

LENT

RETURN



MADE BY



L E N T

RETURN

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LENT

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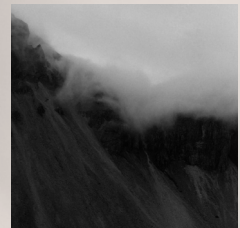
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Introduction

*In Lent,
we encounter
the refreshment
of the Lord in
the aridness
of the desert.*

IN A GLOBAL SOCIETY PLAGUED BY PANDEMICS, recessions, and wars, the longing in recent years has been for a “return to normal.” In our desire for that which is good and enduring, holy and true, we refuse to accept the chaos that surrounds us as normative for our human existence. It is a cry from the depths of our humanity: “This is not how things are meant to be!”

And yet, our present situation is not unique in its struggle against the forces of sin and evil, for this battle has always been with us. It is as old as the Garden itself. To be human is to simultaneously long for the age to come while living in the brokenness of the present. As such, to live is to struggle.

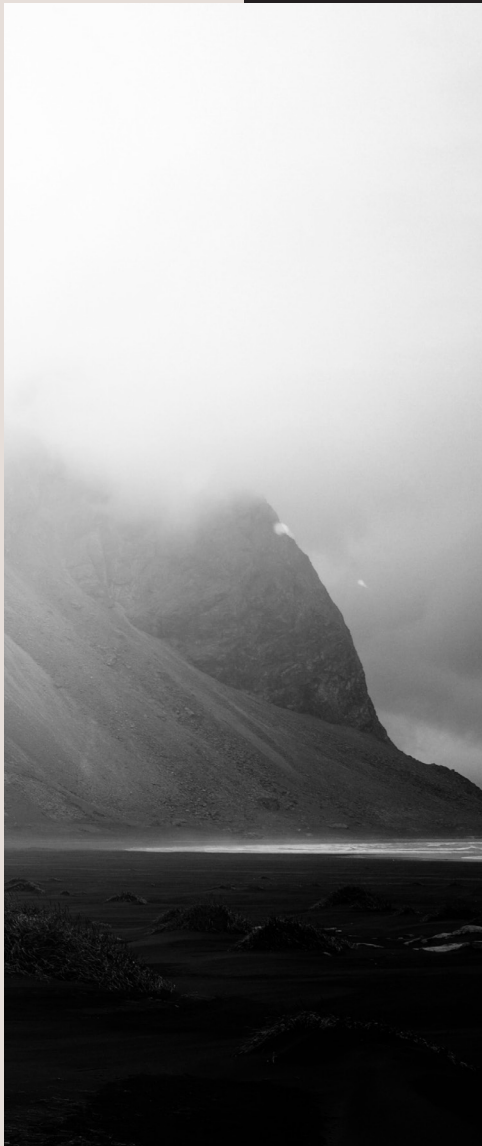
Lent is an invitation to embrace the struggle and encounter the refreshment of the Lord in the aridness of the desert. It is, as God said to his weak and weary people, a call to “return to me with all your heart” (Joel 2:12). It is never the denial of the reality of struggle but the unwavering belief that it can be transformed by the reality of God’s renewing presence.

From Genesis to Revelation, Scripture is filled with stories of leaving and returning. The people of God are often depicted as fickle and easily unsatisfied, at one moment living in intimate union with the Lord, only to turn away from this source of life in the name of “freedom” or “autonomy,” believing it to be for their good. And though the names and details are specific to the Bible, this pattern is universal, speaking directly to our lives today.

In the pages that follow, you will dive deep into these themes of repentance and renewal. You will be invited to explore the forgotten corners of your heart, the places that rarely see the light of day due to the fear, shame, and guilt that lurks in the shadows. However, you will also be encouraged to hold fast to the hope that change is possible, that you can always return to the Lord no matter how far you have strayed or how distant you may feel.

When we return to God, we bring with us the good, bad, and ugly. We must not sugarcoat it or pretend it is otherwise. Yet return to him we must, for it is the only way to bring our self-made exile to an end and find our true home and place of lasting peace.

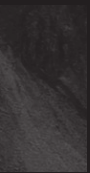
“In returning and rest you shall be saved” (Isa 30:15).

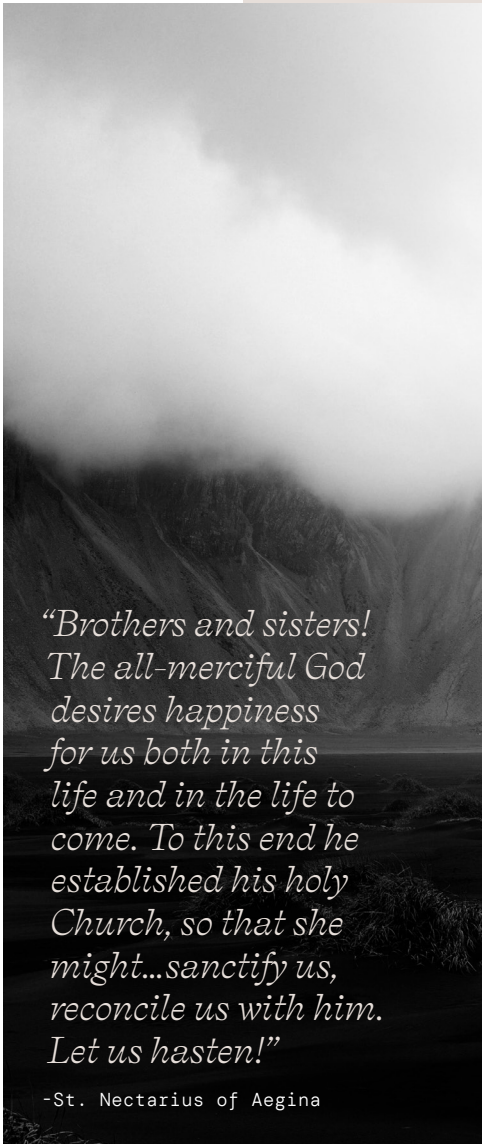


First Days *in* Lent



Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Ps 51:7





*“Brothers and sisters!
The all-merciful God
desires happiness
for us both in this
life and in the life to
come. To this end he
established his holy
Church, so that she
might...sanctify us,
reconcile us with him.
Let us hasten!”*

-St. Nectarius of Aegina

Testing, Testing



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51:1-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

THE ACTS AND SYMBOLS OF LENT are dramatic. Ashes, fasting, kneeling, touching foreheads or faces to the ground, wearing deep purple or black, sitting in darkness, long and repeated prayers about our guilt and sin, weeping, repentance. There might be a time in the next 40 days when we wonder, *Is this all a bit too much? Is this even healthy?*

The prophets were dramatic. But this is because they were in touch with reality in a heightened way—not because they were out of touch. More is going on, they knew, within and behind our daily lives than we often feel and see. Maybe, in our contemporary context, it’s even harder to see and hear hidden realities like God’s presence or how we play our part in communal evils. The prophets remind us. They turn up the volume. Heighten the drama.

“Sound the alarm!” says the prophet Joel. Lent may be a test of the alarm system, keeping us ready for “the day of the Lord,” when all will be revealed in a blaze of love. We won’t have a choice but to see the difference between God’s glory and our faults and self-deception.

Or this alarm could be the real thing. In a sense, it’s both. Where there’s smoke, there’s fire. Where there are the “clouds and thick darkness” of God’s arrival, there’s the cleansing, unsparring fire of his presence here to reveal us completely, to make us whole.

Lent invites us to jump in now, to treat the practice like the real thing. Because, in a way, it always is.

PRAYER for ASH WEDNESDAY

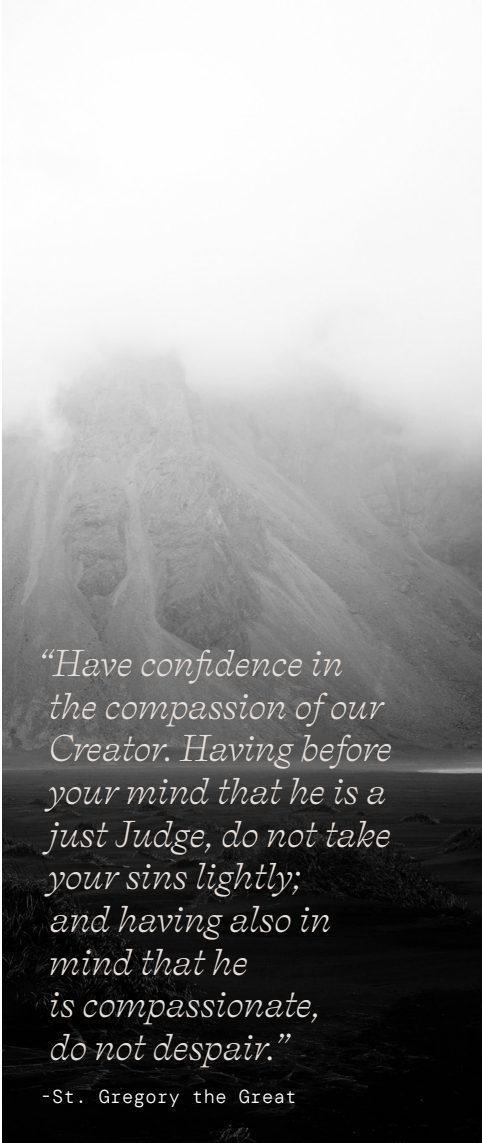
Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent: Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

In a moment of reflection, share with God one thing that alarms you: work, commitment, climate change, fear of spiders—anything. Then share one thing you know he cares about that doesn't touch you deeply but should. Ask him to heal your loves and concerns so that your “alarms” might line up with his reality.

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*“Have confidence in
the compassion of our
Creator. Having before
your mind that he is a
just Judge, do not take
your sins lightly;
and having also in
mind that he
is compassionate,
do not despair.”*

-St. Gregory the Great

THURSDAY

Lord, Have Mercy



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 51; Jonah 3:1-10; Romans 1:1-7

“LORD, HAVE MERCY” is one of the shortest and most ancient prayers of the Christian faith. It is also one of the most powerful. Many Christians around the world and through the centuries have even married this prayer (the Jesus Prayer) with the breath they breathe, saying aloud or silently, inhale and exhale, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.” [It is one of the simplest ways to “pray always” (1 Thess 5:17). It reminds us who God is—the Merciful One—and who we are—in need of mercy.

And we need more mercy than we know. Lent is a beautiful time for rediscovering the depths of our need, the gravity of our shortcomings, and the smallness of our efforts. The psalmist sees this in his very first moments of life. From the spark of conception, before it is possible to sin, he sees the frailty of humanity. By the time an infant takes its first breath, both need and failure are foregone conclusions. As the Jesus Prayer teaches, “Lord have mercy” should not just be words but the cry of our hearts, as irrepressible as a baby’s wail. We should feel it in our bones.

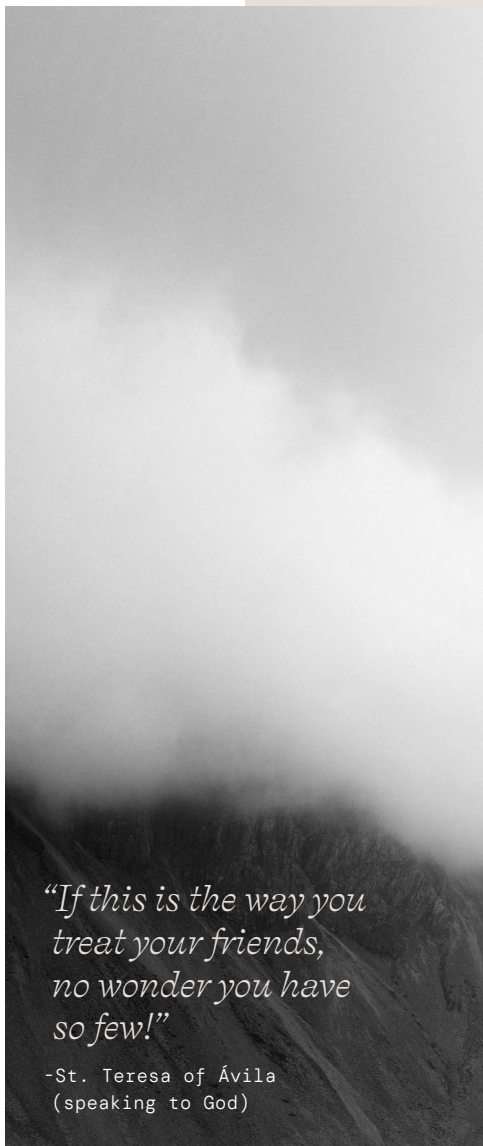
It’s startling to think of a newborn as a “sinner.” But this paradoxical image might be helpful over the next 39 days. We often believe that we are weak, needy, woundable creatures in God’s hands who control so little (infants) or rebellious agents responsible for wounding the world, careless and guilty (sinners). But Psalm 51 sets the tone for God’s beloved people by reminding us that, for now, we are both.

PRAYER for THE WEEK

Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent: Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Try the Jesus Prayer today, this week, or throughout Lent. During devotions or while commuting, walking the dog, or doing chores, just whisper quietly, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.” If you’re able, match “Lord Jesus Christ” with a slow inhale and “have mercy on me, a sinner” with a slow exhale. Repeat as you feel the need.



*“If this is the way you
treat your friends,
no wonder you have
so few!”*

-St. Teresa of Ávila
(speaking to God)

Where Sparks Fly



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 51; Jonah 4:1-11; Romans 1:8-17

GOD IS FASTER TO FORGIVE than we are. It is worth pondering whether the divine wrath we encounter in the Scriptures is often the stubborn hardness of human hearts reacting to God's mercy like a chemical combination. Smoke, fire—BOOM.

Jonah had a feeling that things would go well—too well, in his opinion—between the pagans and the Lord. God had made Jonah a kind of holy fool, suffering to help his enemies. Jonah hated that. And we see Jonah's own fireworks display in response. But he won't face God with it.

"Is it right for you to be angry?" God asks directly, and it's a good question. But Jonah ignores it, so the Lord arranges another annoying situation. The withered bush does its job. It provokes rock-bottom honesty: "YES. Angry enough to die!" Through these irritating visitations, Jonah's heart is now as exposed as his head. Now God can work with him. Work in him.

Where do sparks tend to fly in us? Where do fear or anger flare up quickly? Wherever natural emotions become outsized into despair, rage, envy, or constant anxiety, God might be inviting us to a "withered bush" moment. God might allow irritations to persist in those areas, even very gently, waiting patiently for an honest response. We may need to admit how we feel, ask for help, examine our hearts, repent, or simply receive the gift of God's persistent presence in paradox.

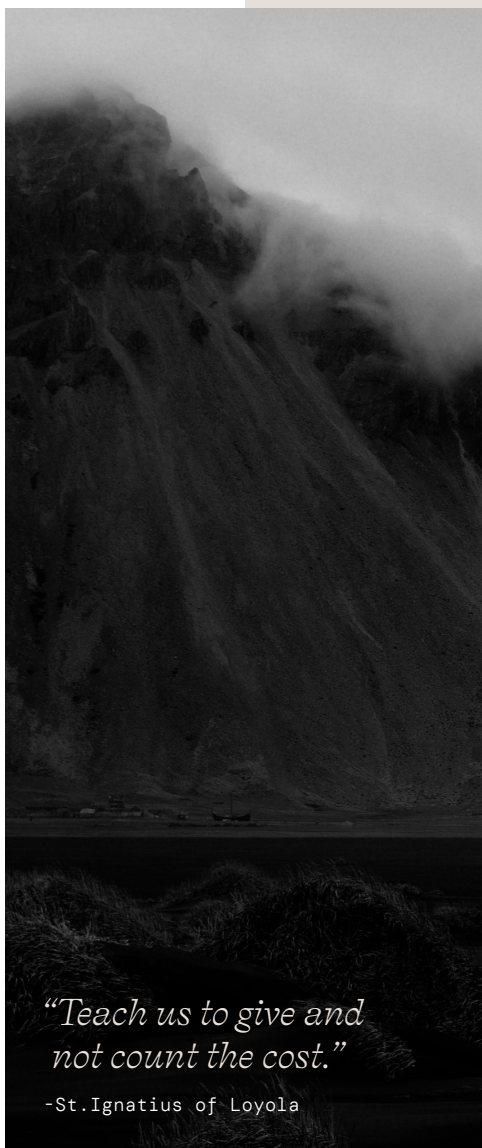
Jonah was so angry he could barely speak. And this is exactly where God wanted to meet him, to ask him a few questions, to challenge his small perspective, and to show him mercy—a truly Lenten invitation.

PRAYER for THE WEEK

Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent: Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

As Lent takes you “outside the city” (Jonah 4:5), notice the sparks that fly in you. The most common are fear, anger, and envy. Don’t judge too quickly. Just notice when you feel them and ask the Lord what they point to. If they overwhelm you, seek out a trusted friend, pastor, or counselor to share them with. Listen for insight and direction.



*“Teach us to give and
not count the cost.”*

-St. Ignatius of Loyola

Flood Banks



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 51; Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 18:1-7

TODAY'S ISAIAH'S PASSAGE IS A SHOCKER. How can God's people be so earnestly faithful in worship, wisdom, and love for his Word but also be rebels?

Fortunately, the Lord is always clear about what makes him unhappy. His people's faith, he says, has become compartmentalized. All the treasure of their life with God remains private, watertight. It builds them up, keeps them safe. Meanwhile, their neighbors don't benefit. In fact, their neighbors suffer—as does the Lord's reputation. And God's people aren't deeply transformed.

God calls his people to be “a spring of water whose waters never fail,” a lively, cool, and refreshing presence in the world. This echoes Jesus' promise to the woman at the well that God's “true worshippers” would produce “rivers of living water” (John 4)—not reservoirs.

It's easy for faith to touch some areas of our lives and not others. Some areas of life, like sex and relationships, or food production and worker's rights, feel either too personal, public, or “secular” for God to have an opinion on the subject. But God invites us to grow out of this mindset. He wants to remove these artificial boundaries we set about what is spiritually important and what's not and let his Holy Spirit flow freely, so that humans might become living conduits of grace in every aspect of life.

Though we will not be quite as in control as we like to think, opening the floodgates of our hearts, minds, bodies, politics, checkbooks, business practices—you name it—to God's love is how he shares his love with others. God is not hard to please. But he refuses to be tamed by flood banks.

PRAYER for THE WEEK

Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent: Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Notice places where you tend not to think God is active, present, and willing to do good. Where does prayer, compassion, or desire for holiness tend not to extend for you or for your faith community? Ask the Lord to move you and your community, even unexpectedly, to greater faithfulness.



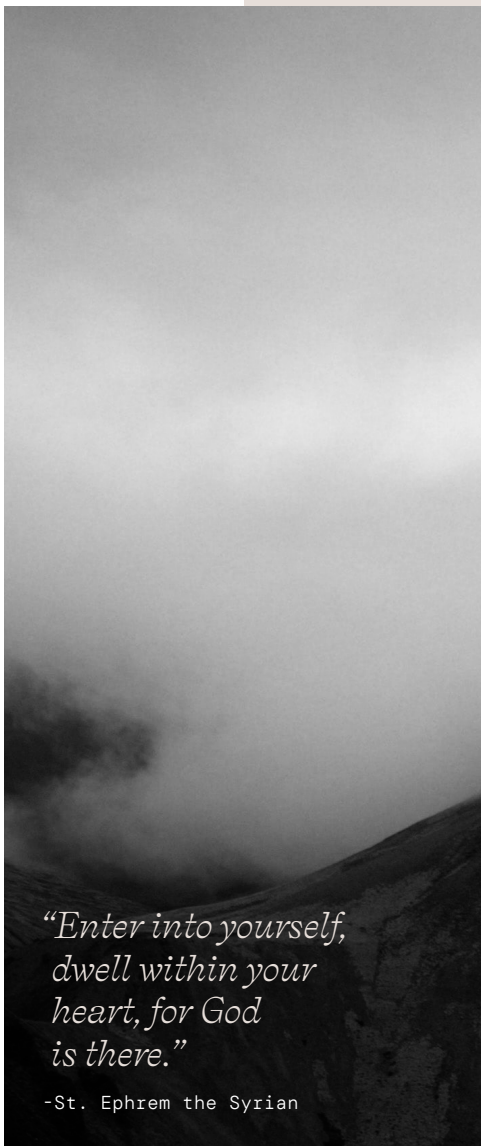


First Sunday *in* Lent

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

Ps 32:1-2





*“Enter into yourself,
dwell within your
heart, for God
is there.”*

-St. Ephrem the Syrian

SUNDAY

Did God Actually Say...



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

*Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19;
Matthew 4:1-11*

QUITE LITERALLY, in Genesis 2, we encounter one of the oldest tricks in the book. Rather than a bold and undeniable display of evil and injustice, humanity is undone with a simple yet subversive question: “Did God actually say...?” Adam and Eve receive this seed of doubt into their hearts, allowing it to slowly grow and take root.

Evil is crafty and harder to identify than we care to admit. Of course, it sometimes rears its ugly head in all its “glory,” leaving no doubt of its true colors and intentions. However, more often than not, evil begins with a single question or slight deviation off the path that leads to life.

“Does the Lord really expect me to keep waiting?”

“Surely suffering cannot be a part of his plan for my life?”

“Maybe he didn’t say what I thought he said?”

The serpent is as consistent as he is crafty, for this pattern of deception spreads from the garden to the entire world. It surfaces again in our readings today as Jesus is tempted in the wilderness. Notice, once again, that this is not a cosmic battle of good vs. evil as Hollywood might depict it but a conflict defined by half-truths and distorted visions of power and purpose. “If you are...”

As we begin this first week of Lent, let us be attentive to the silent and subtle sources of evil in our world and in the recesses of our hearts. More often than not, these places require the most attentiveness and demand our greatest resistance.

PRAYER for THE WEEK

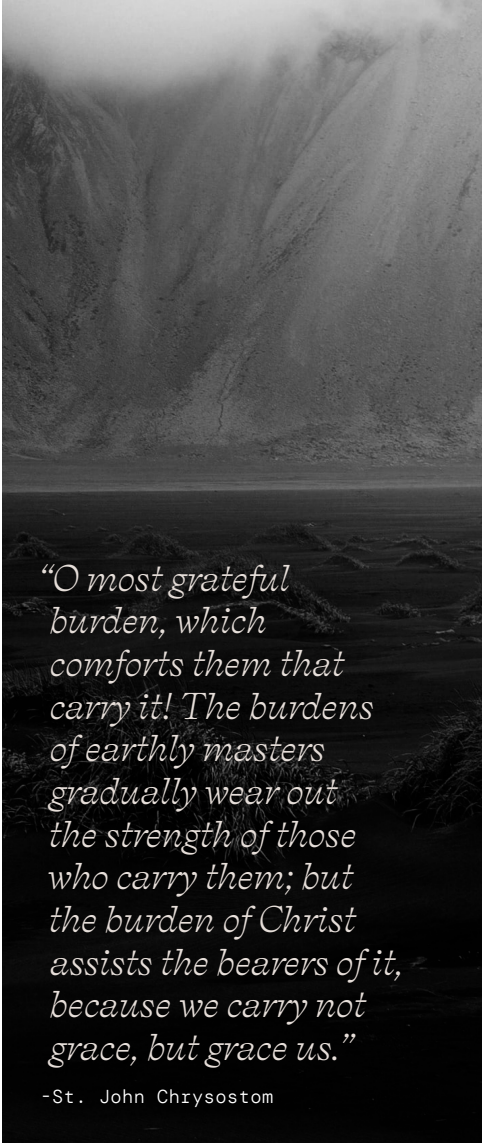
Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

What crafty voices have you allowed to enter your heart and reside there? How might you instead pursue places of purity and messages of truth that flood your heart with goodness, cleansing it from the evil that lies within?

NOTES

A series of horizontal dotted lines for taking notes, starting from the first line below the header and ending just above the page number.



*“O most grateful
burden, which
comforts them that
carry it! The burdens
of earthly masters
gradually wear out
the strength of those
who carry them; but
the burden of Christ
assists the bearers of it,
because we carry not
grace, but grace us.”*

-St. John Chrysostom

Grace in the Wilderness



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 32; 1 Kings 19:1-8; Hebrews 2:10-18

ELIJAH FLEES FROM JEZEBEL. He knows his cowardice is inexcusable after God has worked miracles through him. His response to his failure is to give up entirely: “Take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers.” If Elijah is overdramatic here, he is also logical: Israel is being punished for faithlessness despite God’s provision through the ages. But Elijah’s faith has also failed despite God’s provision. Therefore, God, who is just to punish Israel, should also punish Elijah. Elijah tells him to just get it over with.

The problem with Elijah’s reasoning is that God is gracious. Instead of death, he gives the despairing prophet even more provision. God, while consistent, is not a system of reward or punishment. Elijah, like the psalmist, has confessed his sin, and the Lord makes himself Elijah’s hiding place, counseling him with his eye upon him, treating him like a friend or brother rather than a pack animal who responds only to bits and bridles. This is possible because, as the writer of Hebrews says, Christ himself was also tempted, also weak, sharing our humanity so that he could atone for Elijah’s sins, Israel’s sins, and our sins. He also would kneel in prayer, in a garden rather than a desert, begging not to die. As with Elijah, the Father would send ministering angels to him. And as with Elijah, the Father would—graciously—deny his request.

In the wilderness, we are often tempted to separate God’s grace from his graciousness. We twist “grace” into an impersonal doctrine, as though we’ve found a legal loophole, not a willing Savior. Our failure to merit grace or to respond to it can become our defining story when we stop focusing on the revealed character of the God who lavishes it upon us.

PRAYER for THE WEEK

Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Write down five good things God has given you, including one thing you are fasting from. Write down what you think each might be designed to show you about God's nature. Finally, thank God for them and for his graciousness toward you.

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*“The business of the
Christian is nothing
else than to be ever
preparing for death.”*

-St. Irenaeus of Lyons

Fasting and Failure



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 32; Genesis 4:1-16; Hebrews 4:14-5:10

CHRISTIANS DO NOT FAST TO TRANSCEND their bodies. Instead, our fasts remind us of our weaknesses, temptations, and unstable incarnations. One day, we will be made perfect in resurrected bodies, but not today. One day we will obey perfectly, free from sin. Today, we muddle on after Christ, cursing and then cursing our curses, sharing inadequately in the banal suffering that we hope will someday be transformed into treasure.

Meanwhile, we have something to talk about with God and each other. Our failures cry out from the ground of our being, and, like Cain, we try to conceal them under pristine crops, parading our perfections and forgetting our faults. A natural impulse—but for the followers of a gracious God, not an option. “For when I kept silent,” says the psalmist, “my bones wasted away.”

This is what Lent is for. If you are keeping your fast perfectly, if you are not more aware of your inadequacies, then fasting only helps you deceive yourself. When sins surface in your mind, the Devil will use this awareness to accuse and tempt you to hide them. Your only escape is to confess them through the High Priest who understands our weaknesses because he already knows them, shared them without sinning, and delivers us, body and soul, from death.

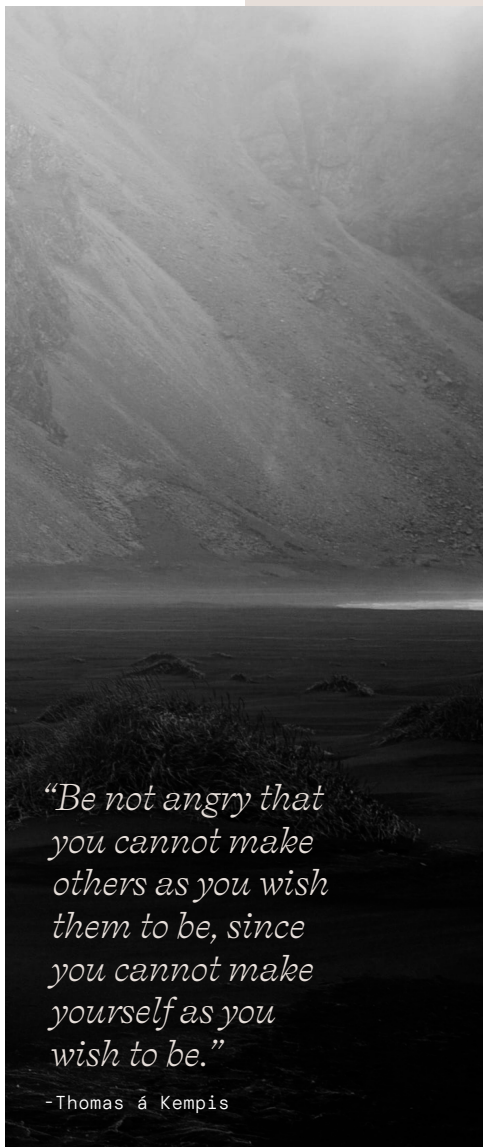
After attempting silence, the psalmist uncovers his iniquity before the Lord, and the Lord’s response is to become his hiding place. His sin is covered, he says—not by his own fruitless burying, but by the one who hides him. Cain’s self-righteous defense is his damnation, but the psalmist’s confession—which should be a verdict against him—becomes instead a starting place for his redemption, harmonizing with victory shouts.

PRAYER for THE WEEK

Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Take ten minutes to think over your struggles and failures in the last twenty-four hours, making sure to allow the Holy Spirit (not the Accuser) to help you process them. Where is God showing you that you most need him? Ask for his grace in these areas of your life.



*“Be not angry that
you cannot make
others as you wish
them to be, since
you cannot make
yourself as you
wish to be.”*

-Thomas á Kempis

God's Grace Through Us



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 32; Exodus 34:1-9, 27-28; Matthew 18:10-14

ISRAEL HAS BEEN IDOLATROUS, worshipping a false image of God, and Moses, in self-righteous rage, has destroyed the commandments that would have molded his wayward brothers into the true image of God on earth. All have failed in their calling. And it is in this moment of failure that God chooses to reveal himself.

Make no mistake: the Lord “will by no means clear the guilty.” The temptation to give up, to neglect holiness as hypocrisy, is as wrongheaded a response to God’s grace as the temptation to despair. Both temptations occur in the absence of God’s presence and personality when we wander off. Again, God’s grace cannot be parted from his nature.

But in our honest failure, the Lord meets us and reveals his name and nature to us: he is intrinsically the one who has searched after us, treating us as stumbling sheep instead of willful rebels. He will gather us back to the fold and make us friends and sons, counseling us with his eye upon us, dwelling with us in the wilderness, and teaching us to lean on him for provision and protection.

In view of this graciousness, which is God’s self-revelation to us, we are invited to consider again those whom we’ve assumed are beyond God’s help—or at least beyond our sympathies. The brutal tyrant and his subjects, our political opponents, the annoying person behind us on the bus, bad drivers, the neighbor, boss, coworker, relative, or fellow Christian who tries our patience. How many of them have we refused not only our sympathies but our prayers? How many of them are precious to God, just as we are, despite their failures? God’s project is to save them along with, not apart from, us. Will we join him?

PRAYER for THE WEEK

Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Every time you are annoyed with someone today, pray for him or her: “Lord, have mercy on them and me.” Pray that you would see them as God does. Do not try to feel compassionate. Instead, ask God to change your heart.



*“I know the power
obedience has
of making things
easy which
seem impossible.”*

-St. Teresa of Avila

Preposterous Promises



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 121; Isaiah 51:1-3; 2 Timothy 1:3-7

IN GENESIS, WE READ that God promised Abraham a vast familial line. It was an absurd promise, for at the time it was made, Abraham was 75 years old and well beyond his generative years. Still, Abraham had faith in God and maintained that faith for another twenty-five years before God followed through with the miracle of Isaac.

The prophet Isaiah claims we are hewn from the same rock as Abraham, but we may have serious doubts about how similar we are to our forefather. Our faith may not seem as rock-solid as his. As we wait for God to fulfill his promises, we may experience serious doubt. We might even consider giving up altogether on the paths on which God has set us. During such times, we should consider Paul's second letter to Timothy.

For years, Timothy ministered to God's fledgling Church alongside Paul. At times, such a calling must have felt like an impossible task, no doubt. Christianity was illegal, and followers were brutally murdered. Perhaps Timothy wondered whether his own faith was hewn from the same rock as Abraham's. Could he continue year after year with little evidence that the Church would survive?

Thankfully, Timothy received encouragement from Paul. In his second letter, Paul reminds Timothy of the faith and gifts God has given him. Do not give up, Paul seems to say, but recommit yourself to the journey on which God has set you, difficult and doomed though it sometimes may seem.

It is challenging to maintain our faith in a God who makes preposterous promises and then takes his time to fulfill them. It took time for Abraham to have Isaac and for God's Church to flourish. Thankfully, God sends encouragement along the way, particularly through the words of our fellow Christians.

PRAYER for THE WEEK

Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Read or listen to 2 Timothy 1:3-7. Take Paul's words to heart. What does it mean for you to have a spirit of power, love, and self-control? Next, think of those in your life who might need encouragement in their faith. What encouraging words could you write or say to them to help them through a difficult part of their journey?



*“As I hope in thee,
O Lord, inspire
me with that
confidence, which
brings me to thy
holy mountain.”*

-St. Agnes of Assisi

Question and Answer



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 121; Micah 7:18-20; Romans 3:21-31

TO GET AN ANSWER, we often must first ask a question. We can find numerous examples of this in Scripture. Psalm 121 begins with a question: “I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?” The kind of question we ask expresses the kind of answer we are seeking. Psalm 121 speaks of needing help, but in looking to the hills, the psalmist does not need just any aid. In our lives, we may find ourselves in a pitched battle against the forces of darkness. Despair and death are bearing down on us. In such circumstances, we are not looking for immediate fixes that are close at hand, but rather we are looking up and out to where a cavalry may suddenly appear, coming up and over the hillside. In asking the question “From where does my help come?” under such desperate conditions, we are led to the only logical answer, which is the next line of the psalm: “My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”

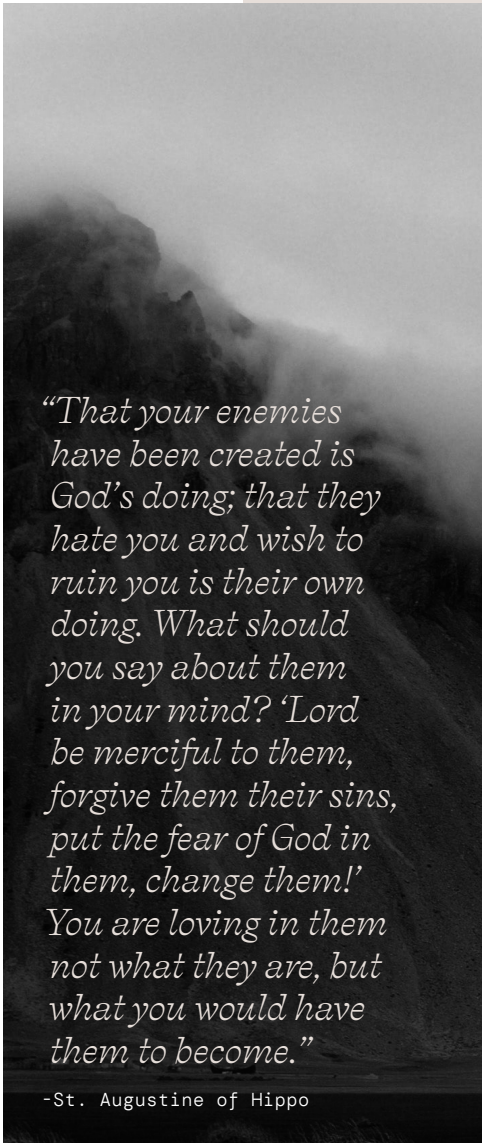
In true Socratic fashion, such an answer may prompt a further question: Why would the Lord help us, a flawed and fallen people? This is at the heart of Micah’s question when he asks: “Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance?” The answer is no one is like God, who comes to the aid of his people not because they deserve it but because of his steadfast love. In our time of need, as we look for the cavalry on the hillside of Calvary, let us continue to ask, “Who is this God, who would come to my aid?” In the asking, we will know the answer.

PRAYER for THE WEEK

Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Where do you turn to seek help in times of trouble? Do you try to go it alone, either doing your best to ignore the problem or ruminating on it until your insides are eaten away? Listen or read through Psalm 121. Prayerfully consider if you, too, lift your eyes to the hills and ask from where your help comes.



*“That your enemies
have been created is
God’s doing; that they
hate you and wish to
ruin you is their own
doing. What should
you say about them
in your mind? ‘Lord
be merciful to them,
forgive them their sins,
put the fear of God in
them, change them!’
You are loving in them
not what they are, but
what you would have
them to become.”*

-St. Augustine of Hippo

Love Your Enemies



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 121; Isaiah 51:4-8; Luke 7:1-10

WE DON'T USUALLY LOOK to our enemies for examples of how to live our lives. Typically, the opposite is true. The way our enemies live in the world is antithetical to our own. Who we are and what we believe directly contradicts who our enemies are and what they believe. Their way of life and our way of life cannot coexist without one of us fundamentally changing. This is what makes us enemies.

Jesus acknowledges that these intractable differences exist. So long as people have free will, there will always be conflicting ways of life, each seeking to convert the other by direct force, like an invading army, or by attrition through cultural or political pressure. Jesus doesn't say, "Do not have enemies," which is beyond our control. He says we are to "love (our) enemies," which is within our control.

Are our enemies hard-hearted, disdainful of God and all he calls us to be in the world? Do they embrace a way of life that is morally horrific and devastating to all around them, including their own souls? Oftentimes, the answer is yes. Jesus commands us to love them enough to open our hearts and pray for them. Hold them close and desire not their humiliation and destruction but their salvation. If we choose not to do this, it is not our enemies who have made it impossible to live out our Christian calling but our own bitter stubbornness.

We are to love all of God's children, even those who are hard to love. Doing so may soften our enemies' hearts as well as our own. On the road to salvation, we walk with our friends and carry our enemies tenderly in our hearts. For it is for these that Jesus carried his cross.

PRAYER for THE WEEK

Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

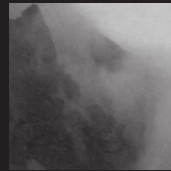
Read Luke 7:1-10. Consider that Jesus lifted up a centurion as an exemplar of the faith even though the Romans were the enemies of the Jewish people. Next, consider your own enemies. Pray for one by name. Ask God to open your heart to tend to that person should he or she reach out in an hour of need. Pray also for the willingness to grow in faith through such an experience.

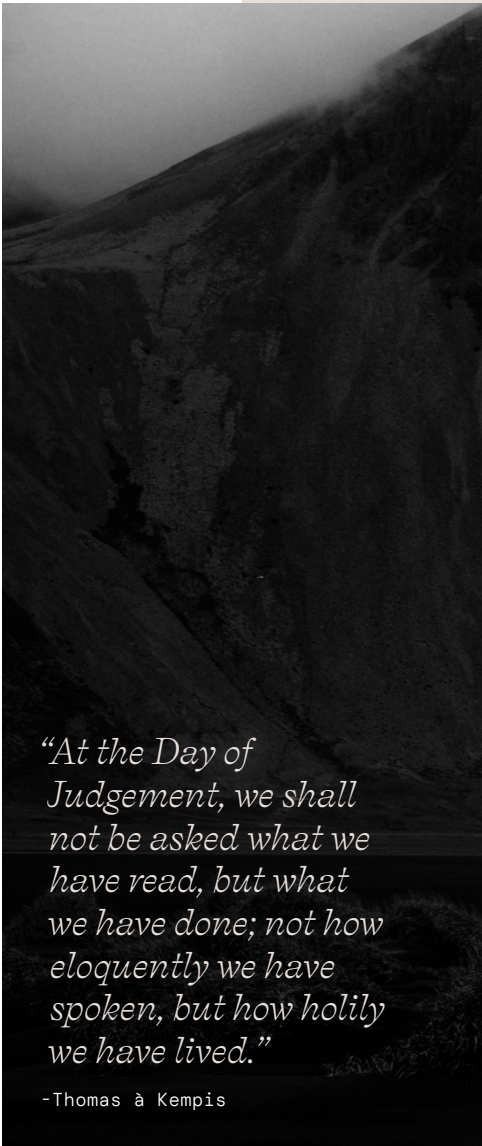




Second Sunday *in* Lent

I lift up my eyes to the hills.
From where does my help come?
My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.
Ps 121:1-2





*“At the Day of
Judgement, we shall
not be asked what we
have read, but what
we have done; not how
eloquently we have
spoken, but how holily
we have lived.”*

-Thomas à Kempis

SUNDAY

Teaching That Transforms



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

*Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17;
John 3:1-17*

JOHN 3 PRESENTS US with the well-known story of Nicodemus coming to Jesus in the cover of night, fearful of the impact this visit might have on his social standing as a respectable Pharisee, yet undeniably drawn to Jesus and desperate to learn more.

“This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him’” (John 3:2).

If you are familiar with these words, it is tempting to rush past them to get to the “heart” of the story. Yet, if we slow down and prayerfully listen to the voice of the Spirit in these opening words, there is much wisdom to be gained.

In our modern age, education and academics have been reduced to an almost entirely abstract pursuit of facts and figures. If Nicodemus lived in our day, we might expect him to say, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one knows as much as you do!” Yet this isn’t what he says, is it? For Nicodemus, the sign of a great teacher was not how well-read he was but the fact that God was with him.

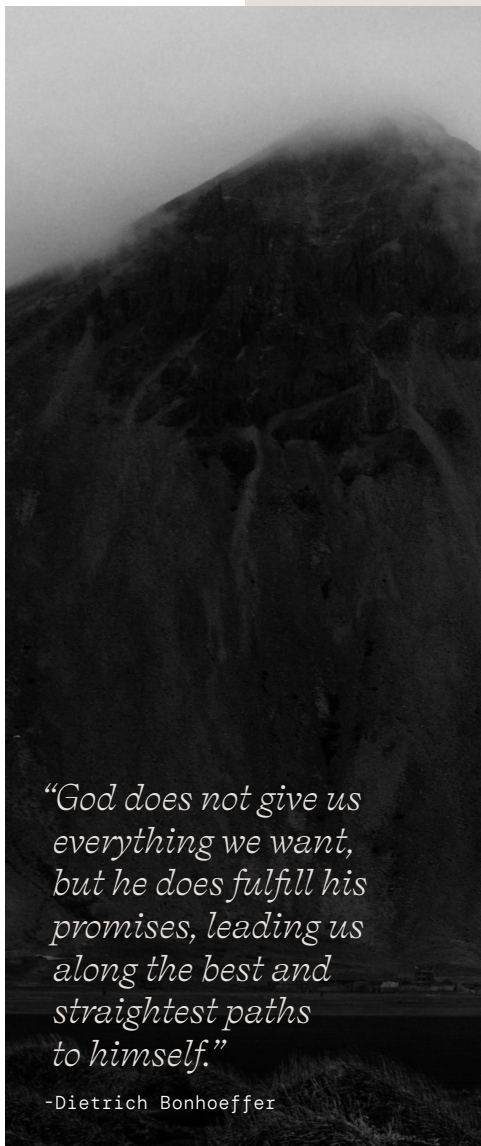
Knowledge is important, but if it does not lead to a lived encounter with the living God, it is sterile and leads to death. In Christ, God was (and is!) reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor 5:19), and it was this power at work in Jesus that Nicodemus longed to encounter for himself. Let us join him and search for the same.

PRAYER for THE WEEK

O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Who are the most influential voices in your life with Christ? Is their influence over you based on their rhetorical skills and education—or on their holiness of life and the power of God at work in and through them?



*“God does not give us
everything we want,
but he does fulfill his
promises, leading us
along the best and
straightest paths
to himself.”*

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Fruitful Vine



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 128; Numbers 21:4-9; Hebrews 3:1-6

IN PSALM 128, we see, in condensed form, the simplicity and sweetness of God's promises to those who follow him. It is one angle (and a comforting one) of the vision of humble repentance:

*You'll do good work and see it through. You'll eat what you earn.
Life will be happy. Marriage, fruitful. Children, flourishing.
Long years of peace and plenty.*

Today's psalm is like a beautiful, homey cross-stitch with wise words traced along its surface. Harmonious houses, twining vines, blooming flowers, full tables, and quietness of heart all tell us something true about what God means for us—has always meant for us—when we walk with him.

But even if we walk with God perfectly, the fulfillment of our own story depends on the fulfillment of everyone else's. Our lives, like vines and families, are rooted and twined together. And so, though the blessings of obedience are real and often tangible, domestic, and natural, they are also often deeply hidden rather than on display. Blessings like peace, contentment, and wholeness are often carried inwardly amid brokenness, without the outward fulfillment of our deepest desires.

Though he was perfectly obedient, Jesus did not have permanent work, a spouse or children, a house, or even a place to lay his head (Matt 8:20). And yet he became "a high priest forever," Bridegroom, "firstborn among many brothers and sisters," and Host of the glorious Supper, which is a taste of the Wedding Feast to come.

While Scripture beautifully puts forth a restful picture of the good life, Jesus offers hope to all who go without those blessings now and reminds us of this reality: we rejoice, we suffer, and we are saved together.

PRAYER for THE WEEK

O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Spend 10-20 minutes before an image or icon of Jesus as the Tree of Life or the Vine. Consider: How is Christ the Lord of “here and now” blessings? How is he the Lord who waits, suffers, and goes without? How does this Lord make his own home with us? What does his “family tree” look like? If anything occurs to you, pray about it.



*“If you are what you
should be, you will
set the whole
world ablaze!”*

-St. Catherine of Sienna

TUESDAY

Peaceable



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 128; Isaiah 65:17-25; Romans 4:6-13

IF YOU'VE EVER SEEN A CAT graze on grass, you might have the idea of a lion eating straw. This almost comical picture of ferocious animals becoming friendly vegetarians is an unforgettable way to say that God is up to something—something only God can do. God is a gardener with a plan. There is a joy, a delight, in the works. And its scope and beauty are almost indescribable. Metaphors strain at the leash of words.

What is this plan, exactly? Romans reminds us how faith—or trust—unlocks it.

It's in the turning of trust that we're "reckoned righteous" like Abraham was. Repentance is simply turning, again and again, in word and act, desire and intention, toward the One who we believe is good and will lead us in a good direction. For God to reckon us righteous is for him to not only forgive our sins but also make us belong in the good place he's preparing, a Peaceable Kingdom.

He's cultivating that Kingdom in us and making a way for us to live there. A dog-eat-dog world is becoming a place where everyone has enough of God's abundance. God's vision is for us to be free to have good relationships, forever, apart from fear and death. Do we want to live in a place like that? Can we leave our vision, our old carnivore's life behind, trusting that there's something better?

PRAYER for THE WEEK

O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Is there some ambition or advantage you'd be willing to give up, freely, to give more or serve the greater good? Examples might include not buying new clothes for a year, eating in a more earth-friendly way, giving up travel, or offering free time as a volunteer. Notice in the coming weeks where the Lord might be softening your heart to a more permanent practice of peace.



*“Just as the blessings
of God are unutterably
great, so their
acquisition requires
much hardship...”*

-St. Macarius the Great

W E D N E S D A Y

An Example



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 128; Ezekiel 36:22-32; John 7:53-8:11

STORIES ABOUT GROWING UP involve hardship. The most classic of these stories tend to include at least one schoolroom scene in which the main character gets made “an example of.” Think of Jane Eyre with a sign around her neck at the orphanage, Harry Potter singled out by Snape, or Bart Simpson eternally doing lines on the chalkboard. It is never a situation our hero wants to be in.

To be made an example of is always a punishment, as the Pharisees want to do with the woman caught in adultery. Many of us know this feeling of being singled out, whether justly or unjustly.

But in both the Gospel story and Ezekiel, we see the Lord taking someone who has sinned, who deserves to stand as a warning for others—“Don’t be like this person!”—and making a different kind of example of them. The Lord stands his children before others—in the front of the classroom—and publicly forgives them. He puts a sign on them: “This is what happens when I love you.”

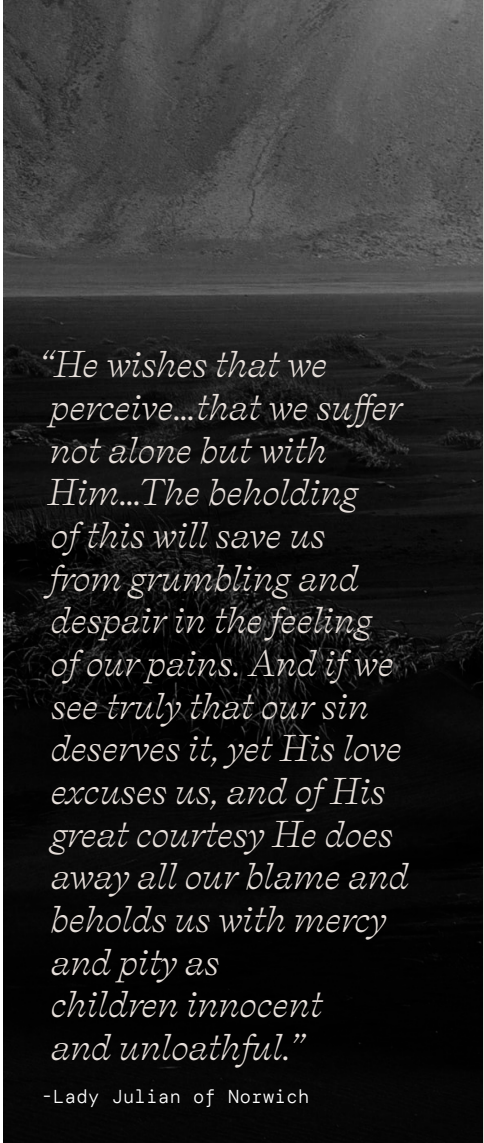
There’s always a bigger picture to forgiveness and obedience. They are blessings that transform our lives, and they are not about us. Even “private” sins and virtues have more impact than we know. God is making an example of his people in the classroom of the world. Our own struggles, second chances, and victories are just a small piece of God’s preparation of all people and all creation to receive the open-hearted love and invitation to life that he poured out on the cross. It is part of our great coming-of-age tale, our growing up in Christ.

PRAYER for THE WEEK

O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

God's way of growing us up can be found in all kinds of stories. Revisit a favorite story or film about growing up. Notice how the main characters grow in Lenten virtues such as self-control, truthfulness, or generosity. Notice how, as they mature, their lives become part of a bigger picture.



*“He wishes that we
perceive...that we suffer
not alone but with
Him...The beholding
of this will save us
from grumbling and
despair in the feeling
of our pains. And if we
see truly that our sin
deserves it, yet His love
excuses us, and of His
great courtesy He does
away all our blame and
beholds us with mercy
and pity as
children innocent
and unloathful.”*

-Lady Julian of Norwich

Pessimism and Praise



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 95; Exodus 16:1-8; Colossians 1:15-23

I TEND TO FIXATE ON GOD'S ANGER at the Israelites and his judgment against them. God loathed an entire generation of his chosen people for their grumbling and refusal to believe he would provide water at Massah or food near Elim. "Haven't I done the same?" I ask myself. If God was angry with those Israelites and prohibited them from entering his rest, what hope have I? Yet this, too, is grumbling, refusing to believe God intends to help me. To despair over Scripture is to misread Scripture.

Rather, today's psalm and the account in Exodus were written to help us listen now, to work now, to accept provision now, "as long as it is called today." It is a fact that God judges his people, yet it is also true that God provides. He provides physical sustenance for Israel in response even to their grumbling, and he provides spiritual sustenance in the form of his guiding presence, his Word, in which all things are held together—even us.


To grumble or despair is to become deaf to that Word, preferring a cheaper, solipsistic story to the one God is writing. We think we foresee how God will let us down, but God directs us in the present moment, guarding us against despair and apathy. In Colossians, Paul says that Christ is reconciling all things—even us—to himself, and that this reconciliation only occurs through our obedience: "if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast..." We will lose that stability without the sort of wonder-filled praise that Paul and the psalmist begin these passages with. To attempt adulation amidst pessimism is to read Scripture well in dialogue with, and in the presence of, the God who is himself our daily bread.

PRAYER for THE WEEK

O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Listen to the Colossians passage repeatedly and see if you can memorize this and the psalm, perhaps even singing them. Use both to praise God and, in doing so, to behold him more clearly.



*“The heart alone/
Is such a stone/
As nothing but/
Thy power doth cut.”*

-George Herbert, “The Altar”

The Trouble with Temples



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 95; Exodus 16:9-21; Ephesians 2:11-22

ONE OF THE DISTINCTIVE THINGS about God is his unwillingness to abide long, or at all, in the temples or images we construct. Instead, he has always sought to build a Temple himself, in and out of us. This process is about as comfortable for us in our raw, natural state as it is for any other building material to be made into a door, an image, or an altar. Some carpenters have rough hands.

We may try hard to follow Christ in Lent—which is good—but God relentlessly shapes us into his dwelling place at the same time. Our passive role as sufferers can seem to conflict with our active role as followers. Each day we are subjected to difficulties, losses, and interruptions, we are at risk of forgetting that it is by such apparent impediments that he refines us into something everlasting and satisfying to him. We want to be self-directed, successful at following God, earning money, looking good, being kind, and raising above-average children. When these limited life goals are blocked by tragedy, trial, or incompetence, we focus on our hard luck, self-denial, faithfulness or faithlessness, and we assume that God intends no good for us. Like the first God-following nation, we often see God’s work yet refuse to know his ways, living in a Godless universe despite daily miracles.

This need not be our whole story. Ephesians reminds us that we are being built into God’s Temple after being separated from Christ, alienated from God’s chosen, “having no hope and without God in the world.” It is Christ who makes us otherwise as we submit to his patient work, achieved through his own suffering as he was stretched out, hammered, and hewn, only to become the glorified Cornerstone to which we are joined.

PRAYER for THE WEEK

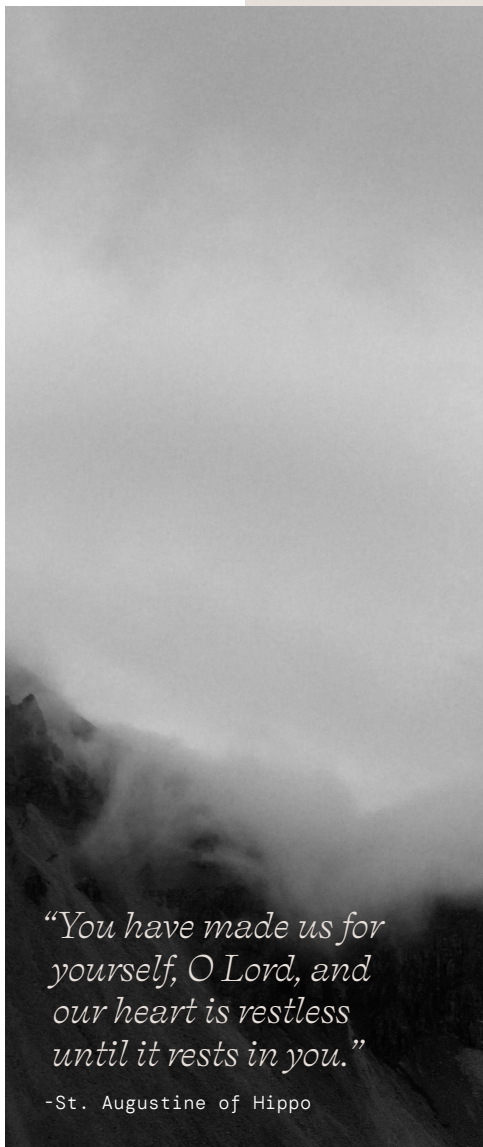
O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Make detailed plans to accomplish some good work; praise God if your plans are foiled. Repeat until praise becomes automatic.

NOTES

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*“You have made us for
yourself, O Lord, and
our heart is restless
until it rests in you.”*

-St. Augustine of Hippo

Rest Resistance



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 95; Exodus 16:27-35; John 4:1-6

REST MARKS US as God's people. We cannot practice love apart from practices of rest, which require an acknowledgment that we are not primarily laborers or competitors but children. For centuries, the Hebrews' value lay in what they produced for the Egyptians, and it took a generation for God to free them from this mentality. Long before he swore they would not enter his rest, they refused, resisting the Sabbath and hardening their hearts against God's guidance and gift.

We also want to be laborers, not children. Laborers put in a day's work, and their employers do not mind what they do with the rest of their life. Children have bedtimes and are always reminded that their value cannot be measured in concrete terms. Parents care about their child's growth not as workers but as humans, and in this way, they are more demanding than managers. Laborers can pretend to be independent. Children cannot.

Christ would not. When his ministry was thriving and people called him greater than John, he sabotaged his career. This is one more step on a long trajectory of self-emptying and chosen dependence, from his straw-lined cradle to the cross and grave.

Beware the pride that apes this humility, seeking a way out of God's mission, magnifying our defects above God's goodness. It is the type of pride that Moses showed when he refused to speak for God and that Israel later showed when that first generation of former slaves fearfully refused the Promised Land. False humility angers God because it is a refusal to believe that he has good in store despite the good he has done already. But Jesus—wearied, unperforming—rests in God's will, and ministry flows from his resting self like streams of living water.

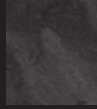
PRAYER for THE WEEK

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REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Ask the Holy Spirit to convict you of one way you are attempting independence from God and fighting true rest. What fears (which often dress up as ambitions) are preventing you from being simply his child? For the next week, ask him each morning to help you yield control of this area to him

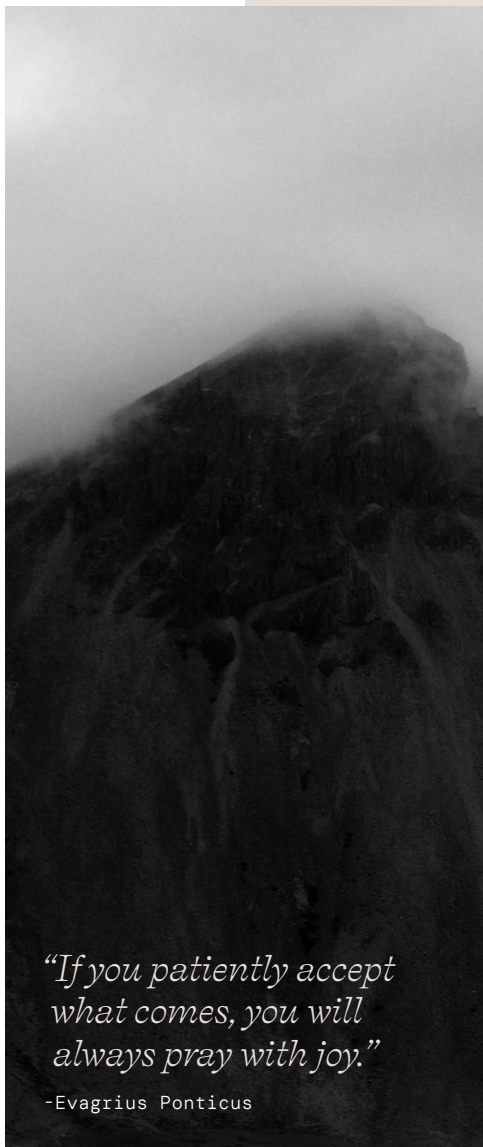




Third Sunday *in* Lent

Oh come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful
noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into
his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful
noise to him with songs of praise!

Ps 95:1-2



*“If you patiently accept
what comes, you will
always pray with joy.”*

-Evagrius Ponticus

Hope That Does Not Disappoint



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42

CHRISTIAN HOPE IS NOTHING SHORT OF ETERNAL participation in the glory of God. As St. Paul says, *this* is the “grace in which we stand” (Rom 5:2). The potential of every human life is to know Christ and be known by him, forever upheld by the God who is himself perfect mercy and unending love. Every momentary trial and earthly pain must be reframed in light of this glorious truth, for this is the only hope in the entire world that will never disappoint or let us down.

In many ways, life is filled with disappointments great and small. People fail us, family members betray us, and politicians deceive us. The enjoyment of a great meal fades, vacations to beautiful destinations lack enduring transcendence, and physical intimacy and passion are met with the inevitable decay of our frail and aging bodies.

If we place our hope in any of these things, no matter how great they may be, they will let us down and leave us empty and hollow inside. The only hope that will never disappoint is a heart overflowing with the love of God that reaches us even when we are at our absolute worst (Rom 5:5-6).

Inevitably, at some point in our lives, each of us will doubt this truth, believing instead that enduring hope can be found outside of the life of the Spirit. We search far and wide, seeking the greatest pleasures this life can offer. And pleasures they undoubtedly are, yet each will eventually run its course and reach its end. When it does, we are left frustrated and despondent or receive the wayward journey as a gift, revealing to us the emptiness of our pursuits and our need for a hope that will last.

PRAYER for THE WEEK

Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Honestly and sincerely reflect on this question: “In what or whom does my deepest hope lie?” If you struggle to answer this question, reflect on a typical week and how you spend your days. More often than not, our calendars are brutally honest guides that reveal our truest hopes and desires.



Sound the Tambourine



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 81; Genesis 24:1-27; 2 John 1:1-13

IT IS THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT. Perhaps the journey thus far through these forty days has seemed short and easy. The disciplines you have taken on or the things you have given up have not proven as challenging as you anticipated. For many of us, however, our commitment to our disciplines has started to waver. We may have faltered once or twice and indulged in those things we had committed to giving up. At times, Lent can feel like a journey that is destined to fail. After a few false starts with our various disciplines, we may feel tempted to give up on Lent altogether and resume our Christian pilgrimage at Easter.


For those of us who have faltered and steered away from our Lenten discipline, fear not! The way back is neither pointless nor difficult. It can be a small, simple act of worship that turns us back to God. Psalm 81 tells us to “raise a song” and “sound the tambourine” in praise of God. This is a low bar. Not to take anything away from the tambourine, but this is usually the instrument the most musically deficient is handed to play. Additionally, the vast majority of humanity can sing. Perhaps we cannot sing well, but we can make a joyful (if somewhat out-of-tune) noise. Music can reset our hearts and recharge our spirits. As it happens, Lent is full of beautiful music that reminds us of our brokenness and how we cannot make this journey alone. If you have fallen away from your Lenten discipline, consider a simple act of musical devotion as an onramp to resuming your journey. Resist taking a shortcut to Easter morning, for you may find that the tomb is not only empty but hollow.

PRAYER for THE WEEK

Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Choose a hymn or a favorite piece of Lenten music. For hymn suggestions, consider “Ah, Holy Jesus, How Hast Thou Offended” and “O Sacred Head Now Wounded.” For pieces of music, consider Allegri’s *Miserere Mei*. Find a private space where you may sing, hum, or listen to the piece without distraction. Afterward, prayerfully recommit yourself to your Lenten journey.



*“Love and sacrifice are
closely linked, like the
sun and the light. We
cannot love without
suffering and
we cannot suffer
without love.”*

-St. Gianna Beretta Molla

TUESDAY

The Ties That Bind



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 81; Genesis 29:1-14; 1 Corinthians 10:1-4

FAMILY CAN BE A DIFFICULT AND WONDERFUL THING. Occasionally, they are all the former or all the latter, but most of the time, they are both simultaneously. Each family's quirks and quarrels are unique to them. Still, we all have them, and we all share in the experience that we love our families and that they also drive us nuts.

There can be a special joy in discovering a long-lost family member. We may not know the person from Adam, but upon meeting him, we know that we already share something on a cellular level. As Laban says, rejoicing in meeting Jacob for the first time: "Surely you are my bone and my flesh!" We may have nothing in common with the person except shared genetics, but it's enough to make it difficult to dismiss our connection to this person. Like it or not, this person is family, and, on some level, we belong to one another.

Paul reminds us that we are similarly bound to our Church family (1 Cor 10:1-4). In this case, it is not our own blood that connects us but the blood of Christ. We may have equally complicated feelings about our Church family as we do about our biological ones. We try to adhere to the commandment to love one another, but we must also admit that our brothers and sisters in Christ—at times—drive us crazy. Still, family is family, and we do not choose them; God chooses them for us. The same cloud covers us, and the same blood that we share in Communion redeems us.

PRAYER for THE WEEK

Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Choose a member of your biological or church family that particularly irritates you. Lift him or her up to God in prayer. Take the time to consider the person's good qualities and the important role only he or she can play in the family. Ask God for the patience to not be easily annoyed by him or her and the strength to rejoice in the person's presence.



*“You cannot be half a
saint; you must be
a whole saint or
no saint at all.”*

-St. Thérèse of Lisieux

Things Done and Left Undone



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 81; Jeremiah 2:4-13; John 7:14-31, 37-39

IN CONFESSION, we admit that we have sinned against God in two ways: first, in the wrong things we have done and, second, in the good things we have left undone. Action and inaction are treated equally, which means no aspect of our life can be left unexamined. Stepping out our door can be just as perilous for our souls as staying in and doing nothing. When doing something and not doing something can both lead to sin, how can we determine the best way to proceed?

Scripture is full to the brim of passages on how to lead a good and godly life. One particularly helpful example comes from Jeremiah. God tells the prophet that his people have committed two evils: they have forsaken their God, the fountain of living water, and they have hewed broken, leaking cisterns for themselves (Jer 2:13). In other words, God is condemning both action and inaction. In the first evil, God's people are no longer going out to seek God, the living water. Instead, they have hastily hewed shoddy cisterns (large basins used to collect rainwater) so that they can focus on other things in their life. Through their inaction (not seeking out the fountain of living water) and action (poorly carving out a place for God in their lives), God's people have been left parched and gasping.

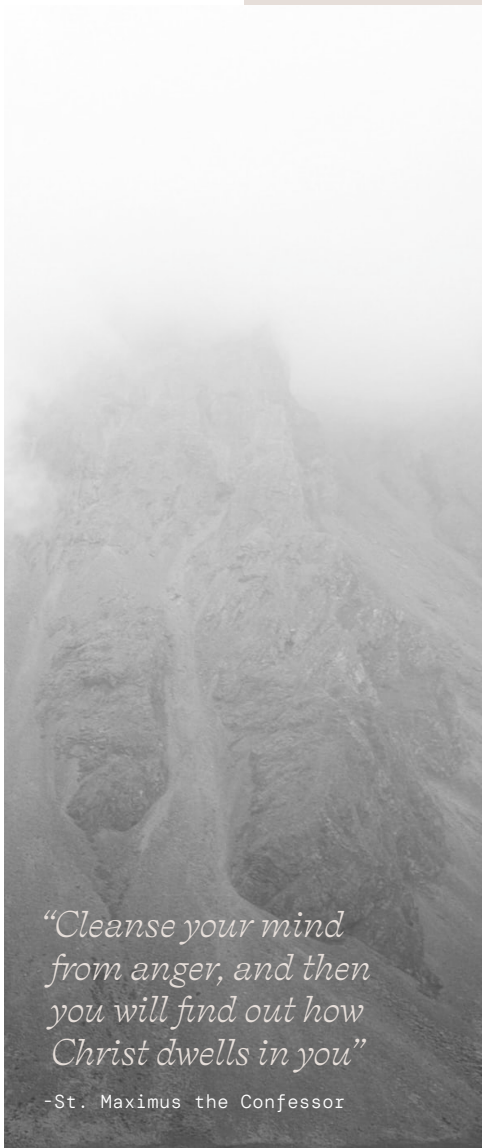
Let us take to heart what God said to Jeremiah and not allow ourselves to fall victim to the same two evils. Let us seek out the water that satisfies and ensure that we have carved a solid, deep place in our life where we may receive the goodness and mercy God rains down on us.

PRAYER for THE WEEK

Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Think back on the first half of this week. When have you neglected to seek God? When have you labored on projects that are unsuitable vessels for God's grace? Put these actions and inactions into words and confess them before God. Ask for his help to seek him in the world. Ask also that he would fill you with his grace like rain pouring into a well-hewn cistern: one that is strong, deep, and unbroken.



*“Cleanse your mind
from anger, and then
you will find out how
Christ dwells in you”*

-St. Maximus the Confessor

THURSDAY

Let It Go



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 23; 1 Samuel 15:10-21; Ephesians 4:25-32

METAPHORS FOR ANGER are physical, from hopping and boiling to blowing up and “seeing red.” Anger is a physical reaction, an instinct that helps creatures fight. And Christian teaching, ancient and modern, contains much wisdom on how anger can be used for good: for example, in defense of those in need. But we’re also warned, in no uncertain terms, against staying angry.

Carrying anger for many weeks or even years can damage muscles, sleep, digestion, and our way of viewing the world. It’s like a hot stovetop: good for getting a pot boiling, destructive to hold onto. It may spur you to wise action, but “don’t let the sun go down” on it. Rage—even righteous rage—should not be a state of being for God’s people.

Paul reminds us that anger arises in relationships; so does healing. To leave a family, friendship, or community of faith may be a last resort, but it is not solitude that makes us whole. Bitterness, wrath, wrangling, slander, and malice are relational, and their antidote—kindness, tenderheartedness, acts of forgiveness—also happen in relationships.

But before Paul calls out our anger issues, he tells us to “put away all falsehood.” As we get braver about telling the truth, leaving isolation and self-protection and entering humbly and vulnerably into community, we will find new causes for anger, frustration, disillusionment, and disappointment!

We may want to give up on others and move on. But St. Paul—and the season of Lent—challenges us to remain, stick with the process, and watch what God will do. He is also asking others not to give up on us.

PRAYER for THE WEEK

Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Lent is a wonderful time to ask the Lord for his help with letting go of grudges or disappointments. Consider planting a seed or bulb this week as a sign of putting a relationship or situation in God's hands. If you don't have a green thumb, do something physically strenuous like running, hiking, or deep stretching as an act of symbolic release.



*“Purity of heart is to
will one thing.”*

-Søren Kierkegaard

FRIDAY

Pure Hearts



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 23; 1 Samuel 15:22-31; Ephesians 5:1-9

CHILDREN PAY ATTENTION—just not always when we want them to. Whether it's learning a new bike stunt, reading a favorite book, or watching someone they admire, their focus is unmatched when something holds their gaze.

This kind of openhearted concentration is the kind that St. Paul commends to us when he says, "Be imitators of God as beloved children." Jesus lived his earthly life as an imitator. Even though he is God, he learned and grew. Think of a boy watching his parents cook, work, pray, pay bills, and talk with neighbors. We might call a child's imitation cute, but it's serious work. The child is becoming a bearer of his family's culture. Jesus is a perfect Son of Heaven. He embodies heaven's culture. We're called to do the same.

Now the epistle moves from a picture of God's family to a stark list of "don'ts." How jarring! But we can see a logic. The key is the word "purity." Purity is not first about dos and don'ts—though rules play their part. It's about that unbroken focus, that singular desire to please. It's a vulnerable, heartbreaking, heart-making attention to God and all that God loves. And only this makes all the Lord's house rules make sense in time.

PRAYER for THE WEEK

Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Try this child's prayer adapted from the Eastern Orthodox tradition:

*Lord Jesus, when you came to earth for us,
you grew as a child in wisdom and grace.
As Lord, you received children in your arms.
You blessed them and said that your
Kingdom belongs to them.
Dear Jesus, receive me also on this day.
Guide me to grow in grace and wisdom
as a member of your Kingdom. Amen.*

*“With my mouth,
God says, ‘I kiss my
own chosen creation.
I uniquely, lovingly,
embrace every image
I have made.’”*

-St. Hildegard of Bingen

SATURDAY

Logos



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 23; 1 Samuel 15:32-34; John 1:1-9

MONKS CHANTING IN THE DARK. A nebula unfolding. The first lines of an ancient, epic poem. The prologue of the Gospel of John is like this. Shot through with meaning, but strange. How does a cosmic word speak to us?

“In the beginning was the Word.” Word is a truth-bearing image—more than a metaphor—for coming from the Father, intimacy with the Father, and the perfect expression of the heart of God. Part of God’s eternal nature is to express and share his life.

The Word is also the wisdom of God. The Greek here for word is *logos*. The *Logos* is the “logic” of creation. Everything was made through him. All creatures carry his life, his stamp, in their bones. Creation, especially when it is most whole, most splendid, has a shape and character that reflect God—from a bird’s egg, to a mountain fog, to a star nursery, to an ear of corn, to a peaceful evening, to a faithful marriage. The humblest and the most breathtaking are embraced in this Word and his work.

And then the Word became flesh.

In the middle of the work of Lent, step back for a moment to before the dawn of time and be refreshed by the big picture: a mysterious, divine Trinity made creatures and gave them life—his life—to the full. Like a distant vista or strange piece of music, it pierces our hearts. It sings to our dust.

PRAYER for THE WEEK

Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

What moves you to awe? Refresh your soul this week with something that draws you into the bigger picture. Here are some suggestions:

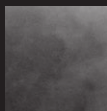
- A walk in nature
- A visit to a museum or observatory
- An hour of silence
- A thoughtful film (ex. Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*)
- A piece of music (ex. John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* or Arvo Pärt's *Spiegel im Spiegel*) as a member of your Kingdom.



Fourth Sunday *in* Lent

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow
of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

Ps 23:4





Good and Right and True



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

*1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14;
John 9:1-41*

THE PATH TO SAINTHOOD lies at the feet of every follower of Jesus. In fact, these are one and the same. To follow Jesus, in the truest sense of the word, is to become like Jesus, to be holy as he is holy (1 Pet 1:16). The Christian life is one of continual transformation, becoming by grace what Christ is by nature. This change, this ongoing encounter of his love, is meant to impact every part of our lives, and the longer we walk with him, the more his love floods into even the driest and darkest corners of our souls.

Of course, this change does not happen overnight. Much of our life is spent living in the tension of longing for holiness yet also desiring that which is ultimately for our harm. The call of discipleship, therefore, is to live more and more into the truest part of our identity, remembering how we were once darkness but now are light in the Lord (Eph 5:8).

When you encounter darkness in your thoughts and deeds, refuse to accept it as core to who you are. Yes, you are a sinner in need of the healing touch of God. Yet this is not the truest part of your being, for your identity as a child of light is greater and deeper than any darkness that remains within you!

So today, seek out that which is good and right and true. Spend your time with other people who love the Lord and encourage holiness of living. Meditate on Scripture, reflect upon beautiful art, and listen to music that moves your soul. And as you do, you will remind yourself of your true identity and ultimate destination.

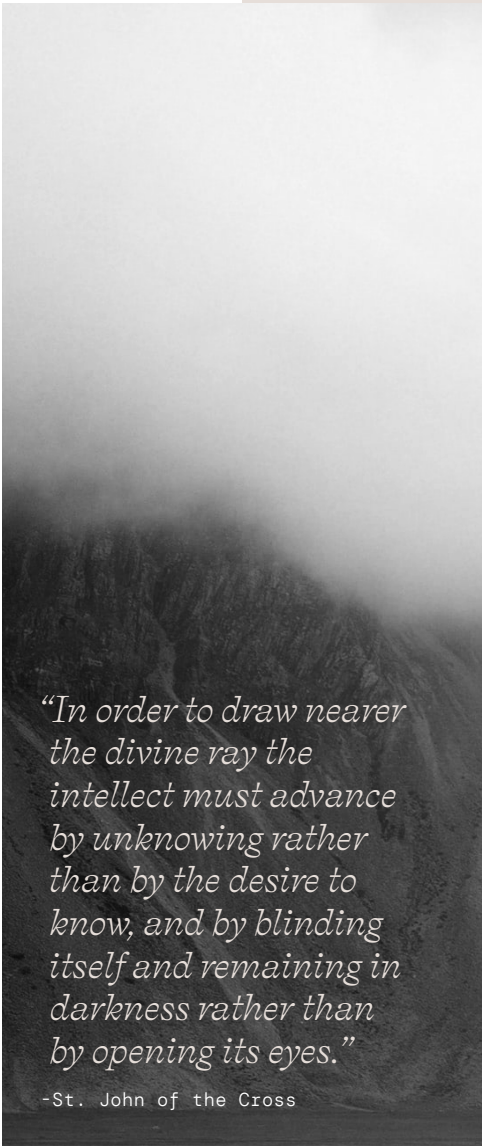
PRAYER for THE WEEK

Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world:

Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Prayerfully ponder the call to sainthood in your own life. Is this an identity with which you resonate? Is it a goal and aspiration of your life to be numbered with the saints of God? If not, ask yourself “why?” And if so, consider the intentional steps you need to take daily to grow as a child of the light and move away from all that is dark and disfiguring your true self.



*“In order to draw nearer
the divine ray the
intellect must advance
by unknowing rather
than by the desire to
know, and by blinding
itself and remaining in
darkness rather than
by opening its eyes.”*

-St. John of the Cross

MONDAY

In Blindsight



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 146; Isaiah 59:9-19; Acts 9:1-20

IT IS FASCINATING that Saul goes blind after encountering the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Saul must have already realized that his campaign to persecute the Church was mistaken. And isn't Christ supposed to heal, not bestow, infirmities? Why strike Saul blind?

Blindness helps Saul contemplate not only his error but also his helplessness to do what is right. It is a fitting rebuke to his prideful legalism and the beginning of his radical understanding of grace. The Scriptures frequently use blindness as a metaphor for our inability to help ourselves.

As a student of Scripture, Saul would have been familiar with passages like Isaiah 59, which describes sinful, unjust Israel as blind, stumbling in gloom at midday. But Saul would have also known passages like Psalm 146, which says God "opens the eyes of the blind." Christ called the Pharisees "blind guides" again and again, and here that metaphor is literalized in the case of this particular "Pharisee of Pharisees." Yet Jesus vividly diagnoses the Pharisees—especially this Pharisee—to cure them.

Saul remains blind and helpless, not eating or drinking for three days. Before his blindness, he was active, zealously doing what seemed correct, appointing himself to work salvation for God. Now he sits—passive, suffering—and it is only through his dependence on another frail and fearful person that God will heal him. Saul will later write about the necessity of his own frailty and foolishness, helping the Church see God's healing and power in their blindness and weakness just as Christ, through the Church (and especially Ananias), has helped him. Christ opens our eyes, but he also blinds us so that we might be humble enough to see.

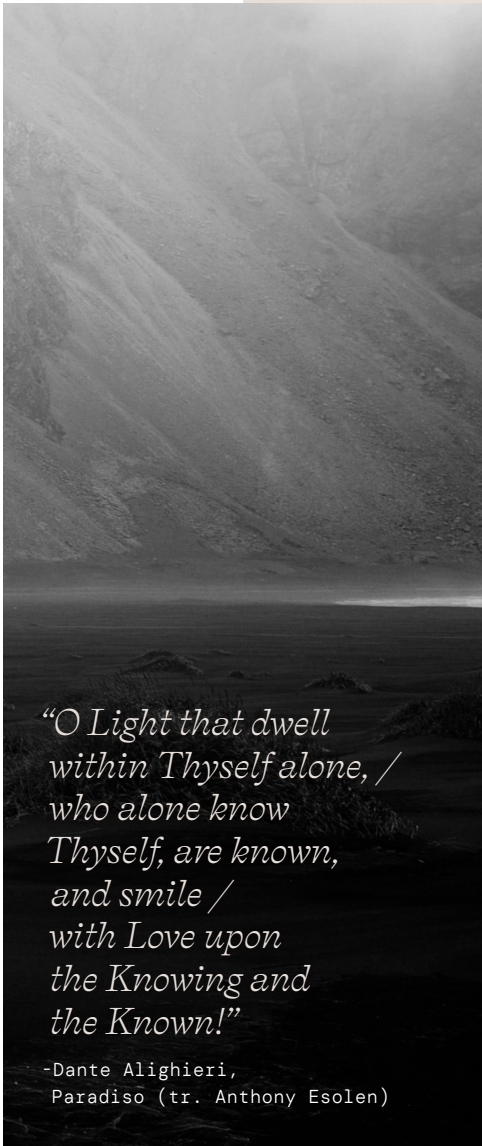
PRAYER for THE WEEK

Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world:

Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Call to mind your most frustrating physical and spiritual weaknesses and write about them. Do not be afraid to question God here. Now take the Scriptures for today and write those that seem most applicable in the margins of your complaint. Offer the whole thing up to God and ask him to open your eyes to how he is healing or using these weaknesses.



*“O Light that dwell
within Thyself alone, /
who alone know
Thyself, are known,
and smile /
with Love upon
the Knowing and
the Known!”*

-Dante Alighieri,
Paradiso (tr. Anthony Esolen)

Becoming Blind



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 146; Isaiah 42:14-21; Colossians 1:9-14

WHY DOES ISAIAH describe God's coming servant as blind? How is someone who cannot see supposed to help God's blind people? This question becomes even more difficult when we interpret the prophet's lines as referring to Christ, our sinless guide and savior.

You and I are blind because of our idolatry. We have, since Eden, trusted what we see. Because of this misplaced trust, the world becomes opaque to us—a “domain of darkness” where nothing has meaning beyond whether it pleases us or brings us stumblingly closer to pleasures that cannot everlastingly satisfy. We give up on meaning because we are hell-bent on acquiring pleasant feelings or the means to buy them. Without a reference point outside our own appetites and ambitions, we lose our souls, our selves, and our sight. We are emptied of “the knowledge of God's will,” of “spiritual wisdom and understanding” concerning triumphs and misfortunes, which frustrate our fragile peace. Only small and large misfortunes shake us enough to help us realize one day that we need guidance.

Christ chose to share our blindness, which he did not deserve, because we need more than a corrector, guide, or messenger. By sharing our darkness, he transformed it. He chose to take our chosen blindness upon himself, suffering our helplessness and the meaningless pain and shame of our death, alone and in the dark. He knows the right way, but he also intimately knows our condition. He not only guides us but heals and delivers us from darkness's domain to his kingdom. This is the inheritance we share with “the saints in light”—all formerly blind, helpless creatures who allowed him to take them by the hand and lead them through the dark chaos of their hearts, crying, “Let there be light!”

And there—is light.

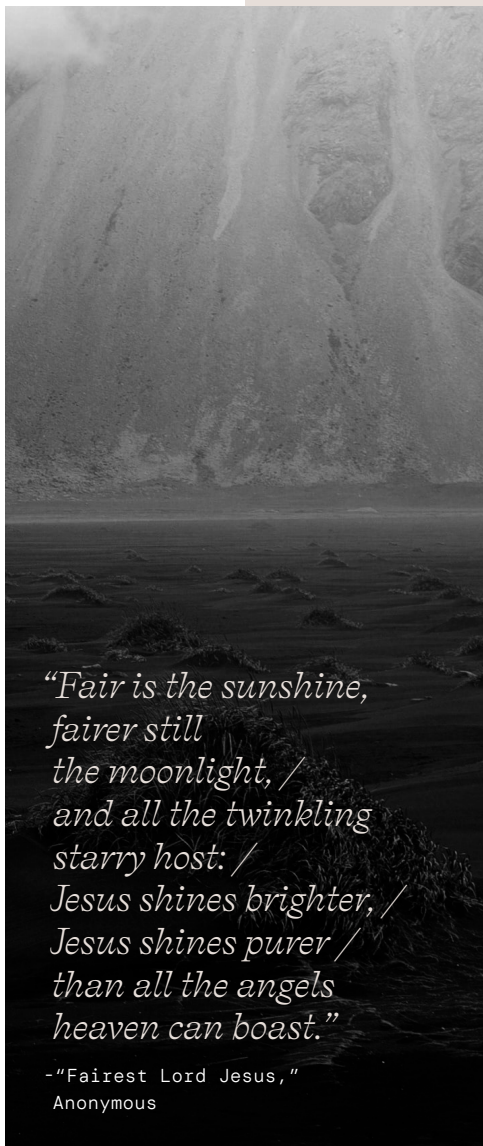
PRAYER for THE WEEK

Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world:

Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Imagine that you are walking with Christ through the darkest places of your heart. Where does he lead you? What things have become dark and opaque to you because you have set them aside for yourself? Remind yourself that God is concerned in every matter—there is no truly secular space, nothing that is yours alone—and ask God to help you see these spaces correctly, as he sees them already.



*“Fair is the sunshine,
fairer still
the moonlight, /
and all the twinkling
starry host: /
Jesus shines brighter, /
Jesus shines purer /
than all the angels
heaven can boast.”*

-“Fairest Lord Jesus,”
Anonymous

Sunless Light



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 146; Isaiah 60:17-22; Matthew 9:27-34

CALL ME OLD-FASHIONED, but I kind of like the sun. The moon's nice, too. They may be spotted and stained, but it's hard for me to imagine enjoying life as much once they've retired. When Isaiah 60 is fulfilled, I wonder if I'll be allowed to thank them before they're phased out, just to say, "I appreciate you, brother" or "Thanks for all those years, sister." Seriously, though, the tough thing about descriptions of heaven is that Scripture often refers to things we know (marriage, the sea, the sun, the moon, the Temple) only to negate them, replacing them with things we can't easily visualize—"glory" or even "the Lord." In Lent, meanwhile, we go without good things, usually physical comforts, but it is rarely obvious how this temporal deprivation enhances our eternal lives.

The blind men in the Gospel passage couldn't imagine exactly what sight would be like, either. If they had tried to guess by analogy, someone would have said, "No, light is not quite like that." If they had asked whether they would still have canes or service dogs (or the first-century equivalents), they would have been told they would not need these things. Yet, because they trust others who tell them that sight fulfills certain aspects of their experience, because they trust Christ to do right by them, they are healed according to that faith.

Do you believe that what God has prepared for you is better than what you currently know and hold onto? Or do you put your trust in "princes"—even in reliable, kindly old stars—"in whom there is no salvation"? Most of us (God help us) attempt both, but this Lent, allow God to wrest your hand from your cane a bit more than before and give you the light that outshines the sun and other stars.

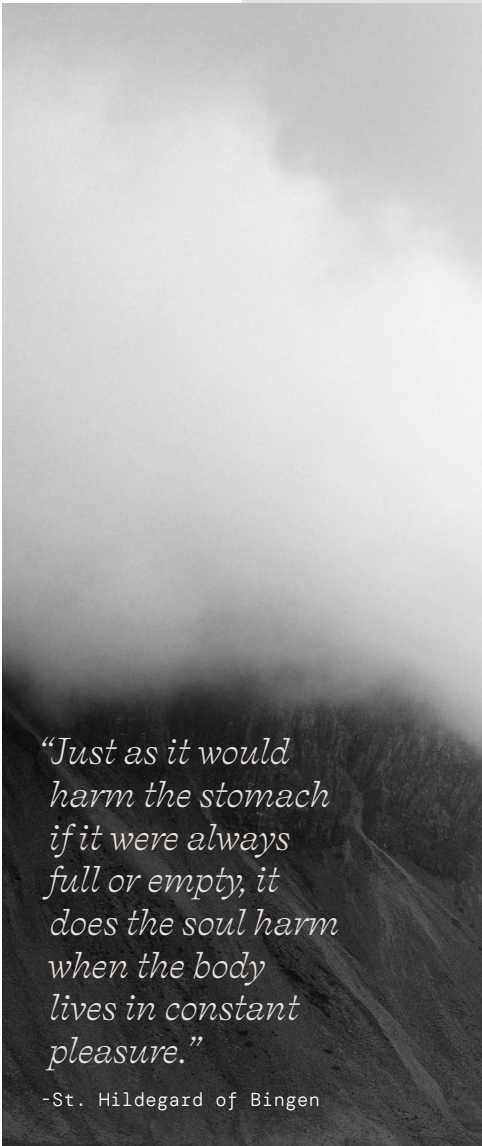
PRAYER for THE WEEK

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Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

What do you depend on? What do you take for granted? How might God be showing his faithfulness to you through that person or thing, calling you to renewed gratefulness for it? How might he be calling you to see beyond it, to depend on it less and on him more?



*“Just as it would
harm the stomach
if it were always
full or empty, it
does the soul harm
when the body
lives in constant
pleasure.”*

-St. Hildegard of Bingen

THURSDAY

Feasting on the Word of God



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 130; Ezekiel 1:1-3, 2:8-3:3; Revelation 10:1-11

FASTING IS ONE OF THE MANY intentional practices in Lent. Refraining from or curtailing consumption can be applied to anything in our lives—such as television, alcohol, or online activity—but typically fasting refers to food. Fasting from food can seem cruelly unnecessary and contrary to what God would want us to be doing. After all, food is a good thing, provided by God so that we may survive. Why would we not partake of his bounty?

Certainly, we should not abuse ourselves. Fasting is not meant to be an extreme form of dieting or a gateway to an eating disorder. In these cases, we become consumed with ourselves, leaving little appetite for anything else. Fasting is meant to make room for God. We are reminded of our vulnerable, mortal nature and are dependent on the blessings of God to survive. In turning to him in prayer with an empty stomach, we signal to God and to ourselves that we seek to be filled by him first. Consider what God feeds Ezekiel when he commands the prophet to open his mouth and eat what God gives him. God provides a scroll. In other words, God gives Scripture for Ezekiel to eat.

Now, there are times and places for feasting, but in our daily lives, we are to feast less on food and more on the Word of God. Our daily food should resemble the simple fare that God provided in the wilderness so that we leave room for the rich feast we find in Scripture.

PRAYER for THE WEEK

Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world:

Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Read or listen to Matthew 14:13-21, which tells of Jesus feeding the 5,000. Consider the simple fare provided that day—bread and fish—and how it was more than enough for all those gathered. Now consider your own daily bread. Is there something you eat at lunch (or perhaps a dessert after dinner) that you could replace with listening to or reading a portion of Scripture?



*“You’re bored? That’s
because you keep your
senses awake and
your soul asleep.”*

-Josemaría Escrivá

FRIDAY

Keep Awake



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 130; Ezekiel 33:10-16; Revelation 11:15-19

IT'S RECOMMENDED that adults get seven to eight hours of good, uninterrupted sleep a night. How many of us can say that we do? Our lives are busy, full of responsibilities and cares that keep us up working or worrying. Yet, while our bodies toss and turn and our minds race, our souls slumber. The frenetic pace of our day-to-day lives crowds out the focus on the soul. We are too busy to pray. Come Sunday, we are too tired to rouse ourselves to worship. Our souls receive too much sleep through disuse, our bodies and minds too little from overuse. This puts us in no fit state to greet each day, and certainly not fit to greet our Lord.

If our bodies and minds are overused and our souls underused, Lent is a perfect time to institute a change. "Keep awake therefore," Jesus commands us, "for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming" (Matt 24:32). Jesus warns us that he will come unexpectedly, even in the middle of the night. The night could be the darkest part of the day or the darkest time of our life, that time when we are most exhausted and most vulnerable, what St. John of the Cross calls the dark night of the soul. Were Jesus to arrive suddenly, like a thief in the night, would he find a soul sitting up with a light on, waiting for him, or would he find it fast asleep in the darkness? Allow your soul to remain awake at night, like a watchman at his post, so that your body and mind may rest.

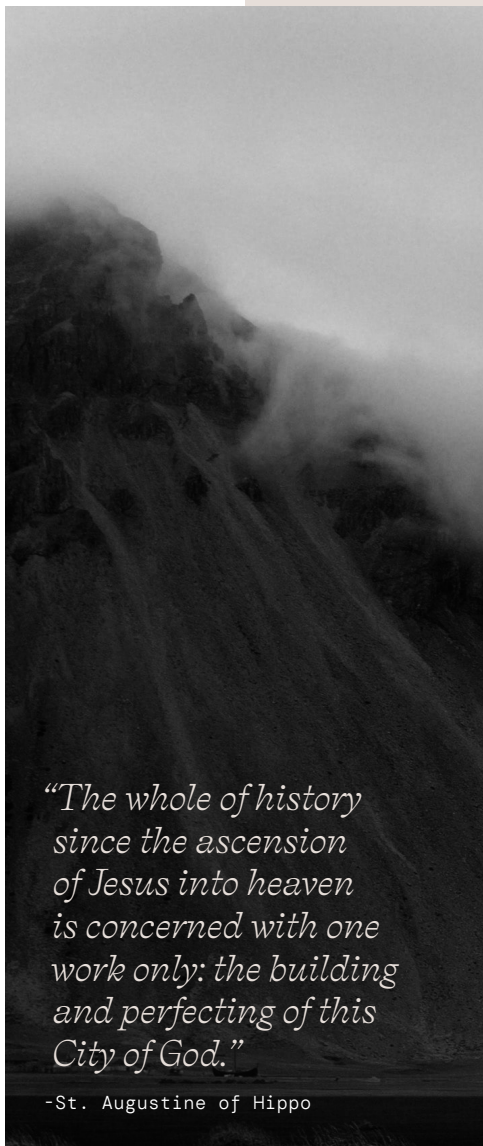
PRAYER for THE WEEK

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Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Listen to or read Psalm 130 before bed tonight. Reflect on what it means to have a soul that is awake, waiting for the Lord. Keep Psalm 130 by your bed and resolve to turn to it in prayer when you are having difficulty quieting your body and mind, rather than resorting to anxious fretting. After all, fretting will do exactly nothing, and prayer can make all the difference.



*“The whole of history
since the ascension
of Jesus into heaven
is concerned with one
work only: the building
and perfecting of this
City of God.”*

-St. Augustine of Hippo

Where's This Story Going?



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 130; Ezekiel 36:8-15; Luke 24:44-53

SOME READERS, UPON STARTING A BOOK, jump to the end to see how it all turns out. This may seem funny to others, but there is a certain logic to it. Knowing the ending can help orient the reader to where he or she is in the story. Little details emerge that otherwise may have been missed, and certain scenes can carry more emotional weight if the reader ultimately knows where it's all leading. Finally, by skipping ahead, the reader either can be reassured that all turns out well or feel more prepared for a tragic ending.

During the fourth week of the Lenten season, the lectionary skips ahead to the very end of the Gospel of Luke. For a brief time, we leapfrog over the journey to Jerusalem and Jesus' subsequent arrest, trial, and crucifixion. In this fourth week, we get to see where all of this is leading: not to the tomb but to a living Jesus who ascends to his Father.

As we resume our Lenten journey to the cross, we are reminded today that the story does not end there. Indeed, by skipping ahead to the end of Luke's Gospel, we find in those final verses that the ending is truly a beginning. Jesus ascends with the promise that the Holy Spirit will descend, which is marked as the beginning of the Church. As Christians, our story gets very dark indeed. In such times, it behooves us to glimpse ahead to the end and be reminded that our story not only ends in great joy but also truly does not end at all. Rather, out of the ending, we find the hope of a new beginning.

PRAYER for THE WEEK

Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world:

Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Look up John Donne's poem, "Ascension," which is in the public domain. Read through it slowly. Finally, offer up a prayer of thanksgiving for the "strong ram," the "mild lamb," and "bright torch," which is our Lord and Savior.



Fifth Sunday *in* Lent

O Israel, hope in the Lord!

For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
and with him is plentiful redemption.

Ps 130:7



*“Give me
understanding,
O Lord, that I may
weep bitterly over
my deeds.”*

-The Canon of Repentance

You Shall Live



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

A LONGING FOR REDEMPTION lies at the heart of repentance. We weep over our sins and shortcomings, grieving the harm we inflict on ourselves and others. Yet true tears of repentance must bring with them the belief that God will not leave us in our places of despair. When we, like the psalmist in Psalm 130, cry out for redemption from our iniquities, we long to believe that it is a cry that will not fall on deaf ears: “God, hear us and make us whole!”

By this point in our Lenten journey, you have likely encountered your need for healing and redemption in ways both great and small. You may eat and drink, laugh and cry, work and rest, yet still end your day with an unsettled longing for a greater experience of life—a healing of your story and hope for the future that feels God-given and unshakable in the best sort of way.

This is the tension that Lent invites us to live in during this season of repentance. We live in the land of death, weeping over our shortcomings and seeing ourselves as we truly are. Yet we equally look ahead to the kingdom of life in which the very Spirit of God is breathed into our dry and desperate bones. It is a reminder that we so often live without becoming truly alive.

In many ways, this life of the kingdom may feel unobtainable and out of reach. And in and of ourselves, this would be an accurate diagnosis. The dead cannot raise the dead! However, the creator of life can breathe his breath upon the dead and dying, drying our tears and once again making us whole. And so, even in our weeping, we cling with hope to the unshakable promises of the God who says, “I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live” (Ezek 37:14).

PRAYER for THE WEEK

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

If you have fully embraced the penitential disciplines of Lent, make sure that these have not caused you to lose sight of their intended purpose of softening your heart toward the Lord and deepening your hope in his promise of new life.



*“People do not enter a
war in order to enjoy
war, but in order to be
saved from war.”*

-St. Nicholas of Serbia

MONDAY

Enemies



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 143; 1 Kings 17:17-24; Acts 20:7-12

WHERE ARE YOU, GOD? What are you doing? Will you come to me? Will you save me—or not?

In one sense, we enter the wilderness purposefully for discipline and re-centering, or we are ushered there by life or the Lord. In another sense, we're always in the wilderness. We are always journeying, asking, wandering, running from something, needy, hiding, hungry, thirsty, not yet safe, not yet fulfilled.

Psalm 143 reminds us of this. It also reminds us that we have enemies to grapple with here, and we can ask to be saved from them. Sometimes our enemies are people who hope we fail, are glad when we do, and try to trip us up—other humans, as in need of God's mercy as we are. Sometimes those enemies are in our imaginations: out of pain or fear, we think others are out to get us. Like the Israelite widow whose son suddenly died, we may blame the wrong person—even blame God.

We also have other unseen enemies. Christian tradition has given them many names, including false self, sickness, death, demons, and principalities and powers. The Adversary himself ("Satan" in Hebrew) appears to Jesus at the end of his 40 days in the wilderness. Weak, laid low, full of childlike trust, and bearing the quiet authority of God, Jesus sends the enemy packing.

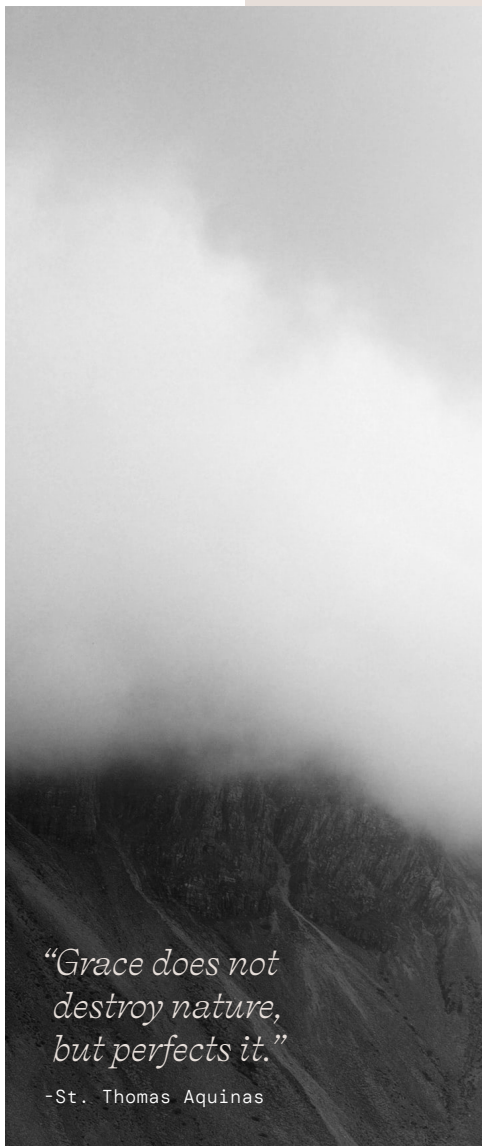
Jesus both prays Psalm 143 and answers it. We can pray it, too, with total honesty, without needing to be "correct," with trust in the Father.

PRAYER for THE WEEK

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

What seems to hound you without letting up? (Criticism, worry, deadlines, a difficult relationship, an intrusive thought?) Whether these troubles seem to come from outside, from within, or both, try asking God for deliverance. Don't worry about being polite or theologically "correct." Focus for now on being honest before God and trusting he knows how to answer you.



TUESDAY

Getting Well



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 143; 2 Kings 4:18-37; Ephesians 2:1-10

AMONG ALL THE STARK PROPHETIC PRONOUNCEMENTS and wild, wonderful promises, today we hear a simple question of concern:

Is it well with you?

This is worth asking as we approach the end of Lent. Easter can feel anticlimactic or disappointing, especially if we feel Lent didn't do all we hoped it would. Like exercise, some of the results depend on effort. But even God's greatest prophets don't make guarantees of how the road will wind.

Are you looking to Lent to solve something for you? Will it be all right if it has been incomplete or imperfect—if you suffered loss, struggled more than you expected, cared less than you hoped, or life handed you some other wild card? Is it okay for your spiritual healing to happen in increments and stages and for these 40 days to have just been a tiny piece of the puzzle?

Ephesians describes our healing, too—our coming alive in Christ. It's a gift no one can take away. It's a miracle. But how many unexpected things happen along the way! We have set times to pray, fast, give, search our hearts, rest, and do all the right things, but still we have to trust.

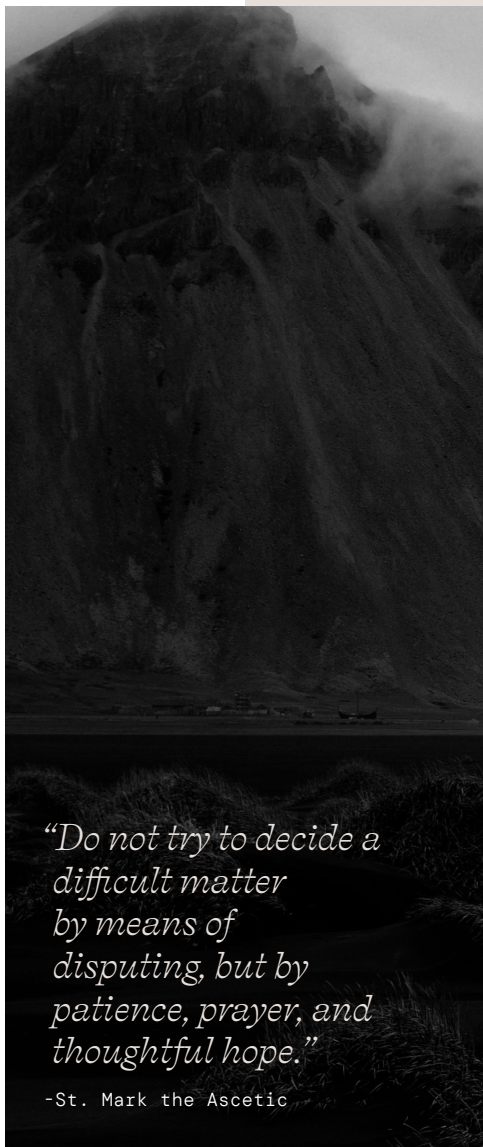
Our healing journey is unpredictable and messy. That's because it's so real. Maybe, if God were more distant from us, it would be cleaner, and there would be some foolproof formula that would always work the same way. But he's hand-to-hand, eye-to-eye, heart-to-heart with us, raising us from the dead through intimate contact. His grace follows the contours of our nature, not to erase it but to perfect it with love.

PRAYER for THE WEEK

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

However Lent has gone for you so far, take a moment to do two simple things: (1) Express your satisfaction or disappointment to the Lord in prayer. (2) Begin a plan for the Easter celebration, even something small like choosing a recipe, adding a treat to next week's grocery list, reading the lyrics of an Easter hymn, or setting aside your Easter outfit.



*“Do not try to decide a
difficult matter
by means of
disputing, but by
patience, prayer, and
thoughtful hope.”*

-St. Mark the Ascetic

W E D N E S D A Y

Holy Kindness



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 143; Jeremiah 32:1-9, 36-41; Matthew 22:23-33

JESUS' TIME BEFORE HIS DEATH IS SHORT. We might marvel even more, then, at his patience with fussy and facetious questions from the Sadducees.

Prayer, fasting, and other faith practices can be used to reinforce negative attitudes and closed-off hearts, as they seem to do for these Sadducees, instead of to gain strength and flexibility for the demands of love's work.

For Jesus and anyone willing, faith practices reinforce in us nothing more certain than God's kingship, God's care, and our dependence on him. They give us more kindness toward others. Holy kindness is far more than a tolerant "It's all good" or "Live and let live." For those softened by God's Spirit, it means relaxing our defenses, sitting with hard (or annoying) questions, and being truly secure among a variety of personalities, misunderstandings, ideas, and choices in order to bring and reveal the presence of Christ.

Jesus, in the disciplines of love, sits with his neighbors to draw them in deeper to the place where God is waiting for them. Only Jesus' connection with the Father, his prayer and obedience, make his kindness possible.

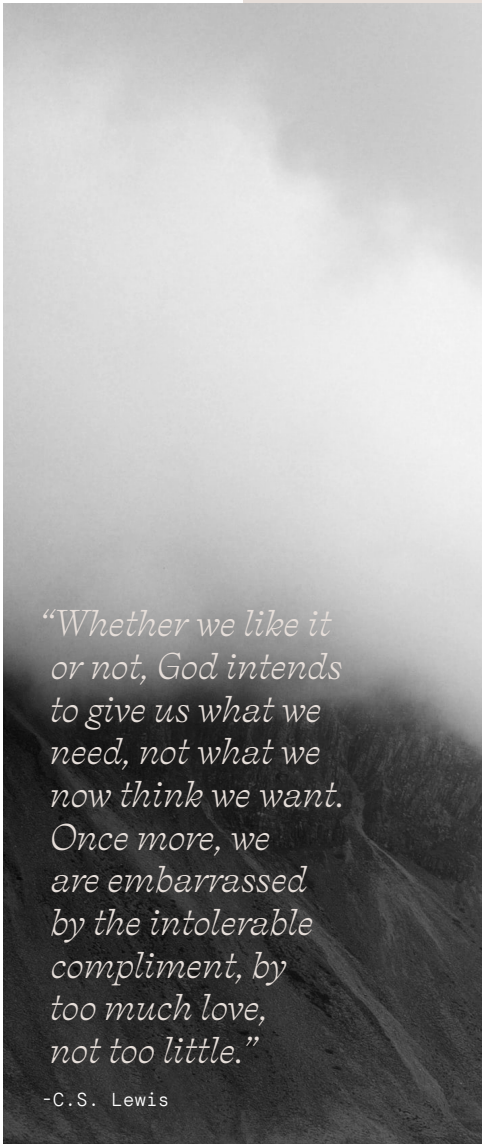
But we have to want kindness. Christ shows a unique kindness toward all of us. We must want that kindness more than we want zingers, safe distance, or even to be right. We must learn what the Sadducees did not yet know. We don't preserve God's ways. His ways preserve us.

PRAYER for THE WEEK

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Try to listen calmly today to a person or opinion that annoys you or read an article by a news source you don't like. Don't do yourself emotional harm—some voices you may truly need to avoid. And don't overdo it. Pray beforehand, and pray afterward, asking the Lord to help you see something new, to love those you find difficult. If you're brave, pray for patience.



*“Whether we like it
or not, God intends
to give us what we
need, not what we
now think we want.
Once more, we
are embarrassed
by the intolerable
compliment, by
too much love,
not too little.”*

-C.S. Lewis

Triumph and Trouble



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 31:9-16; 1 Samuel 16:11-13; Philippians 1:1-11

IT IS A HEADY THING, as a boy, to be preferred above your older brothers and told by a prophet that you will be Israel's next king. Most of us probably can't relate to that moment in David's life, but we can remember other moments of triumph—success in love, an accolade, a promotion. Someone sees something valuable in us and tells us, or our work is recognized by someone who matters to us. All such moments have one thing in common: they never last.

It is difficult to shepherd the hearts of humans. God desires that earthly triumphs and rewards occur in our lives. Taken rightly, they are reminders of his unconditional approval of us in Christ. They may confirm us in our temporal calling and our eternal destiny. Yet the risk of giving us too many laurels is that we rest on them and not in him.


Hardship prevents us in our sheep's pride from wandering off cliffs or into the wolf's maw. In Psalm 31, the difficulties David nearly despairs about are no anomaly for him. The tragedies and griefs he faced in his life outweighed the moments of triumphs, and many of his psalms reflect this fact. It was because God called him to greatness—beyond that of any other king—that his life brimmed over with troubles. Could God have used him if it did not? Such hardships are signs of God's favor as much as any honors. David may not have understood this principle, though it is at work in him. But Paul, writing to the Philippians from prison, does. The Son of David has shown him that suffering and dishonor can be an occasion for grief, yes, but also for grace—grace not for you alone but for those who might otherwise despair.

PRAYER for THE WEEK

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Pray Philippians 1:1-11 at least twice. Pray it for yourself, altering the words where necessary to suit whatever your current trial is. Pray it for five other people who are suffering. Then reach out to at least one of them.



*“For tho’ He slay us we
will trust in Him;/
We will flock home to
Him by divers ways:/
Yea, tho’ He slay us we
will vaunt his praise...”*

-Christina Rossetti

“What Are You Doing?”



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 31:9-16; Job 13:13-19; Philippians 1:21-30

TODAY’S SCRIPTURES MODEL contrasting responses to suffering. The psalmist clings to God despite his fear of enemies and of his own guilt. Job is defiant, protesting that he suffers undeservedly. Paul rejoices in his suffering, encouraging the Philippians to do the same. All three responses require faith.

We are used to seeing the response of Paul—that to live is Christ and to die is gain—as the only Christian response. Consequently, we say a lot of things we think are good theology without understanding them. It may be that we feel more like David or more like Job when we encounter shame, pain, or grief. Paul’s words are miraculous and probably the most mature—when honest. And we should meditate upon and repeat his words in prayer, even when it isn’t how we feel.

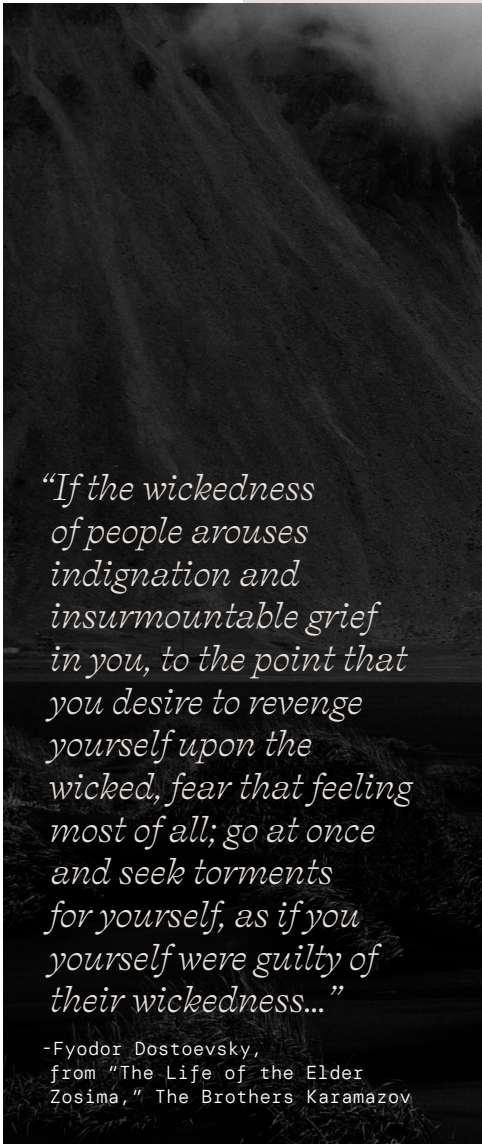
But we should do the same with the Psalms. They are the Church’s prayers, as well as Christ’s. When David suffered, God took his painful questions and, rather than being offended, prescribed them to all his people. Meanwhile, after Job finishes his long complaint against God, the Lord holds him up as a model of virtue and piety. He must make sacrifices to atone for the foolish words of his friends, who tried to defend God with sensible theologies that helped them feel in control. Paul’s words about death as gain are beautiful and revolutionary, but so are the psalmist’s. So are Job’s. Their words were in Christ’s heart and mouth when he suffered, grieved, and was shamed. Paul is building on this foundation, not revising it. We should be willing to ask God, “What are you doing?” Because, of course, merely to ask him is to believe he will somehow answer, somehow bring justice, “though he slay me.”

PRAYER for THE WEEK

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

In your prayers today, think of a situation that seems unjust and troubling. Then meditate on all three Scriptures, using them as models for talking to God about the situation. As you pray, ask the Lord for sincerity, urgency, and patience—his heart for the situation.



*“If the wickedness
of people arouses
indignation and
insurmountable grief
in you, to the point that
you desire to revenge
yourself upon the
wicked, fear that feeling
most of all; go at once
and seek torments
for yourself, as if you
yourself were guilty of
their wickedness...”*

-Fyodor Dostoevsky,
from “The Life of the Elder
Zosima,” The Brothers Karamazov

God and Your Enemies



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Psalm 31:9-16; Lamentations 3:55-66; Mark 10:32-34

WHAT SHOULD OUR RESPONSE BE, not only to evil, not only to suffering, but to spite? What if others have a vendetta against us simply because we have followed God or done what is virtuous?

Don't automatically assume that your uprightness has caused the hatred of "bad people." Beware the impulse to claim persecution for righteousness' sake if it garners you sympathy or credibility among your allies. Martyrs are venerated by their own side, and you should resist the desire for veneration.

At the same time, Christ and the apostles made it clear that, if you follow him, you will eventually be persecuted for it by someone—as often as not, someone who is on your "side," who shares your theology or ideology. In this case, the sense of betrayal, persecution, and injustice are all warranted. But here's the thing—they are not only permitted but used by a God who wants nothing more than to see you made perfect so that you can grow into the sanctified, glorified person he already sees when he looks at you. But this does not happen without the Cross. It does not happen without plots against your life, terror on every side, taunts, mocking, flogging, and killing. In this instance, your enemies are agents of God, sent without their knowledge to do you good and—more than that—to make you perfect.

If unrepentant, they will be repaid for the evil they intended—but not for the harm they did you, for they are God's tools. He is using them to fashion you into the image of Christ, if you let him. Their plans, like Satan's for Christ, have already failed, hurting only themselves and helping to mold you, as you suffer, into Christ's image. And after three days, you will rise.

PRAYER for THE WEEK

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Pray for those who are persecuting you. If you cannot think of anyone, pray for those persecuting those you sympathize with. Confess any hatred you harbor toward your enemies or enemies you've "adopted" on behalf of someone else.



Holy Week

My times are in your hand; rescue me from the
hand of my enemies and from my persecutors!
Ps 31:15

*“When I consider
the actual nature
of compunction
I am amazed at
how that which is
called mourning and
grief should contain
joy and gladness
interwoven within
it like honey in
the comb.”*

-St. John Climacus

Bright Sadness



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Liturgy of the Palms: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29;

Matthew 21:1-11; Liturgy of the Passion: Isaiah 50:4-9a;

Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 26:14-27:66

IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH, Palm Sunday is a remarkably complex and multifaceted day. Unlike the elated crowds who welcome Christ with unhindered joy, unaware of the true nature of his entry, we observe this day with the reality of Christ's passion in our minds and hearts. Yes, we cry our "Hosanna!" and welcome Christ as King, yet we are aware that this entry leads to him willingly giving up his own life for the life of the world. Mourning and grief are interwoven with joy and gladness.

As we reach the end of our season of repentance, we have hopefully grown in our awareness of the ever-present reality of evil in our world and in our hearts. There is always a need to repent, ways we have contributed to the darkness in our world and failed to live in the light, ways we have ignored the Lord's call to return to him and instead plunged further into the mire of our passions. However, even within the deepest sadness, hope is to be found. We are never without the promise of joy and the hope of resurrection.

Yes, the cries of Palm Sunday give way to the horror of Good Friday, yet the silence of Holy Saturday is overwhelmed by the victory and triumph of Easter Sunday.

The events of Holy Week reveal to us the true nature of the universe itself: Christ is King. Self-giving love heals the world. Death gives way to life. And so, let us boldly enter the drama of Holy Week, aware of our sins yet more aware of the power of God at work in and through Jesus Christ, the "God who saves."

PRAYER for THE WEEK

Almighty and everliving God, in your tender love for the human race you sent your Son our Savior Jesus Christ to take upon him our nature, and to suffer death upon the cross, giving us the example of his great humility: Mercifully grant that we may walk in the way of his suffering, and also share in his resurrection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Holy Week is an invitation to take church attendance seriously! Across all Christian traditions and customs, there are services throughout the week that invite us deeper into the events of Christ's passion. Do all you can to clear your calendar this week and prioritize participation in these services, joining with the family of God in retelling the greatest story ever told.



*“The beginning of
evils is distraction.”*

-Abba Poemen

Getting Our Priorities in Order



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

*Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 36:5-11; Hebrews 9:11-15;
John 12:1-11*

THE MONDAY OF HOLY WEEK can feel like the week's trajectory has crashed and burned. In many churches, there is typically a lot of hoopla around Palm Sunday: processing with palm branches, special hymns and music, and long, dramatic readings of the Passion narrative. Often, the special services and church-led devotional practices will not pick back up again until Maundy Thursday. Thus, for the next few days, we may feel spiritually adrift.

As it happens, there is a great deal to do. Now is the time for preparation, and there is important work to be done. Though Lent can seem long, Holy Week can still sneak up on us. On Monday, we may realize that we do not feel wholly prepared to bear witness to Christ's trial, scourging, crucifixion, and death. What does it mean for us to bear the responsibility for these acts, to recognize that these are the wages of our sin, as St. Paul writes, but that they are being paid in full by another? In our daily lives, we dig our own graves, but Christ lifts us out of that pit by being lifted high on a cross.

Yes, there is much to reckon with in this last week of Lent. One way to begin is by taking an uncompromising look at our priorities, particularly in this holiest of weeks. What are we valuing most by giving it most of our time and attention? Are we entering Holy Week distracted and overextended? Let us prepare for the rest of Holy Week by clearing our minds and calendars with all that is not strictly necessary. Jesus died for our whole selves, and these selves must be present to bear witness to that sacrifice.

PRAYER for MONDAY in HOLY WEEK

Almighty God, whose dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Read and listen to the account of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38-42. Consider how Jesus elevates Mary's presence over Martha's absence because she prioritized work. Read and listen to John 12:1-11. Consider Jesus' condemnation of Judas's financial priorities. How can these lessons apply to the priorities in your own life? What adjustments could you start to make this week to more fully orient your time and treasure to the worship of Jesus Christ?



*“God loves us more
than a father, mother,
friend, or any else
could love, and even
more than we are able
to love ourselves.”*

-St. John Chrysostom

Do It Again



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

*Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 71:1-14; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31;
John 12:20-36*

“GOD LOVES YOU AND IS HERE TO SAVE YOU” expresses Jesus’ whole earthly life. The problem is, God’s people are used to this message. They’ve heard it for hundreds of years. Even the best, the truest things, can become par for the course. *Oh, yes, I know this one.* We see the Sunday school answers coming way ahead.

Does the truth get stale? Or do we?

One of the paradoxes about the Word is that he is not only unimaginably ancient and unchanging but also eternally fresh, like a rushing mountain spring. G.K. Chesterton suggests we can see God’s tireless joy even in the cycles of nature. When God makes yet another daisy or another day, it’s as if he’s saying, “Do it again.” Maybe one of the greatest tragedies of the Fall that Jesus comes to deliver us from is not what we *do* but what we *lack*: sensitive hearts easy to delight, easy to break with sorrow and beauty, commitment and love—the fullness of joy.

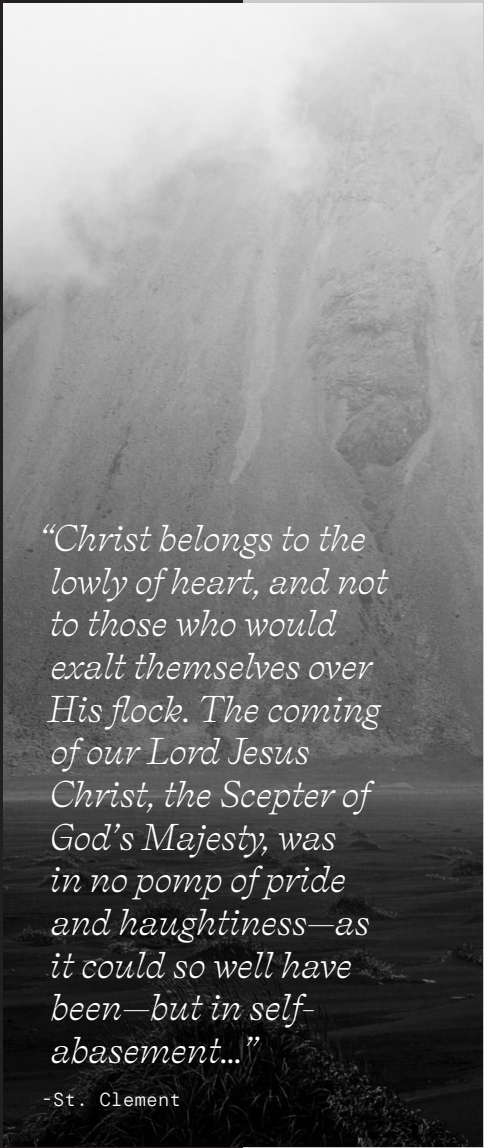
The Lord says it again. Except, this time, “God loves you and is here to save you” comes in his own Nazarene accent, with his eyes looking into each of our own. He knows we’ll reject this offer, as we rejected the prophets who came before, and will kill it and bury it in the ground. To become sensitized to divine love is too painful. But we don’t know that what we reject is a seed God will plant. God will “do it again,” patiently, turning our rejection into a new harvest of love.

PRAYER for TUESDAY in HOLY WEEK

O God, by the passion of your blessed Son you made an instrument of shameful death to be for us the means of life: Grant us so to glory in the cross of Christ, that we may gladly suffer shame and loss for the sake of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

This week, as you read Scripture, don't rush or feel pressure to read every passage. As soon as something sounds strange or fresh, or moves you, or puzzles you, stop there. Stay there for the rest of your reflection time. Ask the living Lord what he might be saying to you or inviting you to notice.



“Christ belongs to the lowly of heart, and not to those who would exalt themselves over His flock. The coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Scepter of God’s Majesty, was in no pomp of pride and haughtiness—as it could so well have been—but in self-abasement...”

-St. Clement

Despising the Shame



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 70; Hebrews 12:1-3; John 13:21-32

IN TWO DAYS, we usually meditate on the physical pain of Jesus' crucifixion—the flogging, the crown of thorns, the slow asphyxiating agony of his death. But this pain is mingled inextricably with shame, betrayal, and the loss of a group of friends. These friends forsake each other and Christ, not because they fear death (most are willing to take part in a glorious-if-doomed Maccabean-style uprising) but because they fear dying like criminals. They fear being tarred with the same brush as their disgraced leader, rejected by Jews and Gentiles. Crucifixion is ignominy.

Humans are social beings, and Christ was fully human. His tradition, meanwhile, recognized that shame and backstabbing hurt more than physical torture. Isaiah's speaker, the writer of Hebrews, and the psalmist are far more preoccupied with disgrace and betrayal than pain—the shame of others saying “Aha! Aha!”, beard-plucking, spitting, “hostility from sinners”—all of which come to a head in Jesus' betrayal, rejection, and crucifixion.

Yet Christ “despised the shame” of the cross. What does that mean? He was certainly sensitive to that shame. The psalm he calls out from the cross (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”) interprets disgrace and betrayal as signs that even God has betrayed the sufferer. Yet after assenting to Judas' betrayal, on the way to having his body and reputation twisted beyond repair, Jesus says, “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him.” Christ undergoes all this as the “Son of Man,” identifying with us in our shame and betrayal, to transform our absolute ignominy, uncleanness, and loneliness into occasions for glory. In despising the shame of the cross, Christ willingly experiences it to the uttermost, and God converts it to honor and praise.

PRAYER for WEDNESDAY in HOLY WEEK

Lord God, whose blessed Son our Savior gave his body to be whipped and his face to be spit upon: Give us grace to accept joyfully the sufferings of the present time, confident of the glory that shall be revealed; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Reach out to the despised, rejected, the shamed in prayer and action. Focus on their social needs more than their physical needs (but meet these as well if you can). Which people in your family, social circles, or commute need most (or deserve least) to be treated as fellow humans or fellow Christians?

*“I didn’t go to religion
to make me happy.
I always knew a bottle
of Port would do
that. If you want a
religion to make you
feel really comfortable,
I certainly don’t
recommend
Christianity.”*

-C.S. Lewis

Uncomfortable Christianity



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19;

1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

WE LEARN A GREAT DEAL about Christian practice from St. Peter. In Scripture, he is not portrayed as a perfect human being but as someone who sometimes gets it wrong. Peter loves the Lord and is a devoted follower but struggles with wanting that devotion to be demonstrated on his terms. “Look how committed I am!” his actions seem to say, but often Jesus shakes his head and admonishes Peter. Consider the account of Jesus washing his disciples’ feet. At first, Peter says no, certain he is correct in refusing—a master should not wash the feet of his servants. His own overconfidence makes Peter miss Jesus’ lesson in humility. After Jesus rebukes him, Peter then overcompensates. If Jesus is to wash his feet, then Peter wants his hands and head washed as well. Again, in his hasty zeal, Peter has missed the point.

Later, Peter draws a sword to prevent Jesus from being arrested. This is not the kind of courage Jesus is seeking from Peter. Rather, he is looking for the kind of courage Peter later fails to exhibit when he denies knowing Jesus three times. In these examples, Peter fails to really listen to Jesus, and so his acts of devotion crash and burn.

It takes time for Peter to fully understand his calling. It can take us time as well. The Lord does not call us to live on our own terms but on his. It can be uncomfortable to relinquish our ideas about who we are and how we want to prove our Christian devotion. If we do not learn to do so, however, we are not truly followers of Jesus Christ but merely followers of our own selfish desires.

PRAYER for MAUNDY THURSDAY

Almighty Father, whose dear Son, on the night before he suffered, instituted the Sacrament of his Body and Blood: Mercifully grant that we may receive it thankfully in remembrance of Jesus Christ our Lord, who in these holy mysteries gives us a pledge of eternal life; and who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Look over your resume. Consider the elements on it that you consider important to defining who you are. How much of that emphasis is driven by your desire to be seen as the best, and how much by desiring the glory of God on his terms?



*“Even on the cross
he did not hide
himself from sight;
rather, he made all
creation witness to the
presence of its Maker.”*

-St. Athanasius

This Is the King



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

*Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9;
John 18:1-19:42*

TODAY CHRIST IS “EXALTED” AND “LIFTED UP” (Isa 52:15). A routine yet brutal execution, witnessed by a handful of people, is somehow a display for the world.

But of what?

The pattern of God’s self-giving love has been public knowledge since before the prophets, going back to Abraham, Noah, the Garden of Eden—as far back as God’s words and deeds toward his creation stretch. The covenants. The sacrifices. The Servant described in Isaiah. The sign over Jesus’ cross makes it plain, in several languages:

This is the King of the Jews. The one who shows the world that God is in charge.

But no one expected this. A cross with God on it? No one would have imagined it.

And yet, all these prophecies and signs are fulfilled. It is finished. All of history bends toward Jesus as he suffers and dies. The fountain from which creation sprang is now revealed, love utterly poured out. Jesus is showing us how God gives, how God is, the essence of God’s authority. In the moment, we don’t see it. But eventually, in retrospect, we do: Jesus Christ is the Lord of all, the center of reality.

No matter how long we have known the Lord, his ways are still deeper, more mysterious, more beautiful. They change our definitions of wisdom and power, what it means to love, to be his Beloved.

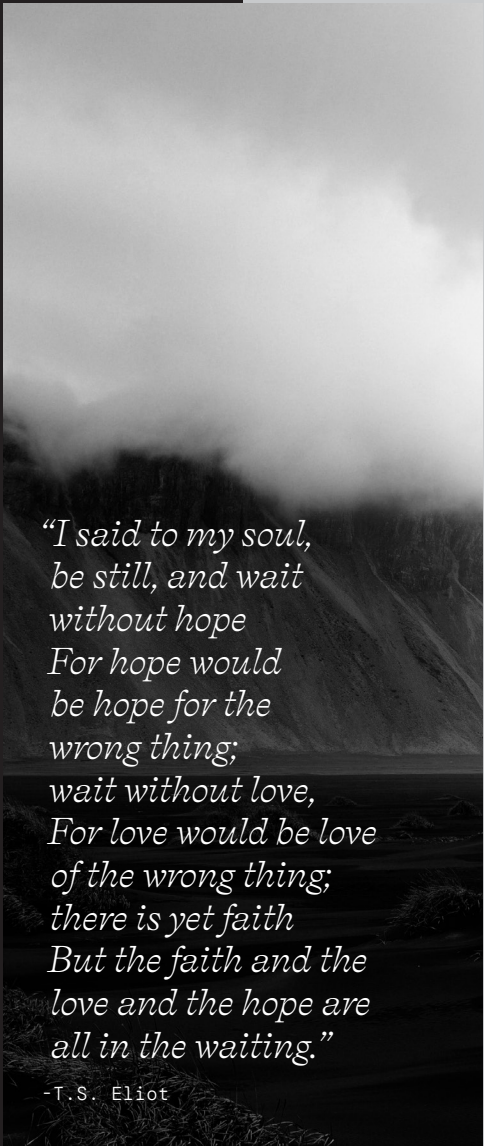
There is so much that can be said about where the Gospel takes us today and where it leaves us. But if those words don’t lead us to awed silence, then perhaps they are not the right words.

PRAYER for GOOD FRIDAY

Almighty God, we pray you graciously to behold this your family, for whom our Lord Jesus Christ was willing to be betrayed, and given into the hands of sinners, and to suffer death upon the cross; who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Consider deepening your fast today—whatever might make extra room in your day for silence and quiet of heart. Spend as much time as you're able in silent reflection or prayer. Breathe deeply. Remember Christ on the cross. Remind yourself that this is your Lord.



*“I said to my soul,
be still, and wait
without hope
For hope would
be hope for the
wrong thing;
wait without love,
For love would be love
of the wrong thing;
there is yet faith
But the faith and the
love and the hope are
all in the waiting.”*

-T.S. Eliot

Trampling Down Death



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

Lamentations 3:1-9, 19-24; Psalm 31:1-4, 15-16;

1 Peter 4:1-8; John 19:38-42

HOLY SATURDAY has always been a strange day for me. Lent is technically over, but Easter is not yet here. The death of Christ has been remembered but not his resurrection. If God or the early church had consulted someone before arranging the calendar, they might have been told, “Better to strike while the iron is hot. Just when everyone’s emotions at Jesus’ death are at their highest pitch—the next day is the time to celebrate the Resurrection.”

Instead, we have this in-between space, the Sabbath when Jesus’ body rested, a hiatus between mourning and celebration. What should we do with it?

Early Christians associated this day with Christ’s descent to Sheol, or Hades, where, in Peter’s words, he “preached even to those who are dead,” freeing righteous souls by conquering death from the inside: “trampling down death by death.” The Bible doesn’t spell this out, but whatever Christ’s soul was doing while he lay entombed, it remained separate from his body. This is the time when Christ was dead. And, unless he died (and stayed dead for a space of time), Christ could not overturn death itself. In many ways, then, part of our redemption occurs today, for most of us will also spend time separate from our bodies.

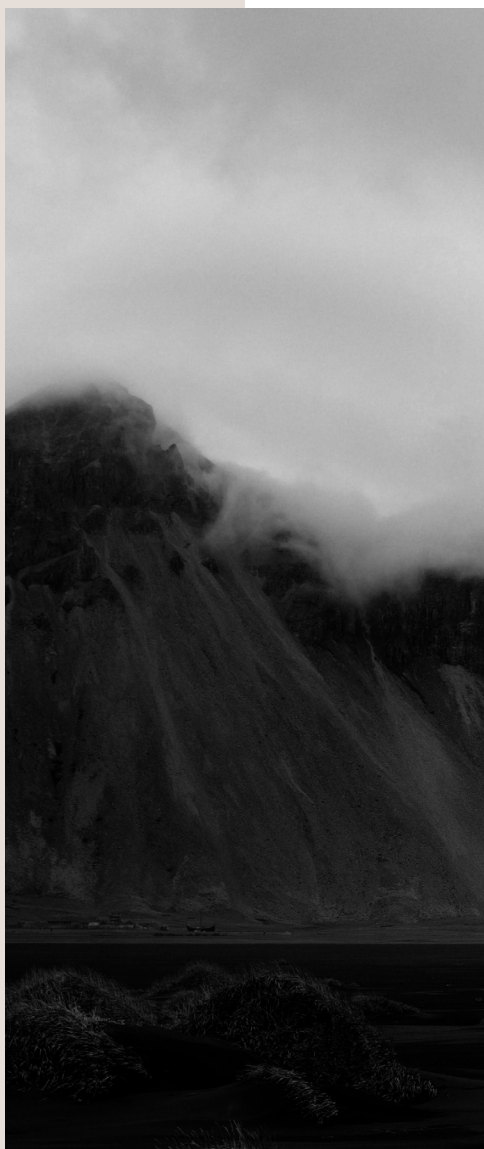
But Holy Saturday also feels awkward because it symbolizes the uncertain place most of us occupy. Like Jesus’ cowering or scattered followers (or the writer of Lamentations), we do not understand what God is invisibly doing when he dashes our hopes. We’re confused about the shattered images of God in our lives, good things that have been broken and buried. Scriptures bear witness that even in confusion, we can trust that he has defeated death, even if we do not notice it yet. As we trust, we must wait.

PRAYER for HOLY SATURDAY

O God, Creator of heaven and earth:
Grant that, as the crucified body of
your dear Son was laid in the tomb
and rested on this holy Sabbath,
so we may await with him the
coming of the third day, and rise
with him to newness of life; who
now lives and reigns with you and
the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever
and ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Find an icon of the Resurrection or the
Harrowing of Hell and draw or trace it,
meditating on it as you do so.






Easter

Glad songs of salvation are in the tents of the righteous: "The right hand of the Lord does valiantly, the right hand of the Lord exalts, the right hand of the Lord does valiantly!"

Ps 118:15-16



*“All who truly believe
in Christ and cleave
to Him with all their
soul, are changed into
his image by the power
of his Resurrection.”*

-St. Theophan the Recluse

I Have Seen the Lord!



OPEN DWELL AND LISTEN TO

*Jeremiah 31:1-6; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24;
Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-18*

“I HAVE SEEN THE LORD!” In just five words, Mary Magdalene points us not only to the aim and destination of this Lenten season but also to the entire purpose of human existence. To live is to see the Lord, encountering the living and resurrected Christ in all his mystery and wonder. Any act of devotion, practice of prayer, or habit of faith is meant to lead you to a single destination: Jesus Christ.

If you’ve made it to the end of this book and the season of Lent, it has undoubtedly been filled with life’s ups and downs—moments of great joy and wonder interwoven with unexpected pain and acute loss. Life is never an easily-distinguished season of joy or sorrow. Instead, we live in the tension of multiple emotions and realities. Thus, our “return” to the Lord is never simple or straightforward. We must contend daily with the sickness within while simultaneously longing for the healing that comes from above.

Today, on Resurrection Sunday, we return to the empty tomb, looking back at a singular moment that changed the very fabric of creation itself. Yet we also look ahead to the righting of every wrong, the return of our Lord in glory to heal the world. And in the space between glory and glory, the everyday realities of our lives, we return daily, learning to see Jesus today as more beautiful and worthy of unceasing devotion than he was the day before.

And so, having completed our journey of returning to our Lord, let us now cleave to him with all our might, seeking “the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” (Col 3:1).

PRAYER for EASTER DAY

O God, who for our redemption gave your only-begotten Son to the death of the cross, and by his glorious resurrection delivered us from the power of our enemy: Grant us so to die daily to sin, that we may evermore live with him in the joy of his resurrection; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Though our Lenten journey is now complete, our life with Christ is just beginning! Reflect on the ways the Lord has met you in this journey, showing you great mercy, and continue to live daily in his love, returning to him with a heart of repentance, gratitude, and unceasing devotion.

End Notes

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