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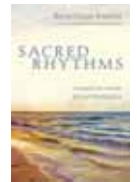
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Stations of the Cross Prayer Guide

LENT

A SEASON OF RETURNING

Reflections for Walking Through the Lenten Season Together

YEAR B, REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY



The Transforming Center exists to strengthen the souls of pastors and Christian leaders, equipping them to guide their churches and organizations in becoming transforming communities that discern and do the will of God.

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1. Richard Rohr, *Wondrous Encounters: Scripture for Lent* (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2011), pp. 23, 24.
2. Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1981), p. 30.
3. As quoted in *Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter* (Mary Knoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), pp. 4, 5.
4. The fourth step of A.A.'s Twelve-step program.
5. Fr. Thomas Keating, *The Human Condition* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), p. 38.

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LENT21

A word about the practice of following the lectionary

The practice of following a common lectionary—a three-year reading schedule that follows the Christian calendar—is an age-old practice that allows the Word of God to guide and shape us throughout the seasons of the church year in the context of the larger community of faith.

Through the discipline of using a shared schedule of Scripture readings, we engage the full range of Scripture and touch all the major themes and passages at least once every three years. The lectionary readings for each week include an Old Testament reading, a Psalm, an Epistle, and a Gospel that share a common theme. Following the lectionary helps us pray and engage Scripture together with particular reverence for the Gospel readings which keep us connected with the life of Christ.

We suggest “reading into” the upcoming Sunday so that those who attend churches that follow the lectionary will then hear the Scriptures they have already been reflecting on throughout the week. Then on Monday, start reading the lectionary selections for the upcoming Sunday. Read not only for information but also for transformation, allowing the Holy Spirit to speak to your heart about God’s invitations to you this season.

Following the lectionary helps us practice surrender—giving ourselves over to Scriptures that have been chosen for us rather than choosing Scripture according to what we think we need or with some other agenda in mind. We surrender to God’s control, allowing Him to bring Scripture to bear on our lives in unexpected ways as He knows we need them. Since the lectionary readings follow the rhythms of the Christian year, we are also surrendering to and being shaped by the life-transforming lessons contained in each season—Advent, the Christmas season, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Eastertide, Ordinary Time—and many other important days in the life of the Church.



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ASH WEDNESDAY
CROSSING THE THRESHOLD INTO
LENT

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the Church's observance of the Lenten season—six weeks that are set apart for the purpose of drawing closer to God and seeking him with greater intensity. Unfortunately, the Lenten season often gets reduced to the question, "What are you giving up for Lent?" This is a fine question, but it can only take us so far. The real question of the Lenten season is, "How will I repent and return to God with all my heart?"

This begs an even deeper question: "Where in my life have I gotten away from God, and what are the disciplines that will enable me to find my way back?"

Honest to God

Ash Wednesday initiates this season in which we are called to be as honest as we are able about the ways we have "left" God and slipped into spiritual mediocrity. "You desire truth in the inward being," Psalm 51 points out, "Therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart."

As God gives us wisdom and insight about our true condition, we can choose spiritual practices that are uniquely suited to help us return to God in the places where we have strayed or to renew our passion where our hearts have grown cold. The Scripture readings for Ash Wednesday (which are the same for Cycles A, B, and C) provide a good introduction to some of the concrete disciplines that have the potential to loosen the grip of

sin and distraction in our lives—prayer and fasting, hiddenness, self-examination and repentance, forgiving others as we have been forgiven, and storing up treasure in heaven by giving generously to others.

Search Me, O God

Left to ourselves, we probably would not choose to devote a whole season to such rigorous and demanding disciplines, but God knows we need it. As we receive the symbolic gesture of the imposition of ashes on our foreheads, we acknowledge our human finiteness and mortality. No matter who we think we are, receiving the ashes reminds us that, "You are dust and to dust you will return" (Genesis 3:19). This is not meant to be morbid; it is just meant to limit our grandiosity and help us to stay in touch with the real human condition we all share.

The ashes marking our foreheads carry the same meaning contained in the Old Testament practice of covering oneself with ashes. They are a graphic reminder of our sinfulness, an outward sign of inward repentance and mourning as we become aware of our sin. This, too, is good for us because we live in so much denial. With as much openness as we can muster, we invite God to search us and know us and (eventually) lead us into resurrection life.

Longing for God

The purpose for engaging in Lenten disciplines is that we would become more finely

tion with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate.² Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" He answered him, "You say so."³ Then the chief priests accused him of many things.⁴ Pilate asked him again, "Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you."⁵ But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.

⁶ Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked.⁷ Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection.⁸ So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom.⁹ Then he answered them, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?"¹⁰ For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over.¹¹ But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead.¹² Pilate spoke to them again, "Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?"¹³ They shouted back, "Crucify him!"¹⁴ Pilate asked them, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him!"¹⁵ So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

¹⁶ Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort.¹⁷ And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him.¹⁸ And they began salut-

ing him, "Hail, King of the Jews!"¹⁹ They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him.²⁰ After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

²¹ They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus.²² Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull).²³ And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it.²⁴ And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.

²⁵ It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him.²⁶ The inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews."²⁷ And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left.²⁸ Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!"²⁹ In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself."³⁰ Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

³¹ When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.³² At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why

have you forsaken me?"³³ When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah."³⁴ And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down."³⁵ Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last.³⁶ And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.³⁷ Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

³⁸ There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome.³⁹ These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

⁴⁰ When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath,⁴¹ Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.⁴² Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time.⁴³ When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph.⁴⁴ Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb.⁴⁵ Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid.

²⁸ But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.”²⁹ Peter said to him, “Even though all become deserters, I will not.”³⁰ Jesus said to him, “Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.”³¹ But he said vehemently, “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And all of them said the same.

³² They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.”³³ He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated.³⁴ And said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.”³⁵ And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him.³⁶ He said, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.”³⁷ He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour?³⁸ Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”³⁹ And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words.⁴⁰ And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him.⁴¹ He came a third time and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.⁴² Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.”

⁴³ Immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him

there was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders.⁴⁴ Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard.”⁴⁵ So when he came, he went up to him at once and said, “Rabbi!” and kissed him.⁴⁶ Then they laid hands on him and arrested him.⁴⁷ But one of those who stood near drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear.⁴⁸ Then Jesus said to them, “Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit?⁴⁹ Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled.”⁵⁰ All of them deserted him and fled.

⁵¹ A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him,⁵² but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.

⁵³ They took Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes were assembled.⁵⁴ Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he was sitting with the guards, warming himself at the fire.⁵⁵ Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none.⁵⁶ For many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree.⁵⁷ Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying,⁵⁸ “We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.’”⁵⁹ But even on this point their testimony did not agree.⁶⁰ Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, “Have

you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?”⁶¹ But he was silent and did not answer. Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?”⁶² Jesus said, “I am; and ‘you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power,’ and ‘coming with the clouds of heaven.’”

⁶³ Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “Why do we still need witnesses?⁶⁴ You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?” All of them condemned him as deserving death.⁶⁵ Some began to spit on him, to blindfold him, and to strike him, saying to him, “Prophecy!” The guards also took him over and beat him.

⁶⁶ While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came by.⁶⁷ When she saw Peter warming himself, she stared at him and said, “You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth.”⁶⁸ But he denied it, saying, “I do not know or understand what you are talking about.” And he went out into the forecourt. Then the cock crowed.⁶⁹ And the servant-girl, on seeing him, began again to say to the bystanders, “This man is one of them.”⁷⁰ But again he denied it. Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, “Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean.”⁷¹ But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, “I do not know this man you are talking about.”⁷² At that moment the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, “Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.” And he broke down and wept.

¹⁵¹ As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consulta-

tioned to our longing for God so we can seek him with all our hearts. Disciplines of fasting and other kinds of abstinence help us face the hold that our sin patterns have on us so we can somehow let go of our attachment to anything that is not God. As we wrestle with a more realistic awareness of the grip our attachments have on us, we enter into the godly grief that leads to repentance, and then forgiveness and freedom.

God's Steadfast Love

Serious as the Lenten season is, it is also a time of great hope as we experience God's steadfast love for us, even in the midst of whatever sin we are acknowledging. In the shadow of Christ's cross and impending resurrection we are assured that there is forgiveness and cleansing for all who turn to him. In him there is the power to pass from death unto life in the places where we ourselves are in need of resurrection.

LECTIONARY READINGS for Ash Wednesday:

JOEL 2:1-2, 12-17

¹ Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—² a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come.

¹² Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; ¹³ rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. ¹⁴ Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD, your God?

¹⁵ Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; ¹⁶ gather the people. Sanctify the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy.

¹⁷ Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep. Let them say, “Spare your people, O LORD, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’”

PSALM 51:1-17

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

³ For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

⁴ Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.

⁵ Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

⁶ You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

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

⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

⁹ Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

(continued)

"And yet even now," says the Lord, "return to me with all your heart . . ." Joel 2:12

¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

¹⁴ Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

¹⁶ For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.

¹⁷ The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:20B-6:10

^{520b} We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

⁶¹ As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.

² For he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you." See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!

³ We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault

may be found with our ministry, ⁴ but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵ beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶ by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, ⁷ truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸ in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹ as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

MATTHEW 6:1-6, 16-21

¹ "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

² "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵ "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

¹⁶ "And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

¹⁹ "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰ but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11

⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, and being found in human form, ⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

MARK 14:1-15:47

¹⁴¹ It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; ² for they said, "Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people."

³ While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. ⁴ But some were there who said to one another in anger, "Why was the ointment

wasted in this way? ⁵ For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor." And they scolded her. ⁶ But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. ⁷ For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. ⁸ She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. ⁹ Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

¹⁰ Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. ¹¹ When they heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised to give him money. So he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

¹² On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, his disciples said to him, "Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?" ¹³ So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, ¹⁴ and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?'" ¹⁵ He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make

preparations for us there."¹⁶ So the disciples set out and went to the city, and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal.

¹⁷ When it was evening, he came with the twelve.¹⁸ And when they had taken their places and were eating, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me."¹⁹ They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, "Surely, not I?"²⁰ He said to them, "It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the bowl with me. ²¹ For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born."

²² While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body."²³ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. ²⁴ He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. ²⁵ Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."

²⁶ When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. ²⁷ And Jesus said to them, "You will all become deserters; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.'

"Could you not stay awake with me one hour?" Matthew 26:40

LECTIONARY READINGS

for the sixth Sunday in Lent:

Liturgy of the Palms

PSALM 118:1-2, 19-29

¹ O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever! ² Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever."

¹⁹ Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.

²⁰ This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it.

²¹ I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.

²² The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

²³ This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

²⁴ This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

²⁵ Save us, we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!

²⁶ Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD. We bless you from the house of the LORD.

²⁷ The LORD is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.

²⁸ You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you.

²⁹ O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

MARK 11:1-11

¹ When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ² and said to them, "Go

into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. ³ If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'"

⁴ They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵ some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" ⁶ They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. ⁷ Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹ Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

¹¹ Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

Liturgy of the Passion

ISAIAH 50:4-9A

⁴ The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught.

⁵ The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward.

⁶ I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.

⁷ The Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame;

⁸ he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me.

^{9a} It is the Lord GOD who helps me; who will declare me guilty?

PSALM 31:9-16

⁹ Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also.

¹⁰ For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away.

¹¹ I am the scorn of all my adversaries, a horror to my neighbors, an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me.

¹² I have passed out of mind like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel.

¹³ For I hear the whispering of many—terror all around!—as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life.

¹⁴ But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, "You are my God."

¹⁵ My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.

¹⁶ Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love.

Oh God, let something essential happen to me, something more than interesting or entertaining or thoughtful.

Oh God, let something essential happen to me, something awesome, something real. Speak to my condition, Lord, and change me somewhere inside where it matters.

Let something happen which is my real self, Oh God.

Ted Loder, Guerrillas of Grace

FOR REFLECTION: Where are the places in your own life where you feel distant from God? What distracts you from cultivating your relationship with God more intentionally? Begin your Lenten journey by saying something honest to God and reflecting on what you might "give up" or rearrange in order to create more space and passion for this most important relationship.

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WEEK ONE

SOLITUDE:

FASHIONING OUR OWN WILDERNESS

The season of Lent derives its structure and its themes from Christ's forty days in the wilderness, where he fasted and prayed and faced Satan's temptations. This was not punishment; in fact, he had just experienced God's public affirmation of his true identity: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Indeed, he was driven into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit as part of his preparation for the ministry that was ahead of him. There he faced the deepest temptations of the human experience—the temptation to trust in that which is not God for our security and survival, affirmation and approval, power and control.

Richard Rohr observes, "These three temptations are the primal and universal temptations that all humans must face before they dare to take on any kind of power—as Jesus was about to do. They are all temptations to the misuse of power for purposes that are less than God's purpose. Jesus passes all three tests, and thus 'the devil left him' because he could not be used for lesser purposes. If you face such demons in yourself, God can use you mightily. Otherwise, you will, for sure be used."¹

During Lent we experience the evil one's proficiency at crafting very subtle and

dangerous appeals to our instinctual patterns to save ourselves through our own human strategies rather than trusting God for what we need. A true Lenten journey demands that we take a clear-eyed look at our lives and wonder, "Where am I tempted to 'turn these stones into bread'—using whatever gifts and powers God has given me to secure my own survival? Where am I putting God to the test—disregarding human limitations in order to prove something to others—and expecting him to come to my rescue time and time again? When, where and how am I tempted to worship the outward trappings of success rather than seeking the inner authority that comes from worshipping God and serving Him only?"

Oftentimes we think of the wilderness as a harsh and punishing place; however, it can also be a place where we find clarity, discover inner strength, and experience the salvation that comes from God alone. It can be a place where we experience God's steadfast love. As Henri Nouwen says, "We have to fashion our own desert where we can withdraw every day, shake off our compulsions and dwell in the gentle healing presence of the Lord. Without such a desert we will lose our own soul while preaching the gospel to others."²

WEEK SIX

HOLY WEEK:

AN INVITATION TO WALK WITH CHRIST

Holy Week is a bizarre juxtaposition of two kinds of passion. In the early part of the week we witness the passion of a hyped-up crowd screaming their affirmation that Jesus is king as he rides humbly into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey. Later in the week we witness Jesus' own passion (suffering) as he walks resolutely into the final stages of God's plan for our redemption.

Many churches that worship liturgically and follow the lectionary live both passions on the sixth Sunday of Lent—they stage a processional with palm branches early in the service (Liturgy of the Palms) and then read the Liturgy of the Passion in its entirety later on in the service.

In the church where I worship, the whole congregation participates in the Liturgy of the Passion by reading the parts spoken by the fickle crowd. It is very sobering to move from crying out in loud voices, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!", to shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" It is a true beginning to the intense and conflicting emotions of this week in which we seek ways to walk with Christ and participate in his passion.

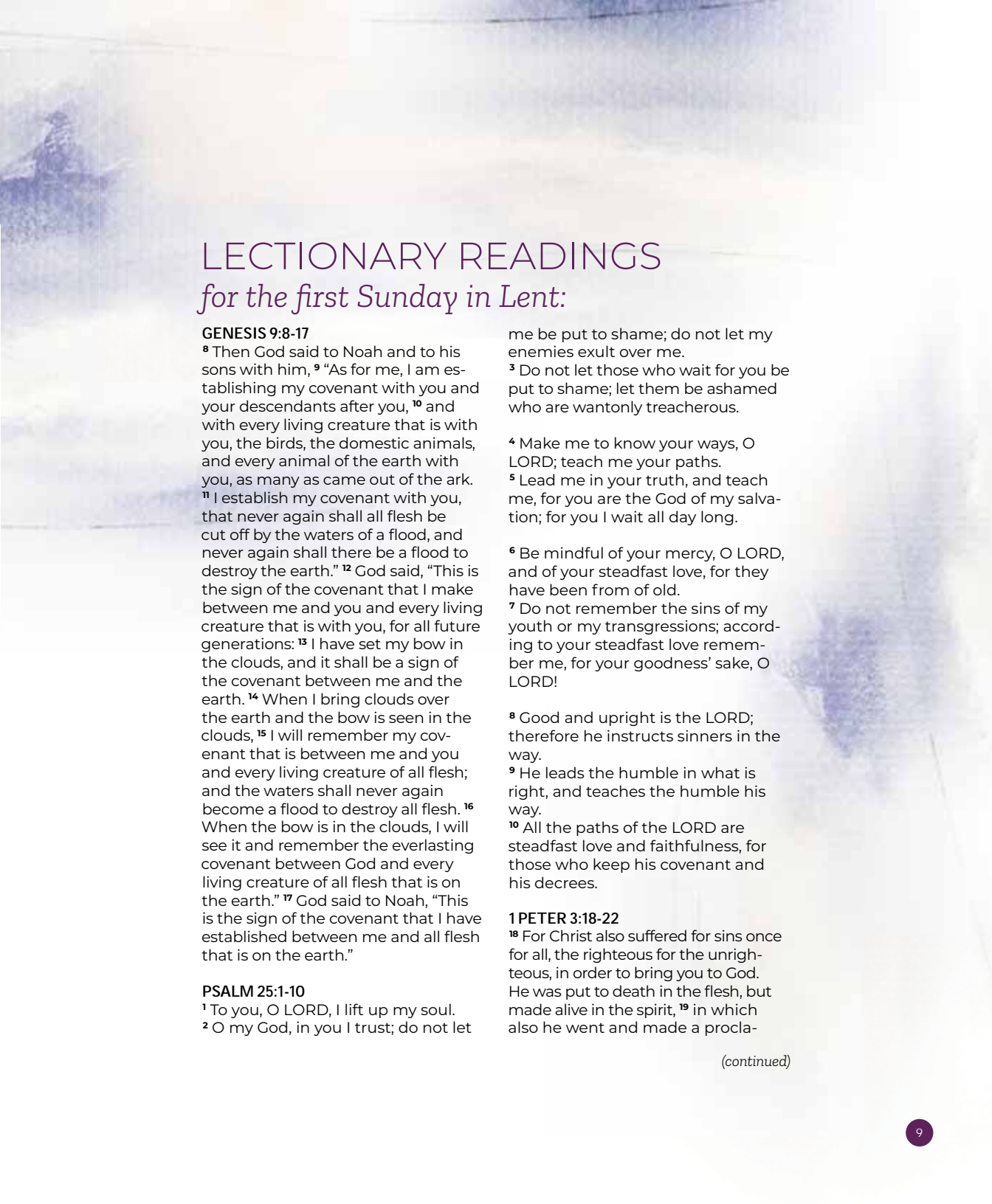
Holy Week is the week in which we as Christians give ourselves most fully and completely to worship. Every year at this time we have the opportunity to choose as best as we can to deepen our friendship with Christ

by staying with him and learning from him as we journey from the triumph of Palm Sunday through the darkness and death of the crucifixion to the victory of the Resurrection. As we seek ways to share the events of this week with Jesus, we respond to his deep and consistent desire to be with those he loves, those whom he has chosen.

Make no mistake—the invitation to walk with Christ through the events of Holy Week is a challenging one. It is an invitation to learn how to be like Christ—not just during the triumphs of Palm Sunday when everything is as we hoped it would be—but also how to be like Christ in the midst of betrayal, violence, pain, struggle, and death. If we're honest, we might admit that we would prefer to skip right to the Resurrection! As Barbara Brown Taylor once commented, "I want to stop about a day short of following Jesus all the way."

As challenging as it is, walking with Christ during Holy Week is part of our discipleship. It is an act of love and friendship with Christ, a gift of staying present with him during the hardest and most unnerving part of his journey. We do this because he has asked us to remain near him, awake and alert. It is the gift of ourselves, which is the truest gift we have to give.

So let us pray together as we enter this Holy Week . . .



LECTIONARY READINGS

for the first Sunday in Lent:

GENESIS 9:8-17

⁸ Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹ "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰ and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. ¹¹ I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." ¹² God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³ I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶ When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." ¹⁷ God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

PSALM 25:1-10

¹ To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.
² O my God, in you I trust; do not let

me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me.

³ Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

⁴ Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths.

⁵ Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.

⁶ Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.

⁷ Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O LORD!

⁸ Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

⁹ He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.

¹⁰ All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

1 PETER 3:18-22

¹⁸ For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹ in which also he went and made a procla-

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"Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness where for forty days he was tempted by the devil." Luke 4:1, 2

mation to the spirits in prison ²⁰ who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. ²¹ And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

MARK 1:9-15

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And just as

he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

¹² And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵ and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

FOR REFLECTION: *What needs to die in me in order for the will of God to come forth in my life? What new thing is God doing in my life that requires some old things to pass away? Where do I sense God wanting to teach me obedience through the things I am suffering?*

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Yes, Lord, I have to die—with you, through you, and in you—and thus become ready to recognize you when you appear to me in your resurrection. There is so much in me that needs to die: false attachments, greed and anger, impatience and stinginess. O Lord, I am self-centered, concerned about myself, my career, my future, my name and fame. Often I even feel that I use you to my own advantage.

Yes, Lord, I know it is true. I know that often I have spoken about you, written about you, and acted in your name for my own glory and success. Your name has not led me to persecution, oppression, or rejection. Your name has brought me rewards! I see clearly how little I have died with you, really gone your way and been faithful to it. O Lord, make this Lenten season different from the other ones.

*Let me find you again.
Amen.*

**Henri Nouwen,
"Spirituality of Waiting"**

"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." John 12:24

with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸ Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; ⁹ and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, ¹⁰ having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

JOHN 12:20-33

²⁰ Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." ²² Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³ Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but

if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵ Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

²⁷ "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say--' Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." ²⁹ The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." ³⁰ Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹ Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." ³³ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

*The desert waits,
ready for those who come,
who come obedient to the Spirit's leading;
or who are driven,
because they will not come any other way.*

*The desert waits,
ready to let us know who we are—
the place of self-discovery.*

*And while we fear, and rightly,
the loneliness and emptiness
and harshness,
we forget the angels,
whom we cannot see for our blindness,
but who come when God decides
that we need their help;
when we are ready
for what they can give us.*

Ruth Burgess, *Bread of Tomorrow*

FOR REFLECTION: In what ways am I trusting something or someone other than God for security and survival, affirmation and approval, power and control? During this Lenten season, how will I fashion my own desert—create more space for solitude and stillness—for the purpose of waiting on God and experiencing his steadfast love as my true salvation?

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WEEK TWO

SELF-DENIAL:

SETTING OUR MINDS ON THINGS ABOVE

Most years I don't feel quite ready for Lent with all its demands and disciplines—especially the call to self-denial and fasting. I don't want to just "give up chocolate for Lent" because God is the curmudgeon in the sky who wants to keep it from me. And I don't want anyone (including myself) to see the spiritual life as a joyless existence that eschews God's good gifts.

And yet, I also don't want to miss anything either! I don't want to miss the possibility of having my life stripped down to its barest essence through fasting from those things that keep me out of touch with my longing and need for God. I don't want to sidestep this "spring cleaning of the soul" intended to clear out the junk and garbage in my life so there is more space for God. I don't want to miss the chance to abstain from soul-numbing distractions so I can be more attuned to God's voice ringing as clear as a bell in the depths of my uncluttered soul.

As we get in touch with our deeper spiritual desires for this season, sometimes we know immediately what our disciplines of abstinence should be. We are struck with some sense of what we need to give up in order to more fully receive the gifts of God's kingdom. If we are struggling with issues of pride and ego-drivenness, we can abstain from activities that feed the ego. We can practice hiddenness—praying, giving and serving without drawing attention to ourselves. If we struggle with sins of speech, carelessness

with our words, or a tendency toward constant chatter, we might consider additional time in daily silence, a longer silent retreat, or just choosing to talk less during this season. If we are aware of exhaustion due to being overextended, we could pare down our activities during this time in order to be more rested and alert in God's presence.

If we find ourselves relying too much on caffeine or other stimulants, why not give up caffeine and ask God to reveal the real sources of our tiredness so we can deal with our exhaustion at the source? If we tend toward the sin of gluttony and our eating patterns are out of control, we might consider some rhythms of fasting from food.

If we are addicted to our work and always relying on our own human effort, we could engage in rhythms of fixed hour prayer that interrupt us and help us turn to God in the midst of our work. If we are addicted to technology, we might consider disconnecting from cell phones, computers and tablets for certain portions of the day or week.

Whatever we choose, disciplines of fasting and other kinds of abstinence clear the decks for spiritual action. As we clear out the clutter of compulsive behaviors and emerge from the fog of inner distractions, we become more finely attuned to the presence of God and all the ways in which that Presence satisfies us utterly.

LECTIONARY READINGS *for the fifth Sunday in Lent:*

JEREMIAH 31:31-34

³¹ The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt--a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

PSALM 51:1-12

¹ Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

³ For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

⁴ Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you

pass judgment.

⁵ Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

⁶ You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

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

⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

⁹ Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

HEBREWS 5:5-10

⁵ So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you";

⁶ as he says also in another place, "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek."

⁷ In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications,

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WEEK FIVE

SUFFERING:

DYING THAT WE MIGHT LIVE

I'll never forget walking to lunch with several young leaders after a teaching I had done on the season of the spiritual life in which God is dismantling the false self in order for the true self to emerge more fully. We had talked about the fact that this season feels like death, and in fact it is—the death of that which is false in order for something truer to come to life.

Clearly the teaching had unnerved them, for as we walked together one of them asked, "Does everyone have to go through this painful place in the spiritual life?" I stopped and thought for a moment and finally said the only thing I could think to say: "Well, even Jesus had to die in order for the will of God to come forth in his life."

This week's lesson brings us face to face with one of the great paradoxes of our faith—that in order to really live, we must die. That before we can reign with Christ we must first share in his sufferings. That when God begins to do a new thing, old things must pass away. That in order to experience resurrection we, too, must die.

That's the bad news. The good news is that the only thing we stand to lose is the false

self, which is not real anyway. The only thing passing away is that crusty old thing that is no longer useful.

Fr. Thomas Keating writes, "The spiritual journey is not a career or a success story. It is a series of small humiliations of the false self that become more and more profound. These make room inside us for the Holy Spirit to come and heal. What prevents us from being available to God is gradually evacuated as we keep getting closer and closer to our Center"⁵—the place where God dwells within us as redeemed people. Oftentimes it is suffering that initiates these necessary "evacuations"; even Jesus learned obedience through the things he suffered. (Hebrews 5:8)

Lent, then, is a time to practice dying in small ways so that when the bigger deaths come, we will know how to let go of that which is no longer needed. It is time to learn obedience in and through the things we suffer, just like Jesus did. It is a time for experiencing what it is like to have our outer nature wasting away while our inner nature is being renewed day by day.

For more on the true self/false self see *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership* (InterVarsity Press, 2008) Chapters 2 and 3.

For more on the Paschal rhythm of death, burial, and resurrection see *Life Together in Christ* (InterVarsity Press, 2014) Chapter 6.

LECTIONARY READINGS for the second Sunday in Lent:

GENESIS 17:1-7, 15-16

¹ When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. ² And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." ³ Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, ⁴ "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵ No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout your generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

¹⁵ God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶ I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

PSALM 22:23-31

²³ You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!

²⁴ For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him.

²⁵ From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him. ²⁶ The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD. May your hearts live forever!

²⁷ All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him.

²⁸ For dominion belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations.

²⁹ To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him.

³⁰ Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord,

³¹ and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.

ROMANS 4:13-25

¹³ For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴ If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the

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"Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and you forgave the guilt of my sin." Psalm 32:5

of the great love with which he loved us ⁵ even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ--by grace you have been saved-- ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God-- ⁹ not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

JOHN 3:14-21

¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷ "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

O God, I admit it...I know nothing about self-denial. I don't know what to give up or how or why.

My whole life is about consuming and being consumed...and I am deeply cynical about anything that diminishes your desire for us to CHOOSE LIFE.

And yet...I know that simplifying actually clarifies, spring cleaning sweeps away the junk and garbage that weighs me down, eliminating distraction puts me in touch with what I most deeply want— which is you and your life-changing Wind blowing unencumbered through my life.

O God, lead me in the letting go of anything that distracts, numbs, keeps me jumbled on the inside. Guide me into uncluttered rooms and wide-open spaces where I can meet you. Amen.

Ruth Haley Barton

FOR REFLECTION: **What activities, behaviors, and relationships are most distracting to my spiritual life these days? Which ones keep me from seeking God with all my heart? During this Lenten season, what do I need to fast *from* in order to focus more fully on heavenly things?**

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WEEK THREE

REPENTANCE:

CLEANING OUR MESSY HOUSE

In her book *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris tells the story of working as an artist-in-residence at a parochial school, teaching children how to write poetry using the Psalms as a model. One little boy wrote a poem entitled, "The Monster Who Was Sorry." He began by admitting that he hates it when his father yells at him: his response (in the poem) is to throw his sister down the stairs, and then to wreck his room, and finally to wreck the whole town. The poem concludes, "Then I sit in my messy house and say to myself, 'I shouldn't have done all that.'"

"My messy house" says it all, Norris observes, "With more honesty than most adults could have mustered, the boy made a metaphor for himself that admitted the depth of his rage and gave him a way out... he was well on his way toward repentance, not a monster after all, but only human. If the house is messy, why not clean it up? Why not make it into a place where God might wish to dwell?"³

During Lent we are called to enter more intentionally into prayer, self-examination and repentance for the purpose of restoration and renewal. We are willing to sit in our messy house and get a little more honest about the fact that we are in disarray. To the best of our ability we acknowledge what got us into the mess we are in, we feel our remorse, and we say, "I wish I hadn't done that." This is truth in the inward being.

Many of us have a hard time admitting that our house is messy. Like the money changers Jesus confronted in the temple in John 2, we have a lot riding on the way in which we've got things set up in our inner world. On some level, the sins and negative patterns work for us, otherwise we wouldn't be so attached to them. We need Jesus to come into the temple of our body and our life and say, "Take these things out of here; they do not belong in a house of prayer!"

The first step in the practice of repentance is self-examination—reviewing our lives in God's presence, asking Him to bring to our awareness those places where we are not like Christ and where we are caught in the grip of sin and negative patterns. Perhaps there is a vague sense that something is not right (like a subtle resistance to doing something loving for another person); or, it could be something more clear-cut (such as an angry outburst). Whatever it is, we are willing to see without rationalizing and listen without defending. This is called awakening.

As painful as it is to be exposed at this level, awakening is evidence of God's grace. God is at work leading us out of the bondage of sin into the freedom from sin that is ours in Christ. We can then invite Jesus to help us understand what's going on inside us that caused the bad behavior so that he can root it out at the source. Once the temple is swept clean, it can become a place of prayer again.

LECTIONARY READINGS for the fourth Sunday in Lent:

NUMBERS 21:4-9

⁴ From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. ⁵ The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." ⁶ Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷ The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." ⁹ So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

PSALM 107:1-3, 17-22

¹ O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever.

² Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, those he redeemed from trouble

³ and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

¹⁷ Some were sick through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities endured affliction;

¹⁸ they loathed any kind of food, and they drew near to the gates of death.

¹⁹ Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress;

²⁰ he sent out his word and healed them, and delivered them from destruction.

²¹ Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind.

²² And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices, and tell of his deeds with songs of joy.

EPHESIANS 2:1-10

¹ You were dead through the trespasses and sins ² in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³ All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.

⁴ But God, who is rich in mercy, out

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WEEK FOUR

CONFESSION:

COMING HOME TO GOD

Confession is good for the soul—and everyone around us. Like the prodigal son who finally came to his senses and confessed to his father, “I have sinned,” and discovered that his father was waiting for him with love in his heart and forgiveness on his lips, Lent is a season when we, too, have the opportunity to confess our sin and experience God’s steadfast love and forgiveness. *“But while he was far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.”*

Confession is the outward discipline associated with the inner act of repentance; it gives us something concrete to do with the sins and negative patterns we are naming in God’s presence. The trouble is, we live in a culture that promotes a profound sense of denial about the presence of sin in our lives. Even when something is our fault, we are encouraged not to admit it unless we can derive some benefit from it (like a reduced penalty, repairing our public image, etc.). We are encouraged to hide the truth until we can no longer get away with it. And, even then, we may still try to twist facts or misuse language to keep from having to acknowledge personal responsibility for our actions. We use all sorts of means, ranging from flat-out denial to subtle misuse of language, to avoid having to admit we are wrong.

True confession requires us to name our sin out loud to ourselves, to God, and to the person(s) we have injured or offended, taking steps to renounce it for Christ’s sake. True confession will involve the willingness to make restitution if that is needed.

Wouldn’t it be something if, during this Lenten season, we asked God to help us “make a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves”? What if we actually confessed *as sin* our bad behaviors toward others—both in our current situations and also in the history of our past relationships? What if during this season we wrote notes, made phone calls, and had face-to-face meetings in which we confessed our sins to one another and asked forgiveness for sins past and present?

I cannot imagine a more powerful force for good in this world than for us as Christians to confess our sins to God and to one another so that grace can flow more freely among us. I cannot imagine the homecomings there might be in our relationships with God and with each other as we acknowledge the ways we have each wounded our own life, the lives of others, and the life of the world. Let us not miss the opportunity to confess our sins to God and to one another so that we can be healed.

LECTIONARY READINGS for the third Sunday in Lent:

EXODUS 20:1-17

¹ Then God spoke all these words:

² I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³ you shall have no other gods before me.

⁴ You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶ but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷ You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

⁸ Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰ But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

¹² Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

¹³ You shall not murder.

¹⁴ You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵ You shall not steal.

¹⁶ You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

¹⁷ You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

PSALM 19

¹ The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

² Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.

³ There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;

⁴ yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,

⁵ which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

⁶ Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat.

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"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy..." Psalm 103:2-4

⁷ The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple; ⁸ the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes; ⁹ the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. ¹⁰ More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honey-comb. ¹¹ Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. ¹² But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults. ¹³ Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression. ¹⁴ Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-25

¹⁸ For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." ²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³ but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

JOHN 2:13-22

¹³ The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵ Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." ¹⁸ The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰ The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹ But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

*O God of such truth as sweeps away all lies,
of such grace as shrivels all excuses,
come now to find us
for we have lost our selves
in a shuffle of disguises
and in the rattle of empty words.*

*We have been careless
of our days,
our loves,
our gifts,
chances...*

*Our prayer is to change , O God,
not out of despair of self
but for love of you,
and for the selves we long to become
before we simply waste away.*

Let your mercy move in and through us now... Amen.

Ted Loder, My Heart in My Mouth

FOR REFLECTION: Set aside some time this week to review all the major components of your life in God's presence—family, work, church, friendships, and your personal relationship with him. Ask God to show you places where you fall short of Christlikeness and need his help for further transformation. As He does, be as honest as you can about the fact that this is a room in your house that needs to be cleaned up.

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