

DAILY REFLECTIONS FOR LENT 2022

Coming Back to *Life*



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Gather the People

Call a solemn assembly; gather the people... assemble the aged; gather the children... —Joel 2:15b-16

Hopefully, after living through two years of the COVID pandemic, we no longer take public gatherings for granted. Most of us didn't go to Ash Wednesday services last year because there weren't many in-person services then. Of course, God kept working in the world for those 40 days. And yes, you can start this Lenten season at home this year, too, without being marked by actual ashes on your forehead.

But if you can get to church for that ritual today (at any church: it doesn't have to be your parish), hopefully, it will mean something more because now you had lived through a time when churches shuttered. In today's first reading, God told Joel to gather all the people together, not because they couldn't pray on their own, but because there is a special power in praying with others. After so much isolation these last two years, do we need more proof that we are social beings? Do whatever you can to gather with a faith community so that you don't have to begin your Lenten season alone. Don't beat yourself up if you don't make it to a church today. Sign yourself on your forehead with the sign of the cross and ask God to guide you through this Lenten season.

FOR ACTION: Who can you journey together with this season? Can you go to Mass with the community more often? Can you make a plan to talk to a friend in faith regularly? Do you want to find a spiritual director? Ponder who God might be putting in your life as a companion now and accept the invitation.

TO PRAY: Lord, show me who I can walk with through this Lenten season so I don't have to make the journey alone.

It's Not Meant to Be a Drag

When I was growing up, Lent was a drag. To me, its only significance was that on Fridays, we ordered Filet-O-Fish sandwiches instead of hamburgers at McDonald's. Oh, and I deprived myself of desserts so that I would appreciate them more come Easter. I was surprised in college, then, to hear a Jesuit priest suggest that instead of thinking of Lent as a time of struggle-with-temptation-and-deprivation-in-the-desert, he imagined Jesus experienced those 40 days in the desert as a luxurious period of retreat with his loving God. After all, just before he went into the desert, God had proclaimed, "You are my beloved Son." That priest challenged us all to think of Lent as a retreat in which we get to focus on God's love and care for us. Since then, Lent is no longer about deprivation but instead is about paying attention to what God wants to do for me, in me, and through me.

FOR REFLECTION: Can you give yourself permission to think of these next six weeks as a retreat-in-real-life and luxuriate in having time with God in prayer? Can you think of it as a time to deepen your trust that God calls you a beloved son or daughter?

TO PRAY: Lord, help me sink into this season as a special time with you. Help me to let go of what's not important to you during this time so that I can be more present.

No Patience for Lip Service

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. —Isaiah 58:3-4

God has little patience for people who pay lip service to religious rules and do all the “externals” right but ignore the point of the rules and commandments. Case in point: today’s first reading: Isaiah 58:1-9a (or the whole 58th chapter of Isaiah for that matter). Isaiah has a scathing rebuke of people, who, on the surface, seem to be good, law-abiding religious folks. They appear to be seeking God, and they fast on the appointed days. They put on sackcloth (uncomfortable cloth made of goat or camel hair) and pour ashes on their heads to show their repentance. Yet, their external actions didn’t translate into more love, justice, or mercy for others, which was the point of the laws. While they fasted, they continued to oppress their workers, fight with each other, and even strike out in violence.

Unfortunately, this didn’t just happen back in that society. It still happens all over the world today when Catholics who go to Mass on Sundays choose profits over just treatment of workers on Monday. It happens when Christians tithe 10% of their income to charity but don’t pay their house cleaner, gardener, or nanny a living wage. It happens when priests and bishops—who perform the sacraments daily—turn a blind eye to the injustices in their church.

Let us all heed Isaiah’s warning. If it’s a choice between following the letter of the law but doing harm or following the spirit of the law, which points toward love and compassion, God is pretty clear which we should choose.

FOR ACTION: Take an honest look at how you use your time, money, skills, education, and social influence. Are there ways in which your decisions cause harm to others, even if they are legal? What can you do to rectify this?

TO PRAY: God, help me to focus on living out the spirit of your laws—love for all—rather than concentrating on doing everything right “religiously.”

Not a Self-Improvement Program

I'm always tempted to use Lent as a self-improvement program: a time to give up judging others, eat healthier, quit wasting my money on coffee shop treats to give it to charity instead, etc. Then I remember that Jesus didn't go into the desert for 40 days for a self-improvement course. He went to the desert to soak in God's words, "You are my beloved Son," and discern what God was calling him to next—which turned out to be the beginning of his teaching and healing ministry.

In some ways, it feels easier and more familiar to use these 40 days to improve myself in the way my culture understands it: kind of like a re-branding that will make me newer, shinier, and more beautiful come Easter. At least there are programs to follow along those lines. But I'm fairly certain self-improvement wasn't on Jesus' mind as he embarked upon his desert retreat. And I'm reasonably certain that listening as God tells me I am a beloved daughter and listening for what God is calling me to do next might not be as straightforward as steps like "clear the house of alcohol" or "delete your Facebook account."

Those things might help us better listen to God, but the focus of the season should be on what God wants to do in us and through us, not on our own self-improvement so that we make ourselves more attractive in the eyes of society.

FOR REFLECTION: As Lent gets underway, sit with the questions "What do you most want out of this Lent?" and "What do you most need from God?" Be bold and ask God for those things! If you journal, write them down and return to it after Easter to see how God answered your prayers.

TO PRAY: Lord, what do YOU want to do for me this Lent? Help me to accept the gifts you want to give.

Why Fast?

He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. —Luke 4:2

The story of Jesus' temptation in the desert echoes the Israelites' 40 years of wandering in the desert. God led them out of slavery in Egypt, and they were on their way to the Promised Land, but the journey ended up being much longer and harder than they had bargained for. They were famished a lot those years, except they weren't famished by choice. Sometimes they were literally in danger of starving or dying of dehydration until God fed them with manna and gave them water from a rock.

It appears that Jesus, on the other hand, fasted in the desert by choice, so this story has become the foundation of our practice of Lenten fasting. What do you think was his reason for fasting? To remind himself how dependent he was on God? To be in solidarity with those who are hungry but not by choice? Whatever reason you imagine Jesus fasted, can you try it out to be more like him, even if you know you can't achieve the level of sacrifice he did? Don't waste time beating yourself up if you come up short (as many of us may). Just get back in the saddle and start again, as often as you need to this Lent.

FOR ACTION: This week, or perhaps even for the rest of Lent, spend as much on the poor as you would typically spend on pleasure for yourself: such as coffee or alcohol, entertainment, dining out, getting your nails done, having a massage, etc.

TO PRAY: Lord, you know what it was like to be famished and tempted. Help me keep my trials in perspective, knowing that others are suffering more than me.

Are You a Sheep?

“He will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.” —Matthew 25:32-33

My daughter’s third-grade teacher was a sheep. She was a sheep because she always had a cereal box, a bowl, and a spoon behind her desk. She got them out discreetly when the children went out for morning recess. A little boy named Christopher always came to school without breakfast. He wasn’t sleeping on the streets, but because his mother was in prison and his dad was a drug addict, he spent most nights being shuffled around to a different relative or friend’s house to sleep on a sofa. My daughter and her classmates didn’t know these details. They just knew him as a sweet-tempered kid who had trouble sitting still, paying attention, and keeping quiet when the class was working. They knew him as the one who stayed inside for the first recess of the day.

I have no idea if that teacher was Christian or if she ever considered that she was feeding Christ when she fed eight-year-old Christopher. I do know that she saw someone who was hungry and fed him that entire year.

Sometimes people who are hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, imprisoned, or strangers don’t look what we imagine hungry, thirsty, or sick people will look like. It can be easy to miss them, just like most of the students in Christopher’s class didn’t know that he came to school hungry. They may even be living in our very homes, next door, or on our street. What if we widen our definition of what such people may look like or act like so we can see their needs?

FOR ACTION: Read Matthew 25:31-46. Then decide on a person or persons you can help in a specific way this week and do it.

TO PRAY: Jesus, open our eyes to see the different ways that you are suffering in the people around us so that we may feed you, welcome you, comfort you, or visit you.

Never Be Ashamed

Look to God, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed.

—Psalm 34:5

My daughter came home from her high school world history class this year and said, “Mom, you wouldn’t believe how the textbook summarized Christianity!”

“It said the goal of Christianity is to gain eternal salvation, and you can do this by confessing your sins to a priest. It also said Christians believe that you will go to eternal damnation if you don’t follow the laws. It barely mentioned Jesus and didn’t give examples of any of his teachings.”

This Catholic kid of mine then explained to her public school classmates that she didn’t think that was a very good description of Christianity. It passed right over Jesus, didn’t make mention of our central teaching of loving your neighbor as yourself, and in fact, didn’t mention the word love at all! When I related this incident to a Christian friend, she responded, “This is why my daughter (also a high schooler) doesn’t want to admit she’s Christian at school.” Another woman said her teens don’t want to be known as Christians because the negativity toward Christianity by their peers is so powerful.

Are you ashamed or embarrassed by your faith in God? Or rather, are you sometimes ashamed or embarrassed by the behavior of some people in our church? I am sometimes embarrassed by the latter, not the former. May we never be ashamed that we follow a loving, healing, merciful God, even if some people don’t understand what is at the core of our religion.

FOR REFLECTION: Are there people in your life who don’t understand why your faith is important to you? Look for opportunities to share why without necessarily convincing them that they should believe the same as you.

TO PRAY: Let me be radiant in my faith, a witness to your love and mercy.

A Chance to Experiment

Lent gives us a good opportunity to experiment with different types of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. It's sort of like making New Year's resolutions, but we can try things that we might not otherwise commit to for a year. Forty days is a long enough period to grow into a new habit while still stretching ourselves as we explore ways God might be inviting us to change. We are a week into Lent now, but it's not too late to resolve to stretch yourself in the areas of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

Last year our family decided to fast from buying anything new except for groceries and toiletries. (We did have some humorous discussions about what could stand in for toilet paper.) The point was to become more aware of how much we take for granted that Jesus didn't have or need during his 40 days in the desert. After six weeks of fasting from new things, we discovered that our quality of life didn't suffer in the least. We realized there was no need to buy a swim parka for our daughter when we knew a former swimmer who didn't need hers anymore. Our other daughter's tennis shoes wore out in March. Guess what? Goodwill had some that fit. For the first time, we questioned, "Why buy the package of professional team photos when we already have thousands of photos of our children?" When I went to Costco to stock up on food staples one day, I instinctively went to check out their clothing section until I realized I couldn't buy anything new, followed by the thought, "We don't need any more clothes anyway."

It was a perfect Lent-sized experiment for us. We would never have made it a year without making a new purchase, but it was long enough that it made a lasting impression on all of us. We still slip into consuming more than we need sometimes, but fasting from new purchases last Lent changed us permanently for the better.

FOR ACTION: Is there anything you might still want to commit to in the areas of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving this Lent? Why not start today?

TO PRAY: Lord, may any prayer, fasting, and almsgiving I do make me a more faithful disciple, more committed to loving my neighbor as myself.

Sleeping with Bread

“For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” —Matthew 7:8

Usually, when I read or hear this passage my mind goes immediately to the future. What do I want or need that I should ask of God? What am I searching for? How might God grant my prayers or open a door for me? Maybe it's because the responsorial psalm for today is “On the day I called, you answered me,” it strikes me that we should sometimes read Jesus' words looking in reverse. What if we take some time to look backward in our lives and acknowledge all those times we asked and *did* receive? What about all those times we were searching for something and God led us to it, or when we knocked on God's door, and God answered? I know for sure there have been times I prayed for something, and God answered my prayers, but I forgot to thank God for the gift. I'm also sure there have been times when I asked for something, and God answered my prayers, but not in the form I imagined, so I didn't even realize God answered me. Now would be a good time for us to remember to thank God for those instances.

The more we focus on how faithful God has been to us in the past, the easier it is to trust that we'll find what we're searching for in the future. It's like the story Dennis, Matt, and Sheila Fabricant Linn tell in their book *Sleeping with Bread*. During World War II, children experienced so much trauma and hunger that they had trouble getting to sleep in their orphanages at night. Even though they were safe now, they were conditioned to live with scarcity and hunger. Then someone had the brilliant idea to give each child a loaf of bread to sleep with, so they knew they would have bread again when they woke up in the morning. They needed a tangible reminder that they would receive food when they asked for it again.

FOR PRAYER: Ask the Holy Spirit to remind you of times when God answered your prayers, big or small. Spend a few minutes today soaking in how faithful God has been to you and saying thank you.

TO PRAY: Gift-giving God, like a good parent, you have always given me what I needed to become who I am today. Give me deeper trust that you will continue to answer me.

Be Like the Narnians

Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die.

—Ezekiel 18:28

There is a scene near the end of C.S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia book *The Last Battle* when the children who have come to Narnia see some creatures they thought were evil take Aslan's side as their world is ending and they are saved. The children puzzle about this for a bit but then give up trying to understand why Aslan welcomes them after their terrible actions. It's not too long until the children accept the other creatures into the heaven Aslan has created for them all.

The reading from Ezekiel today reminds me of that scene. "You say, 'The Lord's way is not fair!'" Ezekiel says. Haven't all of us thought this at some point in our lives when we contemplate that God forgives and welcomes back a sinner? I love the Narnia scene because the children don't argue with Aslan that it's not fair that he saved those creatures. They leave the judging to Aslan because only Aslan can know their hearts. We would do well to follow those children's example.

FOR REFLECTION: Do you usually feel more like a sinner who has a hard time believing God welcomes you back, more like a righteous person indignant that God welcomes sinners, or like the Narnian children who easily accept that God welcomes sinners?

TO PRAY: Lord, let me trust and accept that you stand ready to welcome back each and every one of us after we have sinned.

Praying for People You Dislike

“But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you... For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?” —Matthew 5:44, 46

I pride myself on having no enemies, but there are some people in my life I don't especially like. There is one in particular that I have a strong and active dislike for—I'll call her Amy. I can't put my finger on why, but Amy rubs me the wrong way every single time we have an interaction: in person, in groups together, or via email or text. After we have an exchange, I sometimes ruminate about it for hours, and I have a hard time stopping myself from replaying the interaction. Amy has been in my life for eight years now, and because we move in some of the same circles, it looks like she'll be staying in my life for a long time to come.

Sometimes I think that if I can just cut down on our interactions or avoid thinking about Amy when I'm not around her, I can get over my dislike. When I read this Gospel passage, though, I know that is just a cop-out. The fact is, I have avoided her sometimes but *still* managed to feel judgmental. That's not loving her.

Clearly, I can't heal myself from my negativity towards her. I need to take Jesus seriously now and turn this relationship over to God for healing. What better time than this Lent to pray specifically for Amy every time she crosses my mind? I don't even need to know how to pray for her. I can trust that God knows what we each need in this relationship. It's your turn now, God.

FOR ACTION: Who are your enemies or who rubs you the wrong way? Pray for them today, that God will give them whatever they need. Pray also that God will free you of what keeps you imprisoned to them.

TO PRAY: Lord, I can't make myself feel love toward someone. Soften my heart and heal me to be free of any negativity I have towards others.

Get outside!

He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” —Genesis 15:5

After college, my best friend Lisa and I joined the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. I moved to Oregon for my placement while she moved to Montana. On our last night together at our orientation, we camped outside and watched a meteor shower before falling asleep. About two weeks later, I was with my new community-mates laying on a blanket on a hilltop and talking while we watched the stars come out, and the moon rise. I was feeling a bit homesick and missing my college friends when it occurred to me that Lisa could see the same moon and stars from the Indian reservation where she was living and working. Then it occurred to me that Jesus and his disciples would have slept under the same stars many nights as they traveled between towns—and they would have seen the same moon that I was seeing. Going back even further, Abraham looked up and saw those same pinpricks of light when he heard God’s promise.

Today’s readings are full of reminders of how God speaks to us through nature: the sky, stars, and fire (from Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18), and a mountain-top, bright light, and clouds in the Gospel (Luke 9:28b-36). God is so much bigger than the interior of our churches or the corner of a room where we might pray. Let’s remember to go outside, look around and look up to see what message God might have for us.

FOR ACTION: Commit this week to spend some intentional time outside, quietly soaking in the wonders of creation. If you can, look up at the stars and remember Jesus and Abraham looking at them too.

TO PRAY: Creator of the universe, teach me to look to the marvels of your creation for signs of your greatness and power.

More Reasons Not to Judge

“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.” —Luke 6:36-37

Professor and social scientist Brené Brown points out that studies show 85%-90% of the almost two million prisoners in the United States have had terrible exposure to violence and maltreatment in their past. When she interviewed Dr. Bruce Perry and Oprah Winfrey about their 2021 book *What Happened to You? Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing*, Dr. Perry said, “I want to give them the diagnosis of ‘what-do-you-expect?’ disorder. What do you expect if you neglect a kid and you beat them and you humiliate them and you sexually abuse them, and now they’re having trouble...? What do you expect? Why pathologize something that is a completely predictable outcome from a horrific background? And so I think it’s so important that rather than judging somebody in these pejorative ways... we take the time to get to know... why they’re acting the way they are.”

That interview, and the book it’s based on, rocked my world. How often have I judged others solely from what I see of them externally or based on something they’ve done? How often does our society judge people or blame them for their broken relationships, addictions, inability to climb out of poverty, homelessness, and even mental illness? Why do we not first wonder what has happened to them that has led them to their current behavior or life situation?

What Happened to You? challenges us to remember that Jesus didn’t only teach against judging others (because we’ll never know what they’ve been through), but that we have to go further and be merciful, striving to be as merciful as God.

FOR ACTION: Whom do you feel judgment toward? What can you do proactively this week to show them mercy?

TO PRAY: All-merciful God, free me of my judgments of others. May my heart grow in compassion and mercy, especially for those I don’t understand.

Aim for It

Make justice your aim. —Isaiah 1:17 (NAB)

I like this translation of Isaiah's verse better than the translation of the Bible I usually read. "Make justice your aim" is something I *can* do and am willing to do. Another translation, "Do justice," feels discouraging because no matter how hard I try, it isn't always possible in our very complex global situation in 2022. Because I can't feed my family solely from the food I grow at home or buy organically at the farmer's market, some of the food we eat will inevitably be the fruit of unjust farming practices that exploit farmworkers or poison the land. So although I can't "do justice" 100% of the time in this realm, I can *aim* for it for sure. Likewise, I can't make all of my family's clothes, and I can't grow the cotton for the fabric. Inevitably some of the clothes we wear are produced in sweatshops half a world away where the women and children workers are not treated justly. However, I can aim for more justice in this area by buying second-hand clothes or from fair trade sources. I can choose not to buy new clothes just for the sake of fashion so that I'm not creating more demand for cheaply manufactured items.

I don't think it's a cop-out to "make justice my aim" because there are so many areas in which we as individuals don't have the power and influence to bring about true justice. I can't bring about justice in every realm, but I can make justice my aim in my everyday decisions.

FOR REFLECTION: How do you spend your time, money, energy, skills, or education aiming for justice? Is there something you can do this week to make justice your aim in a new area of your life?

TO PRAY: God, help me not be discouraged about the immensity of the injustice in the world today, and instead to be inspired to make justice my aim in my everyday choices.

A Bold Ask

Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favor of him. And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom."

—Matthew 20:20-21

I can relate to this mother. I'm guessing she thought her sons were the best in the world, just like I think my two daughters are the best in the world. If Jesus were around today, I'm sure I would be asking favors for my girls (although I don't think I would do it in front of other parents!). Please let them always have good health, Jesus. Please protect them from the mean kids in middle school. Please don't let them get addicted to phones, social media, drugs, or alcohol. Please let them get into the best college they might want to attend.

Is it wrong for me to ask for these things? Was it wrong for James' and John's mother to request a special place for her sons? I don't think Jesus has a problem with us asking for things for ourselves and our loved ones. However, this story points out that we don't always understand what is best from God's wider perspective. We can ask for whatever we want, but that doesn't mean that's what is best for us. If my girls don't always have good health, they might find unexpected gifts in living with illnesses or disabilities. If they don't get into their top college, they may discover there's a place that's better for them. The invitation to us is to remember in our asking that we may not know the whole story. Our will may not be God's will, and if that is the case, God has something even better in mind for us. God will be with us even if God's will isn't done.

FOR REFLECTION: When have you prayed or yearned for something that you didn't get, and it turned out to be for the best?

TO PRAY: Jesus, help me see things from your perspective and trust that you will give me what I need, even if I don't understand what that is right now.

Stressed but Still Rooted

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord... They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit. —Jeremiah 17:7-8

Jeremiah didn't know that even deeply rooted trees are stressed by extended periods of drought, as science tells us now. Their chance of surviving and thriving is higher if they are well-rooted and planted near water, but they will still be stressed.

It is the same with us. Just because we are rooted in God doesn't mean we'll be protected from pain and struggle. It doesn't mean we will never be anxious. If we're deeply rooted in God, though, it will help us through the inevitable storms that come in our spiritual, mental, and physical lives.

FOR ACTION: What can you do today to put your roots down further into God? Do it!

TO PRAY: Lord, let me be more deeply rooted in you. Show me where to send my roots further down.

Are Fridays Different?

Are Fridays in Lent any different for you than Fridays during the rest of the year? Like many Catholics my age or older, Fridays in Lent conjure images of fish sticks for dinner. Since I'm a vegetarian now, I can sometimes go an entire Lenten season without thinking about the value behind the call to go meatless.

If the point of skipping meat on Fridays is to be in solidarity with the billions of poor around the world who don't have the privilege of eating meat regularly, there must be something else I can do to be in solidarity with them. If the point is to give the money I would have spent on meat to the poor instead, I can still do that. In fact, there's a homeless man named

Kevin who lives not too far from me who would be happy for me to start showing up with a meal for him every Friday. If the point of giving up meat is to jar myself out of the ordinary to be more thoughtful and grateful about the privilege I have to eat three meals a day, well, I should be able to do that another way too.

FOR REFLECTION: Are you more thoughtful about what you eat on Fridays? What invitation is behind the teaching for you about abstaining from meat on Fridays during Lent?

TO PRAY: Gracious God, thank you for the food you provide. May I always remember many people in the world have less than me.

MARCH 19 ■ SATURDAY, SECOND WEEK OF LENT

Take a Rest

We are at the end of the second week of Lent now. How has this season been for you? Does it feel different from the rest of your year, or have you not entirely entered into the spirit of it yet? Or maybe you're feeling overwhelmed by all the commitments to prayer, fasting, and almsgiving that you've made, and you realize they are not all sustainable. That's okay too. However your Lent is proceeding, can you allow yourself some quiet time with Jesus alone in the desert today? Remember, Lent isn't a diet or a self-improvement program. There are many fantastic ideas for marking the season, but we can't do them all. And God doesn't need us to do them all.

Why not allow yourself some time to rest with Jesus now? Ask him to be with you wherever you are: in the corner of your bedroom, on a bus, lying on your bed. If it helps to imagine being with Jesus out in the desert during his 40-day retreat, do that. You can be with him without talking, and let him be with you. He's good at knowing your heart. Or you can tell him whatever is on your mind. Pay attention to how he receives you and if he has any response.

FOR PRAYER: Without feeling the need to do anything for God today, let yourself rest and simply be with God.

TO PRAY: Lord, help me remember that I am a human being, not a human doing. Teach me to rest regularly in you, just as you rested in your Father.

Spiritual Fertilizer

“Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”
—Luke 13:8-9

I had this parable in mind for years after we planted an apricot tree in our backyard. We dug it up and moved it to a sunnier location when it didn't produce fruit after the first three years. Then I gave it three more years after that, all the while carefully watering, fertilizing, and pruning it. After getting only about a dozen fruit from it, I finally conceded that we should cut it down and plant a different tree. Now an apple tree stands in its place, bearing apples (that the squirrels enjoy before we do).

Here Jesus uses a fig tree and a gardener as a metaphor for us and God. We all have the potential to bear good fruit; to find the work we are most suited to which meets a need in the world, to give love in ways that bring new life into the world (and I'm not just talking about making babies), to care for the earth and all of its creatures, human and otherwise. It takes time, fertilizer, and careful tending to grow into these ways of living. This parable reminds us that we can't afford to wait too long without giving proper attention to our “trees.” The longer we wait to fertilize and cultivate our spiritual lives, the harder it will be to bear fruit, until one day it may be too late.

FOR REFLECTION: How is your spiritual life growing these days? Is it bearing fruit? What fertilizer are you adding: what are you reading, watching, or listening to that aids in your growth? Who are your teachers who enrich the soil? Is anything toxic being added to the soil which you need to remediate?

TO PRAY: Gardener God, I want to bear good fruit. Give me the wisdom to know how to nurture the gifts you have given me.

Are You An Inspiration?

This week is the second anniversary of when my region of the country shut down, and sheltering-in-place began in hopes of reducing COVID-19 hospitalizations. Like many, we thought we were hunkering down for two weeks at home with the kids. My girls looked forward to the break like I looked forward to snow days growing up in Indiana. It was the third week of Lent then too, and I thought we'd be back to church for the adult baptisms and confirmations at the Easter Vigil. Of course, we all know that we didn't get to experience Easter in the usual way in 2020. My RCIA group waited until August to be baptized, confirmed, and receive their first communions during a Mass in the parking lot, sitting six feet apart, with no singing behind our masks. I thought it would be disappointing and anti-climatic for them, but God worked God's usual wonders, and it proved to be a beautiful and moving ceremony. One newly baptized had to change her mask mid-Mass because her tears soaked through her first one!

In my experience as an RCIA Director, those converting to Catholicism often take their faith more seriously than many of us in the pews. They hunger for companions on the journey who intentionally choose to practice their faith in their everyday lives, not just be culturally Catholic. They are looking for others to be examples of a different way of living—a way of living rooted in following the teachings of Jesus and loving your neighbor as yourself. If one of these converts met you, would the way you live your life inspire them?

FOR ACTION: Do you know anyone in your parish RCIA program this year? What can you do to support them? If you don't know them, try to find out their names from the parish staff so you can pray for them specifically as they prepare to receive their sacraments in a few weeks.

TO PRAY: Loving God, bless and inspire those preparing for baptism, confirmation, or first Communion in several weeks. Help me live in such a way that my life might inspire them.

When Forgiveness Takes Awhile

“Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, 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 don't know about you, but I sometimes have the experience of thinking I've forgiven someone only to find myself irritated, hurt, or offended all over when I remember the incident or see the person again. Sometimes it's because I didn't really do the work of forgiving them in the first place—I just wanted to get past the unpleasantness of the situation, so I tried to put it out of my mind. That's not forgiveness.

Other times, I have genuinely prayed about the situation and thought I gave it over to God, so I'm discouraged or disappointed when I realize I'm not “over it” yet. I believe this is exactly what Jesus was getting at when he told Peter he had to forgive someone more times than Peter was hoping to have to do. I remember the wise words of a now-departed priest friend of mine at times like these. He always said that forgiveness is a decision, not a feeling. He said it doesn't mean that something is wrong with us if we still feel hurt or anger long after we've first forgiven someone. It's a sign that we're human and have normal human feelings and emotions. The key, he said, is that we don't wait until we are free of those feelings to forgive someone. We can decide to forgive them again and again and again. It's a slog, and it's definitely work, but Jesus never said forgiveness would be easy.

FOR PRAYER: Ask God for the fortitude to continue forgiving someone who has hurt you. Pray the Our Father slowly and thoughtfully, especially focusing on the lines about forgiveness.

TO PRAY: What person(s) have you struggled to forgive? Ask 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.

Passing It on

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; make them known to your children and your children's children.

—Deuteronomy 4:9

My friends Katie and Pete did what Moses asked the Israelites to do: pass the faith onto their children. They raised their four boys in the church. They prayed with them and taught them stories from the Bible, the Ten Commandments, and the Beatitudes. They helped them learn to live as Jesus taught.

Sadly, their grown children no longer practice their religion. It's distressing and sad for my friends to see that their grandchildren aren't being introduced to the faith and don't hear conversations about Jesus or God in their homes. When they babysit for the grandkids over the weekends, there's always a question about how much they can or should talk about God, if they are allowed to read to the kids from a children's Bible, or if they can take them to Mass with them. Because their daughter-in-law has a strong bias against Christianity, they don't feel it's fair to disrespect her wishes.

Thankfully, Katie and Pete know that our God is still present and active in their grandchildren's lives even if God isn't named aloud. They are not worried that the grandchildren will be excluded from heaven because they don't know Jesus. But their grief in not sharing something so central and life-giving in their lives is real.

FOR REFLECTION: With whom have you tried to share your faith explicitly? Is there anyone in your life now who might need to hear from you because they are not hearing about it from anyone else?

TO PRAY: God, give me the courage and the right words to speak so that I might make you known to others.

How Do I Know It's God?

If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts. —Psalm 95:7-8

As a spiritual director, people often ask me, “How do I know God is talking?” or “How do I know it’s God’s voice and not just my imagination?” These are great questions, and people were asking the same ones of St. Ignatius more than 500 years ago. He got those kinds of questions so often he wrote some guidelines to help us discern God’s voice from other voices. There are hundreds of books on this subject (just search “Ignatian discernment”), but some brief rules of thumb are as follows.

Does what you are hearing and sensing in your prayer, your heart, or your body seem to be an invitation to more freedom, joy, or peace? If so, that’s almost certainly from God. “Yes! Even though I’ll make less money in that job, I would love to do that work!” Notice the freedom present in this response. If the voice you hear leaves you feeling depressed, unsettled, or more anxious, that’s probably not of God. “It seems like something I should *want to* do, but I just can’t imagine how I would manage two months away at this time.” Notice the sense of burden when contemplating this invitation to study abroad for a summer.

Is the voice you hear a voice of love that wants to give more life to you and others? That’s God’s voice. “Ask that homeless man if he needs anything.” Or does it inspire judgment, resentment, or violence? That’s not of God. “They are living in sin, and someone needs to tell them.”

None of this means that God’s voice won’t ask anything hard of us, but if the voice we hear is ultimately asking something that will bring more life and love to us, others, and the world, then harden not your heart.

FOR ACTION: What has God been putting on your heart or nudging you to do recently? Reach out to an estranged relative? Take a meal to a lonely friend or neighbor? Say yes to a particular volunteer opportunity? Leave a toxic relationship? Ask God for the courage to do it, and follow through on it today.

TO PRAY: God, help me to hear your voice, to trust it, and to follow through with what you ask of me.

Nailed It

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” —Mark 12:28

There’s a crowd of people around Jesus with different views on interpreting their religious laws: there are Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees, and scribes present, all arguing about the Old Testament laws they hold in common but understand differently. A modern-day equivalent might be a variety of Catholics, Presbyterians, evangelical Christians, and United Church of Christ leaders arguing about who can be ordained or the exact nature of the Eucharist. Each group could point to support for their views in scripture, just as the groups arguing in front of Jesus could find support for their views about which commandment is the greatest.

The scribe’s question was commonly debated in his day. There are 613 commandments in the Jewish laws, so which one is the most important? Immediately, Jesus repeats the one commandment that every observant Jew would have recited three times a day: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The debaters would be hard-pressed to find fault with that answer, but Jesus doesn’t stop there. Lest someone ask *how* to love God, or someone else claim they love God even as they harm another person, Jesus tags on something, also from the Old Testament. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” If you want to love God, love your neighbor. If you don’t love your neighbor, you don’t love God. The scribe knows Jesus has nailed it by smoothly combining two commandments into one. From then on, Jews and Christians have had a ready-made answer whenever anyone asks us to explain the basics of our religion.

FOR ACTION: What can you commit to doing today to put your love for God in action by showing your love for someone else?

TO PRAY: Lord, let me witness that I love you through the love I show to others.

Still confessing

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. —Psalm 51:1-2

My professor of sacramental theology surprised us one day by saying, “Catholics go to confession as much now as they ever did.” Then he paused and said, “They just don’t confess to priests as much as they used to. They confess to friends, spouses, therapists, or twelve-step groups. They confess on radio call-in shows or in television interviews.” Today I would add that people confess on Facebook and Instagram, blog posts, or other social media.

We have a deep human need to unburden ourselves and admit our sins in the hope that we will be heard and received with compassion. This type of sharing with a trusted individual—priest or otherwise—can be cathartic, healthy, and healing. It can also backfire and result in more pain and confusion if the person or people on the receiving end don’t receive our confession with empathy and mercy. The Catholic tradition invites us to confess to a priest whose primary job in the sacrament of reconciliation is to remind us that God stands ever-ready to receive us with mercy and forgiveness, no matter what we have done.

God uses the priest as a channel of God’s forgiveness. (And yes, God can use friends, spouses, or therapists just as freely to remind us we are forgiven.) Pope Francis reminds us that the sacrament of reconciliation doesn’t exist to make us feel guilty about ourselves or our sins but as a doorway to mercy. Let’s walk through that doorway so we can receive God’s healing.

Note: If you have ever experienced a priest respond to your confession by shaming, blaming, or judging, know that he was not reflecting Jesus, who never shamed, blamed, or judged sinners who came to him.

FOR ACTION: Make a plan to receive the sacrament of reconciliation before Easter. When is your parish offering it?

TO PRAY: Forgiving God, help me know your mercy and trust in your forgiveness.

Meeting the Prodigal Son

“Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

—Luke 15:31-32

When I worked as a hospital chaplain on an in-patient drug and alcohol rehab floor, I was meeting with a patient once who was full of shame and self-reproach for all the terrible things he had done when he was abusing alcohol. His remorse was genuine and his hurt deep, but he couldn't believe in God's forgiveness of him. My job as a chaplain wasn't to be his therapist, move him to make amends as part of the twelve-step program, or chart a path forward. My job was simply to try to be the voice of God for him. That's when I thought of the parable of the Prodigal Son.

I asked him if he knew the story. He said it sounded familiar, but he wasn't sure, so I summarized it. As I related the story from memory, I was surprised by how gripping it was to tell out loud to an unfamiliar audience. By the time I got to the part about the father welcoming back the wayward son, my patient was sobbing. “I'm the younger brother,” he said. “That's me.” From then on, when I met with patients on that floor, if the occasion seemed right, I would re-tell that story. Every single patient cried.

I had always related to the older brother in the story. Like him, I felt some lingering resentment that God welcomed back someone who didn't deserve it. But in telling the story to self-identified younger brothers who cried with amazement that God would still welcome them back, I felt nothing but gratitude to have the God we do.

FOR REFLECTION: Which brother do you most relate to? Why? Who in your life do you identify as the other brother? Can you imagine what it is like to be them and hear the father's words in the story?

TO PRAY: Gracious God, may I be welcoming and forgiving to any younger brothers in my life. May I always know that you stand ready to welcome me home when I leave.

Scave: Scared but Brave

The official said to him, “Sir, come down before my little boy dies.” Jesus said to him, “Go; your son will live.” The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started on his way. —John 4:49-50

When my daughters were little, we made up a word: scave. It was for those times when they were scared but brave enough to go through with whatever it was that scared them. They were scave on the first day of school every year and scave when they had to get dental x-rays. We talked about how they were braver for doing those things when scared than if they weren't scared in the first place.

There are the people who have a gift of faith that helps them hope in the unseen without much effort. Then there are others who have to *practice* hoping in the unseen, sometimes with much effort. The man in the Gospel story had the gift that allowed him to believe without any evidence. I think Jesus is just as moved, if not more so, by people who ask something of him and then have to really work to believe in his promises.

FOR PRAYER: What is it you want to ask of God? Turn to God as if to a friend, and tell him what you think and feel about your request.

TO PRAY: Lord, grant me more trust and faith in you and your promises.

Blaming and Betraying

The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. Therefore the Jews started persecuting Jesus. —John 5:15-16

The man had been lying ill for 38 years, but when Jesus asked him, “Do you want to be made well?” he didn't answer the question. He gave a pouting response about how he hadn't been cured yet while others had. Jesus healed him anyway and then, interestingly, told him to pick up his mat and walk. Jesus knew it was the Sabbath, and Jews weren't supposed to carry anything on the Sabbath because that was considered work. Jesus knew he

was instructing the man to do something against the law.

When the man was accused of breaking the Sabbath, he blamed Jesus and reported him to the authorities. He selfishly accepted Jesus' gift then immediately betrayed him.

FOR REFLECTION: What are some examples you see in the world or the church of people betraying Jesus?

TO PRAY: Lord, I am grateful for all that you have done and do for me. Help me never to forget you are the source of all my blessings.

MARCH 30 ■ WEDNESDAY, FOURTH WEEK OF LENT

Creation Keeps Singing

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! —Isaiah 49:13

Although the Lenten season is often imaged as dry, barren, and desert-like, that doesn't mean we can't rejoice and sing in the midst of it. The same goes for us in our spiritual lives. Even when we feel down or somber, there are still reasons to lift our voices and sing with creation that praises God.

Early on in the pandemic, when the country shut down and people retreated inside, it seemed that all conversations centered on the coronavirus. Worry and fear were in the air. Then I noticed that our cats weren't worried about the pandemic. They were still doing their cat things: hunting in the backyard or snuggling up with us on the couch. Next, I noticed that our chickens were still going about their everyday chickeny things: scratching for bugs, preening their feathers, and laying eggs. Finally, I noticed that the trees, the birds perched in them, and every squirrel, butterfly, and insect I saw were unmoved by the human fear in the world. It was as if all of creation was still singing for joy and praising their Maker by continuing to do what was theirs to do. They reminded me to remember to sing, even in a desert time.

FOR ACTION: Put on some music you like and sing along today in praise to God.

TO PRAY: Lord, I thank you for all of creation which you have made. May I join my spirit to theirs in praising you, our Maker.

Modern-Day Golden Calves

“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, and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” —Exodus 32:8

It’s easy for us to identify the idolatry of the Israelites when they begin worshipping the statue of a calf they created by melting down precious metals. Still, it’s a lot harder to identify idolatry in our own lives. Lenten fasts are an excellent tool for self-examination in this realm. Fasting asks us to evaluate what our values and priorities are. When we fast from over-eating, buying non-essentials, or technology use, or we fast from judging others or workaholicism, it reveals what we have allowed to become our idols: food, material consumption, productivity, etc. Even more telling may be those things we can’t imagine fasting from.

Just because we don’t have a statue in front of us doesn’t mean we’re free from idolatry. (Although watching how many hours my neighbors spend babying their sports car suggests that golden calves are still around in different forms today.) As you think about what you are fasting from, consider if it has unconsciously become an idol for you. Does the time, attention, and energy you give to it detract from living with humility, mercy, and justice? This doesn’t mean that if you enjoy a glass of wine to help unwind at the end of a stressful day that alcohol has necessarily become your idol/savior. The question is, where does your mind turn when you 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 you less able to be present to yourself and others?

FOR ACTION: Look around at your possessions, what you wear, and what you use regularly. Do any of them implicitly deny your Christian faith and its values? Choose one thing to fast from using or wearing for the rest of Lent—and then give it away.

TO PRAY: God, open my eyes to how I worship things other than you. Draw my mind and heart back to you as the source of all that is good.

God Doesn't Hate Him

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted. —Psalm 34:18

In the book *What Happened to You?* by Oprah Winfrey and Dr. Bruce Perry, Perry tells a story of a young boy he worked with once who had been physically and sexually abused for years, first by his biological parents and later his foster parents. When he ran away one day, a police officer missed a chance to rescue him because he didn't believe the boy's story, and he returned him to his abusers. They punished him by making him sleep outside in the chicken coop that night. The next day, the boy wrote in his diary, "Why does God hate me so much?"

My first thought upon reading that was that not only does God not hate him, but God was suffering with him every moment that he suffered. After he was finally removed from his abusers, I hope medical care workers and mental health professionals surrounded him with care so he could come to know that he was worthy of love. I hope that someone helped him realize that God didn't do those things to him, but that sick and broken human beings did those things to him. I pray that he and all those who suffer so incredibly can come to feel what the psalmist proclaimed: "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted."

FOR PRAYER: If you are brokenhearted in any way, beg to feel and trust in God's presence with you and love for you. If you are not brokenhearted today, pray to be an instrument of God's care for someone else who is.

TO PRAY: Jesus, you proved your willingness to be with brokenhearted people. May we know your presence with us now when we are hurting.

More Than Pseudo-Rest

O Lord my God, in you I take refuge; save me from all my pursuers, and deliver me, or like a lion they will tear me apart. —Psalm 7:1-2

Substantial research today suggests that the chronic state of stress and busyness in our modern culture is worse for our health than the stress our ancestors experienced when predators chassed them. In those old days, the human fight-or-flight system was in full gear, with adrenaline coursing through lungs pumping more oxygen and hearts pumping more blood to muscles. But when the threat was over, they returned to their relaxed baseline until the next threat came along. Today, we're suffering negative health effects from our constant state of stress and stimulation: suppressed immune systems, digestive problems, and chronic high blood pressure that don't return to normal because our stress never completely disappears.

So many of us don't make time to regularly stop our work, our self-improvement programs, and our worries so that we might take refuge in God's values. Some of us take time for "pseudo-rest," but bingeing on Netflix, food, or alcohol; mindlessly scrolling through our news feeds; or shopping for things that won't satisfy our deepest needs won't ultimately leave us more rested. They might eventually even tear apart our relationships or ruin our health. What if we made it a priority to make time for real rest for our bodies, minds, and souls, time in which we take refuge in our faith, our spiritual traditions, and God?

FOR REFLECTION: What does real rest look like for you? In what way(s) might God be inviting you to take refuge from all the "pursuers" in your life? Take a mid-day walk by yourself? Light a candle and drink a cup of tea while sitting in silence before you begin or end your day? Give up the idea of buying a bigger house? Decide you'll be okay even though your teenager won't go to the top-tier college you were hoping he would go to? Make an appointment with a spiritual director to support you in deepening your prayer and spiritual life?

TO PRAY: Oh, God, my refuge is in you. Keep leading me back to you for rest and renewal.

Mercy or Punishment?

When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” —John 8:7

One of the arguments against capital punishment is the rhetorical question, “Why do we kill people to show that killing people is wrong?” There is no evidence that the death penalty deters crime, and it certainly doesn’t help someone grow into the fullness of who they might become if they were treated with compassion and understanding. Jesus’ ability to see a bigger picture than a list of laws and punishments meant that the woman caught in adultery would have the chance to live and grow into the woman God hoped she would become.

Would killing her prevent other people from committing adultery? Probably not—and it would snuff out all the potential in her to be a bright light in her world and a witness to the power of forgiveness. No one in that crowd knew all the life circumstances that led her to that moment in time. They judged her for one specific action, with no understanding of what came before. Jesus’ response of mercy instead of punishment was much more likely to lead to a “positive clinical outcome” both for her and hopefully for those looking on (some of whom had likely committed adultery before too). Just as he did with the tax collector Zacchaeus, Jesus shows people are more likely to respond to love, acceptance, and forgiveness than to haranguing, intolerance, or condemnation.

FOR REFLECTION: Do you jump to judgment about someone in your life? Pray that God opens your mind and heart to respond with more understanding, compassion, and mercy for what has shaped them and made them act as they do.

TO PRAY: Jesus, you always chose mercy over rule-following. Help me to do the same.

Which Line Stands out?

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. —Psalm 23:5b

When I read the responsorial psalm for today, the above line stood out because I have so much for which to be grateful. My family is in good health. My husband and I have good work. Our kids are doing well in school this semester, and although they could always stand to learn some more social skills, they are doing fine. We're enjoying the company of neighbors, friends, and fellow church members. Today is one of those days when I know my cup overflows, and it's good for me to be thankful for it.

This verse also makes me think of other people who feel anything but anointed or feel like their cup is empty today. Maybe if they read this psalm now, the image that would jump out for them is walking through the darkest valley—the valley of the shadow of death. Maybe they feel the presence of their enemies in whatever form their enemies take—addiction, trauma, loss, betrayal—and they can't fathom a table set with a feast before them. So I wonder—how might God want me to use my overflowing cup to be a blessing for them?

FOR PRAYER: Read the entirety of Psalm 23. What line most speaks to you today? Repeat it throughout the day, and let that be your prayer.

TO PRAY: Shepherd God, make your presence known to everyone, especially those who don't sense your presence with them now.

The Misery of Uncertainty

The people became impatient on the way. They spoke 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

"We feel better with the certainty of misery than the misery of uncertainty," says psychologist Virginia Satir. That could explain why some people

don't leave abusive relationships or demeaning jobs. It might explain why some people sabotage good relationships, living situations, or work opportunities. It seems to explain why the Israelites complained that they would rather go back to slavery in Egypt than endure the uncertainties of their journey to the Promised Land. The hardship of Egypt was preferable to the anxiety of the unknown.

From our vantage point of history, we know that things will get better for Moses' band of escapees, but having lived through the oppression, torture, and trauma of slavery, they simply couldn't envision anything different. We see this pattern still playing out thousands of years later, even though rational people should not willingly choose misery over a better life.

FOR REFLECTION: Have you ever chosen something familiar over the unfamiliar, even though you knew it was not good for you?

TO PRAY: God, help me to grow in trust that you want to lead me to the Promised Land, even if it takes time and discomfort to get there.

APRIL 6 ■ WEDNESDAY, FIFTH WEEK OF LENT

Time to check-in

How are your Lenten practices going? Are there any commitments that have been particularly meaningful for you this season? Can you see the good that God is doing in you and through you because of them?

Maybe your intention this Lent wasn't to do anything more but to do less so that you could be more attentive to God's invitations as they've come. Maybe God's invitation to you has been to rest and simply be in God's presence as Jesus was for those 40 days in the desert. Whatever you committed to doing or not doing, and how well you've been doing or not doing it, God is still at work in your heart. There are 11 more days of this seasonal journey and then the rest of your life to continue growing your spiritual life.

FOR REFLECTION: Spend a few minutes taking stock of your Lenten season so far. For what are you grateful?

TO PRAY: Jesus, thank you for walking with me this Lent. Open my eyes, ears, and heart to how you want to keep working in me and through me.

The Danger of Mislabeling

The Jews said to him, “Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham died, and so did the prophets; yet you say, ‘Whoever keeps my word will never taste death.’” —John 8:52

This week, the Gospel readings come from a long passage in John during which Jesus is talking circles around the Jewish authorities who are looking for reasons to kill him. They get lost in the semantics when he’s trying to communicate something deeper beneath the words. The problem is, they don’t want to hear it, or they aren’t willing to do the work to understand what he is getting at. It’s easier for them to claim Jesus is possessed by a demon than to have to re-work their worldview.

We do the same today when, for example, the educational system labels a child as a problem student rather than piecing together that the child is hyper-vigilant, fidgety, inattentive, and physically aggressive because he witnesses domestic violence at home or is abused himself. His behaviors don’t necessarily mean he needs to be medicated for ADHD but point out that he has been traumatized, and his body reacts predictably. His behavior begs for evidence that he is safe and loved. Sadly, most, if not all, adults will miss the meaning behind his behavior, and he’ll get labeled with some version of disability or mental illness. Like the Jewish leaders in Jesus’ time, we often react with judgment to people whose language or behavior we don’t understand. We don’t like feeling threatened by a different worldview, so it’s easier to scapegoat the person than to sit with the unknowing of what they might really be trying to say.

FOR REFLECTION: What groups of people does society write off as “crazy” in one way or another? Is there any person or group of people in your life whom you label, dismiss, or ignore rather than trying to understand what is underneath their words or actions? Perhaps a neighbor from another country? Someone from a different political party? A troubled teen? The homeless people who sleep in front of the library?

TO PRAY: Jesus, sometimes it is hard to understand your teachings. Help me catch the meaning beneath your words rather than rationalizing my judgments.

Good Works

The Jews took up stones again to stone him. Jesus replied, "I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?" —John 10:31-32

Jesus just can't win. Nothing he says or does in John's Gospel is good enough to satisfy the "Jews." (John's phrase for the religious authorities of the time should not be extrapolated to all Jews throughout history.) They are bent on killing him regardless of his good works. When he tells them of his intimacy with God, they are offended. When he heals a lame man, they accuse him of breaking the laws of the Sabbath. When he feeds a crowd of thousands, they are suspicious of his motives. Most of the people in the crowds around Jesus are amazed and grateful for his good works, but the leaders find fault with his words and actions. They can't let go of their pre-conceived idea of how the Messiah was supposed to speak and act, so they can't appreciate what is right in front of them.

FOR ACTION: Be on the lookout for others who are doing good works, even if they aren't the ones you would naturally expect to be channels of God's grace. Thank them, show appreciation, or offer to support them.

TO PRAY: Jesus, help me see and appreciate all the good things that people do, whether they do it in your name or not.

Rocking the Boat Too Much?

So from that day on they planned to put him to death... Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who knew where Jesus was should let them know, so that they might arrest him.

—John 11:52, 57

Do you ever wonder what might be different if Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. toned down his criticisms of the government and structures that supported racism? Might he have lived longer to see justice rendered more swiftly? What if Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador was less strident in his calls for justice by the military leaders killing Salvadoran peasants? Maybe they wouldn't have felt the need to kill him, and he could have brokered peace between the military and the guerrilla fighters. What if Mahatma Gandhi wasn't so extreme in his hunger strikes and demonstrations of non-violence? Might he have escaped the attention of his assassin and lived longer to work for greater peace and justice in India?

Do you ever wonder the same about Jesus? Did he really need to rock the boat as much as he did? Couldn't he have backed off some of his more radical critiques of the Roman ruling government, the culture of militarism and oppression, and the hypocrisy of the religious leaders so that he could have lived longer and done more good in the world? Like the prophets before him and the modern-day prophets mentioned above, Jesus knew that speaking out as forcefully as he did put his life in danger. Like all those prophets, he also refused to quit speaking the truth to power. Jesus was killed because he allowed himself to become human, and he put himself at the mercy of humans who didn't want to hear the truth. In his faithfulness to speaking the truth, he refused to save himself from the consequences, just as King, Romero, and Gandhi chose.

FOR REFLECTION: Who are the prophets in 2022 who rock the boat in their calls for justice? How do the people in power react to them?

TO PRAY: Oh, God, let your justice roll down like the waters. May I stand with courage, supporting those who speak the truth to those in power.

What Should the Kids Hear?

Every year on Palm Sunday, I wonder how much of the Passion the kids in the pews should be hearing. Anyone who has listened to the entire Passion story knows it is intense and disturbing. Then again, many parents don't think twice about letting their children see a movie that contains violence and killing or read books about the same. (I can't judge them because I thoroughly enjoyed reading Harry Potter to my kids—and it is full of violence.) But the movies and books kids are reading are fiction, fantasy, or science-fiction, right? Many of them are, but kids are also exposed to local or world news that is filled with deeply disturbing reports. This brings me to the question, should we shield our children from what happened to Jesus? After all, kids' eyes often zero in on the crucifixes in church. If we advertise that moment in Jesus' life as central to our faith, shouldn't children be exposed to the story that culminated there?

I have also found that even young kids who can't possibly comprehend the language or follow the arc of the story tune in to the Passion reading and catch its flavor as the adults around them are moved during it. I don't think this is a bad thing in a culture that generally avoids discomfort and distress. We *should* be disturbed when we hear the Passion story, and our children can learn from watching how we react to betrayal, torture, unjust sentencing, and killing. Most of Jesus' closest companions left the scene. For various reasons, they simply couldn't deal with it. Yet some—notably, the women—stayed with Jesus despite how frightening and horrific it was. Are we willing to brave the discomfort this week so that we can stay and learn from him? Are we willing to let our children learn from him?

FOR ACTION: Make a commitment to read the entire Passion account yourself this week. The one read in churches throughout the world today is Luke 22:14-23:56, but you can read any of the Gospel accounts.

TO PRAY: Lord Jesus, as we remember your final days before your crucifixion, give us the strength to stay present to those who are still suffering their own passions today.

What If It's You?

I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations.

—Isaiah 42:6

There has always been debate about this passage. Who exactly is it referring to? Some think it's about Isaiah himself. Others believe it's about the entire Jewish people, Jesus, or all of us. We will never know for sure, so what if we live as if it refers to us? (God won't mind, I'm sure.)

Ask yourself how you might treat yourself differently if you truly believed God has called you personally, taken you by the hand, and kept you close all of your life. What decisions might you change if you thought of yourself with that much reverence? If you believe that God intends for you to be a light to the nations, would you be a different kind of neighbor? Would you live differently as a student or classmate? How might you be a different employer or employee? Would your home life change if you were committed to being a light to those with whom you share your home?

Even if Isaiah didn't have you or me in mind when he wrote this passage 2,500 years ago, God is still calling us, taking us by the hand, and asking us to be lights in whatever corner of the world we find ourselves. Jesus often talked about light in the darkness, and he asked his followers not to hide their lights under bushel baskets. Let's take on the mantle of responsibility, and let our light shine forth.

FOR ACTION: Go about your day today conscious that God wants you to be a light for others. Let God use you as a conduit of love, healing, and grace.

TO PRAY: Lord, help me let your light shine forth today.

Singing out Loud

I will sing of your salvation. —Psalm 71:15

During Lent last year, our church offered a variety of small groups as we tried to take concrete actions of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. There were groups focused on reducing clutter (“making space for grace”), fasting from technology, fasting from Amazon shopping, reading and journaling with a daily devotional, daily poem writing, walking and picking up litter, etc. I joined a group committed to singing out loud each day—wherever we found ourselves when the inspiration struck. The invitation was to use our voices as instruments of praise, lament, or petition—to sing out to God whatever we were thinking and feeling. I have never sung in a choir before, and I’m not the type to break into song when showering, driving, or cleaning the house, but I have always enjoyed singing in church. It gives me the sense that “to sing is to pray twice.” So I signed up, despite my self-consciousness and my question, “How will I know what to sing each day?”

I didn’t remember to sing out loud every single day of Lent, but I did more often than not. I was pleasantly surprised at how lifting my voice lifted my spirits. Instead of listening to the news on the car radio as I usually do, I listened to music and sang along. I went through an old playlist and fondly remembered singing certain songs with college friends many years ago, which prompted me to pray for them. I sang along to songs that my husband had introduced me to when we were first dating—and subsequently felt closer to him. Sometimes I sang the songs from church the previous Sunday (making that prayer count four times, right?), and sometimes it was radio favorites from my childhood. Singing out loud had a cumulative effect over those six weeks that felt like praise and thanksgiving. There’s something to be said for singing of God’s salvation rather than talking of God’s salvation.

FOR ACTION: Pick a song—any song—that has a flavor of praise to it, and sing it out loud today.

TO PRAY: Gracious God, too often I forget to praise and thank you. Receive my thanksgiving and praise for you now.

Betrayal

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 escaped being the victim of a major betrayal until I was 29 years old when one of my closest friends and housemates inexplicably turned on me, ending our friendship and spreading false accusations against me to some common friends. I was so surprised and confused that I don't know which was stronger, the hurt or the anger I felt toward her. To be honest, I was pretty shocked at how much rage there was within me. My trusted spiritual director suggested that I look through the Psalms and pray with those that mirrored my emotions. Let me just say that the verses about bashing the teeth of my enemies had never spoken to me before then. He also suggested I pray with the passages about Judas betraying Jesus, including the one we hear in the Gospel reading today. Until that experience, I hadn't given much thought to Judas' actions; I was more affected by Peter's denial.

Obviously, what happened to me when I was 29 wasn't on the level of what Judas did to Jesus, but it gave me a glimmer of insight into the confusion and hurt Jesus must have felt when his friend betrayed him. What about you? Have you been the victim of a betrayal? Or have you been the perpetrator of a betrayal? What does this part of Jesus' story evoke in you today?

FOR PRAYER: Do you still need healing from a betrayal that happened to you? Or do you need healing and forgiveness for a hurt you caused? Read Matthew 26:14-25 and talk to Jesus about what is on your heart now, asking him to heal what you can't.

TO PRAY: Lord Jesus, you experienced the worst of what humans can do to each other. Bring healing now to all who have been betrayed.

The Art of Gathering

One of my favorite liturgies of the year is the Holy Thursday Mass at my parish, when all are invited 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.

We were strictly a Sunday Mass attending family when I was growing up, so I never attended a Holy Thursday, Good Friday, or Easter Vigil service until after college. The first time I went to a Triduum liturgy, I thought, "I missed out all those years," so ever since then, I've been a cheerleader encouraging people to give them a try. Last year, our church still wasn't open for Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday services. None were open at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, so this Holy Week will be a chance for especially holy re-gatherings.

In her book, *The Art of Gathering*, Priya Parker argues that when we gathered before the pandemic—for birthday parties, staff meetings, Friday evening drinks, potlucks, and, dare I say it, even church services—we had mostly fallen into rote routines. We didn't give much thought to "how" we came together, much less "why" we were gathering. Catholics are often guilty of this since Mass is so ritualized, but the Triduum services are a far cry from routine. So the question is, can we re-gather physically with more purpose and presence this Holy Week? Are you willing to get our feet washed tonight? (Try it if you haven't before!). Are you willing to take time out of your day Friday to go to a somber service that very well may evoke tears? Can you consider giving up your Saturday evening to attend the Easter Vigil service? I guarantee you won't be disappointed if you do. The readings, sights, sounds, smells, and rituals of these next few days are so rich. You'll live through much in your heart if you open yourself to what happened on Jesus' last days on earth.

FOR ACTION: Find out the time of the services at your parish over the next few days and plan which you can attend. If you can't get to a daytime service tomorrow at your own parish, attend a closer parish.

TO PRAY: Lord, draw closer me closer to you over these next few days.

Revisiting a Death

*He said, “It is finished.” Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.
—John 19:30*

Stephen Jenkinson teaches in hospitals, medical schools, and palliative care settings that our culture often puts people on a “not allowed to die” list. The medical community tries to stave off death through months and years of treatment, often resulting in “more dying” rather than “more living.” He tells the story of a three-year-old girl whose parents finally asked the doctors to stop the ineffective treatments and allow her to die naturally, in her own time. It was a heart-wrenching decision, but it brought relief to all of them.

Reading or hearing the story of Jesus’ last hours will bring pain, and it will bring memories of our loved ones who have died. Today is a day to let yourself be solemn. By staying with your sadness, you are staying with Jesus and those who stayed with him on his last day: his mother, Mary Magdalene, the beloved disciple, Simon of Cyrene, and the women of Jerusalem. Give yourself time to be with them and them with you.

FOR REFLECTION: When you have experienced a personal passion, who stood by you? To whom might God be calling you to stand alongside now?

TO PRAY: God of life and God of death, be with us in our fear and sadness.

The Day After

Can you imagine what it was like for Peter, Jesus’ mother, Mary Magdalene, and all of Jesus’ other close friends on the day after he died? It was the Sabbath, so they couldn’t do anything to keep busy. Was that a blessing or a curse? Like all observant Jews, their work for the Sabbath day was to rest and pray. How did they spend that time? Who was together, and who was alone? How did others relate to Peter, who must have been dying of shame? What were the other apostles thinking and feeling the day after they ran

away from Jesus? How did they look after Mary, who had just seen her son killed?

Maybe you have the experience of living a “first day” after a loved one died. Maybe you understand the shock they were all going through. What helped you get through those first hours? Maybe you couldn’t see it then, but can you see now how God cared for you that day and the days after?

FOR REFLECTION: If you are grieving the death of a loved one, let yourself rest and pray. Don’t try to do any work on this holy Saturday. If you aren’t grieving today, can you offer your presence or a thoughtful gift today to someone else who might be struggling?

TO PRAY: Oh, Jesus, in times of grief, may we find others to share in our sadness. May we be for others a comforting presence when they grieve.

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Spiritual direction is a practice that encourages individuals to explore a closer relationship with God. In spiritual direction, you have the chance to reflect more consciously on your experiences of prayer (and the routine of your daily life) for how God is present and communicating with you. Often, sharing your thoughts and experiences with a trained spiritual director leads to greater clarity about how God is with you and is leading you. To learn more about spiritual direction or Ann’s practice please visit: <http://SpiritualDirection.today>

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