

DAYbreaks



Daily Reflections for Lent and Easter

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Prayer

God of all life and love, during this season of penance, prayer, and reflection, may my eyes be open to see your work in the world before me, may my ears be clear to hear your word speaking to me, may my hands be available to assist those around me, and may my heart be renewed for the task of loving others as you have loved me. Amen.



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Introduction



The American Trappist monk and best-selling author Thomas Merton once declared, “Even the darkest moments of the liturgy are filled with joy, and Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the Lenten fast, is a day of happiness, a Christian feast. It cannot be otherwise, as it forms part of the great Easter cycle.” At first glance, this affirmation of the joy and happiness of the Lenten season seems odd. Aren’t fasting, almsgiving, and penitential prayer supposed to be laborious, difficult, and somber? Though this is a common stereotype of Lent, Jesus had a very different instruction for how we were to approach this time: “Whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting” (Matthew 6:16). In a sense, Merton is expanding what Jesus instructs in the Gospel—we are not meant to put on a somber or gloomy show. Instead we should seek to find the joy in life and the gifts of God’s grace as we prepare to celebrate the death and resurrection of the Lord.

Finding joy in the Lenten season may strike some as an impossible task, but nevertheless it is our task as Christian women and men. The Lenten and Easter reflections in this book are meant to provide a starting point for just such a mission. By examining our consciences, reflecting on the signs of our times, and considering the fuller meaning of Scripture, it is my hope that this *Daybreaks* series helps guide each of us to find the joy of God’s light in even the darkest moments of the next forty days.

***Aren’t fasting,
almsgiving, and
penitential prayer
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Ash Wednesday

By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Genesis 3:19



In recent years, it has struck me that ministers distributing ashes

on the foreheads of the faithful have avoided using the more traditional prayer formula (“Remember, you are dust and to dust you shall return”) and have instead opted for the alternative form (“Repent, and believe in the gospel”). There is nothing wrong with either of these, for both come from Scripture: the former from Genesis 3 and the latter from Mark 1. But still I have this feeling that many people prefer the latter because it is less creepy than the first. This business about being dust and “returning to dust” is a little too morbid for some people. I love it.

I don’t particularly love the fact that people associate death with the passage—that association is certainly OK given the truth that we are all, in fact, going to die some day and that, considering the saving power of Christ, death has no power over us—but I do love what the reminder that we are dust signifies for the human family and the entirety of creation.

The reference in Genesis 3 refers back to the creation narrative found in Genesis 2, which, unlike Genesis 1 with its well-known “evening came, and morning followed” repeating stanzas, describes the creation of humanity and the rest of God’s creatures being molded *ha-adamah* (Hebrew: “from the earth”). To say that we are dust is to say that we are part and parcel of the cosmic community of creation, made of the same material earthiness (*adamah*) as all the rest of creation. Without any sense of modern physics, astronomy, or evolutionary biology, the ancient community that told the story of God’s creation in Genesis 2 anticipated the oft-quoted dictum from the late Carl Sagan who once observed that, “The nitrogen in our DNA, the calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood, the carbon in our apple pies were made in the interiors of collapsing stars. We are made of star stuff.”



The ashes we receive on our foreheads today to mark the start of the penitential season of Lent are also a symbol that invite us to consider our place within the broader family of creation. How often do you incorporate care for creation or reflection on ecological justice into your Lenten prayer? Do you ever think about the ways in which we are called to examine our consciences not only for the sins we've committed against God and other members of the human family, but also for "our sins against creation" (*Laudato si'*, 8)? This time of prayer and reflection, of renewal and reconciliation requires a spirit of conversion within us not only for the healing needed among our human kin but also among the entire family of God's very good creation.



SHUTTERSTOCK

Thursday After Ash Wednesday

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.

Joel 2:13



Pope Francis, pontiff since 2013, has restored our collective attention to the theme of mercy as a central element of Christian life. It's not a novel or clever idea but an essential feature of our faith that we can frequently overlook. We live in societies that run on an economy of exchange, a system of finance that has shaped even our religious imaginations. Too often we believe that God operates according to a logic or outlook much like our own human one. We can be tempted to think that what God wants in return for our faults and failings is some kind of outward payment or action. Yet we hear the prophetic call of Joel today challenging this perspective.

God's outlook is one governed by mercy and love. What God wants from us is *metanoia*, a Greek term that is typically translated as "conversion." But the fuller sense of *metanoia* is less about a sudden change or break with one's former identity like we generally associate with conversion. Instead, *metanoia* is about the transformation of one's heart, it is an awakening to the presence of God in the world, and it is a turning toward something—or *someone*—in a relationship. What God desires from us is not an "eye for an eye" but instead the *metanoia* of our entire personhood.

***This business about
being dust and
"returning to dust"
is a little too morbid
for some people.
But for me, I love it.***

Recognizing God's mercy and love, may we take the opportunity this Lent to accept that love extended to us by God and allow it to shape our hearts and minds so we may better live the gospel call we all received at baptism.

Friday After Ash Wednesday



*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father,
is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress,
and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

James 1:27



Continuing the theme from yesterday seen in Joel, we look to the Letter of James today for insight into how the early Christian communities understood the importance of worship and what God truly desires from us. Orphans and widows appear as regular figures throughout both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. They are stand-in characters representing all those who are without authority, power, status, recognition, or even legal recourse. In the Book of Joel the prophet we are reminded that God really desires metanoia, a transformation of our hearts. In the Letter of James we get a glimpse at what a transformed heart looks like in action.

God desires that we open a space within our hearts not only for those we find easy to love or feel obligated to care for due to familial ties or friendship, but also for those we find difficult to love and about whom we are rarely concerned. Though widows and orphans exist in our own time, those who are most marginalized, most overlooked, most ignored tend to fall into other categories such as immigrants, refugees, the homeless, the addicted, and so on. Who cares for these women, children, and men?

The change required of us during this season of Lent, the metanoia that transforms our hearts, should impel us to look beyond the comfort zones of our family, friends, and preferred communities to seek out the abandoned, abused, ignored, and forgotten. Doing so, even in little ways—such as looking a stranger in the eye to recognize that individual's God-given humanity—is a sure-fire sign that we are beginning to authentically worship God in all ways.

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Saturday After Ash Wednesday

Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.

James 5:16



Weakness is typically looked down upon as a trait despised

and rejected. In my own context as someone born and raised in the United States, perception of weakness—especially among men—is to be avoided at all costs. We are encouraged to present a persona that is always strong, always in control, always right, and always cool. Needing help or acknowledging one's failings is strongly discouraged.

Nevertheless, the New Testament offers us a very different perspective. The Letter of James conveys a different set of priorities than the modern American obsession with perceived strength. We read that we are to declare our sins to one another, pray for each other, and find healing in that process.

We all can benefit from prayer and should pray for others.

There are two presumptions here that are timely during our Lenten journey of transformation and penance. The first is that Christian values are often different from our cultural values. As we see in the case of Jesus' own life, death, and resurrection, God does not prioritize human strength but rather divine mercy, love, and peace in the most gentle ways. The second presumption seen in James is the universality of our frailty and weakness. We *all* struggle, are weak, and sin. We *all* need healing and forgiveness. We *all* can benefit from prayer and should pray for others.

This Lent may we embrace our whole selves—both weak and strong, loving and sinful—so that we may be free to be honest, pray for others, and receive healing.

First Sunday of Lent



Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

Matthew 4:1-2



The first week of Lent always begins with the Gospel account of Jesus being led into the desert, where he experiences three temptations. Scholars have long noted that these temptations, while seeming specific at first glance, actually represent an array of the most basic temptations all of us face: the desires for power, security, and eternal life. While we may not face the same particular challenges placed before Jesus by Satan in this passage, we do have our own personal temptations that rightly represent various times we've found ourselves in the uncomfortable and desolate place of a spiritual, emotional, or physical desert.

The question placed before us is: How are we going to respond to our own temptations? To what or whom will we turn for guidance?

To this second question, Jesus gives us a clue. Every time he's faced with a temptation, his response is to begin: "It is written...." In other words, what guides Jesus is not some clever or original response that he's come up with in the moment. Instead, he returns to sacred Scripture to find his bearings and respond to the challenge.

It's not that the Bible is an answer book for each circumstance or temptation we encounter in life. But Scripture provides us with the overarching narrative of how to live the covenantal life to which God calls each of us. Jesus models for us what is important to God and how we are to act, and the more his example and the broader scriptural story becomes our story, the better equipped we'll be in the moment to face the challenges life places before us.

Monday

FIRST WEEK OF LENT

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Romans 12:2



If Lent is a time for transformation and renewal, then what are we in the business of transforming and renewing? As Christians, we can look to Scripture for guidance. One of the clues that St. Paul's Letter to the Romans reveals to us is that we are meant to transform and renew our mind. What he means here is not simply an intellectual capacity or a boosting of one's memory skills, but instead a development of the way we look at the world. In other words, what we are called to transform and renew is the way we think about reality.

The world in which we live is an increasingly complex environment shaped by technology, globalization, international trade, pluralism, and the like. We receive multiple messages—and, at times, competing messages—about what we should think is important, good, or necessary. For example, in capitalist societies driven by market logic like the United States, one of the major forces influencing our outlook is the consumer pressure to continually buy the newest and latest products. We are encouraged to place our immediate desires over the discernment of the collective good, to pursue self-gratification with guilt-free abandon, and to value external appearance and social status as high-priority concerns.

The Christian approach to viewing the world and thinking about reality differs dramatically from this approach. May this Lent be a time when we learn to discern better between the message of the gospel and the message of the world, so as to transform and renew our minds and hearts to see the world as God intends us to see it and live accordingly.