

# *Children of the Promise*

Daily Reflections for Lent and Easter

James Wallace



## FOREWORD

Many of us are people of routine. Exercise, eating, errands, work, recreation – the habits we establish in these activities give us freedom to really enjoy them. The routine, you see, is a facilitator. It is not the end. Keeping the routine is not the goal. It is the means to noticing beauty and partaking of it.

We all need a daily prayer routine. If you are like me, you are mediocre. I can't sporadically pick up a golf club or a guitar and perform well. Similarly, I can't expect to pray once a week or only when I'm in a crisis and expect to really receive fulfillment from the existence of God. I need daily exposure.

Without the habit of prayer, we will never plumb the depths of the spiritual life. We will always be stuck in beginner's mode, trying to find our way in the dark. When we pray consistently at a certain point of the day, however, then the light shines and we notice the beauty around us. We are drawn into that beauty. We communicate with it. We actually add to it. A whole new dynamic of love is experienced. We are deeply satisfied, and God is glorified in our satisfaction.

If you already have a good prayer routine and these daily reflections would be a burden or disruption, then drop the document. Or, perhaps read it through, in a sitting or two, like you would a book. If you are looking to go deeper in your spiritual life, and don't have a routine, then let this be the beginning of you creating your daily prayer habit.

The reflections are based off the daily readings from the Catholic Mass. At the end of each week is a bonus reflection, called the Coda. Finally, while each day of Lent and the Triduum is covered, I've only provided a week's worth of reflections for Easter, though Easter runs longer than Lent. Perhaps you can finish the document with your own reflections.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Fr. James F. Wallace". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. Below the signature is a thin horizontal line.

Mardi Gras, 2023

## LENT

"Offer no resistance to one who is evil... Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." Two injunctions from the same Sermon on the Mount. Which is it? Are we to surrender or are we to strive?

Both. We strive to pray. We surrender when we pray. We strive to surrender to the will of God. We strain to listen. We toil to receive. We yield so that we may be used. We work to remain affixed to the cross. Striving and surrendering... welcome to the season of Lent.

Jackson Pollock was a pivotal player in the abstract expressionism movement of the middle 20th Century. The style combined emotional intensity with a certain abandonment. One of Pollock's drip paintings recently sold for \$140 million. There is an appeal to this tension.

Not many have heard of Jackson's older brother, also a painter, named Charles Pollock. While Charles' works of the social realist genre may seem quite opposite of his brother's, the painting below, *Look Down that Road* (1942), does portray a similar passive intensity. The man contemplates both his past and his future, sitting beneath a tree of life under a bright and threatening sky. Christ, Noah, Moses, Elijah, David – all "Forty Day Figures" – entered a similar posture.

"Stand at the crossroads and look," says the prophet Jeremiah. "Ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls." May we stand at the crossroad. May we sit beneath the tree. The tree may be tortuous, but it is our salvation.



*Look Down that Road*, Charles Pollock, 1942

## Ash Wednesday

"Then the LORD was stirred to concern for his land and took pity on his people."

*Joel 2:18*

Three fires took place on the exact same day: October 8, 1871. The Great Chicago Fire lasted two days, killing nearly 300 people and destroying a third of the city. The Peshtigo fire in northeast Wisconsin destroyed 1,500 lives, and the Great Michigan Fire burned almost the entire state and killed 482. Almost 1,800 years earlier in that same month, the Great Fire of Rome raged for nine days, destroyed two-thirds of the city, and led to the deaths of nearly 900 Christians.

Ash reigned in the Great Lakes and Mediterranean these days. Whatever had been there and however large, beautiful, and expensive it was, mattered not. Buildings, books, animals, people, trees, money – all made into a powdery evanescence. Fire is the great equalizer.

The ancient Israelites had a custom of sitting in sackcloth and ashes when they wanted to publicly express sorrow. The ash represented what was lost. It was also their hope for redemption, for with fire comes the opportunity for regrowth. The ash united them as a nation.

We are all equal this day as we wear ash on our foreheads. May we also be equal with God.

*Directed Prayer:* Invite the Holy Spirit to enter into your heart and set it on fire. Bring to that fire one or two particular attachments which cause disquiet in you (food, money, technology, etc.). Then pray God will give you the strength to endure your bodily fast today. Whenever you feel a pang of hunger throughout the day, know that is another attachment being burned. Offer its ashes for a loved one.



## Thursday after Ash Wednesday

"Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live, by loving the LORD, your God, heeding his voice, and holding fast to him."

*Deuteronomy 30:19-20*

In the *Wham!*, "Wake me up before you Go-Go," music video from 1984 the main artists' garb is simple: white shoes, white pants, and white tee-shirts with the following words in big black letters: CHOOSE LIFE. The singers frolic around the stage, spreading their message, while the crowd cheers and sings along with the upbeat song.

Evangelization has come in the least likely of places.

Life is relationship with Jesus Christ. "Whoever loses his life for my sake will save it." When we 'choose life,' we are choosing to lose the things of the world that give us fleeting pleasure. The items of the world come to us and go. We do not obsess over them and find our meaning in them. Instead, we yearn for union with God. We wake up with the Lord on our mind. We seek to be with him and serve him throughout the day. We rest with him by our side. That is life.

Life isn't always a happy affair. It is not the euphoric three and a half minutes of the *Wham!* song. Choosing life, our Lord informs us, is "to take up one's cross daily." When we let the item of the world pass us by there is pain. But we will be much more satisfied with that choice.

*Directed Prayer:* Make at least a half hour of mental prayer today. When you pray, ask Jesus to plant the 'jitterbug into my brain' (one of the lyrics of the song) and have it slowly spread through your body. Close your eyes and be convicted in your heart that real life is in Jesus.



## *Friday after Ash Wednesday*

"They seek me day after day, and desire to know my ways."

*Isaiah 58:2*

Sometimes desire is not enough. Just because I desire to play golf or the guitar well does not mean it will happen. I can practice every day, but if the talent does not come naturally to me, no amount of personal effort will make me good. At some point I need help. Only with an instructor to show me the proper technique and adjust my erroneous form will I be able to advance in the proper direction.

"Why do we fast, and you do not see it? Afflict ourselves, and you take no note of it?" This was ancient Israel's lament, as relayed by Isaiah. They were trying. They were desiring. But it wasn't working. They were fasting and repenting the wrong way.

Lacking a natural skill isn't meant to cause shame or blame. It's not my fault that I struggle in these areas. It was not Israel's fault that their fasting was incorrect. No. Acknowledging the natural deficiency is simply an encouragement to those skilled in mediocrity to reach out for help.

Jesus was the ultimate instructor. He showed Israel how to fast and repent in a way that would glorify God and lead to the peoples' well-being. Many accepted the advice. Many did not, choosing futility instead of freedom.

*Directed Prayer:* Pray with one of your superficial struggles (e.g., math, reading, a sport) and one of your interior struggles (e.g., patience, moderation, purity). Admit, as they do in Alcoholics Anonymous, that you are powerless over this. Surrender your will into the Almighty's hands.



## *Saturday after Ash Wednesday*

"Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"

*Luke 5:30*

The Jewish authorities certainly did not appreciate Jesus consorting with tax collectors, especially Levi and Zacchaeus, the major ones. Nor did the Roman authorities. The Roman Empire, in many ways, was centered around the system of taxation. Taxes collected from the provinces funded the many public projects (aqueducts, harbors, roads), the military, and the government. Because the empire was so large, and the number of actual Romans comparatively small, local, non-Roman citizens were relied upon to gather taxes. If Christ took these locals away from their jobs, the whole system could very well crumble. It was a simple, hidden, and gentle form of revolution by Christ. The way to conquer Caesar was not by army, but by conversion of tax collectors. Our Lord does not always fight the main issue directly.

We think we know the main sins in our life. Don't be surprised when Jesus does not take those away. He might let them remain as he goes to work in other areas of your life that you think are fine but are equally problematic. Sometimes Jesus goes to your heart through the back door.

*Directed Prayer:* Ask the Lord to reveal the little areas of your life that are problematic. Some would call them "venial sins." See how they are connected to the main sin that is wounding your heart, the "mortal sin." Invite Jesus' grace into that trifling matter. Hear his positive voice show you how a change in this area will bring great fruit. Rely on him to affect the change.



## *Coda to the Days Post-Ash Wednesday*

"Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?"

*Mark 2:19*

The whole point of any spiritual activity is to be in the presence of God. Praying, celebrating the sacraments, serving the poor – if we are not in touch with God, then these activities are for ourselves and not fulfilling their purpose as God intended.

This was Jesus' claim against the Pharisees, who criticized Jesus and the disciples for not fasting. People might fast, but are they in sync with God? Actions do not automatically produce holiness.

As we settle into this penitential season, we might keep in mind the words of Robert Herrick, from his 1648 poem, *To Keep a True Lent*.

*Is this a fast, to keep  
The larder lean?  
And clean  
From fat of veals and sheep?*

*Is it to quit the dish  
Of flesh, yet still  
To fill  
The platter high with fish?*

*Is it to fast an hour,  
Or ragg'd to go,  
Or show  
A downcast look and sour?*

*No; 'tis a fast to dole  
Thy sheaf of wheat,  
And meat,  
Unto the hungry soul.*

*It is to fast from strife,  
From old debate  
And hate;  
To circumcise thy life.*

*To show a heart grief-rent;  
To starve thy sin,  
Not bin;  
And that's to keep thy Lent.*

*Directed Prayer:* Allow yourself to 'to dole thy sheaf of wheat and meat unto the hungry soul'; that is, to be still and in the real presence of God for an extended period of time. Notice how you feel when you are in communion with God. See if you can put words to it; describe how God is for you and how you are for God. Then notice how that contrasts to when you are not in communion with God. Ask for the grace to remain in communion with him.



## *The First Sunday of Lent*

"Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized that they were naked;  
so they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves."

*Genesis 3:7*

Adam and Eve figured if the leaf could cover and protect the actual fruit, it must also be able to cover and protect them. It did. Our first parents would eventually go on to make more sophisticated clothing, but this initial loincloth did its purpose. Adam and Eve were no longer innocent. They needed modesty, and the leaf provided that.

Christ himself wore only a loincloth when he hung upon the tree over the spot where Adam and Eve ate the apple. It was an homage to his troubled ancestors. But instead of an act of distrust in God, clinging to the forbidden fruit, Jesus would open his hands and commend his soul to the Father.

We have all sinned and have experienced the shame Adam and Eve felt. We have sewn fig leaves to cover ourselves up. But nothing we do will remove the guilt. Only Christ can. We need not a leaf. We need the fruit, and the fruit is God's mercy.

*Directed Prayer:* In what ways have you listened to Satan and even heeded his suggestion? Give your shame to Jesus Christ. Look upon a crucifix and see your sins as the loincloth wrapped around his body. It is his only protection. He will save you.



## *Monday of the First Week of Lent*

"Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom  
prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

*Matthew 25:34*

These are the words we will hear God speak to us when we are in heaven. Embedded in the metaphor of sheep and goats are words we ought to cherish and hold sacred, like we would "This is my Body, this is my blood" or some other important phrase.

*A kingdom has been prepared for you.* Just you. You have been chosen and all things have been crafted for you. This is how special you are. "In my father's house are many mansions," our Lord speaks on another occasion

about the afterlife. There are personal elements, parts of your personality and heart, that will go into the kingdom.

*A kingdom from the foundation of the world.* The Kingdom exists before us, which means we are also fashioned for the kingdom. That is to say, there are objective elements of the kingdom that will influence our own making and how we live.

We learn some of those objective elements of the Kingdom from Moses in Leviticus. "Do not steal, do not lie, hold no grudge against your neighbor, etc." The kingdom will not have dishonesty or division. Jesus adds something more positive: welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, tending the ill, visiting the imprisoned. That is, the Kingdom will have generosity.

Our Lord speaks these words to us when we enter heaven. He speaks them to us now.

*Directed Prayer:* Spend some time reflecting on the unique aspects of your personality. What makes you you. It might not be something glorious, but see how it is good and molds the kingdom. Open your heart then to be molded by one of those corporal works of mercy. Hear Jesus invite you into the inheritance.



## *Tuesday of the First Week of Lent*

"Your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

*Matthew 6:8*

Our Lord's point can be either very consoling or very frustrating. Consoling because we do not need to convince or cajole God into granting our desires. Frustrating because we wonder why our desires are not fulfilled.

As to whether we should bother asking God for something, since he already knows what we need, Jesus says on another occasion, "ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be opened." So, yes, we should articulate our request to God in prayer. Doing so puts us in a position of humility.

It also helps manifest the desire we have. If we remain silent, assuming God knows what we want, then the desire remains somewhat hidden even to us. We might not really want it. But once we speak the desire aloud, we realize that this indeed is something we want. For as much as we might talk in the world, we do not talk that often in prayer. It must be important when we actually talk and ask for something.

Rarely will God grant our desire right then and there. He will give us something more immediate, and better than our desire: himself. We will find, after we express our desire, that what we really want(ed) is God. God will come to us and fill us.

*Directed Prayer:* There may be something you've been praying for recently. There may have been something you prayed for but have given up praying for it. Lift to your mind those requests and make a simple petition to God: "Lord, please help me find a job" or whatever it is. Then pause and listen. Christ will most likely say back to you something along the lines of: "Trust me. I am with you. I love you. Let me give you the Father now."



## *Wednesday of the First Week of Lent*

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

*Jonah 3:4-5*

The first commissioning of Jonah by God had a slightly different set of instructions than the second. The first: "Set out for the great city of Ninevah and preach against it; their wickedness has come up before me." The second: "Set out for the great city of Nineveh and announce to it the message that I will tell you."

Jonah balked with the first. Perhaps he thought he had to convince the people with the content of his message; that his sermon had to be eloquent, memorable, and inspiring. The second time God would provide the message and do the work. Jonah heeded this commission.

We don't need eloquence or skill. We just need to be ourselves – ourselves in union with God.

We also need to trust our life experiences, especially the crosses. The success of the Ninevite mission on the second attempt was due to Jonah the man. The Ninevites could relate to Jonah, a man who suffered and struggled with God. Jonah was forged in the belly of the whale. His chiseled personality saved a nation.

*Directed Prayer:* Enter the belly of the whale when you pray today. Call to mind your struggles with God and hesitation at some aspect of his will. Trust God will use that strife to his good.



## *Thursday of the First Week of Lent*

"As a child I used to hear from the books of my forefathers that you, O LORD, always free those who are pleasing to you."

*Esther C:16*

Before Esther makes her request to God to be saved, she acknowledges God, the lowly state of her people, and her own lowly state. She provides a preface to the request. After the request, then, she gives a kind

of afterword: "turn our mourning into gladness and our sorrows into wholeness."

Esther's request is granted not because she was sycophantic. "Seek and you will find," said Christ. The nature of Esther's prayer, consisting of the acknowledgment, petition, and then higher blessing, was the process of seeking. The whole goal of prayer is to be with God. Petition, a valid form of prayer, has the same goal. Not to obtain the sought-for good, but to be in relationship with God. The state of neediness is what puts us in relationship to God. Reflecting upon what led to our neediness and why we should be delivered from this neediness unites us to God, and this is a prayer he will answer.

The Book of Esther takes place when the Israelites are in exile in Babylon, a wretched state for the chosen people of God. Esther was a bright light in the otherwise dark time and became a model for future Jews. Forsakenness can become a great grace.

*Directed Prayer:* Esther was "seized with mortal anguish." What seizes you similarly? State your petition to God. What deliverance do you seek? Why do you want to be free? As you petition, let God draw close to your needy heart.



## *Friday of the First Week of Lent*

"My soul looks for the Lord, more than sentinels for daybreak."

*Psalms 130:6*

I've given up two drinks this Lent: coffee and beer. Already I've felt the effects of both. Initially the felt loss is more on the physical level. I miss the morning routine and caffeine jolt, the Friday evening socialization. As I find myself craving the liquid, particularly the coffee in the morning, I see now a deeper craving I have. It is for the Lord. Because I can't turn to those creaturely comforts, I turn now to the Lord in those acute moments of longing. Hence the wisdom of fasting.

The fasting has also helped me appreciate the drinks, as I realize I miss the taste of a bold cup of black coffee or a stout beer. Like anything in life, doing something with the same routine leads one to build up a tolerance and familiarity. A cup of coffee every morning, a beer every Friday with parishioners – the thing is no longer noticed and the enjoyment is lost. But these things aren't meant to be everyday necessities, like drinking water or bathing. They are meant to enhance life. When we let them go, returning them to the Lord, he will give them back to us as a true luxury. A change-up is a good thing. Our Lord does not take life. He gives it.

*Directed Prayer:* Think about a luxury in your life. Has it become a need and no longer a luxury, like coffee for me? Prayer is a balance between the two. We need prayer, but we can also savor it as a delicacy. Ask God to show you how you can really appreciate your time of prayer.



## *Saturday of the First Week of Lent*

"He is to be your God and you are to walk in his ways."

*Deuteronomy 26:17*

Jesus Christ has a specific style. He walks and talks a certain way, he prefers particular actions, and he moves to a specific destination. Christ is not complete acquiescence. There is a "law" about him.

To follow the law in the church isn't for the sake of the law. It isn't for the sake of the institution. It isn't for the sake of harmony and peace and the future. It is for the sake of Christ. The goal of a Christian is to be one with Jesus; to follow and walk with the Lord. The law facilitates the imitation of Christ.

When Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," it's a command because that's what Christ himself would do. It's what Christ did. While he wrestled with the Jewish authorities who despised him, he forgave them from the cross.

'Love your enemy' thus becomes not so much about our enemy as it becomes about God. "Blessed are they who observe his decrees, who seek him with all their heart," says Psalm 119.

The decrees of the Church aren't a test of our strength. They are our channel to God.

*Directed Prayer:* Imagine Jesus as your most favorite person – friend, leader, family member. You would do anything for this person and would enjoy doing it. Imagine now Jesus calling you to follow him and go where he goes, eat what he eats, sleep where he sleeps, wear what he wears. Notice in your heart how those items (food, clothing, etc.) don't matter and how joyful you are to simply be with Jesus imitating him.



## *Coda to the First Week of Lent: Saints Peter and Paul*

"Go, for this man is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before Gentiles, kings, and children of Israel, and I will show him what he will have to suffer for my name."

*Acts 9:15*

Feast days in the church are typically the anniversary of the death of the saint. There are a few exceptions to this rule: the Nativity of Mary, John the Baptist, and our Lord. Peter and Paul receive feasts neither for their actual births or deaths. But if we look more closely at January 25 (Conversation of Paul), February 22 (Chair of Peter), and June 29 (Sts. Peter and Paul), we actually do see a mystical birth and mystical death being honored

in these men.

When Saul was struck by the light on the road to Damascus, he was forever changed. He had died to his old way of living as a Jew and angry man. Paul, the friend and instrument of Jesus Christ, was born. When Peter was given the keys at Caesaria Philippi, he at last relinquished the fishing rod and was born into the role of chief shepherd.

Their births, while glorious occasions, were not unmarked by darkness. When we forsake our former ways of unfulfilled and materialistic living to follow Jesus, there is a death that takes place; there is sadness. But "blessed are those who mourn."

We seek to be reborn in Lent, which is why so many of us embrace the season. May we also seek to truly die to a former way of life, like Peter and Paul.

*Directed Prayer:* "What are you looking for?" Jesus once asked the apostles. Ask the Holy Spirit to knock you off your horse or thrust a set of keys into your hand. Let your sadness be turned to joy.



## *The Second Sunday of Lent*

"When the disciples heard this, they fell prostrate and were very much afraid."

*Matthew 17:6*

The Transfiguration marks the half-way point in the Gospel. As Jesus descends Mount Tabor to make his way to Jerusalem following this event, the tenor of his teaching and encounters will be different. Opposition will harden and predictions of his death will be made. But for this one moment, glory abounds.

Why, then, were the three apostles filled with fear? Perhaps it was because they overheard the conversation between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Perhaps it was Jesus' countenance and the other two ghosts. Perhaps it was because Jesus, who had once seemed so relatable as a man, now seemed very distant.

"But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Rise, and do not be afraid.'" Their fear at first may have been justified, but Jesus told them to be afraid no more. He touched them to assure them, much like he would use the sense of touch after his resurrection to dispel any fear or doubt.

Jesus Christ is relatable. He is our friend, the best of friends. But he is also God and, in many ways, frightening. When we are overcome with fear and awe at our Lord it is then he will come to us and touch us and say to us, "do not be afraid."

*Directed Prayer:* Ask the Holy Spirit to enflame in you the Fear of the Lord, one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. Pray with how awesome and mighty and omniscient Jesus is. See your desire to please the Lord and do him fitting homage. Then let him speak words of comfort to you: *Do not be afraid. You are very pleasing to me.*



## *Monday of the Second Week of Lent*

"Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."

*Luke 6:36*

Much ink is spilled on the subject of mercy. Typically it is about *God's* mercy: how he is merciful to us sinners, how he is merciful to other sinners, how he is merciful to the world. But not much is shed on the mercy we are called to give to others.

Oh, mercy! Such a wonderful and easy gift to receive; such a difficult gift to give.

Yes, we are well aware of our faults and are inclined to seek pardon from the merciful God when we are low. This is a good thing, and if we hesitate in this, we must overcome it. God is not looking to shame us and make us feel worse, but to lighten our burdens.

Yet it is so hard for us to turn around and extend that same mercy to those who have offended us. For whatever reason we choose to hold onto the anger, the resentment, and the hurt. It is our attempt at control. It is our unfortunate thinking that holding it over the other will soothe our hurt. It is our means of self-defense and protection.

We trust in God when we ask him for forgiveness. We trust that he will pardon us. We need to exercise a similar trust in God when we forgive others. Lent is the time to pray with forgiveness.

*Directed Prayer:* Pray with one or two major faults in yourself. Rest in God's forgiveness of your faults and see the contours of his forgiveness. Then think of a person who has hurt you and is in need of your mercy, whether they know it or not. Ask God to help you see that person with God's eyes, to love that person with God's heart.



## *Tuesday of the Second Week of Lent*

"Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

*Matthew 23:12*

The Old Testament is full of examples of the lowliest being chosen as the favorite. Cain was the stronger older brother – Abel's gift was selected by God. Ishmael was the first born of Abraham – Isaac, the latecomer, becomes the heir. Jacob, the second son of Isaac, was a runt compared to Esau – Jacob is named patriarch. Judah is the lowliest son of Jacob – his clan bears the king. King David was not as tall or prominent as Saul – Saul is deposed. The last shall be first.

But the first are not called to remain first. They are called back to their origin, to become last and be servants of the scorned. All of these Old Testament upstarts fail in that endeavor.

Christ was truly the first, the only begotten son and firstborn of all creation. He became last when he took upon flesh and was born in poverty. This humiliation exalted him to greatness, and once great he abdicated the position to serve. Thus, we see the cycle of holiness. Last to first, first to last, last to first; servant to master to servant and so forth.

Perhaps the point is that we never rest in one position in this life. We are given a throne upon which we never sit. The movement of exaltation and abasement is our fulfillment.

*Directed Prayer:* "The greatest among you must be your servant." Christ is your servant. How are you served by him? How can you be further served? Pray with how the Lord might be inviting you today or this week to serve someone. It can be as simple as a prayer for that person.



## *Wednesday of the Second Week of Lent*

"Come, let us contrive a plot against Jeremiah. It will not mean the loss of instruction from the priests, nor of counsel from the wise, nor of messages from the prophets."

*Jeremiah 18:18*

People are more than what they do. A parent is more than just an adult who provides shelter, food, and clothing for a child. A single woman is more than just the job she has. The priest himself more than preaching, celebrating the sacraments, and administering a parish.

Anyone can do the above activities – earning a living, teaching, etc. In every age these tasks will be executed, and life will go on. But life is more than just 'going on'; more than 'keeping the place afloat.' Life is about being impacted, and it is the actual man or woman, and not their function, who truly makes the impact.

The opponents of the prophet Jeremiah recognized this truth. Eliminate the prophet and the people will not be deprived of instruction. There are other prophets and priests to do that.

Jeremiah, like Jesus, was powerful not so much in his words and deeds, but in his very being. This is why both were eliminated by the institution.

We long for the truth and we long for justice, true. But, really, we long for a person to love. We have that in our Lord.

*Directed Prayer:* We receive messages all day long; business, political, academic, even religious insights. They pass through us. The medium of the message is inconsequential. Focus on the person of Jesus Christ before you in prayer and let his words specifically intended to you truly impact your heart.



## *Thursday of the Second Week of Lent*

"Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am suffering torment in these flames."

*Luke 16:26*

These aren't actual flames of God's punishment the rich man suffers in Christ's parable. The suffering is within the man: psychological, we could say. A theologian once opined that heaven and hell are actually the same exact place. What makes the place heaven or hell is how each individual experiences it. The opera, for example, might be heaven for one and hell for another. The "flames" burned the rich man, but they warmed Lazarus.

Yes, indeed, there are fires of heaven in addition to the fires of hell. The heavenly ones are delightful. It is the heat produced by the communion saints, the Blessed Mother, the union with the Holy Trinity. For those who have longed for this divine love on earth, these fires will be a blessing. For those who have sought only worldly pleasures on earth, these fires will be a curse. Just like the torch that guided the Israelites through the Sinai desert at night was a curse for those who longed to return to Egypt; a blessing for those who sought the homeland.

It was Lazarus' suffering that made him long for God. It was his poverty that allowed heaven to be truly heaven for him.

*Directed Prayer:* Pray with an area of poverty in your life; the struggle that makes you like Lazarus sitting outside the house in destitution. It might be a personal weakness, a loved one who is suffering, a challenge you see in the world. Do not pray to have that poverty removed. Pray, rather, to be in touch with God. Pray the finger of God descends from heaven, cools your tongue, and enflames your heart.



## *Friday of the Second Week of Lent*

"So when Joseph came up to them, they stripped him of the long tunic he had on; then they took him and threw him into the cistern, which was empty and dry."

*Genesis 37:23-24*

The painting *El Expolio* (see image below), completed by El Greco in 1579, hangs in the sacristy of the Cathedral of Toledo in Spain. It depicts the scene of Christ being stripped of his garment atop Mount Calvary. While everyone in the world, it seems, is angrily around him, the Lord calmly gazes heavenward to the Father. Christ is radiant in the swirl of hatred and commotion.

The priest is often likewise in a swirl of busyness and turmoil, people grasping at him and the world trying to strip away his identity. He can be swept up in the tide of furor, or, like Christ, he can center his heart in a gaze upon the Father. The way to true peace isn't to resist every combatant, but to pray. We can lose everything, but we can never lose our relationship to God, and that is all that matters.

Joseph's stripping of his glorious robe was a precursor to the tenth station. Joseph was able to enter a period of silence and prayer as he dwelt in the dry cistern. Jesus in this moment was in the cistern of his heart. He didn't hear the noise, didn't feel the coldness on his naked body, didn't see the hateful scowls. The Father is eager to shield us too from the chaos if we enter the cistern of prayer.

*Directed Prayer:* Who or what is grasping at you, assaulting you? What is your "robe of comfort" the world is trying to strip away? Breathe deeply as you pray and know that the Father is holding you. Ask the Holy Spirit to allow you to let go of your robe.



*El Expolio (The Disrobing of Christ), El Greco, 1579*



## *Saturday of the Second Week of Lent*

"A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of your estate that should come to me.' So the father divided the property between them."

*Luke 15:11-12*

The late Jesuit priest and accomplished scholar, Father John O'Malley, chose the prodigal son as his funeral Gospel. An atypical selection, but fitting nonetheless. Fitting not because O'Malley was a particularly wayward son – who isn't? – but because his life demonstrated the forbearance of the Father. The prodigality of the father is what we all will rely upon at the conclusion of our life.

The father in the parable first accedes to his son's request for the inheritance. He then embraces him upon his return. The father brushes aside the insult at the beginning; brushes aside the apology at the end. It's as if the father says, "never mind all that."

Same too is the treatment of the elder son, who is as troubled as the younger. "All that is mine is yours." The father has nothing left for himself. It makes no difference.

Wherever we might be at this stage in our life – in the distant land, working at home, enjoying the party, forgiving our children – when our time comes to an end, we can be assured the Father will brush aside any speech we have prepared and welcome us home.

*Directed Prayer:* Read the entire fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke, which includes the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son. Are you the one who is lost or are you the one who is searching? Either way, you are not alone. The Father is with you as you search; the Son is with you as you wander.



## *Coda to the Second Week of Lent: Pontius Pilate*

"Pilate said to them, 'Take him yourselves and crucify him. I find no guilt in him.'"

*John 19:6*

Paul Maier's 1968 documentary novel, *Pontius Pilate*, concludes with the title character retiring from civic life to a villa outside of Rome with his wife. It would appear to be an anticlimactic ending for one of the most notorious characters in history. But the author's point is clear. Pontius Pilate may not be all that notorious. "Therefore," says the author in a personal note at the end of the novel, "with Josephus' recording Pilate's humanity, as well as his blunders, and the New Testament reading casting him virtually as Jesus' lawyer for

the defense debate before capitulation to popular pressure, a more balance portrait of Pontius Pilate is possible, even if he is hardly the saint the Ethiopians would make of him."

Pilate most likely never officially converted to Christianity. But he respected and appreciated both Christ and his followers, and he attempted, to the best of his ability, to make sense of it all. Sometimes this is all we can ask of someone.

Pilate stands for the limited man. He is not religious, but he is also not hostile to religion. He can accept the truth of Jesus in his mind, but he cannot believe it in his heart, such that it changes his life. There is a room for the Pontius Pilates in our church. They cause suffering, but we must love them nonetheless.

*Directed Prayer:* Most of us have a "Pontius Pilate" in our life. Spend some time praying about that individual, and notice what arises in your heart: anger, pity, hope. Ask Jesus what he thinks about that person; what he thought about the actual Pontius Pilate. Then pray for their conversion, knowing that the conversion may look very different than what you picture.



## *The Third Sunday of Lent*

"The water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

*John 4:14*

When we think of power and authority, we think of the stronger being over the weaker. Subordinate, by the very structure of the word, is underneath.

Like most things, Christ turns power upside-down. The Almighty bends to wash the feet of the apostles. The Messiah falls to the dirt, under the woman caught in adultery, to write on it. The Son of Man is submerged in the waters of the Jordan by his cousin.

Rembrandt's 1668 painting of the prodigal son, of which many are familiar, portrays the son who has returned beneath the father in his embrace. Rembrandt's lesser-known 1659 painting of the Samaritan woman at the well has an opposite depiction. The woman is above the Lord. On the other side of the well, she dons the same red garment as the father and elder son in the prodigal painting did. Christ will give her, from the lower position, water that will elevate her to eternity. Not water from the well in the ground, but water from his heart.

We no longer need to clamor to the top. "Believe me, woman, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem." No more mountains to surmount. Just water into which to descend.

*Directed Prayer:* Consider a troubled individual you know of; one who might even be an outcast. Pray for them. If possible, while on your knees, ask God to lift them up. Then consider how you are troubled and in what ways you are lowly. See Jesus bend to lift you up.



## *Monday of the Third Week of Lent*

"They rose up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town had been built, to hurl him down headlong."

*Luke 4:29*

Good Friday was not the first attempt on Christ's life. The Gospel today speaks of an earlier attempt from his hometown of Nazareth.

And there were more.

Even earlier was the attempt on Jesus' life in Bethlehem when he was a baby. There too he escaped, and Herod slaughtered all the males under two years of age. And a year before Jesus' death he was nearly stoned in Jerusalem when he said, "Before Abraham was, I AM."

The chances of dying grew progressively more painful emotionally: being slain as a baby, thrown from a height, stoned, crucified. So why did Jesus wait to die on Good Friday?

Perhaps because he wanted the most brutal and protracted way of dying as a way to show his love for us.

Perhaps because he wanted the time to heal, teach, and establish his church. Had he died in Nazareth, none of this would have happened.

And perhaps because he wanted us to know that it's not just one time in our life we die – the final time. We all, like him, experience rejections, betrayals, and deaths... at all stages of our life. Which means we constantly experience the resurrection.

*Directed Prayer:* Pray with one of the deepest wounds you've received from another individual – when someone nearly threw you off a cliff. As Jesus "passed through their midst and went away," so too you survived. Ask God for the grace to forgive that person. Then ask him for forgiveness for the person who you nearly threw off the cliff.



## *Tuesday of the Third Week of Lent*

"So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart."

*Matthew 18:25*

"But I think it's about forgiveness... forgiveness," sings Don Henley in the 1990 hit, *The Heart of the Matter*. The singer is trying to figure out the situation: what's wrong with him, what's wrong with her, what to do. The heart of the matter is simply forgiveness. He sings,

*There are people in your life who've come and gone  
They let you down, you know they hurt your pride  
You better put it all behind you, baby, 'cause life goes on  
You keep carrying that anger, it'll eat you up inside, baby*

Yes, but how do we put it all behind?

Henri Nouwen says to forgive we need to first be forgiven. That is, we need to experience for ourselves what we are called to give.

To be forgiven we have to acknowledge that all of us, in some way, have hurt someone. We have not been, for whatever reason, the kind of friend, mother, father, brother, sister, child, priest the other needed us to be. In Nouwen's words, we need to say, "I have handed you over to suffering. Somehow, I failed you. I am sorry I failed you."

Most of our offenses are not intentional. We don't always try to fail another. But it happens. If we can humbly see how we have failed someone, then we will be on our way to possessing the heart of the matter.

*Directed Prayer:* Look deep into yourself: the weaknesses of your nature that have or could possibly hurt another. Ask God to heal that weakness in you. Ask him for the grace to seek forgiveness and then to forgive another.



## *Wednesday of the Third Week of Lent*

"I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."

*Matthew 5:17*

It is natural for us to throw away something which displeases us or no longer serves any use. Articles

of clothing, books, old supplies of an abandoned hobby... into the trash they go.

We should resist the similar inclination to do this with people. Someone is distanced from us? Do not immediately fire them, divorce them, unfriend them, demote them, resent them. Jesus, who has been hurt by everyone, would not abolish them. Nor should we.

That supposedly useless person can actually be a means for personal growth, as we see, perhaps, the flaw within us that led to their action or omission. At minimum they can lead to our greater connection with God. For when we are hurt, we desire to reach out to someone for comfort. God can be that person for us. Then the enemy has become a grace, as they have facilitated our union with God.

Yes, not to abolish, but to fulfill. Give condemned individuals time. Do the same with forsaken values. The seed might be ugly to you now, but it will bear fruit. The caterpillar will become the butterfly.

*Directed Prayer:* Imagine little pipes or troughs in your heart. See the people or values you have disregarded as seeds of your favorite fruit or vegetable. Ask Jesus to scatter those seeds into the seedbed of your heart. Then feel the Holy Spirit shining his warming and vitalizing light upon you.



## *Thursday of the Third Week of Lent*

"Say to them: This is the nation that does not listen to the voice of the Lord, its God, or take correction."

*Jeremiah 7:28*

Holy listening is a skill, and one taught to aspiring pastoral ministers. When we truly listen to the other before us, we clear our mind and receive what they are communicating. We set aside our agenda and our desire to problem-solve. We have no worry or fear, and we are not preoccupied with our needs.

When we listen to the person in such a way, we are actually listening to God. What then stands out in our heads and hearts is what God wants us to hear. And what we say in response, be it a word or gesture, will be inspired by the Holy Spirit. The person will be changed, and so will we. In this exchange of holy listening, God is experienced.

God sought to communicate with Israel. They refused to listen. As Jeremiah said, "they turned their backs, not their faces," to him. If we do not listen to someone, then we are not in real communion with them. We prefer isolation. Israel might have been "wedded to God," but the marriage was sterile.

Not listening typically stems from fear: fear of letting go, fear of being converted, fear of surrender, fear of the unknown, fear of the uncontrolled. Lent is a time to overcome this fear and open our ears.

*Directed Prayer:* Before you speak to God in prayer today, pause, close your eyes, and invite the Holy Spirit to inspire you. Tap into the depths of your heart and communicate something simple to the Lord. Then ask Jesus to speak back to you. He will speak in a similar fashion. As Deacon Jim Keating says, what Jesus says will be "brief, deep, gentle, and true."



## *Friday of the Third Week of Lent*

"He shall strike root like the Lebanon cedar, and put forth his shoots."

*Hosea 14:6-7*

The cedars of Lebanon are mentioned over seventy times throughout the Bible. This durable and beautiful wood was used for the construction of the temple, for Phoenician ships that navigated the Mediterranean, and for chariots for the armies of Israel, Egypt, and Assyria. In the Middle Ages, a title given to Mary was "the Cedar of Lebanon," so graceful and helpful she was and is.

A stable tree, like a cedar, is an icon for contemplation. When we are praying deeply and authentically with the Lord – not rushing through prayers or distracted – we are planted deeply in the earth and our souls extend upward to God. We are silent, focused, and unaffected by the pollution around us. We sit upright in our position of prayer. God pours his dew upon us. Our hearts become stout, as the psalmist says.

"And when Jesus saw that he answered with understanding, he said to him, 'You are not far from the Kingdom of God'." The scribe was acknowledged by Jesus as a cedar of Lebanon. He didn't play games or turn around and plot against Jesus. He answered with depth and clarity. The scribe became part of a forest of cedars.

The government in Lebanon recently has undertaken a campaign to protect and restore the severely depleted woods in Lebanon. Our church too needs men and women of contemplation and understanding to enhance our forest.

*Directed Prayer:* Pray about an area of which you are confused and seeking clarity: a church issue, a personality flaw, a broken relationship. Bring the issue before the Lord and then let it drift upwards to him. Sit upright in your place of prayer, palms open upwards, breathe deeply, and receive the grace the Lord seeks to give you.



## *Saturday of the Third Week of Lent*

"Your piety is like a morning cloud, like the dew that early passes away."

*Hosea 6:4*

I recently conducted Confirmation interviews with 8th graders as part of their preparation to receive the sacrament. I was surprised how many students responded "piety" when asked which Gift of the Holy Spirit was their favorite and which they thought would serve them the best in high school. Earlier I had asked them why they wanted to receive the sacrament. To that question, many responded, "because I want to keep God in my life, and I want to grow deeper with him."

Piety, these students subconsciously realized, was congruent with being close to God. When we are pious, God is in our consciousness. Whether it's not eating meat on a Friday, not taking the Lord's name in vain, or making the sign of the cross before an exam, the pious person has not forgotten the Lord.

In Christ's parable of the publican and the pharisee, both make acts of piety. The Pharisee fasts and tithes. The publican prays and beats his breast. But it is the publican who is justified.

A man does not bend on a knee to propose marriage to a woman he doesn't love. If we genuflect – an act of piety – we should know why we are doing it. The publican didn't beat his breast for the sake of beating his breast. He did it because he loved God. May these students – and all of us who are still students in the school of prayer – do it because we love God.

*Directed Prayer:* The Holy Spirit is the love of God. It is the love poured into our hearts. Think of all the pious actions you do throughout your day. Ask the Holy Spirit to anoint those actions so that they deepen your love and appreciation for God.



## *Coda to the Third Week of Lent: Saint Joseph*

"It is he who shall build a house for my name."

*2 Samuel 7:13*

To keep holy the sabbath is the third commandment in the decalogue. It is more important than not killing or stealing or committing adultery. Hence, many wonder what, beyond worshiping God on Sunday, it means to reverence the day. Many wonder what, beyond not going to church, violation of the commandment entails. Is cleaning your house on a Sunday and running errands an infraction? Are doctors, first responders, and priests who all have to work on Sundays in a state of mortal sin?

It is the spirit of the law rather than the letter. Yes, one can actually do work on Sunday and not be in violation of the commandment... *if* they are interiorly mindful of God. By the same token, sitting on the couch on Sunday and watching football all day is not necessarily holy.

This is the art of work and the art of rest; the spirituality of labor and spirituality of rest. The holy person maintains an interior peace and openness to God while their bodies move and function (or rest).

Joseph can be our guide in this difficult endeavor. The patron saint of workers can imbue deep within our spirit a connection to God. He will pray for us that whatever we do or wherever we are, God, his son, is with us.

*Directed Prayer:* If it is the end of the day, reflect back on your activities. Invoke Joseph's assistance. Was your mind in sync with God or, while you were working, were you a million miles from him? If it was a mixed bag, ask God to bless those activities where you were mentally distant.



## *The Fourth Sunday of Lent*

"Not as man sees does God see, because man sees the appearance but the Lord looks into the heart."

*1 Samuel 16:7*

Jesse had seven sons. Six were strong and talented. The seventh, David, was small and scrawny. It was David who was elected by God, through the prophet Samuel, to be the king of Israel.

David wasn't predestined from before his birth to be the king. None of the prominent Old Testament figures were – Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, and so forth. They all existed normally, and God found them. This is, of course, different from Jesus and Mary, who were fashioned in the Trinity and given as gifts to the human race. They were begotten by God, we say.

But these Old Testament figures, along with the man born blind in John 9, did have something that made them attractive to God. Their bodies were weak, but their hearts were strong. They had character.

David was strong and courageous, humble and respectful, creative and open. The man born blind similar. He answered candidly the Pharisees' interrogation. He demonstrated a deep brilliance when he responded, "If he is a sinner, I do not know. One thing I do know is that I was blind and now I see." And he respected God, as illustrated when he worships Jesus when Jesus admits he is indeed the Son of Man.

There might not be anything special to our outer appearances, but our hearts can have a depth that make us ready to be elected by God.

*Directed Prayer:* David and the man born blind had virtuous hearts, but hearts also with sin. Acknowledge your weaknesses and ask God to compensate with additional virtues. Your sin and weakness is what makes you a candidate for the kingdom.



## *Monday of the Fourth Week of Lent*

"Jesus said to him, 'Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will not believe.'"

*John 4:48*

We are familiar with Cana because of the wedding feast. But we don't recall that Christ, here in this section of John, returned to Cana a second time and healed a royal official's son. After the boy is healed, we are told "the father and his whole household came to believe."

Why did they not come to believe after the transformation of water into wine?

One wonders if it was because the sign was not personal enough for this particular family. Witnessing the wedding miracle was like watching a magician from afar. It might have thrilled the mind, but it didn't move the heart. When a family member is saved, then, all of a sudden, the heart is touched. This royal family saw the compassionate heart of Jesus with this second miracle. They saw the plan of God, as Isaiah said, "to create Jerusalem to be a joy and its people to be a delight." They wanted to be near this good God.

Married couples today travel to Cana to renew their wedding vows. Wine is purchased from the gift shops. But maybe families who do not truly believe in Christ should travel instead to Cana. Maybe the "royal officials" of the world should visit this place of conversion to intercede for their households.

*Directed Prayer:* Many people either do not believe or are not close to God. Like the father in the story, we who do believe can intercede to the Lord for these individuals. We can ask Jesus to heal the specific ailments of our loved ones. But this will require we know what ails them truly and desire their well-being.



## *Tuesday of the Fourth Week of Lent*

"Once more he measured off a thousand cubits, but there was now a river through which I could not wade; for the water had risen so high it had become a river that could not be crossed except by swimming."

*Ezekiel 47:5*

The depth increases. It begins with a trickle for Ezekiel, becomes an ankle-deep creek, then a knee-deep stream, a waist-deep river, and finally a sea. The prophet must swim.

When we swim, we leave our feet. We leave steady ground and the control that is walking. We also lie flat. As we are when we are sleeping, in the reclined position we are vulnerable to the forces around us. There

is an act of faith that occurs. We trust we will float.

But swimming isn't total passivity. We can, and must, exert our own influence to navigate the waters and move.

We are called to swim in the spiritual life. We are called to swim into the heart of Jesus, the way Peter would swim to Jesus in the Sea of Galilee after the resurrection.

Life and work is walking. It is steady. We are in control. We are safe. But there is an increasing source of water around us. We can walk through the trickle and the knee-deep river for a time, but there will come a point when we must swim. We need not wait until death or some crisis to learn how to swim. We can start swimming now. We can take the plunge into authentic prayer, allow ourselves to be swept away in the heart of Jesus. The advent of the sea need not be frightening.

*Directed Prayer:* The sick man in John 5 was unable to make his way to the pool of Bethesda to swim. Jesus came and cured him. Ask Jesus to come to you as he did that man. Ask him to eliminate your fear of diving into the deep end of discipleship.



## *Wednesday of the Fourth Week of Lent*

"Amen, amen, I say to you, the Son cannot do anything on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing."

*John 5:19*

A mentor is one who invests in another. He shares with the protégé his wisdom and his talents. There is a fundamental desire in the mentor to not be about himself, but to care about the well-being of the individual and the institution, be it the company, the family, or the church. The mentor is not selfish. Deeply humble, he sees a greatness in the apprentice; an ability in the young person to surpass himself and take the institution to even greater levels. A mentor is truly a man of communion.

Fear, insecurity, egotism, and power kill this beautiful species, and the mentor is indeed an endangered species these days. If the mentor is unable to let go and trust, he will never empower the future. He will have buried his talents in the field and the treasure will be lost.

In Christ we have the supreme mentor. He learned from his own Father, who both showed and bequeathed everything that was his. Christ emptied himself in turn. He did not pour his chalice onto the ground and into the drain, but into the hearts of the apostles. That group mentored others and so on.

Christ desires to mentor us today. More than just teaching us the business, the God-mentor desires to take us into a deeply consoling relationship of love.

*Directed Prayer:* Consider those who have mentored you in your life. Say a prayer of thanksgiving for them and ask the Lord to reveal what these mentors gave you. Then ask the Lord to show you who he has placed in your life to mentor.



## *Thursday of the Fourth Week of Lent*

"I do not accept human praise."

*John 5:41*

Abraham, Moses, David, and Elijah are the most important figures of the Old Testament. None was greater than the other and all represented different elements of the Israelite faith. Abraham was the Father, Moses the Law-Giver, David the King, and Elijah the teacher. In Christ we have all of these elements together. He is the one perfect individual.

Let Moses be our focus today. Moses gave the law, with the Ten Commandments being at the heart of the law, and his flock subsequently broke the law. The very first violation, in fact, was the violation of the very first law. 'You shall worship no other gods' was broken by the golden calf.

Jesus gave the new law, with the Beatitudes being at the heart of his Sermon on the Mount, and immediately, like Moses, it was broken. Instead of being poor in spirit, meek, and so forth, the Pharisees and disciples turn to power and pride, etc.

We break the Ten Commandments today. We also break the Beatitudes. And just as Moses interceded for the Israelites after their depravity and saved them, so Christ does the same for us. He neither destroys us nor the law.

Both Moses and Christ saved the people not because of anything the people did subsequently. They ignored the excuses and the manipulative praise and pleading. Christ and Moses saved because they unconditionally loved the people. They were truly men of mercy.

*Directed Prayer:* Allow the Lord to unconditionally love you. There's no need to cajole a favor from him. Let that naturally lead you into praise of him.



## *Friday of the Fourth Week of Lent*

"You know me and also know where I am from."

*John 7:28*

There seems to be a preoccupation in John's Gospel with Jesus' origin. The first apostles by the Jordan River ask Jesus, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" Nathanael remarks, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" The Samaritan woman by the well balks because the man is from Israel. Pilate will want to know the territory where Jesus is apparently king. The people in the crowd during the feast of tabernacles say, "But we know where Jesus is from. When the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from."

It was the work of the enemy to make people think the Messiah would have some unknowable origin. When someone is from our native country or even our hometown, we have an instant connection. A bond is shared, and a trust is immediately formed.

Christ does not want us to take our time in coming to trust him and be vulnerable before him. He is from our hometown. He is our flesh and blood. We know him like a brother or cousin, and we can unpack our lives before him. He will understand us, and he will work for us.

So, where was Jesus from? He was from Nazareth. But he was also from Chicago. And from New York, and Mexico City, and Paris, and Vietnam, and... your hometown.

Directed Prayer: If you've ever lived away from your hometown, or are currently living away, think of what it is like when you meet someone from home. Imagine Jesus connecting to your heart. What do you want to share with him? What does he share with you?



## *Saturday of the Fourth Week of Lent*

"Does our law condemn a man before it first hears him and finds out what he is doing?"

*John 7:51*

There are specific ways each of us seek to be loved. Some of us look for words of affirmation, others for touch. Some hope to receive acts of service or gifts, while others want time with the person. The individual in our life might not be inclined to our particular love language, and we are hurt when they do not provide it for us.

Part of the healing and forgiveness process is allowing the individual to defend themselves before the law. That is, for us to express our grievance, and for them to express their intention; or, at least, their lack of malintent.

The Israelites actually had malintent with Jeremiah. The prophet still doesn't judge or condemn them. He instead prays to God, "let me witness the vengeance you take on them, for to you I have entrusted my cause!"

We don't pray God will harm those who harm us, as if we are hoping bad karma to come around. Rather, we simply surrender the individuals and the restoration of the right order to God's care. Jesus did not lash out from the cross. He humbled himself and was exalted.

*Directed Prayer:* We cannot forgive if we cannot see how we are wired to be loved and cared for. What do you want and need? Ask God to give it to you, and then ask God for the grace to forgive the person in your life who has offended you. Give that person a fair trial.



## *Coda to the Fourth Week of Lent: The Annunciation*

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you."

*Luke 1:35*

There are innumerable paintings of the Annunciation, and Gari Melchers' *Southern Girl* from the 19th Century (see image on the following page) would probably not be included in the gallery. The virgin depicted is not the Blessed Mother and the scene is not from 1st Century Palestine. But when we gaze upon the striking image, there are several parallels, and lessons, we can draw.

The maiden is in the shade with the lush garden behind her. We see the sunlight in the bottom right corner. Her basket of vegetables has spilled, but she seems not to mind. She contemplates something else. But it is not a strictly serene contemplation, as she grasps her thigh and bunches her feet together, showing the slightest bit of anxiousness. She remains seated, nonetheless, and does not flee. She will appropriate what has happened and move eventually, when the time is right, to gather her vegetables and go on with her day.

Mary received the most startling piece of news anyone could ever receive... that has ever been received. Her graceful response, "Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord" displays a deep trust in God and a gentle authority over her surroundings. Mary would not be afraid of this new role. Although a change from what she had planned, she would not lose her desire for the life of prayer and holiness.

*Southern Girl* shows a woman in command. She knows "the one thing necessary" and she remains with it. The Blessed Mother, a "southern girl" in relationship to Jerusalem, gives an icon of true authority: one who is able to receive and remain with God.

*Directed Prayer:* Find a relaxing location somewhere to pray, a place in the "shade," so to speak. Surrender the spilled basket of vegetables – your work – and receive God in the depths of your being.



Gari Melchers, *Southern Girl*, ca.1920



## *The Fifth Sunday of Lent*

"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

*John 11:21*

Martha and Mary both independently make the same above statement to Jesus about Lazarus. They must have said this to themselves before Christ arrived, as if they were rehearsing their upcoming conversation. Jesus does not directly respond to their statements. He focuses on the future. "Your brother will rise," he says.

If. It is a word we often say. *If I had received that promotion... If I had said yes... If I didn't have that tragedy... If I wasn't alive.* We might be suffering, but 'if' is a word from the enemy's lexicon, meant to separate us from God. 'If' tells us the past is forsaken; that God is not present now; that the future is bleak if not hopeless.

There are no 'ifs' with God. God did not say to himself *"If I had been present with Adam, he would not have eaten the apple... If I had counseled David better, he would not have sinned... If I had spoken to Judas, he would not have betrayed me."* No. God simply moves forward to redemption and restoration.

Jesus was in control in Bethany. So too in our own Bethanies. When we are troubled, Christ is with us. He weeps with us, and he raises us.

*Directed Prayer:* Pray with your troubles or your unfulfilled hopes. Listen to our Lord's response to you now. What do you really want in the present moment? Let Jesus give that to you as you sit at his feet.



## *Monday of the Fifth Week of Lent*

"Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger."

*John 8:6*

The scene of the woman caught in adultery about to be stoned took place the day after the Feast of Tabernacles had concluded. This autumn feast lasted seven days, and it was believed that the Messiah would appear during this week. Each day of the feast a priest would take a pitcher of water from the pool at Siloam and pour it through the streets of Jerusalem, symbolizing the cleansing of the nation to prepare for the Messiah. It was on the last day of the feast that Jesus stood up and proclaimed, "I am the living water!" When he bent down to write in the dust before the Pharisees and the accused woman, he was further emphasizing he was the cleansing water for the nation.

"He straightened up..." Jesus does not stay mingled in the dirt. As the Red Sea waters stood up to save Israel, so too did he stand to save the woman and the people. The living water entered the heart of the woman and healed her. She was indeed guilty of adultery – she had been "caught in the very act" as the Pharisees lodge – but she was freed of the punishment. The Messiah is not in the business of condemning, but of giving life. As Isaiah prophesied, "for I put water in the desert and rivers in the wasteland for my chosen people to drink."

*Directed Prayer:* Lent is nearing its end. We've given up things, but have we drunk the living water? Have we drunk from the pierced side of Christ? Imagine yourself dry, cracked, and thirsty. Feel the waters of Christ wash over you, revitalize you, heal you, and push you out.



## *Tuesday of the Fifth Week of Lent*

"We have sinned in complaining against the Lord and you."

*Numbers 21:7*

After passing through the Red Sea, Moses intentionally took the Israelites on a long detour. His goal was to bypass a territory possessed by the Edomites. The Edomites were distant relatives of the Israelites (they were descendants of Esau, who was the brother of Jacob). Moses did not want to provoke this clan into battle, as the Edomites would have been frightened by an approaching army. Moses' circumvention meant longer time in the desert, and more suffering, but it prevented potential warfare. The Israelites didn't know, or didn't care, about Moses' rationale, and complained about the detour.

When the Israelites came to their senses, after being attacked by the seraph serpents, they realized in complaining about Moses, they were actually complaining about God. In doubting and distrusting Moses, they were doing the same to God.

Complaining is the work of the evil one. It serves no purpose. If there truly is a problem, the righteous person confronts the issue. Or, they take their concern to God, pray for the wisdom to see, and wait patiently. When we are inclined to complain, the invitation Jesus offers us is not to speak, but to look upon the cross. It will heal us as the bronze serpent on the pole healed the Israelites. The point isn't to suppress our consternation, but to appropriate it in a healthy way. The healthiest way is always with God in prayer.

*Directed Prayer:* Bring to God what is bothering you of late. Ask for the grace to not complain about that issue to another person. Ask him for the grace to receive clarity about what he is calling you to do.



## *Wednesday of the Fifth Week of Lent*

"Nebuchadnezzar exclaimed, 'Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who sent his angel to deliver the servants who trusted in him; they disobeyed the royal command and yielded their bodies rather than serve or worship any god except their own God'."

*Daniel 3:95*

The King of Babylon came to praise the one true God because of the simple witness of the three young men. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did not eat unblessed meat from the king's table. They ate vegetables instead. And when they were thrown into the fire, they did not cry out in fright or beg the king for pardon. They calmly sang a long canticle of praise to God.

Take note: it was not convincing arguments, a winning personality, a mighty feat, or some other exceptional act that prompted conversion. It was a simple remaining true to one's belief. When we live our faith out authentically – not necessarily imposing it on others, but just living it ourselves – we influence the world. When we look to please only God and not men, then we inspire others to do the same.

"Learn to appease the king," Diogenes said condescendingly to Socrates one day, "and you will not have to live on lentils." "Learn to live on lentils," Socrates responded, "and you will not have to appease the king."

*Directed Prayer:* Read from the Old Testament Daniel 3:25-90, Abednego's prayer he sung while in the fire with his two companions. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you praise God the Father and to see his beauty in everything. Ask Mary to help your love of God be an instrument of evangelization.



## *Thursday of the Fifth Week of Lent*

"Abraham your father rejoiced to see my day; he saw it and was glad."

*John 8:56*

The Jews, who did not have the benefit of the idea of time travel, were clearly confused by Jesus' words about Abraham. We probably would be too.

Let us simply take the statement at face value. Abraham was rejoicing at that moment in time in 33AD when Jesus was preaching in the temple in Jerusalem. This meant Abraham, who died in 2,000 BC, was alive in the afterlife.

Abraham waited his entire earthly life for such a day, the way a Chicago Cubs fan waited over a century to see a World Series win. Interestingly too, Abraham also waited some of his eternal life for the day, like those Cubs fans who died before 2016 "waited." Eternity, somehow, is both ever-present and changing. It is like a painting with layers of colors added after one coat is dry. The painting is not undone with addition. It is enhanced.

Jesus is always adding on to our life, making it better. The day God changed Abram's name and gave him the covenant was a glorious day, but not as glorious as this. The day Abraham's son Isaac was at last born was also a great day, but not as great as this. The day Abraham died was beautiful, but not as beautiful as the day he tasted the resurrection.

Our days have been good, but there is something better to come. Jesus desires to give it to us.

*Directed Prayer:* See the goodness and beauty of Jesus Christ – what he's said and done... what he says and does. Let the spirit of joy wash over you as you settle into prayer. Ask that spirit of joy to break you out of your own self-centeredness and into the world to proclaim the good news.



## *Friday of the Fifth Week of Lent*

"He went back across the Jordan to the place where John first baptized, and there he remained."

*John 10:40*

Relapse. Rejection. Failure. Everyone experiences it. So too did our Lord.

After Christ's dramatic moment of teaching and healing in Jerusalem during Tabernacles, having laid everything out clearly to the people that he is the Messiah, and performing signs to back his claim, Jesus returned humbly to where it all began. He did not continue to the throne of Israel. He went back to the swamp of the Jordan. Christ wasn't rejected only in Nazareth. He was rejected in Jerusalem. This latter rejection on the high stage could have been seen as the ultimate defeat, like losing the Super Bowl.

But Jesus did not retire. He tried once again in Jerusalem the following spring. And he was rejected a third time.

An individual might have a bad fall after a long stretch of sobriety. The message from Jesus' example is clear: do not quit. Starting from the beginning is not a defeat. The origin is where God first sent us. When we return to the origin, we prime ourselves to be sent again. Only through relapses and perseverance can we make it to the tomb and emerge from it resurrected.

*Directed Prayer:* Today's psalm opens with, "I love you, O Lord, my strength" (Psalm 18). Our strength, our love, our joy is not in our successes or holiness. It is in God. And God is with us always, regardless of our success or failure. We allow him, actually, to be closer to us in our failure – our return to the Jordan River. Pray Psalm 18

and return to the beginning of your journey in your heart.



## *Saturday of the Fifth Week of Lent*

"If we leave him alone, all will believe in him, and the Romans will come  
and take away both our land and our nation."

*John 11:48*

Ancient Rome always had a certain respect for the nation of Israel. It was an older nation than Rome and it was not a nation interested necessarily in conquest, like the Greeks, Persians, Parthians, or Carthaginians were. Israel's religiosity was also something that intrigued Rome, who similarly had a healthy respect for the divine. So, while Rome had conquered Israel, it had allowed Israel to exist in peace, maintaining its own culture and almost its own system of governance. Rome had even permitted the existence of a king of Israel (Herod).

If Israel changed, so too would the Romans' tolerance. This is precisely what Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin feared in Jesus of Nazareth, the paragon of change... or, rather, of conversion. A new nation with a new order would not garner the sufferance of Rome.

Yet the whole history of Israel was one founded on the hope for change. Every prophet spoke of a new and better time. "I will make them a new nation upon the land," said the prophet Ezekiel. "I will give them a new heart," said Jeremiah.

The Romans inevitably took away both the land and the nation of Israel. It happened in 70AD. It was not that the Sanhedrin could not prevent change. It was, rather, that they could not change. In stopping Christ, they betrayed their identity. Ironically, the Romans would have respected Israel with Jesus. They might have even become Jewish. They became Christian, after all.

*Directed Prayer:* Speak to the Lord about a possible change you sense he is proposing to you in your life. Acknowledge openly your fears around that change, as well as your hopes. See if the Lord can show you an even better life he wants for you. Ask for the grace to trust in the Lord's plan for change.



## *Coda to the Fifth Week of Lent*

"So the Lord said to Cain: Why are you so resentful and crestfallen. If you do well, you can hold up your head; but if not, sin is a demon lurking at the door: his urge is toward you, yet you can be his master."

*Genesis 4:6-7*

Cain did not listen to God's advice. He could hear the words but could not truly appropriate them. The apple didn't fall far from the tree. Cain's father heard God's admonition about the tree and chose instead to listen to the serpent.

When Jesus restored paradise, walking around Galilee performing miracles, he healed a deaf man by putting his fingers into the man's ears, spitting, and breathing on him. "Be opened," he proclaimed. It was the way God had used his fingers, breath, and voice to create the first man. But with our Lord, this man was actually able to listen and receive. Same with us. We can actually hear and be moved by the divine symphony. We can heed the beauty and reject the ugliness of the demon's lies.

Adam holds both his wife and his dead son, Abel, in William Adolphe-Bouguereau's 1888 painting, *Premier Deuil* or 'The First Mourning' (see image below). Adam, clutching his rib, feels the pain of Eve. While the image resembles Michelangelo's *Pietà*, there is a striking difference in the two. Here outside of Eden is despair. Eve's complexion is pallid like her son, and she buries her face. Mary, on the other hand, exudes a somber confidence. She is able to hear the assuring voice of God. Mary is our mother.

Directed Prayer: Invite Jesus to place his fingers in your ears. Tune out the noise of anger, doubt, shame. Enjoy the divine sounds.



*The First Mourning*, William Adolphe-Bouguereau, 1888



## *Palm Sunday*

"Hosanna in the highest!"

*Matthew 21:10*

*I see his blood upon the rose  
And in the stars the glory of his eyes,  
His body gleams amid eternal snows,  
His tears fall from the skies.*

*I see his face in every flower;  
The thunder and the singing of the birds  
Are but his voice – and carved by his power  
Rocks are his written words.*

*All pathways by his feet are worn,  
His strong heart stirs the ever-beating sea,  
His crown of thorns is twined with every thorn,  
His cross is every tree.*

- Joseph Mary Plunkett (1887-1916)

Israelites would often camp outside of Jerusalem and build huts with thatched roofs. The gesture was meant as a symbol. They hoped God would come and dwell under those palmed tents, like he had dwelt with the Israelites in the Sinai desert. When they strewed branches before Jesus and held palms over his head, they were reenacting this symbol. Hosanna is Hebrew for "please, save us now!"

Those palms and branches decayed, but God still dwells. He is in the highest so he can be in the lowest. He dwells in the rose, the snows, the sea, and in your heart.

*Directed Prayer:* Let the palm you take from church today be a symbol of your commitment to Jesus Christ. Make an act of love to him. Promise devotion – that you will be his servant forever.



## *Monday of Holy Week*

"The house was filled with the fragrance of the oil."

*John 12:3*

Mary of Bethany poured out her livelihood, literally, to Jesus. Three hundred days' wages was the oil's worth – nearly \$100,000 today. Gone in a moment it was, seeping into the dirt floor of the home. Who could blame Judas for questioning the prudence of this action?

The talents we have, our health, our experiences, our possessions – they are nothing. But when we lay them all before the feet of the Lord, then they are something. That's what will fill your house with the fragrance of oil as opposed to the decaying rot of something hoarded.

There are holes in Jesus' feet. They are waiting for your gift.

*Directed Prayer:* Don't worry about how much money you need to give away. This isn't meant to induce guilt and fear. Jesus will not take anything away. Rest in that comfort that Jesus will give you back one hundredfold.



## *Tuesday of Holy Week*

"Though I thought I had toiled in vain, and for nothing, uselessly, spent my strength,  
yet my reward is with the Lord, my recompense is with my God."

*Isaiah 49:4*

Many of us wonder at some point in our day, in our lives, what was the point? What have I done? Does any of this make a difference? We might ask the question about our job. We might ask the question about our vocation – raising a family, being a priest, and so forth. Was it all for nothing?

Yes, it was. And that is glorious.

"You cannot follow me now," Jesus told the apostles at the Last Supper, "but you will follow me later." We do not completely understand now the fruits of our life. We surrender understanding. We let go of the return on our investment and simply continue investing.

All the success Jesus had in his three years was about to completely vanish – the miracles, the great teachings, the crowds who had flocked to him. It would appear to have all been in vain. But Christ knew better.

Others would run in the face of this crisis. Jesus remained. And the Kingdom was born. The harvest was gathered.

*Directed Prayer:* If you have a restless heart, pray about it. Examine your longings and what is unfulfilling for you currently. "Water your own lawn," the saying goes, "if the grass is greener on the other side." Let the Holy Spirit seal you in the love of God this very day.



## *Wednesday of Holy Week*

"Surely it is not I, Lord?"

*Matthew 26:22*

We have the benefit of hindsight to know it was Judas. But it was not clear at the time. The fact the apostles did not know meant they were all guilty of sin. They were all capable of betrayal.

Saint Paul of the Cross, the 18th Century mystic and founder of the Passionist Congregation, had a nickname for the devil. He called him "the scarecrow." The devil looks frightening, but he is a manikin. If we stand firm in our anointing from God, the devil will flee. "Do not fear, do not fear," wrote Paul on March 4, 1757, "the Lord will fight for us. Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia. The devil trembles at the Alleluia, a word come from Paradise."

Judas and the others were confronted by the monster in the cornfield. Instead of looking to Jesus, they looked to themselves. When they saw their weakness, they panicked, and the monster had them. Judas betrayed, Peter denied, Thomas doubted, the others ran.

Spy Wednesday need not be a day of destruction for us. Let us remember that our Lord has invited us to the table. Yes, we are all capable of betrayal. But we are called to holiness. We are not in the field anymore. We are in the Cenacle with the crop before us.

*Directed Prayer:* Do a personal inventory of the times you have betrayed the Lord. But before doing so, ground yourself in the love and mercy of God. He called you knowing you would do this. Have compassion on yourself and then ask for a similar compassion for the other Judases.



## *Coda to Holy Week: The Chrism Mass*

"To give them oil of gladness in place of mourning."

*Isaiah 61:3*

Every year during Holy Week all priests of the diocese gather with their bishop in the cathedral to bless the three sacred oils that will be used in the upcoming year for the sacraments. At this Mass the priests also renew the promises they made on the day of their ordination. During this rite of renewal, the bishop asks the priest:

*Are you resolved to be more united with the Lord Jesus and more closely conformed to him, denying yourselves and confirming those promises about sacred duties towards Christ's Church which, prompted by love of him, you willingly and joyfully pledged on the day of your priestly ordination?*

The bishop then exhorts the people:

*As for you, dearest sons and daughters, pray for your priests, that the Lord may pour out his gifts abundantly upon them, and keep them faithful as ministers of Christ, the High Priest, so that they may lead you to him, who is the source of salvation.*

We do not resolve to be better managers or to give more money. We resolve to love and conform ourselves to Christ. The olive oil consecrated at the Mass symbolizes this. Oil has binding properties, and the faithful are bound to the Lord.

Oil also flows in all directions. It blesses everyone. People learn from the priest and receive grace from the Lord through his actions; the priest learns and grows closer to Christ through the people. A people without a priest is lost... and vice versa. There is a reason the first tree the dove found after the flood was an olive tree.

*Directed Prayer:* Think of the people who have blessed you most recently in your life. What kind of oil of gladness have they given you? What has God shown you about himself (and yourself) through them?



## THE SACRED PASCHAL TRIDUUM

Lent is over. We embark now on the shortest and most unique liturgical season of the year. Time is contorted these next three days. Mass of the Lord's Supper on Thursday, the Passion of the Lord on Friday, and the Easter Vigil on Saturday the Church treats as one continuous liturgy. In this space the spectrum of emotions are experienced. We see all aspects of the Lord.

There was a similarly distinctive period upon Noah's ark after the period of forty days when the storms had finally ceased. The dread was over, but dry land was not yet present. Noah first sent out a black raven to test the surface of the earth: a symbol of his pessimism. He then sent out the more optimistic dove. He waited with hope and despair. Would his family be confined to the ark for the rest of eternity? Would God remain a father and creator?

In 1816 the French frigate, the *Medusa*, sunk off the coast of Northwest Africa. Of the 400 passengers, only 147 were able to make it aboard a makeshift raft, and of that number only 15 survived by the time raft was rescued two weeks later. Mutiny, cannibalism, heroism all occurred aboard the raft.

Théodore Géricault's famous painting, *The Raft of the Medusa*, is actually not the moment of rescue. It depicts the moment of greatest devastation. A ship is finally spotted in the distance. Alas, it sailed on! So close to salvation and yet so far!

Another ship would eventually come and rescue the suffering souls. The most unlikely of heroes for the time – a black slave – would be the leader to spot it. There is always redemption in God's story.

"The Son of Man must suffer greatly, be killed, and rise after three days." Jesus' suffering was the flood and shipwreck. His death was the point of great devastation. His resurrection was the new and glorious rainbow. Every time we celebrate this Paschal Mystery each Triduum, a new world – and a new soul – is born.



*The Raft of the Medusa*, Théodore Géricault, 1819-1820



## *Holy Thursday*

"Seeing the blood on the door, I will pass over you."

*Exodus 12:13*

God saved the Israelites because they had blood. The Egyptians had no blood, and they were killed.

Christ saved the apostles because he washed their feet, and their feet had blood upon them. He then had them drink from the chalice because it contained his blood.

Tonight is a night of blood.

After the Last Supper, Christ went to the Garden of Gethsemane and, as we hear in Luke's account, he sweated blood. No, this was not a sweat of fear, for fear drives the blood back to the heart, inducing pallor. This was a sweat of determination and love. The blood in Christ's body was pushed away from the heart with such violence that the delicate blood vessels could not withstand the pressure and were bursted. That blood poured upon the earth.

Tonight we remember the institution of the Eucharist and Holy Orders. Both of these are empty gestures without blood. Christ's flesh and blood in the appearance of bread and wine truly feeds and saves us. The priest gives his entire life to God, pouring his blood out to the Church.

What does it mean to be a Catholic? What does it mean to be alive? To be red-blooded. True greatness lies not in the height of our skyscraper or our bell tower, but in our love for Jesus and our love for one another. When we give our blood to Christ, we will not be like those Egyptians lost in darkness.

*Directed Prayer:* Close your eyes and imagine "pushing" the blood away from your heart and into Jesus. He pushes his blood into you.



## *Good Friday*

"And immediately the cock crowed."

*John 18:27*

Every morning before dawn in ancient Jerusalem a chosen priest would enter the temple, clean off the ashes from the altar, and then climb to the temple tower. There he would blast a trumpet and cry out: "All the

priests prepare for the sacrifice... All the Levites to their stations... All the Israelites come to worship!" He was known as the *gewrah*, which in Hebrew means "man" or, more specifically, "man who cries out." Not coincidentally, the word in Hebrew for rooster or cockcrow is also *gewrah*.

While there most likely was not a rooster in Caiaphas' courtyard, Peter very well could have heard an actual crow from a bird somewhere off in the distance beyond the valley. He most certainly, however, heard the cry of the *gewrah* from the adjacent temple. Jesus did say, "before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times."

It was with the failure in Peter's responsibility as a priest to serve the Lord that immediately the *gewrah* cried out. In John's Gospel account of this scene, we are not told that Peter wept. We are not told of anything else that happened after with Peter. We are simply told the cry rose out. So, we can presume Peter got up and went to his station. He would fulfill his responsibility, unlike Judas. He would not fail a second time.

*Directed Prayer:* God provides a *gewrah* for us when we sin. Not to shame us, but to encourage us. You might be denying the Lord right now without realizing it, like Peter. May the cock crow for you.



## *Holy Saturday*

"My soul yearns for you in the night."

*Isaiah 26:9*

The sealed tomb. It is a reality many of us experience in our lives. There we sit, looking at a cold rock wall, feeling empty. We know there has to be more. There has to be more joy, more intimacy. Nothing happens. We wait. We wonder. We hurt.

"You have saved my soul from hell" (Psalm 30:3). Beneath the ashes in our heart is a little ember of hope. We know we will not be doomed to destruction. We don't know how or when, but we know Christ will relieve us. He will draw us into that intimacy for which we long. The seal of the tomb will be broken.

Alas, that is for tomorrow. We live in today. We face the seal now. Our agony is not assuaged.

"You have fed them with tears for bread," continues the psalmist, "tears have been their drink." Our heart interiorly weeps as we feel our life slipping away. Another hour, another day, another week, another year gone by, and still we feel no different. Our silent tears stream like the unremitting tide of the sea.

Little do we realize that those tears are feeding us. They feed the Lord. They water the earth and make the bed of flowers upon which Jesus will trod when he rises.

*Directed Prayer:* Sit as much as you can today in silence. No phone, no TV, no music, no distractions. Give the Lord your aching heart as Mary Magdalene did. Resist the urge to jump to the future, to the fulfilled promise. Remain in the night today.



## *Easter Vigil*

"I will make your battlements of rubies."

*Isaiah 54:12*

In sacred architecture, a church's bell tower resembles a plant. The church building itself is the seed and the tower protrudes like a stem. The bells chiming would then be the flowers of the plant. The delight from the sound would be the delight from the flowers' scent, pollen, and color. The way bees carry pollen to benefit the environment, the effects of the parish church sanctify the neighborhood.

Fittingly, and not coincidentally, an easter lily has bell-shaped flowers. It is as if the bells are rung in jubilation when Christ emerges from the tomb.

The origin of the word "bell" actually comes from the Greek word *semantron*, which means "signal." The ancient Greeks had a wooden board that would be rapped with different beats for different signals. In the Garden of Eden after the fall, God called out "Adam! Adam!" like a *semantron*. In the early Middle Ages, bells first began to be attached to churches in Ireland. Bells had been used to summon sheep. Now Christ, the Good Shepherd, was summoning his flock to himself, and not with a wooden board, but with a delightful bell.

In the Second World War, the Nazis had infamously melted 150,000 bells throughout Europe to make weapons. A godless regime, they also did it intentionally to mock Scripture (the reverse of "beating swords into plowshares") and to crush morale (the bell symbolizes faith and peace, while the drum is the symbol of war). When bells rang throughout the land on VE Day, May 8, 1945, it had been years since the sound was heard. Christ once again reigned over the land and over hearts.

Without real love for God, we are, as Saint Paul said, "a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal." This night let the bells once again ring out in our church, in our neighborhood, and in our hearts.

*Directed Prayer:* Breathe deeply several times as you pray silently with your eyes closed. Imagine in your ears a deep and beautiful chime as you breathe God's love in and your love out.



## *EASTER*

We looked down the road at the beginning of Lent. Down the road behind and down the road ahead.

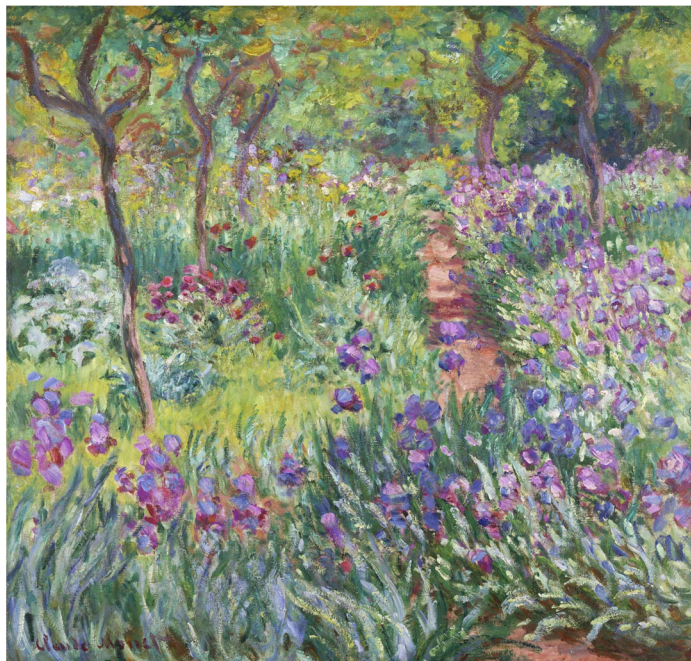
The Lenten road went down into our own past and into the past of Israel. This road of history was a road of enlightenment. The Lenten road went forward to the future: how we could live and pray better. This is a road of healing.

The road behind and the road ahead – both the same road – confirm of our present. God has intentionally paved our past and he will be with us in the future. We are meant to be right where we are.

If we sat during Lent looking both ways, we now move on the road during Easter. But it is a relaxing move. We walk not on an asphalt road through the heat, but through a path in a luscious Monet garden. This Easter move allows us to be present to ourselves. We see Christ in a newer and deeper way.

Jesus walked the Easter road himself first. In his post-resurrection body, the Lord passed through locked doors, bilocated, was disguised to some, and appeared suddenly just to vanish. Only those who could stay balanced in the point of tension between despair and hope were able to see Jesus. Mary Magdalene, the disciples on the road to Emmaus, Thomas, the apostles on the Sea of Galilee all initially failed to recognize Christ at first. But when they lived between their despair of having lost their love and their hope of regaining it in a deeper way, their eyes were opened.

It is time for us live in that point of tension; to walk in that new garden of Eden.



*The Garden at Giverny, Claude Monet, undated*



## *The Resurrection of the Lord - Easter Sunday*

"This man God raised on the third day and granted that he be visible, not to all the people, but to us."

*Acts 10:40*

After the resurrection, Jesus appeared only to a select few, as Peter said to Cornelius. Jesus did not appear to Caiaphas or Pilate or the large crowd that saw him die and mocked him. He did not show up to tell them he was right and they were wrong; that now they should believe all that he said. Interesting.

Our Lord did not make Easter about himself. It was about us. It was about making *ambassadors of the resurrection*, as Peter also mentioned. Christ left it to the others to go to Caiaphas, Pilate, the crowd, and so on. He left it to us to make disciples.

Christ did a lot while he lived, but we are to do the major work. Recall what he said at the Last Supper: "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father."

But before we do the works, we each have to experience the resurrection personally. We have to be put to death and have the seed of renewal planted in the furrow of our heart.

Lent may be over, but our spiritual effort should not wane. This is precisely when we need to focus all the more on our relationship with Christ. We need to savor how good Christ is, and what he has done and will continue to do for us. Only then we can invite others into that relationship to live the joy.

*Directed Prayer:* Before you eat the chocolate or drink the beer, spend some time reflecting back upon Lent. Was it a good time for you? Or was it difficult? Express a desire to make the Easter season better than Lent was. Consider perhaps even holding off on the chocolate or beer for another week.



## *Monday in the Octave of Easter*

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

*Matthew 28:10*

Galilee was a crossroads. The sea connected to the Euphrates and Babylon in the north; to the King's Road and the Mediterranean in the west. This meant the presence of traders and travelers, which meant the presence

of different cultures, languages, and religions. This, in turn, meant the spirit of new ideas and opportunities and, ultimately, hope. Yes, life teemed in Galilee. This is precisely why Jesus began his ministry here, in the "Galilee of the Gentiles." It was precisely why he returned here after the resurrection to begin his second, albeit much briefer, ministry.

Jerusalem was buried deep in the land, in the heart of the nation in the desert; very few water sources, very few visitors other than Israelite pilgrims, and very few introductions. It was symbolic of the state of the nation: dry, isolated, barren. It was where Jesus died. It was not where he would live.

The apostles were experiencing Jerusalem. Jesus wanted them in Galilee. Their home would facilitate the new life Jesus wanted to give them. They would be able to bring something even more dynamic to the locale. The coin given to Jerusalem buried in the earth would be given to the servant already with ten.

*Directed Prayer:* Recall the fond moments of prayer over the past five weeks. Notice what was characteristic of that consolation. Return there in your heart. Put aside all preoccupations and let Jesus appear to you. He will give you something even better than what you already have.



## *Tuesday in the Octave of Easter*

"Stop holding on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father."

*John 20:17*

We cling to Jesus. He is our refuge. He is our love. Like Mary, we weep when we feel he is not present to us. We think we see an empty tomb and that Jesus has been taken for us, and we long for him.

But all the while Jesus is standing behind us. Only when Mary moved herself out of her pity to bend down and look into the tomb did she receive the good news from the angels and then from Jesus. She had been stuck in the assumption that her love had vanished; in the uncertainty of where she would next find love. God was present, however. He is always present. He does not work in assumptions or uncertainties.

When we are broken from the darkness of our misunderstanding, and we see Jesus, there is a temptation to rest in him and never get up. But we must let him go, in a sense. We will always have the Lord with us, true, but he calls us to move with himself out to the mission. "Go to my brothers and tell them," Jesus told Mary. And on an earlier occasion when a town begged Jesus to stay after he had performed miracles, he responded as he left, "I must go to other villages to preach the message."

When Mary left the tomb to go to Simon, Jesus was with her. The resurrection assures us of Jesus' presence wherever we are.

*Directed Prayer:* Where do you have to go today? What do you have to do? As you pray this morning outside the empty tomb before leaving the house, pray silently and open your heart. Allow Jesus to dwell in you. Trust that he will be with you the whole day. With him you will encounter beauty.



## *Wednesday in the Octave of Easter*

"Oh, how foolish you are! How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets spoke!"

*Luke 24:25*

The Road to Emmaus. Something was off in Cleopas and the other disciple. These men had heard from the women about the empty tomb and about the Lord's instruction to go to Galilee. They had heard Jesus' earlier teachings and indications about the resurrection. They discounted it. They chose to travel in despair to Emmaus, like the rich young man chose to walk away sad from Jesus instead of relinquishing his possessions.

We teach and teach and teach, and still the message does not get through. Or, we are taught and taught and taught, and we still do not understand. It is okay. Christ, the ever patient one, draws up alongside the blind, the stubborn, the slow. He shows us again.

Lest we choose again to miss the point, Christ does something more than show. He actually implants the truth and ability to understand within us. Behold grace! Behold the sacraments! Receiving the Eucharist is the great awakening of our heart. Only in the breaking of the bread did the disciples 'get it.'

On the very day he rose from the dead, Jesus celebrated the event he experienced three days earlier: his passion and death. That Easter Sunday afternoon at Emmaus, Calvary was refashioned. The disciples who had fled from the scene could now see it for themselves and understand.

Cleopas and the other man retraced the road they had traveled. The Road to Emmaus became the Road to Calvary; that is, the Road to the Mass. One would imagine, after apologizing to the women and seeing the Lord, the Emmaus men celebrated the Last Supper in that same room with the group. Most priests, after all, celebrate at least two Masses on Sunday.

*Directed Prayer:* Every one of us has something or someone we just can't figure out. If you are able to make it to Mass today, lay that struggle before the altar and ask Christ to show you. Inhale trust as you pray; trust that there is a purpose.



## *Thursday in the Octave of Easter*

"You are the children of the prophets."

*Acts 3:25*

In the Acts of the Apostles, from which we will read continuously at Mass throughout the Easter season, Peter features prominently in the first half (Paul in the second). Peter's ministry of speeches and actions mimicked Christ's. More than just a mimicry, however, Peter was continuing the work of Jesus. Peter was the new chapter in the life of Christ. This was why, just as Christ gained many disciples, Peter and the apostles converted many souls. Jesus attracted then; he attracts now.

The Old Testament prophets were men who were in touch with God and communicated God's will. They worked with the people and the nation to help it be in communion with God. Well, Peter and his companions were the new line of prophet. Now everyone was doing what the prophets of old did: being in real touch with God, relating his will, and helping others be saved.

That Easter Sunday evening, the eleven were huddled in that same upper room where Jesus, on Holy Thursday, had made them priests. They were holy, but they needed more. Jesus breathed on them, "opened their minds to understand the Scriptures," and made them prophets. The disciples from Emmaus and the women, who had already been made prophets, witnessed this event in the upper room. It is for us to enter that upper room and invite others into prophecy.

*Directed Prayer:* Open your heart intentionally today in your prayer and ask God to make you a prophet. May he breathe his power, wisdom, and love into you, so that you may prophesy and lead others into communion with Jesus Christ.



## *Friday in the Octave of Easter*

"Children, have you caught anything to eat?"

*John 21:5*

The resurrection was the final stage of initiation. The disciples, who had been learning from Jesus these three years, and made priests and prophets, were now made leaders. They were made kings and queens. They were made, most profoundly, mothers and fathers.

A parent has a certain authority, confidence, and care about them. There is never a moment when the mother wipes her hands clean of responsibility; never a moment when the father retires. The parent knows no weekend, vacation, or time off. They are always engaged. The parent cares that their child grows properly and is both fulfilled in life and contributes to society. The parent boldly acts to ensure this happens in their son or daughter.

This post-resurrection scene on the Sea of Tiberius was the enemy's last attempt to keep the apostles infants. They went fishing when at a loss as to how to lead the group of disciples in the absence of Jesus. They isolated themselves in their own hobby. They failed to pray when their hobby bore no fruit. They didn't recognize Jesus standing on the shore.

Jesus, seeing the enemy at work, acknowledged they were children at the moment. Never again, however, would they be called children. When they disembarked and went upon the shore to sit in front of the purifying fire and to eat, they would become fathers.

*Directed Prayer:* In the power of the Spirit, boldly pray that Jesus conform your heart to that of a true mother or father. See how you can really lead with that sense of care and desire for the wellbeing of someone other than you. Bring your old, childish self to the charcoal fire to be burned away.



## *Saturday in the Octave of Easter*

"Go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature."

*Mark 16:15*

The apostles were first told at the Transfiguration that Jesus would die and rise from the dead. He then told them explicitly three other times over the next few months this would happen. He gave a parable about the resurrection, he raised Lazarus from the dead as a sign that such a thing could happen, and he preached about the temple being rebuilt after three days. Even the chief priests were aware of the possibility of the resurrection, which was why they stationed guards outside the tomb and put a seal around the rock. When the resurrection occurs, the apostles are told by the women and the disciples from Emmaus, and they still do not believe. What was their issue?

They balked at the resurrection because belief in the resurrection without the presence of Christ meant suffering and disappointment. Christ alive but not present is the impossible task. We can't sell something we don't cherish. A dead Christ cannot be cherished.

They could only know Christ was alive when they saw him themselves. As they loved him while he lived with them, they could love him now. This love would drive them forward. The apostles knew now the work they would be doing was not their own work, but the Lord's.

We are all faced with the challenge of resurrecting something in our life that has died. The task might seem impossible, but all we need to do, like the apostles did, is lower the sails on our boat. Christ will provide the wind.

*Directed Prayer:* Notice if some challenge or task in your life is causing heaviness in you. Notice where you feel you are laboring and tired. Let Christ blow his breath into you as your heart stays open like the sails of a ship.



## *The Second Sunday of Easter*

"Thomas, called Didymus, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came."

*John 20:24*

'Didymus' is Greek for twin. In Aramaic it is 'Thoma.' Some therefore thought Thomas had a twin brother in the apostolic group (Judas Iscariot); others thought Thomas was given the moniker because of his split personality. "Let us go to die with him," he had said boldly on one occasion; "I will not believe," he had said on another.

Thomas was indeed a twin: a twin of the Lord. Not biological, of course, but spiritual. As twins have an innate sense of one another, so Thomas had a peculiar sense about Jesus. Why was Thomas not in the upper room that Easter Sunday evening? Because Jesus wanted Thomas to be absent. He wanted to make a lesson for all future skeptics. He wanted to demonstrate the primacy of his mercy (that even if you doubt or are angry with the Lord, Jesus still loves you and will help you).

As twins want to be close to each other, stemming from their uterine formation, so Thomas wanted to be close to Jesus. He would go with Jesus to die with him. He had to touch the wounds and see the Lord, and not just hear about it from others. No, Thomas was not a selfish man. He was not a rigid rationalist or empiricist. He was a man of deep love. He was a saint. May he be our brother too. May we be triplets.

*Directed Prayer:* Imagine yourself, like Thomas, wandering around for that first week of Easter, not knowing whether or not Christ had risen from the dead. Others have seen the Lord, but you haven't. What are your emotions? What do you want to say to Jesus in your pain? What will you say when he appears to you?



## *The Ascension and Pentecost*

"It is better for you that I go. For if I do not go, the Advocate will not come to you."

*John 16:7*

Elijah is an Advent and Christmas icon. We see him represented by John the Baptist, calling on people to "prepare the way." Well, Elijah is also a Lenten and Easter icon. He was atop Mount Carmel praying for forty days and ended his life not in death, but in being taken up to heaven on a fiery chariot.

Abraham died and was buried. Same with Moses and David and Isaiah and all the important Old Testament figures, save Enoch. Elijah was the one person who ascended. Hence there was a sense that Elijah would return – his story had not officially concluded. One will note in Mark's Gospel account that the bystanders atop Calvary thought Jesus was calling upon Elijah.

Similarly, the Ascension was not Christ's finale. It was merely the ending of the overture of the musical. We don't move on from Jesus. We don't consider Jesus by remembering him fondly, like the Israelites did with Moses and David, or we do with Abraham Lincoln or whoever. We keep Jesus on the forefront of our hearts, as the Israelites did with Elijah. He is still alive.

There is one difference, however, between Elijah and Christ. The Israelites were waiting for Elijah. They were not sure when he would descend on that fiery chariot that took him away. There is no wondering with Jesus. He came back to us at Pentecost in the tongues of fire. We are not sure when he will come again to this earth with the final fire, but that is of no consequence to us right now. He blazes into our lives every time we pray and every time we receive the sacraments.

*Directed Prayer:* Pray: "Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, enkindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and we shall be created. And you shall renew the face of the earth." Resolve throughout the rest of the Easter season at various moments throughout your day to close your eyes and pray simply "Come, Holy Spirit."



## *Conclusion: Mary*

"Behold your mother."

*John 19:27*

As much as we hear about the unconditional love of God, many of us are still inclined to see God in an evaluative way. We are only loved to the extent that we are good or productive. Any sin or imperfection is a cause for shame. We are constantly working to earn the love of God.

While we know none of this is true with our God, any reference to a superior conditions us to feel that way. And so the Blessed Mother properly aligns our hearts. We need not be afraid or tense around God. Mary assures us of that. We are all equal. "Jesus became man so that we might become God," said Saint Athanasius.

Mary makes us necessary. A father cannot create without a mother. A mother cannot form without the father. Mothers and fathers cannot exist without children. A child prefers a brother or sister. With Mary we have a brother in Jesus. We are a child. We are a partner. We don't just exist. We create.

Ancient Israel lacked such a woman, hence their state of atrophy. They had glimpses in the likes of Judith, Esther, Ruth, Deborah, and Hannah. But these females lasted only a time. The patriarch or king eventually supplanted whatever impact they had made. The nation needed a permanent motherly fixture to ensure its fecundity.

Jesus gave Mary to John at the crucifixion. He took her back at the assumption. She learned the human heart in the interim. Now, from the potter's wheel in eternity, she builds the family.

*Directed Prayer:* Honestly examine the 'state of your love.' Could you grow in your love? Love more maturely? Ask Mary to shape your soft heart to experience the fullness of love.