

DAYbreaks

Daily Reflections for
Lent and Easter



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AMY WELBORN



INTRODUCTION

Some of us love Lent, others hate it. But, love or hate, here we are, celebrations tumbling into Ash Wednesday, feast giving way to fast.

For forty days we will fast more, give more, and pray more. Our motivations vary. We are sorry for our sins and our stubbornness in sin. Our sacrifices become acts of penance. We give God's will more room to flourish by denying ourselves. We clarify. We prune. We focus. We realize how much we have crowded God out with silly, wasteful, or selfish things.

Most of all, we seek to be like Jesus, to take up a cross. Just as Jesus embraced his cross in love, we do the same. The discipline of fasting, giving, and praying during Lent reminds us that our suffering and sacrifice is a cross, joined with the cross of Christ, so that we might be more like him—strengthened to love, no matter what. We cannot let distractions or the threat of suffering get in the way.

We don't do this on our own. It's satisfying, comforting, and inspiring to do Lent with the world. We walk out of our church with our ashes on Ash Wednesday, and six weeks later we crowd back in, relieved, amazed, and singing, "Alleluia!"

Daily Prayer

*Jesus, may this time with you strengthen me today
to take up my own cross and bear it in patience and love.
Amen.*



ASH WEDNESDAY

Years ago—years—friends cajoled me into attending an Eagles concert in Tampa.

As the date approached, I realized when it would be happening: Ash Wednesday.

Predictably, I was seized with guilt. Me, a long-standing and—dare I say—prideful Lenten rigorist, a firm critic, for example, of my mother's habits of serving expensive cuts of fish or dining out on Fridays while I humbly dished out beans or macaroni and cheese to my own family, here I was at a pop concert.

Guilt mixed with something else that night—judgment—while I waited around outside the venue and watched a parade of lithe, tall, gorgeous young women climb out of limos. A surprising number of them had crosses smudged on their foreheads. Did those models realize how lucky they were to be on the receiving end of double judgment? They were evidently doing Ash Wednesday with even more panache and high style than I was but also without an ounce of shame, parading the dichotomy in front of the whole world, with me, on my high horse, remembering the Gospel:

"Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them..." (Matthew 6:1).

Lent seems fairly straightforward, but Ash Wednesday's Scripture readings reflect a tension. Joel calls God's people to a fast. It's a loud, urgent public call for the entire people to embark on a public penitential walk.

But then Jesus seems to tell us something different. That fast? Do it in secret. Wash your face. Smile. Pray in private. Don't let anyone know what you're doing. God knows. That's enough.

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It's a dilemma we face when we pause at the church door after Mass on Ash Wednesday. We have that cross smudged on our foreheads. Our ashes witness to our sinfulness and our trust in God's mercy. It's good for us to publicly admit it, good for the world to see.

But Jesus says what he says, and so my hand reaches up to my forehead, tissue in hand. Do I wipe it off? Should it stay?

Wherever I find myself at Lent's beginning these days, my first step is to accept that tension. I live in the world. The world needs Jesus. We are his witnesses. But Jesus tells me, repent, witness, pray, and give while fasting from the most deadly thing of all: pride.

Yet even now—oracle of the LORD—return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, weeping, and mourning. Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the LORD, your God.

JOEL 2:12–13



THURSDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

Not long after Christmas, I look at the calendar and see Lent heading my way with surprising speed. Lent is a chance, I'm told, to get a fresh start. I encounter advice on personal, spiritual renewal.

It sounds good and right. But then I hear Jesus, and I'm not sure the two visions quite match up.

I remember an older priest who spoke about liturgical seasons and ordinary Sunday Mass in a different way. Instead of calling us to self-improvement through a fantastic Lent experience, he brusquely reminded us that this could be—and for some certainly would be—our last Lent.

The difference is not morbidity, but basic orientation. Following Jesus bears fruit: renewal, peace, and focus. The saints live that out. The saints also tell us that when we put ourselves and our own goals at the center of discipleship and the intense school of discipleship that is Lent, we might be missing the point, no matter how well-meaning we are.

Jesus calls me to deny myself. Right off I'm challenged to consider whether my first act of Lenten self-denial might be to set aside my big plans for how I will use Lent to improve my life and simply focus on following Jesus to the cross. Letting God renew me in whatever way he wills.

*If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself
and take up his cross daily and follow me.*

LUKE 9:23



FRIDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

I am not a devout carnivore, but predictably on the Fridays during Lent (and only on those days), I will crave hamburgers.

It's also predictable that by the end of this first miniweek of Lent, I am already hearing a voice rationalizing inside my head: *"You know those things you gave up? What's so bad about them? And look at this reading from Isaiah! It's the spirit of the fast that's important, not the specifics. Go ahead...."*

Weak.

When that dynamic starts working in my spirit, I have to stop, read carefully, and pray.

Then I sense God, through the prophet Isaiah, critiquing not fasting itself but fasting divorced from love. It is Paul who will remind us, centuries later, that I can do anything through faith, but if it's done without love, it's like nothing.

The Lenten fast is of a piece with the love of others expressed through almsgiving and the love of God expressed through prayer. As I sacrifice good things, things that are blessings, I am releasing myself from my own needs and desires. I am setting them aside, not for my own sake, but for the sake of love. My grasp is loosened on what serves me, and my hands are freed to share.

Is this the manner of fasting I would choose, a day to afflict oneself? To bow one's head like a reed, and lie upon sackcloth and ashes? Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

ISAIAH 58:5



SATURDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

The most well-known artistic depiction of the moment from today's Bible verses is Caravaggio's. Unlike much art originally created for a church, this painting remains in its original space: a side chapel of the St. Luigi dei Francesi church in Rome.

You can't get right up to it, but the thought-provoking details are visible even from a distance. Having just entered the counting house, Jesus will not be staying long. His feet are already turned away, ready to lead. He points to Matthew with a gesture evocative of God the Creator's hand reaching to Adam in Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling.

Matthew has that moment to decide. You can see he is torn. One hand gestures to his heart, as if saying, "Me?" The other rests on a pile of coins. His treasure. In between the two, bathed in light, a window. The wood supports above are in the shape of a cross.

The invitation to follow Jesus comes to us now. Yes, the cross awaits, but so does love. I may wonder, like Matthew, "Who, me?" I may sometimes reach out first for the things that tie me to earth. What are those things? What will it take for me to lift my hand from the wealth on the table and follow Jesus?

After this [Jesus] went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the customs post. He said to him, "Follow me." And leaving everything behind, he got up and followed him.

LUKE 5:27-28



FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

This Sunday, we listen to stories of temptation. God has given the first woman and man everything they need to flourish. No matter. There is that one thing, that one tree they cannot have because it holds what belongs to God alone: the power to determine, in a fundamental way, what is right and wrong—the structure of reality and relations.

One thing, one temptation, one choice.

It seems to me that all sin is reflected in this first sin. It's like looking at the one who loved you into existence, who created you out of loving intention, and saying, "No."

In the Gospel, I hear the mystery of Jesus' temptation in the desert. Hungry after forty days of fasting, he is met by the tempter. He is offered a way of pride. Every response Jesus makes to the tempter is a Scripture passage.

How often have I looked back after I have given in to temptations great and small and thought, *"Would it have really been so hard to say no?"* Relying on God, letting God move and speak through my life rather than my own pride, I can make different decisions.

But the snake said to the woman: "You certainly will not die! God knows well that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods...."

GENESIS 3:4–5



FIRST WEEK OF LENT

MONDAY

It's a challenge to talk about moments when you attempted to live out a corporal work of mercy. It can sound like you're bragging—not exactly giving alms in secret. But I'll tell this brief tale nonetheless.

I needed to stop at a big-box store for a few things. Turning the corner, I saw a man standing and a woman in a wheelchair, holding signs indicating need.

Despite being aware of advice from friends involved in homeless ministry (which is to not attend to folks begging at the side of the road because there are plenty of community resources for those in need), something tugged at me. Once inside the store, I gathered my own purchases, then picked out some drinks, packaged sandwiches, and protein bars.

On the way out, I handed the bag to the man. He took it, gratefully, through the open window. The woman waved and smiled. We wished blessings on each other.

As I drove off, one thought dominated my heart. It wasn't a question of who deserved what. It was simply: *"Why don't I live like this all the time? What's holding me back from being more free and open to Christ in everyone without hesitation or judgment?"*

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.

MATTHEW 25:35–36



FIRST WEEK OF LENT

TUESDAY

We often hear the biblical quotation of Jesus below used as an argument against rote or recited prayer and especially against repetitive prayers like the rosary.

We're encouraged to pray with our own words, from the heart.

I don't know about you, but I've found my most babble-filled prayers are those where I depend solely on my own power. I repeat myself, it's mostly about me, and it leaves me where I started.

On the other hand, when I turn to the Psalms or traditional Catholic prayers—from the Lord's Prayer to the Memorare to St. Ignatius' Suscipe prayer or any one of thousands of others that have evolved through centuries of Spirit-shaped Catholic Tradition—it's different.

I bring my own needs into that space, but when I join all of that to the prayer of the Church, it lifts me out of my own world. Over the centuries, the Spirit has shaped these prayers so that in them we are gently led to put God, not ourselves, first.

During Lent, I am invited to pray more and more deeply. I am also invited to consider how I pray and to let God lead me away from my own babbling toward the expansiveness of his heart.

In praying, do not babble like the pagans, who think that they will be heard because of their many words....Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

MATTHEW 6:7-8