



Here I Am,
LORD

DAILY REFLECTIONS
ON THE LENTEN READINGS FOR MASS

Introduction

Every journey of transformation begins with an imperative: a call, an invitation to enter into a relationship. Each Lent we renew Jesus' inviting command and commanding invitation to "Follow me." How will we respond? Will we deepen our trust and entrust ourselves to Jesus, knowing that if we do everything about ourselves and our lives will change? Will we dare to follow him knowing that if we do we too will have to "take up our cross daily"? If we are willing to say to him, "Here I am, Lord," then our Lenten journey begins anew. To help us on that journey, we turn to God's Word in the daily Mass readings and to many fellow travelers who share their experiences of following Jesus. And if you find that this handy Lenten booklet draws you closer to God through your daily reflection on God's Word, you might consider the reflections for each day of the year found in the quarterly editions of *Words of Grace* available from *AllSaintsPress.com*.

— Steve Mueller, Editor

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FIRE OR ASH?

Jl 2:12-18 / 2 Cor 5:20—6:2 / Mt 6:1-6, 16-18

Today the ash on our forehead is a sign to help us find our direction by considering what occupies our mind. The small mark of ash reminds us that the many transient things we chase after and worry about every day will fade away like dust in the wind. Possessions are temporary, power passes, success wanes. The culture of appearance that persuades us to live for passing things is like a blaze: once ended, only ash remains. Lent invites us to free ourselves from the illusion of chasing after dust and to rediscover that we are created for the inextinguishable flame, not for ashes that immediately disappear; for God, not for the world; for the eternity of heaven, not for earthly deceit; for the freedom of God's children, not for slavery to things.

—Pope Francis

*How might I live less for the ashes of passing things
and more for God?*

“Merciful God, you called us forth from the dust of the earth; you claimed us for Christ in the waters of baptism. Look upon us as we enter these Forty Days bearing the mark of ashes, and bless our journey through the desert of Lent to the font of rebirth.”

—Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers

TAKE UP YOUR CROSS DAILY

Dt 30:15-20 / Lk 9:22-25

Jesus also called us to die with him, to take up our cross daily and follow him if we are to be his disciples. It is easier to make Jesus' death on the cross a pietistic wonder. Lost in our sins, rescued by the precious blood of his sacrifice, we are grateful. We may be grateful, but are we willing to pick up our own cross daily? To do so means we must learn how to die daily to our fears and self-centered ambitions, our aversions and attractions. To take up our cross daily means that we enter the emptiness of our heart and die there, like Jesus did. It is easier to glorify the cross of Christ. It is easier to believe in the cross than to take it up.

—Brian C. Taylor
Setting the Gospel Free

What cross is Jesus calling me to carry in my life now?

Abstinence is the voluntary self-denial of meat or of foods prepared with meat on those days prescribed by the Church as penitential (Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and all Fridays of Lent). Those fourteen years of age and older are bound by this practice.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF FASTING

Is 58:1-9a / Mt 9:14-15

On this third day of Lent, God is calling us to make good choices with the expectation of increasing in holiness. Perhaps many made the traditional Lenten promise to “give up” something for Lent. The readings today ask us to change our focus from “giving up” to “living justly.” Isaiah challenges us to do more than “carry out our own pursuits.” He reminds us that seeking God “day after day” involves choosing to live justly personally and to act with justice to others so that all people might live in right relationships as God desires. Our challenge is to make this Lent a time to open ourselves to this pursuit, which God promises will heal the wounds that mark us now. Are you ready to broaden your fasting in this way?

—Dorothy Jonaitis

*How will I fast today to create greater justice
and right relationships?*

Fasting as explained by the US bishops means partaking of only one full meal and two smaller meals that do not equal the main meal. Catholics in good health between the ages of 18 and 59 are obliged to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

HE CALLS, WE FOLLOW

Is 58:9b-14 / Lk 5:27-32

The call goes forth, and is at once followed by the response of obedience. The response of the disciples is an act of obedience, not a confession of faith in Jesus. How could the call immediately evoke obedience? The story is a stumbling block for the natural reason, and it is no wonder that frantic attempts have been made to separate the call and the following. Something must have happened in between, some psychological or historical event. But for the gospel writers, the cause behind the immediate following of call by response is Jesus Christ himself. The encounter is a testimony to the absolute, direct and unaccountable authority of Jesus. Because Jesus is the Christ, he has the authority to call and to demand obedience to his word.

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer
The Cost of Discipleship

*What am I doing to respond more faithfully
to Jesus' invitation to follow him today?*

“Jesus called Matthew: ‘Follow me.’ Following meant imitating the pattern of his life and not just walking after him.”

—St. Bede the Venerable

A NEW KIND OF KINGDOM

Gn 9:8-15 / 1 Pt 3:18-22 / Mk 1:12-15

Jesus' announces the kingdom of God. This kingdom does not involve the establishment of a new political power, but the fulfillment of the covenant between God and his people, which inaugurates a season of peace and justice. To secure this covenant pact with God, each one is called to convert, transforming his or her way of thinking and living. It is not a matter of changing clothing, but habits! Jesus chooses to be an itinerant prophet. He doesn't stay and await people, but goes to encounter them. His first missionary appearances take place along the lake of Galilee, in contact with the multitude, in particular with the fishermen. There Jesus does not only proclaim the coming of God's kingdom, but seeks companions to join in his saving mission.

—Pope Francis

What habits or attitudes do I most need to change to follow Christ more closely?

The Easter Duty is the serious obligation binding Roman Catholics to receive the eucharist sometime during the Easter season (in the US, from the first Sunday of Lent to and including Trinity Sunday, 10 days after Ascension Thursday).

TRIUMPH THROUGH WEAKNESS

1 Pt 5:1-4 / Mt 16:13-19

The true Church is the Church of the defeated, the weak, the poor, those on society's fringe. It is a pity that the great gatherings of Christians too often take place in St. Peter's Square where Bernini, in a pagan period sick with triumphalism, designed everything as a triumph. We must beware! In St. Peter's Square there are many people to shout hosannas! But there is no sign of the Church's agony, of human agony—and everything can go wrong if we forget reality, even when everything seems fine. Rallies of Christians are more suitable in hospitals, prisons, shanty towns and mental homes where people cry, where people suffer, where the devastation of sin is being physically endured, sin in the form of the arrogance of the rich and the powerful.

—Carlo Carretto

Blessed Are You Who Believed

*How has weakness and
defeat brought me closer to Christ?*

The **bishop's chair** (Greek, *cathedra*) was the official seat from which the bishop, like other magistrates on their thrones, taught authoritatively and presided over the community liturgy. Since it was located in the chief church of the diocese, that church became known as a cathedral.

OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN

Is 55:10-11 / Mt 6:7-15

Do you see what those words mean? They mean quite frankly, that you are putting yourself in the place of a son of God. To put it bluntly, you are dressing up as Christ. If you like, you are pretending. Because, of course, the moment you realize what the words mean, you realize that you are not a son of God. You are not a being like The Son of God, whose will and interests are at one with those of the Father: you are a bundle of self-centered fears, hopes, greeds, jealousies, and self-conceit, all doomed to death. So that, in a way, this dressing up as Christ is a piece of outrageous cheek. But the odd thing is that He has ordered us to do it.

—C.S. Lewis
Mere Christianity

*How does being God's beloved child challenge me
to change my way of life?*

Isaiah reflects the Israelites' belief that the sky was like a large inverted clear glass-type dome (see Genesis 1:6, called *the firmament* in older translations) with waters in the heavens above it (so of course the sky is blue!) with doors that God opened so **that the rain and snow come down.**

HOW DOES YOUR GARDEN GROW?

Jon 3:1-10 / Lk 11:29-32

Lent is a season for spiritual gardening. Oddly, Jesus counsels disciples to leave the wheat and the weeds together until the harvest. Closer inspection reveals the method in this divine madness. Good and evil are closely related, for virtue is often the flip side of vice. Envy is the shadow of emulation, patience a mere stone's throw from lethargy, and stubbornness the downside of determination. Similarly, destructive rage is akin to prophetic anger and there is a fine line between self-love and selfishness. If we pull out the weeds of our souls, we risk uprooting the wheat. During Lent we prune our habits rather than plowing them under. Wise spiritual gardeners reap advocacy from ambition, cooperation from competition, and compassion from self-pity. —Jerry Welte

*What are the weeds in my spirit that
can be pruned into wheat?*

Abnegation is the spiritual practice of self-denial (or mortification), in order to atone for past sins or in order to join oneself to the passion of Christ. Mortification can be undertaken through fasting, abstinence, or refraining from legitimate pleasure.

TIME FOR TRANSCENDENCE

Est C:12, 14-16, 23-25 / Mt 7:7-12

Grace and mercy build on human nature. This is part of the mystery, that the humane, humanity, human bodies, are where we experience transcendence and God, restoration, the inclination to serve those who are suffering. We reach out as we are reached out to. This all looks so ordinary that you might miss it. It probably looks like people saying hello, making eye contact, letting others go first. Ordinary human daily ways, but moving more slowly. It looks like me with a few free minutes, deciding to close my eyes, drop to a quieter plane, or look up into a tree or the sky. Even a moment's transcendence changes us. Everything is different afterward because we deep-dove, were there in downward, inward, higher places. So we know now. We remember.

—Anne Lamont
Hallelujah Anyway

*Where and when might I find a moment today
to recall God's presence all around me?*

The **Book of Esther**, along with those of Tobit, Judith, Daniel and Maccabees, are later Jewish writings that help the community navigate the difficulties of living in the encroaching Hellenistic culture. Esther shows how a Jewish woman can use both her beauty and her strength to save her people from persecution.

YOU HAVE HEARD IT SAID

Ez 18:21-28 / Mt 5:20-26

All of us have “heard it said”—by parents, friends, society, religious institutions—that we ought to “do this” or “avoid that.” Unreflectively, we may have accepted or rejected what we heard. Jesus’ words ask us to become more conscious. He tells us that truth is not found on the surface. We are encouraged to explore the original purpose and meanings of the things we have been told, as well as their genuine truth and relevance in our hearts and lives today. Although many people and institutions have become protectors of empty practices, there are others who still hold truthful, living attitudes of heart. We are on a journey to discover which have real veracity for us and endeavor to claim them in our own personal way.

—Alexander J. Shaia
The Hidden Power of the Gospels

*What important things about God
do I hold on to because others have told me?*

In order to stop the escalating pattern that often leads to killing, Jesus tells his listeners to avoid not only anger but also abusive and disrespectful name-calling like “you empty-head” (Aramaic, **raqa**) and “**You fool**” (Greek, *moros*, the root of our word *moron*).

SHARING GOD'S LOVE

Dt 26:16-19 / Mt 5:43-48

Hospitality is essential to human well-being. We all need hospitality; both to receive it and to give it. The claim that only by sharing can we experience wholeness applies to hospitality as well. Jesus asked his disciples, "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" (Mt 5:46-47). The church has drawn the quite logical conclusion that we are to share with all people. Being able to be hospitable with others is our grateful response to the hospitality of God and a way of being the sacrament of God's love in the world.

—L. Shannon Jung
Sharing Food

*How can I better share God's love through
my hospitality to others today?*

"There is still time for endurance, time for patience, time for healing, time for change. Have you slipped? Rise up. Have you sinned? Cease. Do not stand among sinners, but leap aside."

—St. Basil

ENLIGHTENED BY GOD'S LOVE

Gn 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18 / Rom 8:31b-34 / Mk 9:2-10

The light momentarily transfigures a man who lives completely true to the best in himself. He appears to his friends to be literally transformed by the light of that inner truth. The light illuminates the whole course of a people's sacred history (Moses and Elijah are included in its halo). It displaces everything except its own perfect radiance and causes those who fall within its power to shade their eyes in reverence. Do you have any memories of your own, of moments when your life's landscape was momentarily transfigured by the sweeping beam of God's love, or the breathtaking beauty of creation, or the deep warmth of human communion? Just remember these sacred times of transfiguration and let their light penetrate the height and depth and breadth of your being.

—Margaret Silf
Companions of Christ

*When and how has Jesus' identity
become most clear for me?*

The Hebrew word for **glory** is related to weight or heaviness, hence whatever gives a person dignity, honor and worth and so commands respect, esteem and admiration from others. When describing God, **glory** points either to God's divinity or to some visible manifestation of God's invisible presence which we must honor.

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

Dn 9:4b-10 / Lk 6:36-38

Can we bring our enemies before God, those people we most fear and despise. Can we pray to see our enemies as God sees them? It's not an easy prayer, and you may resist praying it as strenuously as I have. But when I pray to see the other person through the eyes of God, slowly I begin to see that the other person is wounded, hurting and imperfect, as I am; sinning, as I am; and yet beloved by God, as I am. This realization changes everything. It affects our behavior and our response. It sets us free from the reflexive urge to pursue revenge, enabling us to look for creative solutions to conflict. It sets us free from hatred, releasing our energy to seek fresh approaches to healing old wounds.

—Margaret Bullitt-Jonas
Christ's Passion, Our Passions

*What might I do to try to see others
through God's eyes instead of just my own?*

The **Book of Daniel** combines examples of God's care for faithful Jews in their hostile Greek environment and sections depicting God's triumph over evil in our world. It offers hope in times of crisis by stressing that God will always deliver those who remain faithful to the covenant.

DARING TO LOOK WITHIN

Is 1:10, 16-20 / Mt 23:1-12

Much as we want to know ourselves, we do not really know ourselves. Do we really want to see ourselves as God sees us, or even as our fellow human beings see us? Could we bear it, weak as we are? You know that feeling of contentment in which we sometimes go about, clothed in it, as it were, like a garment, content with the world and with ourselves. We are ourselves and we would be no one else. We are glad that God made us as we are and we would not have had him make us like anyone else. We do not want to be given that clear inward vision which discloses to us our most secret faults.

—Dorothy Day
From Union Square to Rome

*What inner secret faults do I most want
to change with God's help this Lent?*

Phylacteries (Greek, *phylakterion*, Hebrew, *tefillin*) are two small cubic leather boxes containing certain scripture quotes written on small strips of parchment. During prayer time, a man wears them tied to his forehead and upper left arm as prescribed by Deuteronomy 6:8.

GREATNESS COMES THROUGH SERVICE

Jer 18:18-20 / Mt 20:17-28

Do not worry in the least about yourself, leave all worry to God—this appears to be the commandment in all religions. This need not frighten anyone. He who devotes himself to service with a clear conscience, will day by day grasp the necessity for it in greater measure, and will continually grow richer in faith. The path of service can hardly be trodden by one who is not prepared to renounce self-interest, and to recognize the conditions of his birth. Consciously or unconsciously, every one of us does render some service or other. If we cultivate the habit of doing this service deliberately, our desire for service will steadily grow stronger, and will make not only for our own happiness but that of the world at large.

—Mohandas Gandhi
The Words of Gandhi

Whom can I serve today as Jesus challenges me to do?

Over the centuries, the **chalice** (Latin, *calyx*, a cup) has become much more ornate than the simple cup that Jesus probably used. When Jesus asks the disciples whether they can drink his chalice, he means can they share in his portion of suffering instead of just expecting rewards and glory.

TRUST THE DIVINE SCULPTOR

Jer 17:5-10 / Lk 16:19-31

Our task is to offer ourselves up to God like a stone in a sculptor's hand. We might ask it: "What do you think is happening to you?" And it might well answer: "Why are you asking me? All I know is that I must stay immobile in the hands of the sculptor. I have no notion of what he is doing, nor do I know what he will make of me. What I do know, however, is that his work is the finest imaginable. It is perfect. I welcome each blow of his chisel as the best thing that could happen to me, although, if I am to tell the complete truth, I feel that every one of these blows is ruining me, destroying me, and disfiguring me."

—Jean Pierre de Caussade, SJ
in *Teachings of the Christian Mystics*

*How have I most experienced God
sculpting me during this Lenten season?*

"We cannot stand idly by, enjoying our own riches and freedom if, in any place, the Lazarus of the 20th century stands at our doors. In the light of Christ's parable, riches and freedom mean a special responsibility."

—Pope St. John Paul II

THE POWER OF PARABLES

Gn 37:3-4, 12-13a, 17b-28a / Mt 21:33-43, 45-46

This is the greatest genius of a parable: it doesn't grab you by the lapels and scream in your face, "Repent, you vile sinner! Turn or burn!" Rather, it works gently, subtly, indirectly. It respects your dignity. It doesn't batter you into submission but leaves you free to discover and choose for yourself. Maybe that's why the message of the kingdom of God comes, then, not as a simple formula or list of information and not as an angry threat or ultimatum, but instead as a secret hidden in a parable. Human kingdoms advance by force and violence with falling bombs and flying bullets, but God's kingdom advances by stories, fictions, tales that are easily ignored and easily misunderstood. Perhaps that's the only way it can be.

—Brian McLaren
The Secret Message of Jesus

*Which parables of Jesus have most
caused me to think and respond?*

Slavery was widespread in the ancient world and was most often the result of conquest in war or falling into debt and poverty. Slave labor produced most of the goods and services for the community. Unlike slavery in our nation, in their world it was not based on race.

THE FATHER RUNS TOWARD US

Mi 7:14-15, 18-20 / Lk 15:1-3, 11-32

If we want to hear something we must prepare ourselves to listen by being still. If we ourselves are talking, or if our own thoughts, wishes and concerns are speaking within us, the noise they make will render us unable to hear. Hence directions for meditating always begin by requiring us to create inner stillness and emptiness as a means of making room for what is to be received. Accordingly, we need only a brief realization in faith of where our true center and emphasis permanently are. We seem to be far from God, but God is near us. We need not work our way up to God. Instead, our situation is like that described in the parable of the father seeing his wayward son from afar and running to embrace him.

—Hans Urs von Balthasar
Christian Meditation

*How might I prepare myself better
to pay attention to God's presence within me?*

Sinners were both those who led immoral lives and those whose occupations were considered sure to lead them into immorality—e.g., **tax collectors** who extorted more than what they needed to pay the Romans and shepherds who would pasture their sheep on other people's land, thus stealing food for their sheep.

GOD'S WORDS ARE NO BURDEN

Ex 20:1-17 / 1 Cor 1:22-25 / Jn 2:13-25

Israel never thought of the Decalogue as a set of ten “commandments,” that is, an anonymous collection of prohibitions and taboos, but rather as “words of God,” or, better still, as “the ten words of the covenant” in the covenant dialogue that God enters into with his people. It is as if God were saying to this people: “If you want to enter upon the covenant, here are the words for your dialogue with me. By keeping them you will become my people and I shall remain your God.” Consequently, when Israel thinks of “the ten words of the covenant,” it does not start sighing as though it were contemplating a burden, or groaning as though it were weighed down by them; its attitude is one of gratitude and praise.

—Lucien Deiss
God's Word and God's People

Is my attitude toward God's commandments positive or negative? How does it have to change?

In the Old Testament, **commandments** refers to the 10 basic “words” (Decalogue) that God speaks directly to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 20:1-17). Then the people are afraid and ask that in the future God not speak to them directly but only through Moses. These teachings are called statutes and decrees.

THE REJECTED PROPHET

2 Kgs 5:1-15b / Lk 4:24-30

Into this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ has come uninvited. But because he cannot be at home in it, because he is out of place in it, his place is with those others for whom there is no room. His place is with those who do not belong, who are rejected by power because they are regarded as weak, those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons, who are tortured, bombed and exterminated. With those for whom there is no room, Christ is present in the world. He is mysteriously present in those for whom there seems to be nothing but the world at its worst. In these he hides himself, for whom there is no room.

—Thomas Merton
Raids on the Unspeakable

*How can I imitate Jesus' attraction to the poor,
weak and vulnerable in society?*

The Israelites thought the sky was like a large inverted clear glass-type bowl with waters above it (so the sky is blue!) with doors God opened to allow rain and snow to fall. So it would take a divine power to **close up the sky** so no rain could fall.

FORGIVE AND BE RECONCILED

Dn 3:25, 34-43 / Mt 18:21-35

It is so easy to lose what we value. We may truly believe in the need to forgive and to be reconciled, to start anew in relationships that have sharp edges or dull pain, but we allow little, hard spots in our hearts to build up into a wall that forgiveness cannot penetrate. Eventually we end up losing that warm spot in our heart for a person we once loved. We can so simply let the days and months go by without ever searching for our lost pearls of great price. The church is wise in offering us the season of Lent so that our lives can once again reflect the gospel which Jesus encouraged us to live. Lent can be the means for renewed direction and perspective.

—Joyce Rupp

Fresh Bread and Other Gifts of Spiritual Nourishment

*What new direction or perspective
have I gained this Lent?*

“May we love one another as God loves each one of us, more and more each day, and forgive each other’s faults as you forgive our sins. Help us, O Loving Father, to take whatever you give and give whatever you take with a big smile. Amen.”

—St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta

JESUS' RADICAL DEMANDS

Dt 4:1, 5-9 / Mt 5:17-19

We need to avoid the misunderstanding that we human beings can, by our own strength, heal all human wounds, eliminate all unjust conditions, create a final state of rest, peace and welfare. But we are called by God to follow God's example and risk what appears to be humanly impossible without trust in God. For Jesus, the issue is the crossing of all boundaries, the victory of a conduct governed by law and justice, the surpassing of all previous rules of conduct established by human beings. That is the meaning of his extreme instructions, or, as we could also say, his "radical" demands which penetrate to the roots of the human heart.

—Rudolf Schnackenburg
All Things Are Possible

What boundaries do I most need to strike down to be more inclusive toward others?

The Law and the prophets is a convenient way of identifying the two major categories of Israel's sacred scriptures, the Law (found in the first five books of the Bible or *Torah*) and the prophets who communicated God's messages for the covenant community.

LISTEN TO MY VOICE

Jer 7:23-28 / Lk 11:14-23

Silence is a teacher; within it we learn some of the deepest lessons of our lives—about aloneness and intimacy, joy and sorrow, conflict and peace. When we speak less to the world and everything in it, we bring a silence in which we can listen to the story of life, other people, and our own heart. Silence is revealed in moments of wholehearted attention, when we are fully present in this life. A Christian mystic reminds us, “Absolute, unmixed attention is prayer.” The art of cultivating silence does not take us to a destination divorced from the present moment of reality in our life. As we treasure its rich potential, we learn to discover what it means to live with a silent heart, rich in vitality, creativity, energy, and life.

—Christina Feldman
Silence

How might I use silence better to listen to God's word?

In earlier biblical books like Job, the **satan** or accuser is a kind of Grand Inquisitor who tests human faith. After the exile, **Satan** was understood as evil spirit, subordinate but hostile to God, struggling with God for domination of the earth, and tempting humans from following God's ways.

LOVE IS ESSENTIAL FOR CHRISTIANS

Hos 14:2-10 / Mk 12:28-34

The double commandment of love and Christ's injunction to forgive clearly had major implications for the way I lived my life, and I didn't yet feel ready to accept and act on them. But no matter how I scanned the gospels for a loophole, or even one good reason to stall a little longer, I kept coming up empty-handed. Jesus' teachings on forgiveness lie at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. Forgiveness as Jesus teaches it in the gospels is the natural extension of his wider teaching on love. Yet Jesus calmly states that all of us, no matter how imperfect, are meant to live this way. We are to love one another as Jesus loves us. We cannot live only for ourselves and still call ourselves Christian.

—Paula Huston
Simplifying the Soul

Whom and for what do I most need to forgive today?

For biblical people, **love** was not so much the romantic personal attachment we envision today but a fierce attachment to one's group, especially the family. This attitude was matched by actions. Love presumed intense loyalty and expected one to do good for those in one's group.

GLAD I'M NOT LIKE HIM

Hos 6:1-6 / Lk 18:9-14

The Pharisee's prayer is one we often pray. "I'm glad I'm not like him, her, or them. I am lucky not to belong to that family, that country or that race." We are always comparing ourselves with others, trying to convince ourselves that we are better off than they are. But this is a very dangerous prayer. It leads from compassion to competition, from competition to rivalry, from rivalry to violence, from violence to war, from war to destruction. It is a prayer that lies all the time, because we are not the difference we try so hard to find. No, our deepest identity is rooted where we are like other people—weak, broken, sinful, but sons and daughters of God.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen
Sabbatical Journey

What can I do to stop thinking I am better than others and recognize how alike we are?

The Romans delegated the collection of import-export taxes, customs fees, and tolls for using roads, markets, and harbors to Jewish nationals. So **tax collectors** were considered traitors to their nation as well as crooks. These men and their families were barred from the synagogues and forbidden to give testimony in court.

HOW GOD TREATS FAILURES

2 Chr 36:14-16, 19-23 / Eph 2:4-10 / Jn 3:14-21

We should remember how God chose to deal with the failures of this world: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” God saved the world through love, not through condemnation. God restored broken creation through grace, not through judgment. The Devil, remember, is the one whom Scripture calls the Accuser. God is the Affirmer. Grace alone has the power to change people for the better. Only in the capacious freedom of having already been accepted can people own their failure and walk down another path.

—Donald McCullough

If Grace Is So Amazing, Why Don't We Like It?

On what new path might Jesus now be leading me?

Today is called **Laetare Sunday**, from the Latin word for rejoice, which is the first word of the Entrance Antiphon of the Mass, “Rejoice, Jerusalem” (Isaiah 66:10). It reminds us that the rigors of Lent are now over half completed and encourages our anticipation for Easter.

GOD'S GROWTH IN ME

Is 65:17-21 / Jn 4:43-54

It was my joy, O God, in the midst of the struggle, to feel that in developing myself I was increasing your hold on me. It was a joy, too, under the inward thrust of life or amid the favorable play of events, to abandon myself to your providence. Now that I have found the joy of utilizing all forms of growth to make you, or to let you, grow in me, grant that I may willingly consent to this last phase of communion in the course of which I shall possess you by diminishing in you. After having perceived you as one who is “a greater myself,” grant, when my hour comes, that I may recognize you in each alien or hostile force that seems bent upon destroying or uprooting me.

—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ
The Divine Milieu

*How have I most experienced God
growing within me this Lent?*

A **sacrament** is a “visible sign of the hidden reality of salvation” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #774). Jesus’ words and acts bring salvation by creating and establishing communion with God and inviting us into communion with himself.

DO YOU WANT TO BE WELL?

Ez 47:1-9, 12 / Jn 5:1-16

Like the notion of tough love, in which families and friends must help their loved ones escape destructive patterns by challenging them, tough grace is a gift from God to the soul in need of growth. Suffering provides us with lessons that dispose us more readily to divine union and helps us to consider those things we often take for granted. We are pushed to make decisions about our relationship with God. Tough grace highlights just what we need for the spiritual journey and counsels us to leave the rest behind. In this way, tough grace is itself a gift, though it may be the kind of gift we aren't too anxious to receive, until we witness its profound transformation effects on us. Then we understand.

—Wayne Teasdale
A Monk in the World

How have I experienced God's "tough grace" this Lent?

A **temple** (Lat: *templum*, a consecrated space) was the place where heaven and earth met. It was God's house (the sanctuary) where gifts (sacrifices) were offered and God was worshipped. Ezekiel imagines God's bountiful presence like a spring bubbling from under the altar giving life to everything around.

LIFE TO THE FULL

Is 49:8-15 / Jn 5:17-30

What might it mean to be “fully alive”? It is not simply eating and breathing but of living out of the deepest part of oneself. Call it the heart or the soul—words that describe the central and intimate core of our being where we are most truly ourselves. Usually we glide along the surface, taking our cues from the newspapers, our neighbors or the commercials on TV. They tell us what to desire, what to fear and what will bring us joy. Yet the more we listen to such voices, the less we know about ourselves. The men and women called saints have walked a different path, a path to God that was at the same time the path to their own true selves.

—Robert Ellsberg
The Saints' Guide to Happiness

*What have I most learned about my deeper,
true self during this Lent?*

“Christ shield me this day: Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in the heart of every person who thinks of me, Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me.”

—St. Patrick

GOD'S WRATH

Ex 32:7-14 / Jn 5:31-47

God's wrath is the result of humans distorting his good creation—including human nature. God's wrath is simply the shadow side of God's love for his wonderful creation and his amazing human creatures. God's implacable rejection of evil is the natural outflowing of his creative love. God's anger against evil is itself the determination to put things right, to get rid of the corrupt attitudes and behaviors that have spoiled his world and his human creatures. Because God loves the glorious world he has made and is utterly determined to put everything right, God is utterly opposed to everything that spoils or destroys that creation, especially the human creatures who were supposed to be the linchpins of his plan for how that creation would flourish.

—N.T. Wright
Simply Good News

*How might I help God put things right
in myself and my life today?*

Many Bible translations now use LORD in small capital letters for God's sacred personal name—Yahweh. This choice is apt because LORD has 4 letters as does God's sacred name in Hebrew and the Jews did not say God's sacred name aloud but would instead say Adonai, the Hebrew word for Lord.

JOSEPH'S LOFTY PRIVILEGE

2 Sm 7:4-5a, 12-14a, 16 / Rom 4:13, 16-18, 22 /
Mt 1:16, 18-21, 24a or Lk 2:41-51a

I would like to say a few words about the grandeur of St. Joseph whom we love so much because he has cultivated love in every heart. My God, how good and upright this great saint must have been if the Lord gave him the lofty privilege of being entrusted with his mother and his son! With these two responsibilities, he could have been envied by the angels. Could anyone in all heaven possess any greater privilege than this? Who is there among the angels who could be compared with the queen of angels? And who can compare with the son of God himself? Yet St. Joseph was closer to them than anyone else.

—St. Francis De Sales
Letters

*How might I imitate Joseph's love
for Jesus and Mary in my life?*

Betrothal (from the Middle English *troth*, a pledge or commitment) was similar to a marriage engagement, which would intensify relations between the 2 families. To discover that one's fiancée was pregnant by another man would be a major reason for ending the engagement and sending her back to her family in shame.

NO ONE SPEAKS LIKE HIM

Jer 11:18-20 / Jn 7:40-53

Christians believe that they have heard a “word” speaking out to us in our lostness, a word telling us we are not alone and that through it the cosmos has been delivered from its apparent aloneness. The breaking through of this word into the apparent silence of the universe is what is called “revelation.” This word is communicated essentially in the form of a promise of a better future with God. Christians believe that in Jesus, God’s gift of self to the universe is bestowed definitively and irreversibly. The substance of the promise made long ago is the very being of the God who planted a restlessness in the universe and a hope in the hearts of our ancestors. Revelation is the self-gift of the promising God to the universe.

—John F. Haught
The Revelation of God in History

*How has this Lent been a time
of creating a better future with God?*

When Jeremiah calls Yahweh the **God of Hosts**, this has nothing to do with the little white wafers we receive at communion (Latin, *hostia*, a sacrificial victim). Instead, it identifies the angelic armies (Latin, *hostis*, a stranger or enemy, hence *hostile* soldiers) who carry out whatever God commands.

A COVENANT IN THE HEART

Jer 31:31-34 / Heb 5:7-9 / Jn 12:20-33

In exile, the Jews learn that a deep bond of love exists between Yahweh and the “broken-hearted.” They find themselves in the presence of an entirely new covenant that does not take hold of people simply because they belong to an ethnic or political group. Rather it takes hold of them in the most intimate part of their being: It reaches the heart. Jeremiah’s prophecy proclaims that Yahweh’s covenant with the people will no longer be connected with past events; it will establish itself directly in the heart of the person. The new people of God is no longer defined by its belonging to an ethnic or political group; by blood, race, or institutions but in a certain quality of heart, in an experience of limitless communion.

—Eloi LeClerc

People of God in the Night

*How can I reach out to extend the covenant
of God’s loving care to others today?*

In the biblical world, a **covenant** was a formal agreement between two persons or parties binding the parties in the mutual and reciprocal obligations of their relationship. These relationships were voluntary and freely entered into with open-ended obligations and were not to be confused with the specific obligations of legal contracts.

THE CHALLENGE OF FORGIVENESS

Dn 13:1-9, 15-17, 19-30, 33-62 / Jn 8:1-11

To forgive is to break the vicious cycles of death by a fresh act of utter generosity. Forgiveness is not playacting, not romantic religion, not casual hugs. It is a decision to begin at a different place. Without forgiveness, the world works its way to death and destructiveness, generation after generation. Unforgiveness leads to death, both for the victim and for the perpetrator. The news is not just that God forgives, but that God has created a people to have as its main, single business in the world the forgiveness of sins, the cancellation of debts, the breaking of the power of fear and hate and death, in order to start again.

—Walter Brueggemann
The Collected Sermons

*How has my lack of forgiveness kept me
from being a better Christian?*

Execution by **stoning** is mentioned several times in the Bible, usually as a spontaneous event although the Jewish *Torah* prescribes it for several crimes such as idolatry, blasphemy, child sacrifice, divination, adultery, Sabbath violation, fornication by an unmarried woman, rebellion of children and an ox that gores.

CHRIST SPEAKS FROM THE CROSS

Nm 21:4-9 / Jn 8:21-30

“If my divinity is something you cannot comprehend, then know me in my flesh. You see in me your body, your limbs, your organs, your bones, your blood. If you are afraid of my divinity, why do you not love me in your humanity? Do not be afraid. These nails do not pierce me with pain; they pierce me more deeply with love of you. These wounds do not draw groans from me; rather they draw you into my heart. The stretching-out of my body makes room for you in my heart; it does not increase my pain. Come then, come back to God, and come to know God as a father. For see, I return good for evil, love for injuries, and for deep wounds a deeper love.”

—St. Peter Chrysologus

How have I been drawn more deeply into the mystery of Jesus' suffering this Lent?

In John's gospel **the world** (Greek, *cosmos*, the universe as an ordered structure) usually refers to the social, political and religious institutions that resist God's ordering power and oppose and then kill Jesus. Though the world is hostile to God, God is not hostile to the world but sends Jesus to save it.

NO FALSE GODS

Dn 3:14-20, 91-92, 95 / Jn 8:31-42

It's almost funny, this menacing, Pavlovian Nebuchadnezzar, who wants the three young Hebrew boys to fall down in worship whenever they hear the sound of the trumpet, flute, lyre, etc. Can faithful, religious young men be hypnotized into defying their God whenever they hear a certain musical cue? The king demands it. The extra-fiery furnace demands it. But the boys are not cowed by the king or his furnace. No sweet promises of comfort and prestige (and the positive regard of those whose opinions should matter) can force them to break the first commandment. How telling that they aren't particularly interested in whether God intervenes or not. Their consciences are formed, and they won't be lured. We have much to learn from them.

—Kathy McGovern

*How am I resisting cultural pressures
to sin against the commandments?*

King **Nebuchadnezzar** II was an historical figure who ruled Babylon from 605-562 BC. He conquered Judah, destroyed the temple and exiled the Jews (597, 587) and thus became synonymous with an evil king. In the book of Daniel, it is not this historic figure but rather the symbolic figure that is described.

SPEAK QUICKLY, MARY!

Is 7:10-14; 8:10 / Heb 10:4-10 / Lk 1:26-38

You have heard, O Mary, the announcement of a great mystery, and you have heard how it will happen. You have reason for astonishment and rejoicing. And since to you have been given tidings of joy and gladness, let us hear the joyous reply that we long for, so we may rejoice. You have heard what is to happen and you have believed. Believe also the way you have heard it is to happen. You have heard that you will conceive and bear a son not by a man, but by God's Holy Spirit. The angel is waiting for your answer. And we too are waiting for this word of mercy. Give your answer quickly, my Lady, speak the word which earth and heaven are waiting for.

—St. Bernard of Clairvaux
Sermon

*Like Mary, how can I say “Yes”
and let God begin to live in me today?*

“Mary is the first Christian to follow Christ, and she is the first and most perfect model of Christ. Indeed, that is why the imitation of Mary is not only relevant to women but to all Christians.”

—St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein)

JESUS OUR MODEL OF SERVICE

Jer 20:10-13 / Jn 10:31-42

Jesus lives his life in the service of others. Open the gospel to any page, and you will find Jesus doing something for someone. He is forgiving sins, healing diseases, freeing people from what limits them, feeding a crowd, calming a storm, teaching or answering questions, inviting or encouraging someone. He boldly confronts religious and political leaders, this too in the interest of suffering people. His outstanding human quality is his concern. He feels others' pain and devotes himself to easing it. Indeed his dedication to God seems to consist chiefly in this total commitment to the well-being of the human community. There is something remarkable about the scope of his love. Most people love someone. But Jesus had a heart large enough to embrace everyone.

—Kathleen Fischer & Thomas Hart
Christian Foundations

*Whom do I need to include in my concern
and into my community?*

In the biblical world, to **blaspheme** meant to dishonor God or something holy by speech, for example by calling God abusive names or telling lies (slander) or, as in today's Gospel, by speaking against the Holy Spirit, which is God's holy power at work for salvation.

BETTER ONE MAN DIE

Ez 37:21-28 / Jn 11:45-56

In Jesus' ministry the interpersonal union of the eternal embrace—Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the perfect pattern of union in love—was in Jesus confronting a world so unfamiliar with that vision that its response could only be either radical resistance or radical conversion. Like the collision of a cold front with a warm front, the resulting storm would take the life of Jesus and the martyrs after him, and mark all his followers with the cross. But just as the storm releases the refreshing rain, new life springs up where death had seemed to triumph. Jesus leaves the tomb forever, the martyrs' blood falls to the ground as seed preparing a harvest of Christians, and those spared martyrdom are empowered to be heroes of daily life.

—George T. Montague, SM
Living in the Father's Embrace

*Who have been most like Jesus
and "heroes of daily life" for me?*

The **Sanhedrin** (Greek, council) was the official group of Jewish leaders in Jerusalem that functioned as a court both to decide cases and to determine disputed points of the Law. Because religious and political concerns were not separate in their world, the council dealt with both.

THE WAY OF THE CROSS

Mk 11:1-10 / Is 50:4-7 / Phil 2:6-11 / Mk 14:1—15:47

Human life is a pilgrimage, continual, long and wearisome. Up and up along the steep and stony road, the road marked out for all upon that hill. In this mystery Jesus represents the whole human race. Every one of us must have our own cross to bear; otherwise, tempted by selfishness or cruelty, we should sooner or later fall by the roadside. From the contemplation of Jesus climbing up to Calvary we learn, first with our hearts and then with our minds, to embrace the cross and bear it bravely and with joy. And how can we fail to include Mary in our prayers, Mary who followed Jesus sorrowing, sharing so intimately in his merits and his sufferings.

—Pope St. John XXIII
Journal of a Soul

What most keeps me from embracing my crosses with joy?

The **Feast of Unleavened Bread** (Hebrew, *mazzoth*) was an 8 day period joined to the Passover when only unleavened bread could be eaten. Their leaven was a fermentation agent (as in sour-dough bread today). Thus leavened bread contained a corrupting agent that would render it “unclean” for ritual use.

GOD'S SUFFERING SERVANT

Is 42:1-7 / Jn 12:1-11

Perhaps no passages were as important for discovering a new understanding of a suffering messiah than the four servant songs found in the prophet Isaiah. By identifying Jesus the messiah with this suffering servant/son, Christians found the way to connect Jesus' suffering and death with his resurrection. His faithful suffering service to God's justice was rewarded by his resurrection and placement at God's right hand. The suffering servant also clarified how Jesus' death could help others achieve the righting of wrongly ordered relationships and overcome the effects of sin. His resurrection was the first step in bringing humanity into right relationship with God again. So anyone who joined himself or herself to Jesus' death and resurrection through faith and baptism would also share the reward of eternal life with God. —Steve Mueller

*How might I better show my faithfulness
in God's service this week?*

In 4 "Servant Songs" (42:1-4, 49:1-7, 50:4-11, 52:13-53:12), the prophet Isaiah describes **God's servant** who is called to be a misunderstood and ill-treated prophet to a sin-weary people. These songs helped Israel to interpret the suffering and humiliation of their exile and early Christians to understand Jesus' suffering.

THE GREATEST BETRAYAL

Is 49:1-6 / Jn 13:21-33, 36-38

This week's readings specialize in the Isaiah's Servant Songs, the touchstones from the Israelite Scriptures that helped the first Christians comprehend what God was doing in Jesus, especially in his suffering and death. Today we hear a jarring combination of the call of vocation from before our birth and the tragic scene at the Last Supper when Jesus gives communion to the disciple who is about to betray him. Judas's story reminds us that all of us, no matter how privileged our call, are subject to temptation and even to abandoning our deepest commitments. The greatest tragedy in Judas's story is not that he handed Jesus over, but that he lost faith in Jesus' love and readiness to forgive anything. Despair was Judas's greatest act of betrayal.

—Mary M. McGlone, CSJ

How have I been most changed by God's forgiveness?

Going to Confession is a shorthand way of describing the celebration of the sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation because the ritual requires that one tell or "confess" one's sins to a priest who is authorized to forgive sins in the name of Jesus and the Church.

THROUGH DEATH TO LIFE

Is 50:4-9a / Mt 26:14-25

Our Lenten journey is drawing to a close as we approach the celebration of the most awesome mystery of our faith, the Paschal mystery, the mystery of Jesus' passage through death to life. This is the most sacred week of our Christian calendar. In it we journey with Jesus on his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, remember his last meal and betrayal, and enter into his passion and death on the cross. But even as we walk through these days, we know that death does not have the final word for we believe that Jesus also rose and that we are called not only to follow him to death, but also to enter into new life with him as we celebrate his resurrection on Sunday.

—Angeline Hubert

*What might I do during these holy days
to deepen my relationship with Jesus?*

The most ancient and always the central event of the liturgical year is the **Easter Triduum** (Latin: three days) celebrating the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. The sacred three days (Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday) are a liturgical season in themselves and not strictly part of Lent.

WE ARE THE BODY OF CHRIST

Ex 12:1-8, 11-14 / 1 Cor 11:23-26 / Jn 13:1-15

We are the body of Christ when we open ourselves to the spirit of Jesus and continue what he began. But let us be very careful that we do not limit Jesus. The one who welcomed everyone left us a challenging perspective as our legacy. He identified with those who are hungry and thirsty and lack proper clothes, with the sick, the felon, the stranger, saying: when we attend to their bodily needs, when we give food, drink, clothing, care, compassion, empathy, shelter, we are doing these things for him. Christ's body is one with embodied humanity. Here then is real presence. Here is his body. Here is his blood. Indeed, if we would be brutally honest, here among suffering humanity is authentic eucharist.

—Miriam Therese Winter
Eucharist with a Small "e"

How has my prayer and participation in the eucharist helped open me to the needs of others?

“Evangelization through the Eucharist, in the Eucharist, and from the Eucharist—these are three inseparable aspects of how the Church lives the mystery of Christ and fulfills her mission of communicating it to all people.”

—Pope St. John Paul II

BEING THERE

Is 52:13—53:12 / Heb 4:14-16; 5:7-9 / Jn 18:1—19:42

Mary stands beneath the cross, close to her crucified son. She does nothing; she can do nothing for him. She is there, present to him. Mary teaches us that when we are close to a child or an adult who has been completely broken, full of anguish, one for whom it seems we can do nothing, it is important to stay there, to be with him. Through our presence, a warm, loving faithful presence, we can give him or her some strength and peace; we can help them to continue on. We are to be present to the child who has been innocently wounded, disfigured, beaten, and rejected. We are to trust and have a heart surrendered to God, in the face of the unfathomable mystery of human suffering.

—Jean Vanier

Living with the Poor, Learning from Mary and Joseph

*How might I become better at just
“being with” others who are suffering?*

In many parishes between noon and 3 pm there is reflection focused on the **Seven Last Words of Christ**, a collection of the words spoken by Jesus on the cross gathered from the 4 gospels. They are Luke 23:34; Luke 23:43; John 19:26-27; Mark 15:34; John 19:28; John 19:30; Luke 23:46.

DEATH IS NOT THE END

Vigil: Gn 1:1—2:2 / Gn 22:1 18 / Ex 14:15—15:1 / Is 54:5-14
Is 55:1-11 / Bar 3:9-15, 32—4:4 / Ez 36:16-17a, 18-28
Rom 6:3-11 / Mk 16:1-7

Easter Sunday: Acts 10:34a, 37-43 / Col 3:1-4 or 1 Cor 5:6b-8
Jn 20:1-9 / or Mk 16:1-7 / Lk 24:13-35

Death affects us all, and it questions us in a profound way. If it is understood as the end of everything, death frightens us, it terrifies us, it becomes a threat that shatters every dream, every promise, it severs every relationship and interrupts every journey. However, the human heart with its desire for the infinite, its longing for eternity, rebels against this false solution. There is in us a powerful instinct telling us that our lives do not end with death. Jesus' resurrection not only gives us the certainty of life after death, it also illumines the mystery of our own death. If we live united to Jesus, faithful to him, we will also be able to face the passage of death with hope and serenity.

—Pope Francis

*How have I experienced the joy
of new life in Christ this Easter*

The **empty tomb** was not a proof of the resurrection but a fact whose meaning needed to be discovered. Jesus' **resurrection** was the first great sign (the second was the gift of the Holy Spirit) indicating that the world's final transformation had begun.