

DAYbreaks

Daily Reflections for
Lent and Easter

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REV. PAUL TURNER

Introduction

The third accident in twelve months finally totaled my car. It survived the sideswipe while parked on the street in front of the parish rectory. It even made it through a high-speed encounter with a loose fender that suddenly blew off a dump truck in the next lane. But it did not withstand a collision that happened when I was turning into my own driveway. So after nearly eight years and 134,000 miles, the insurance company proclaimed that my car was irrefutably dead. It was time for new wheels.

The Church gives us Lent each year to help us avoid getting into a similar spiritual situation. You never want to get to a point where your soul is totaled. It can happen. Sometimes you get hit with a succession of catastrophes: the death of a family member, a divorce, or the loss of a job. You think your life is cruising along just fine and then—BAM! You get hit when you least expect it.

It's enough to shake your faith.

I survived the multiple problems with my car thanks to the support of friends, the security of a job, and the cooperation of insurance companies. And, thanks be to God, I avoided injury.

The spiritual life works the same way. If you have the support of a believing community, the security of a regular prayer life, and the cooperation of spiritual leaders, you can rebound more easily when accidents happen.

Lent is a time for a tune-up for the soul. Lent will help you cruise through a period of formation and rise brand new on Easter. Along this road, you may find that some of your habits are causing you problems. You may discover some parts of your spiritual life need to be rebuilt. Lent invites you to get rid of what is damaged so you have some “new wheels” come Easter.

Prayer for Each Day

*To you I sacrifice, O Lord, that you may
help me see whatever keeps me from you.
Cleanse me, renew me. Through Christ, our Lord.*

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Ash Wednesday

Overlooking Mistakes

The lady seated in front of me was correcting the passenger behind me about the current location of our bus. "No, we're not in Missouri yet. We're in Kansas. We'll enter Missouri when we cross the river."

She was wrong. We were traveling from Omaha to Kansas City, but there are *two* cities called Kansas City: one in Kansas, the other in Missouri. The one in Missouri is the larger of the two. Many people outside these two states get confused about our geography. When you travel the interstate from Omaha to Kansas City, Missouri, you never enter Kansas. Once you cross into Missouri, you stay there until you reach your destination.

As a resident of Kansas City, Missouri, I have a speech I often give to people who think I live in Kansas. I could have uncorked part of it at this point of the ride. But it was late. Many of us were just trying to sleep through the conversation, and entering the discussion might not have accomplished much.

So I let her remark go.

Often I wish God will "let go" the wrong things I say and the bad things I do. As we begin Lent this year, we do not ignore our sins, but we pray that God will forgive them in love, looking over our faults to see our repentance.

*But you have mercy on all, because you
can do all things; and you overlook sins
for the sake of repentance. For you love
all things that are and loathe nothing
that you have made [...] You spare
all things, because they are yours,
O Ruler and Lover of souls.*

WISDOM 11:23-26

Thursday After Ash Wednesday

Cast Your Cares Upon the Lord

Enrique does not have papers. What he does have is a tumor. He has gone to three hospitals, but no one will admit him. He not only lacks insurance, but he also doesn't have a proper ID.

Many people argue about the correct response to immigrants with undocumented residency in the United States. Some got here legally but overstayed a visa. Others crossed a border under cover. Some have lived in the United States for decades. Some have tried to get legal papers but were told they have to wait. It's a very difficult situation. Millions of like stories replay all over the country.

Debates rage within the halls of Congress, on the streets, and in churches. Immigration reform is necessary, but it is hard to discern the proper path. Meanwhile, people like Enrique cannot get the care they need right now.

Even citizens of our country sometimes feel they are fighting against the system to obtain good health care. Surely God looks out for those in need. God probably looks not only at the illness but at how we respond when we hear the diagnosis.

Illness can make or break your spirituality. Either you spend your days complaining or you cast your cares upon God and ask for mercy.

Enrique does not know his future. But he has cast his cares upon the Lord.

*I will grieve and complain,
and my prayer will be heard.
He will redeem my soul in peace
from those who war against me....
Cast your cares upon the LORD,
who will give you support.*

PSALM 55:18-19, 23

Friday After Ash Wednesday

The Lord, My Helper

He told me in the confessional that he wanted to make a complete change in his life. He had been involved with all the bad stuff: drugs, theft, violent fights. He said he was done. He wanted to get back to church. He wanted to begin a new life.

He seemed sincere, said this man I'd never seen before, but he was describing a whole array of bad habits that would be difficult to overcome.

I told him what I tell anyone looking to start over: "The single most important improvement you can make is participating in the Mass every week," I said. "Make this a habit and you'll be surprised how many other parts of your life begin to fall in line. Once you make room for the Eucharist each week, you'll start to think about other decisions differently. Your relationships will improve. You'll feel better about yourself. You'll meet new people who can support your desire to reform."

He nodded. It all made sense to him. "I'm definitely going to do this, Father. You're going to see me here every week."

I never saw him again.

Both the priest and the penitent rely on the Lord for help. The penitent has already had an experience of God that brought him or her to confession. The priest prays that God will help him find the right words. Sometimes it works. Sometimes it doesn't. But God stands ready to help. Always.

*Hear, O LORD, have mercy on me;
LORD, be my helper.*

PSALM 30:11

Saturday After Ash Wednesday

Generous Love

When Marisol contacted our office, she was desperate for help. Her husband had just abandoned her. She was behind on the rent. Late fees were accumulating. She had five children, two of whom had special needs. She was willing to work, but she couldn't find a job.

She didn't belong to our church, but a friend of hers knew about us and told her to call. She didn't speak English, but because of the neighborhood we were in, the staff had to be bilingual, so we were able to understand her.

Our parish deacon responded generously with his time. He talked with the caseworker who was helping with supplemental food. He got application forms from City Housing for Low-Income People. He contacted several sources to obtain much-needed medication for the children. He wasn't able to resolve all of her problems, but she now knew that help was there. She experienced compassion.

God is generous to us at all times but especially in our times of need. Sometimes when things go wrong, we wonder if God has abandoned us. We think God has turned away. It's only natural to ask God to turn back.

More likely, however, is that God has never turned away. God's love is always generous. God has many ways of helping us, but they aren't always what we want or expect. Sometimes we must open our eyes to what's already there.

*Answer me, LORD, in your generous love;
in your great mercy turn to me.*

PSALM 69:17

First Sunday of Lent

Distress and Honor

When Paul broke his hip, it changed his life—for the worse. He could no longer walk well, even after surgery, but at eighty-one he wasn't surprised. He had seen many other people go through surgeries. He was familiar with hospitals and their emergency rooms, but not because he was a doctor, or a nurse, or a minister.

Paul had been a high-school football coach. And he was a mentor, a role model, a husband, a dad, a churchgoer, a donor of time and money, and a friend to people in all times. He knew about injuries and the resilience young people have after a traumatic break.

Paul's body was no longer young. It could not do what it had done for decades nor what he had trained athletes to do on the field. With his physical infirmity, his mental weakness accelerated. Conversations with him were becoming more difficult. He could not articulate what he was thinking or even *if* he was thinking.

His wife and five children all took care of him. Paul also had a strong network of supporters after twenty-six years on the high-school staff. Colleagues, alumni, and students revered him. In fact, the school bestowed on him a high honor: they named the football field after him. Every game played there would recall his work, his name.

Paul appreciated the help lavished upon him in his old age, but he couldn't reciprocate; actually, he already had. They wouldn't have cared so much for him if he had not made a difference in their lives.

Often when we see people who are infirm, we don't see the complete person. We see only the present. Not the past. Yet etched in the lines of their faces are years of loving care. Traced in their unsteady gait is the path they walked.

God takes care of these, the least of us. Once they call upon him, after years of service, he bestows honor on them.

*He will call upon me and I will answer;
I will be with him in distress;
I will deliver him and give him honor.
With length of days I will satisfy him.*

PSALM 91:15-16

Monday of the First Week of Lent

Eyes on the Lord

I love to watch baseball games, but I cannot see a baseball in the batter's box. I spent many embarrassing hours as a child standing at home plate with a bat in my hands. No matter how slowly the pitcher lobbed the ball or how close the mound drew to the plate, I had bad hand-eye coordination.

My father played catcher as a young man. He tried to teach me with this mantra: "Keep your eye on the ball." I tried watching the ball, but it came too fast. I simply couldn't move my bat any closer to that hurtling sphere.

I grew discouraged and went years without following baseball, but as a young adult I renewed my interest in the game. To this day, I'm still impressed with batters who can hit. Somehow when they keep their eyes on the ball, the rest of their body knows what to do.

Our relationship with God is a lot like this. We sometimes feel we strike out every time we try to pray or make a moral decision, but if we keep our eyes fixed on the Lord, our God, the rest of us will know what to do.

*Yes, like the eyes of servants
on the hand of their masters,
Like the eyes of a maid on the hand
of her mistress,
So our eyes are on the LORD our God,
till we are shown favor.
Show us favor, LORD, show us favor.*

PSALM 123:2-3

Tuesday of the First Week of Lent

Through All Generations

“**W**ould you like to have my grandmother’s milk pitcher?” My eyes lit up when Mom asked me this question. I was well into my fifties by then, and I didn’t know my great-grandmother had a milk pitcher or that it was still in the hands of a member of the family.

While she is now buried with other members of my mother’s family, my great-grandmother was among the immigrants who left their homeland—a city probably near the German and Austrian border—to take up residence in southern Minnesota. She probably had very few possessions when she made the crossing in the boat. But one of the items she carefully packed was a ceramic pitcher standing about eight inches tall. Mom gave it to me.

I decided to use it for milk. It drips, but I don’t care. I still use it.

It made me wonder many things about my great-grandmother. Did she get this pitcher cheaper because it wasn’t made quite right?

Did someone give it to her? Did she milk the cows on that farm in Minnesota and bring warm milk to the family breakfast table? I imagine she possessed the values of hard work, family life, and a yearning for her precious homeland. I also imagine these values have been passed down to me through all the generations. Just like her milk pitcher.

*LORD, you have been our refuge
through all generations.
Before the mountains were born,
the earth and the world brought forth,
from eternity to eternity you are God.*

PSALM 90:1-2

Wednesday of the First Week of Lent

Compassion and Mercy Ages Old

Abe was in the hospital. Again. It was a different hospital this time, but the problems were the same. He had trouble breathing, so his wife had summoned paramedics. When they arrived, they saw he needed immediate help, so they took him to an intensive-care unit.

Abe's condition was serious, but every time before, his doctors had miraculously stabilized him. "I have wonderful care," he always said after his hospitalization. Indeed, when admitted with some mysterious ailment, he was discharged without it.

I knew that the "wonderful care" he received was from more than the medical team. It included his wife, and Abe would be the first to say so. She stood beside him as a pillar of strength, prayer, and hope. No matter how many times Abe had trouble breathing, she calmly took the steps that opened the door for his recovery. Her compassion never waned. Her mercy never died.

Throughout Lent, we accept various disciplines, all with the intent of making us more loving. Sometimes it is hard to share our compassion over and over again. Yet this is what God does for us. With the example of our Maker and of some of the extraordinarily good people around us, we can share in mercy ages old.

*Remember your compassion and your
mercy, O LORD, for they are ages old.
Do not let my enemies gloat over me.
Redeem Israel, O God, from all its distress!*

PSALM 26:6, 2, 22

Thursday of the First Week of Lent

Understanding My Sighs

Maybe it's because I have no children of my own, but I'm always amazed at how parents can understand the cries, giggles, and burps of newborns. In a roomful of crying infants, parents can discern exactly which child is theirs. A child making a moan in the night is sending a message of—contentment? hunger? discomfort? I can't tell. But parents can.

This same phenomenon occurs among adult friends. We can understand the wordless sighs, grunts, and exclamations of one another. Words you can't look up in any dictionary are completely understandable between friends. We can understand one another without words.

Because we are children of God, we can count on that same kind of understanding. Sometimes we pray in total silence. Sometimes we hum. Sometimes we start words or phrases and then stop. It doesn't matter. God reads our hearts, not just our lips.

When we are in our greatest need, we can count on God to hear not only our words but even our sighing. During this Lent, we have taken on some penance in hopes of living a better life and growing closer to God. We sacrifice for the sake of others and we spend time in prayer. Even when we do not know what words to say, God will attend to the sound of our sighs.

*Give ear to my words, O LORD;
understand my sighing.
Attend to the sound of my cry,
my king and my God!*

PSALM 5:2-3

Friday of the First Week of Lent

Suffering and Sin

Esther was dying, and she did not like it, not one bit. "I want to live," she told me defiantly when I visited her home to anoint her. "But you're ninety-one years old," I said, trying to be chipper about it. "You've lived a great life!" I was only twenty-six and a little naïve about how older people could still be deeply attached to life, but as a newly ordained priest I brought youthful enthusiasm to my work that most people loved to see. Not Esther.

All I could think of was how she could soon be saying hello to the bliss of heaven. All she could think of was saying goodbye to life.

I'd visited her before, when she felt better, but now she had received bad news from her doctor. "I don't know what I did wrong," she said. "Is God punishing me for something? I don't want to die."

Almost all of us, whenever something unwanted happens unexpectedly, suspect that God may be punishing us for something.

Pain and suffering feel like punishment from God. But it's not. It's just something that happens. Even if you're ninety-one, you can still feel a connection between suffering and sin, between death and punishment. Instead of praying for freedom from illness, perhaps we should pray for the strength to follow God's path.

*Relieve the troubles of my heart;
bring me out of my distress.
Look upon my affliction and suffering;
take away all my sins.*

PSALM 25:17-18

God's Refreshing Law

Our parish policy is that a family has to be registered here for one year before they can celebrate a quinceañera (a celebration for a girl's fifteenth birthday) in the church. At this service, the girl will express her commitment to God and the Church in a ceremony filled with religious symbolism.

Some parents feel social pressure to make this a massive celebration. The friends and relatives of their teenager have had elaborate celebrations for their fifteenth birthday, and they feel they should offer the same. While the event should be, foremost, a celebration of faith as with any family ritual—from baptisms, to first Communions, to weddings—sometimes our secular culture makes materialistic demands the priority.

We get lots of requests to reserve the church for a quinceañera from families who aren't members of *any* parish. Many seem to want the church building as a backdrop for a secular celebration but have not made the personal commitment to participate in parish life, especially Sunday Mass.

So we have a policy. We expect to see a family on Sundays for at least one year. While some think this policy is harsh, we think it refreshes the soul. Rules can invite a more sincere connection between the rituals we enact and the lives we lead.

*The law of the LORD is perfect,
refreshing the soul.*

*The decree of the LORD is trustworthy,
giving wisdom to the simple.*

PSALM 19:8-9

Second Sunday of Lent

Seeking God's Face

"**Y**ou cannot see me," I said playfully to my two-year old great-niece, holding one hand in front of my face. "Yes, I can!" she exclaimed. "No, you can't," I insisted, not budging my hand.

She ran around the room and hid under a table. "You can't see me," she called out. That was true. "Yes, I can," I said anyway.

I don't see her very often. She lives far away. Still, she warmed to me quickly. This puzzled me. Many kids are naturally friendly, but many are also taught to keep their distance from strangers.

My brother, her grandfather, sees her a bit more often. We think this has contributed to her friendliness toward me. She was confusing my face with the face of her grandfather, whom she dearly loved.

In the days when the Book of Psalms was written, one expression that people used for being in someone's presence was having the ability to see that person's face. To say you were seeking someone's face was just another way of saying you wanted to be in the same place—close enough to recognize each other. Even to embrace.

We long to see the faces of people we love and the face of God. During Lent, we sacrifice because we feel that in some way we have grown distant from God—that we're too far away to see God's face. God shows his face to us in many ways and through many people. The face does not always look the same, but God lives behind it, offering us all the hopes, inspirations, and joy we could want.

Even when we think we recognize a face, we may not fully know it. There's always more to learn about the person behind the face we love. When that person's face is away, we experience great longing.

The same longing surfaces in our relationship with God. While it may seem at times that God has hidden his face, that's unlikely. More likely is that we have hidden ours.

***"Come," says my heart, "seek his face";
your face, LORD, do I seek!
Do not hide your face from me.***

PSALM 27:8-9

Lent is an opportunity for us to reflect on our lives, for us to refresh and renew our faith, and to grow even stronger in our love for God. Rev. Paul Turner uses stories from his pastoral ministry to bring the themes of Lent and triumphs of Easter into our everyday lives. By taking the time out of our busy daily routines to reflect on the mysteries of the Lent and Easter season, we can start to see just how much we do need the resurrection, and Christ, in our lives.

Find time during your day to reflect, meditate, and experience these stories for yourself. Let them reshape your heart so you will be renewed this Easter.

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