselves and more on Christ. The Scriptures at Mass no longer emphasize the themes of our sinfulness or holiness. Rather, Christ and Christ's messages become the main theme. We see this, for instance, in the long discourses in the Gospel of John that we read. Jesus takes the spotlight. He speaks of his compassion on sinners, his desire for union with all of us, and how he is "I AM."

When God first said "I AM" to Moses in the burning bush, Moses was drawn into relationship with God. Moses was entranced. He forgot about himself and his sinfulness and weakness. He became one with the Lord and then was sent out on mission.

Abraham experienced a similar encounter with God several generations prior to Moses. God spoke the covenant to Abraham, and the man from Ur was hooked into union with the divine. Abraham was then given his mission.

God is so good, and when we come in touch with him, like Moses and Abraham, we never want to leave his side. Living in our heads, focused only on ourselves, is a hellish way to live. Living out of ourselves and for God and others is where beauty and joy lie.

Directed Prayer: Jesus, I give you praise and thanks this day. Thank you for overwhelming me with your beauty and goodness. You are always by my side. You are eager to pour goodness into your life. May I receive your love and share it with others.



Friday of the Fifth Week of Lent

"I have shown you many good works from my Father. For which of these are you trying to stone me?"

John 10:32

The people who had experienced Christ's works personally--those who were blind or ill or crippled and received the miracle--knew Christ was the Messiah. They did not attempt to stone Jesus. They became, instead, his followers. Those who had not experienced the words of Jesus were the ones who tried to kill him.

The point? We need real experiences and not just theories to be disciples.

If we want to believe, we need to experience personally the works of Jesus. Our Lord as Messiah does not work on the macro level. Upset with the state of affairs of the country, the world, the Church, the parish, your family? Don't expect Christ to fix it. He's not interested in "the country" or "the Church." He's interested in your soul. He's interested in the souls of your fellow Americans or Catholics. The Messiah works on the individual, personal level.

Your soul is the acting ground for our Savior. It is where he will walk and talk and perform miracles. If you don't want other people to stone Jesus, then show them your heart.

Directed Prayer: Jesus, I have family members who don't believe in you or who have fallen away from your Church. I want them to come back. I want them to have faith. Please give me the courage to witness to them your beauty. May I not preach at them. May I love them and show them the good you've done in my life.



Saturday of the Fifth Week of Lent

"What do you think? That he will not come to the feast?"

John 11:56

Yes, Jesus would come to the feast. On his third and final Passover, he entered Jerusalem publicly, riding on a donkey to shouts of "Hosannah." Our Lord always comes to the feast.

Many of our spiritual disciplines can be driven by shame and guilt. If we don't go to daily Mass, then we are a sinner, we think. If we don't make it through a rosary without being distracted, then we are a failure. If we are sinners and failures, then we are unwanted and we will be forgotten. If we are forgotten then we will be alone. And being alone is one of our greatest fears.

But those are all lies. We will never be alone. We are wanted and we are known by God. Just as no failure or weakness can take that away, no success or achievement can earn that. Going to Mass, praying without distractions, fasting and almsgiving do not make us loved by God. That is the whole point of unconditional love.

The reality of unconditional love is a feast. A feast is enjoyable, lighthearted, and peaceful. Drivenness by shame or drivenness by success are not aspects of the feast, and the Lord will not come to that feast.

Less is more in the spiritual life. Praying when we feel the tug to do more is where we will find the Lord.

Directed Prayer: Jesus, as we enter Holy Week, please make my heart a joyful celebration. I might be more recollected and solemn this week, but may my soul exude glory for you. I want to be a joyful disciple. You are my life and love, and with you by my side, I will always be happy.



Palm Sunday

"Let us go to Jerusalem, to the house of the Lord"

Psalms 122:1

King David rode in and out of Jerusalem several times, just as our Lord did. Some of those rides were triumphant, like when David brought the ark of the covenant into the city. On that occasion David danced with abandon and delight before the ark and train of priests to the cheering crowd. Some of David's rides were somber, like when he fled from his son Absalom who had usurped the throne. On that occasion David fled barefoot in sackcloth, while Shimei hurled insults and dirt and rocks at him.

One year Jesus snuck into Jerusalem, as he was a public enemy (see yesterday's Gospel). Another year Jesus rode triumphantly, as he was the long-awaited Messiah.

Whether it was easy or difficult, David and the Son of David always went to and from Jerusalem. Our Church is the new Jerusalem. Our souls are the new Jerusalem. Sometimes we cheer Jesus as he comes, sometimes we shun him. Sometimes Jesus' parades into our hearts, sometimes he sneaks in. Sometimes we lay palms at his feet, sometimes we hurl stones. None of it matters to the Lord. Jesus belonged to Jerusalem. He belongs to us.

Directed Prayer: Jesus, I lift up the gates of my heart. Rise up and enter within me. Pour your light into me and may it radiate out of my body. May your Precious Blood flow over my heart. May I become a new and eternal Jerusalem.



Monday of Holy Week

"Mary took a liter of costly perfumed oil made from genuine aromatic nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and dried them with her hair; the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil."

John 12:3

We see how Mary and Judas both valued Jesus. Thirty pieces of silver was Judas'. Three hundred days' wages was Mary's. Thirty pieces of silver was the price of a slave. Three hundred days' wages was Mary's livelihood. Judas thought little of Jesus. Mary thought everything of him.

Christ is worth everything. Nothing is more valuable. No pleasure, no food, no amount of sleep, no person is worth more than our relationship with God. If anything holds us back from Jesus, may we break it like that alabaster jar and pour it on the feet of our Lord. It will anoint his feet. It will soothe his being. The whole house will be filled with the fragrance of the oil. That is, the people and Church around us will be blessed by our devotion to God.

Mary's extravagance was unreasonable and foolish in the eyes of the world and of Judas. We all have a little bit of Judas within us. *Hold that back from Jesus*, we think to ourselves, *he doesn't really need it*. Correct, he doesn't need it. He wants it. Silence the Judas within you and let the Mary speak.

Directed Prayer: Jesus, I break the flask of precious oil that I cling to. I break it and pour the contents over your feet. It is a meager offering, but it shows how much I love you. I know you will use my gift for the day of your burial.



Tuesday of Holy Week

"So Judas took the morsel and left at once."

John 13:30

The difference between Judas and Peter is that Judas left the table and Peter stayed.

Both Judas and Peter betrayed the Lord. In fact, all the apostles in one way or another betrayed the Lord. When the Lord predicted that one of them would betray him, the apostles questioned who it would be. It wasn't obvious that Judas was the betrayer. They all knew they were capable of the sin. But the eleven sinners remained at the table with Jesus, while it was only Judas who stood up and departed. This departure is symbolic of refusing to reach out to the Lord in your brokenness and uncertainty. Judas was unable to remain with Jesus and reach out for help.

After the Lord predicted Peter's denial, he did not tell Peter to leave the table. He left it open for Peter, and the rock remained seated. The rest of the dinner certainly was awkward, as Peter was silenced, but he stayed in the openness of his heart and in contact with God.

We all sin and betray the Lord. It is inevitable. The Lord sees it in our hearts. But he offers us mercy and healing and love. The call for each of us remains the same when we sin. Our Lord doesn't need us to be perfect. He needs us to stay.

Directed Prayer: Jesus, show me my blindspots. I will show to you where I know exactly I am a sinner. Mary and my guardian angel, pray that I may have the grace to stay at the table. May I let go of my pride and perfectionism and reach out to our Savior for mercy.



Wednesday of Holy Week

"One of the Twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, 'What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?'"

Matthew 26:14-15

We have desires that are good. They are given to us by God. Naturally impatient, we want that desire to come to fulfillment as soon as possible. The unfulfilled desire brings suffering, and no one wants to suffer. When we have to wait we begin to think God has forgotten about our desire, or that he is waiting for us to make it come about. So we act. We run ahead of grace and try to bring the desire to completion. This involves us departing the waiting presence of the Lord and going off on our own. And this is when we fall.

Judas' heart was not entirely corrupt. He had an initial calling. He had a desire to love God and be with Jesus. Perhaps some other desire along the way came into Judas' heart. It would have been a good desire: the glory of Israel, the reign of the Kingdom of God, the total acceptance of Jesus of Nazareth, etc. When he saw Jesus rejected and saw Jesus focusing his attention elsewhere, like on the raising of Lazarus or spending time with friends at a meal, he grew restless. He left and betrayed the Lord.

The invitation as we embark on the Triduum is to silence the sense of hurry within us. Love is patient. God will give us what we need when the time is right. It is for simply to be with him right now.

Directed Prayer: Jesus, I am so eager to see these things come to fruition in my life, in the life of others around me, and in the life of the Church. I want to see progress, change, redemption. I

breathe deeply and look out of myself and into your eyes. You are before me and you are all I need.



Thursday of Holy Week

"Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me."

John 13:8

There comes a point in our relationship with Jesus where we no longer feel like an outsider looking in. We don't judge our prayer as good or bad. In fact, we don't even see prayer as "prayer," as in one other activity in our day. Guilt or pressure subsides, and we just exist. There is confidence with Jesus. Nothing to achieve, no sort of person to be, no figuring out to do. Like a long-time married couple, who see their partnership as an integral part of their being, like an arm or leg, we are one with God. Nothing can ever break this bond.

This is the inheritance Jesus has given us. We are inheriting him. Not an item, like grace or a position in the church or some special access to blessings. Jesus as our lover is who we have. And we never need to feel like we don't belong. There is great freedom in this inheritance.

Like Peter, this is a bit uncomfortable for us. We want to keep God at a distance. We want to control God. We want God as the fashioned God to whom we pay homage and visit and then breathe a sigh of relief when we make it out alive. Love, on the other hand, takes us beyond our control to a place of risk and vulnerability. It is hard, but there is no better way to live.

Directed Prayer: Jesus, I commit my life to you. I know it will be difficult. You will lead me into challenging situations. I will experience pain and rejection. I will be uncomfortable. But I want you. Having you makes all those crosses nothing, like clouds in a beautiful blue sky.



Good Friday

"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

Luke 23:46

We could look at today and tomorrow as days as much about the Father as about Jesus. Yes, Jesus suffered and died for us. But it was the Father who led him to this. And it was to the Father that Jesus was truly giving his life. Jesus accepted fully this day his sonship. The Baptism in the Jordan, the Transfiguration on Tabor were but stepping stones to this day. When he breathed his last, it truly was finished. God the Father was now truly the Father of us all.

There is no debt to be paid to our Father. He has given us everything, and we need not be ashamed. We need not work to please him or feel we need to earn his love. Our holiness he does not need. Our saintly acts he does not require. Christ did that once and for all. We need simply receive the Father's love. We need simply place ourselves silently before God and allow ourselves to be sons and daughters. God does not demand anything of us and his fundamental disposition toward us isn't one of disappointment. We need prove nothing before him. We need merely hang upon the cross as our brother did.

Directed Prayer: Lord, into your hands I commend my spirit. Receive me as I am. Forgive my sins and remember me when you come into your Kingdom.



Holy Saturday

"In the night watch just before dawn the LORD cast through the column of the fiery cloud upon the Egyptian force a glance that threw it into a panic; and he so clogged their chariot wheels that they could hardly drive."

Exodus 14:24-25

A very curious phenomenon, in a night full of phenomena, occurred along the Red Sea coast this day millennia ago. The 600,000 Israelite horde, with Moses at its head, had been led through the desert by a miraculous column of cloud during the day and a blazing ball of fire at night. The cloud and fireball hadn't taken them the direct route northwest to the Promised Land, but, rather, due east straight into the desert, dead-ending at the Red Sea. When the Israelites stopped at the water's edge, apparently lost, the cloud moved to the rear of the camp and hung between the Israelites and Egyptians, who were now pursuing the former slaves. The cloud suddenly "became dark," as the Red Sea parted. It remained dark for a period of time, blocking the view of the Egyptians as the Israelites passed through the sea. When the Israelites were mostly through the trail, the cloud brightened up and beckoned the Egyptians into the parted waterway. Pharaoh and his army followed the cloud.

It was then, we hear, that suddenly a "glance of the Lord" appeared out of the cloud before the Egyptians. This terrified the army and they retreated in panic. Moses, from the other shore, saw this glance and was emboldened. The sea closed around the unbelievers and the Israelites were saved.

We see the glance of the Lord tonight in the cloud. It will not drive us into a panic. It will enflame our hearts with love. May that glance become a gaze, and may that gaze drive us forward to the promised land.

Directed Prayer: God, I've seen your face so many times throughout my life. I saw it when I made my First Holy Communion, when I was confirmed, when I received the other sacraments. I saw it in a moving prayer experience. I saw it in a good friend. I saw it in a beautiful sunset. I am encouraged by your presence and I will go forward to the mission.

EASTER



Mary Magdalene, author and date unknown
(painting in the rectory at St. Paul of the Cross Parish)

Easter Sunday

"For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God."
Colossians 3:3

Saint Peter was told by God in a vision to visit Cornelius. Peter was hesitant, for Cornelius was a pagan and a Roman soldier. A Jew could not come in contact with an unclean individual, let alone an enemy of Israel. But God broke Peter out of this old way of thinking with a sign. Certain foods, people, objects and places were no longer profane. The period of fear and isolation was over. Life could be lived. The news given to Peter brought him great joy.

This is the context for our first reading from Acts of the Apostles this Easter Sunday, which is an excerpt from Peter's speech to Cornelius. Christ has set us free from burdens and impositions. We are able now to live in ease and peace and freedom.

When the two Marys traveled to the sealed tomb on Easter Sunday morning, they were worried about how they would enter the tomb to anoint Jesus' body with the spices, for the stone was so large. Their burdens were lifted when they arrive and see the stone rolled away.

We need no longer be anxious about the heavy stones in our life. What's the worst that can happen? We die? Well, death no longer has power over us. It is our entry to Heaven.

Directed Prayer: Jesus, you removed the obstacles from Peter and Mary Magdalene. Remove them from my life. Your resurrected body can pass through locked doors and be in two places at once. Breathe your freedom and lightness into me.



Monday in the Octave of Easter

"Do not be afraid. Go tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."
Matthew 28:10

The disciples were afraid when they saw the risen Lord. There is precedent for this. The Israelites were frightened when God revealed himself for a split second in the desert on Mount Hermon. They asked Moses to tell God to never again show his face to them. The shepherds were afraid when they saw the glory of the Lord in that field outside Bethlehem. Peter, James, and John were frightened when they saw the divine radiance at the Transfiguration. The whole apostolic cohort was frightened on the boat when God walked on water to them.

We all would have some modicum of fear if Jesus were to literally appear to us today. As much as we love the Lord, there is a part of us that fears we might be judged. There is part of us that wants Jesus to stay at a safe, spiritual distance. There is something within us that fears Heaven. Gazing upon a loved one does take to us an amazing place beyond ourselves. It is so rapturous it is frightening.

Whatever be the source of that fear in us, our Lord tells us to let it go. Trust that we can indeed see the face of Jesus, and expose our hearts, and live.

Directed Prayer: Lord, I am afraid to see you because I put so much pressure on myself to be perfect and to have you figured out, so I can say something proper to you. I surrender all that. You don't need me to be perfect or say the right thing. All those people to whom you appeared in the scriptures were sinners, just as me.



Tuesday in the Octave of Easter

"Jesus said to her, 'Mary!'"
John 20:16

It is when Mary hears the voice of Jesus calling her name that her eyes are opened and she recognizes the Lord whom she earlier thought was the gardener. Thomas will require touch and sight of the wounds. Peter needs something of the mind: an acknowledgement of his past and affirmation of his future. John needs something of the heart: the folding of the garments that he had two days earlier folded over the dead body of his beloved.

Our souls are triggered by the Lord in various ways. One of those ways, which we highlight today, is the way of Magdalene: voice. "My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me." The sheep recognize the shepherd by not by the clothes he wears or the staff in his hand. It is his voice. His voice that calls the sheep by name, lovingly and confidently. When Jesus speaks to us, we follow.

If we are called to be like Christ, called to be good shepherds, then we are called to speak like Christ. We are to know the names of the people in our lives. When we call their names, we are to do so with a power and love that Jesus called to Mary.

Directed Prayer: Jesus, you gently and confidently speak my name. I listen. I follow. I open my heart to you and love you. Jesus. I speak your name. I speak the names of the people in my life (name them). May they be set free.



Wednesday in the Octave of Easter

"Were not our hearts burning within us while he spoke to us on the way and opened the Scriptures to us?"
Luke 24:32

The disciples on the road to Emmaus had Christ in their midst but they did not see him. "Their eyes were prevented from recognizing him." They were too focused on the past--why had this had happened? They were too focused on the future--what will this mean?

When we are pulled away from the present moment, we miss the risen Lord.

"What are you discussing as you walk along?" Jesus asked Cleopas and his companion. It is the same question Jesus asked the apostles when they were debating among themselves who was the greatest in the kingdom of God. The apostles were similarly out of the present moment.

We stay grounded in the here and now because the moment is actual union with God. He is before us, and he wants an exchange of love to occur. If we are thinking about the past or future our eyes and heart are elsewhere. Right now Christ wants to show us he is faithful and caring and proud of us. "Today you will be with me in paradise," he told the good thief.

At Emmaus the disciples' eyes are opened for a split second when they receive the broken and blessed bread from Christ. That's all they needed, and they never again had downcast eyes.

Directed Prayer: Jesus, I acknowledge my past and my hopes for the future. I know you affirm me. But you invite me to let go of the burden. Right now, with you before me, is lovely, and that is where you invite me to remain.



Thursday in the Octave of Easter

"Everything written about me in the law of Moses and in the prophets and psalms must be fulfilled."

Luke 24:44

According to the Scriptures. It's a phrase we encounter often, be it in the Scriptures or in the Creed we say at Mass ("He rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures"). Everything is part of a plan. Nothing is arbitrary or random. Not that we are determined and fatalistic, but, rather, that God has beautifully orchestrated every moment of our lives.

When Christ appeared to the apostles after the Resurrection, he explained to them the Scriptures. It might have appeared incredibly desolate when Peter denied Jesus or when Jesus was abandoned on the cross, but all of that was needed to make the beautiful harmony.

The story is not over. We are living in the existing edifice built from the blue-print of the Bible. Each season of Easter Christ comes to us and opens our minds a little more to receive this cosmic symphony and invite others to hear it.

There was a loud thunder clap when God appeared before Moses on Mount Sinai. It painfully shook the ears of those hearing. Now God provides a string quartet to soothe our heart.

Directed Prayer: Lord, my mistakes from the past and my weaknesses right now I bring before you. They are painful, but you tell me that you have blessed and anointed them. May I hear the beautiful music you are producing with my life and the lives of those around me.



Friday in the Octave of Easter

"When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he tucked in his garment, for he was lightly clad, and jumped into the sea."

John 21:7

Why did Peter jump into the sea? Was it for a good reason or a bad reason?

If we are to spin it positively, then we would say Peter jumped into the sea because he was eager to be near the Lord. It was why he ran to the tomb on Easter Sunday morning. Perhaps now Peter thought he could run on water to Jesus, as he had walked earlier toward the Lord in the midst of the storm.

If we are to take the negative spin, then we would say Peter jumped into the sea because he was eager to turn away from the Lord. Just as he had once told the Lord at the initial catch of faith, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man," now Peter was once again ashamed of his sinfulness. He ran away from the Lord like he ran away from Calvary after he had denied Jesus.

Maybe there was a little bit of both good and bad in Peter, both a turning towards and turning away from the Lord. Perhaps it is the same for us, we who would both run towards and run away from Jesus.

Either way, Christ will be waiting for us on the shore. He will be with a fire to dry and warm us, and set us on our way.

Directed Prayer: Lord, I love you. I don't understand all that is my heart. There are parts of me I can't fix, parts of me that lead me away from you. But I love you all the same, and I know you are patient with me. When I jump into the water in prayer today, please cleanse me and make me a new person, one who trusts entirely in your mercy.



Saturday in the Octave of Easter

"He appeared to them and rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart because they had not believed those who saw him after he had been raised."

Mark 16:14

To believe in the resurrection we have to want to believe in it. We have to want Jesus to be alive. We have to want our relationship with Jesus to continue and progress. Part of the reason for the apostles' unbelief with the news of the resurrection was their initial lack of desire to want. If we want something, it will happen. We will believe and it will be true. The apostles thought the life of Jesus was over. Their three-year run with the Lord, while enjoyable, had come to an end and it was time to move on to something else. When they hear this might not be the case, they are reticent to believe. They have moved on in their hearts. Jesus will have to refashion their hearts and give them a second calling. "Follow me" becomes "Go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature."

Each of us are in need of an experience of the resurrection. A part of our lives that is fallen needs to be raised up. But do we want it? If we do, the resurrection will come.

Each of us know someone who needs to be resurrected. Each of us has someone with whom we struggle. If we believe that they too can be raised, and that we can live in love and peace with this person, then that individual will be raised up. The empty tomb is waiting for us.

Directed Prayer: Mary, give me the desire to want the resurrection. Pray that I may let go of my need for comfort and go out to the margins. Make my heart receptive as yours was. Holy Spirit, rush into me and raise me up.



The Second Sunday of Easter

"He breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'."

John 20:22

The upper room on Easter Sunday was the new Garden of Eden. The upper room a week later was the new Exodus.

Jesus appeared and breathed on the apostles once, like God breathed new life into Adam. In saying "peace be with you" he bestowed a deep harmony in the apostles like there was in the Garden with man and the creatures living together peacefully. The way God fashioned Adam with his finger and then Eve from the side of Adam, Thomas and the others touch and come forth from the side of the new Adam.

Jesus then breathed on the apostles a second time the following week. When the Israelites passed out of slavery in Egypt, going through the Red Sea, a large wind, the breath of

God, was responsible for parting the Red Sea waters. Jesus, with that same breath, parted the waters of the apostles' hearts and minds, setting them free. They were able to enter into the Promised Land.

We know Adam and Eve and Israel's history, however. Adam and Eve eat the apple and the Israelites fashion a golden calf. The apostles too would sin and doubt.

It is time for a third breath. May it come to each of us now.

Directed Prayer: Come, Holy Spirit, breath of life. Overshadow me like a cloud, pour over me like a gentle rain, soothe me like a beautiful voice. May I know you and love you, God, in a new way. May others do the same. May we live forever in the kingdom.