

Readings for March 6, 2019 -- Ash Wednesday

Now is the Time

These first days serve as an introduction to our Lenten journey. We have a powerful set of readings about our prayer, repentance, almsgiving and fasting. We place ashes on our foreheads and learn about the meaning of death and life. In the Church's daily readings we pray over the powerful challenge of Isaiah 58. And Jesus reminds us that he is inviting us to a "change of heart."

Opening Prayer (Or choose one from the back prayer pages):

Enlarge my heart, Oh Lord, that you may enter in. Amen. (Dorothy Day, Servant of God)

Reading 1: JL 2:12-18

The Prophet Joel calls his people (and us) to a life focused on the spiritual. We are assured of God's loving presence.

Even now, says the LORD, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning; Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the LORD, your God. For gracious and merciful is he, slow to anger, rich in kindness, and relenting in punishment. Perhaps he will again relent and leave behind him a blessing, Offerings and libations for the LORD, your God. Blow the trumpet in Zion! proclaim a fast, call an assembly; Gather the people, notify the congregation; Assemble the elders, gather the children and the infants at the breast; Let the bridegroom quit his room and the bride her chamber. Between the porch and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep, And say, "Spare, O LORD, your people, and make not your heritage a reproach, with the nations ruling over them! Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'" Then the LORD was stirred to concern for his land and took pity on his people.

Reading 2: 2 COR 5:20—6:2

NOW is the time to turn toward the God who loves us.

Brothers and sisters: We are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him. Working together, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says: *In an acceptable time I heard you, and on the day of salvation I helped you.* Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

Gospel: MT 6:1-6, 16-18

Let your prayer be authentic and genuine; not a performance, but instead a humble gift

Jesus said to his disciples: "Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them; otherwise, you will have no recompense from your heavenly Father. When you give alms, do not blow a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets to win the praise of others. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand

know what your right is doing, so that your almsgiving may be secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you. "When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on street corners so that others may see them. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you." "When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites. They neglect their appearance, so that they may appear to others to be fasting. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you may not appear to be fasting, except to your Father who is hidden. And your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you."

Related Reflections

Never Alone

God is always with me, residing in my inner chapel that I carry with me wherever I go. God's friendship and presence within me is an unshakable gift of companionship and one of the main reasons I can hope in the first place. I am never alone, because God is with me. I know and believe this in my bones because of my own experience of God's presence in my life and also from the hours and hours of listening to people's prayer experiences in spiritual direction. The Holy Spirit is our advocate given to us "to teach [us] everything." (John 14:26) As we are reminded in Romans 8:26, the Holy Spirit groans on our behalf, comes to aid us in our weakness, and intercedes for us when we do not know the words to pray.

What comfort to know that when we seek to grow in a relationship with God, the Holy Spirit is working with us in our steps forward. When we are feeling weak, the Holy Spirit supports our efforts to overcome temptations. When we do not know the words to pray, the Holy Spirit is praying with us and for us.

Take comfort in these promises of God, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, for we are not and never will be alone.

(Becky Eldredge - www.ignatianspirituality.com)

Our journey starts today

Let us enter into this moment fully open-hearted and available to what our God wants to say to us about His life, His great Passion and Death, His ultimate example of sacrificial love. Let us dive into the story of a God Who came down for you and for me to show us the way of God's own heart. . . And so, for the next forty days, we will follow Jesus the Way on the path of love through our fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. We fast to remember to Whom we belong. We fast to recognize there is nothing on this earth which cannot be replaced by Jesus. We pray to know our God with renewed hearts. We increase our awareness of the presence of God, no matter our state or season of life. God is in the wind; He is in the dishes; He is in the work; He is in family; He is in our very bodies and souls. We give alms because we recognize the mercy Jesus has extended to us each day of our lives, we cannot help but extend this same mercy to every single person we meet. . . Let us lay down our own to-do list for the day, surrender our incessant thoughts of what's next, and rest in the closeness of our King. Let us breathe out the chaos of everyday life and breathe in the stillness and steadiness of our Savior. God is present to us right now. He is here. He never left. He never disappeared. He never abandoned us. He sees our questioning, out

doubting, our fear. He sees our frustration, our tired hearts, our desperate longings. And He says, *I will love you to the end.* (To The End: The story of sacrificial love, Blessed is She 2019 Lenten Journal)

From Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM:

As we enter Lent, we are reminded that we are “dust to dust” and “ashes to ashes.” After a year full of sorrows such as the separation of families at the US border, destructive wildfires, mass shootings, war and famine in Yemen, refugees fleeing Syria, and much of the world’s suffering that frequently goes without notice, I am ready for a season of somber humility. Lent offers an invitation, as is our faith’s custom, to pray, to say I am sorry, and to go hungry once in a while knowing that others do so often. And I do so with genuine grief—but not without hope.

Coming on the heels of a season of joyous festivity, from Christmas and New Year’s to Mardi Gras, Lent is an opportunity to cleanse the palate so that we can taste all—the bitter and the sweet. This season calls us to witness the good and the bad—and to own our own responsibility and potential for being agents of both.

Lent is about looking deeply within and simultaneously experiencing gravity and wonder. In my book *Wondrous Encounters: Scripture for Lent*, I describe the invitation to know ourselves and God more fully: There are two moments that matter. One is when you know that your one and only life is absolutely valuable and alive. The other is when you know your life, as presently lived, is entirely pointless and empty. Lent is about both. The first such moment gives you energy and joy by connecting you with your ultimate Source and Ground. The second gives you limits and boundaries, and a proper humility, so you keep seeking the Source and Ground and not just your small self.

Human and Divine: St. Teresa of Avila said that we find God in ourselves, and we find ourselves in God. Authentic spirituality seeks to facilitate this knowing of self and God. I believe that only when humans realize and embrace their wholeness—their smallness and their greatness at the same time—will there be any in-depth transformation. Lent is about being human and divine. Though we are made of dust, we are called to participate in the divine creative dance.

Jesus showed us how to walk the human-divine path through self-emptying. It is the journey of death and resurrection, with life taking ever new shapes and forms. Even as we face our little ego deaths, we trust that resurrection inevitably follows if we walk through fall and winter. New beginnings invariably come from old falsities that are allowed to die. We know that the story ends in resurrection. After Lent, Easter! Weeping may endure for the night, but joy comes in the morning (Ps 30:6).

Author Cynthia Bourgeault wrote in her book *The Holy Trinity and the Law of Three*: “Don’t be afraid of darkness, of the things that look like they’re going in the wrong direction. The soul has to go through this overwhelm. So often I realize the difficulty was exactly the thing that needed to happen in order for there to be clarity.” Trust that even when it seems our world is moving backward—away from justice and peace—this friction can help us discover a new way forward.

Desire to be Transformed: The word Lent comes from the Old English *lencten*, or springtime. Resurrection is not a one-time anomaly in the body of Jesus, but the pattern of reality. The Trinitarian flow is mirrored in every atom and circulatory system, the change of seasons and substances, and all the orbits and cycles of the stars, planets, and galaxies. We are a dynamic universe echoing a very dynamic

God. **Most of us were taught that God would love us if and when we change. In fact, God loves us so that we can change.** Loved people have the courage and the energy to imagine new things. The experience of being loved creates in us the desire to be transformed. Yes, even the desire is a gift.

Discussion Questions

- What must you let go of in order to make room in your heart for God this Lent?
- Do I feel that my Lenten practices will bring glory to God, or just glory to me?
- How is your prayer life? Is it done out of devotion and desire, or out of obligation?
- The Lenten season calls us to turn away from sin and to be faithful to the Gospel. What does that really ask of me?
- What is my main hope for myself and for God during this Lenten season?

Suggested Music

Come as You Are (Crowder)

40 Days (Matt Maher)