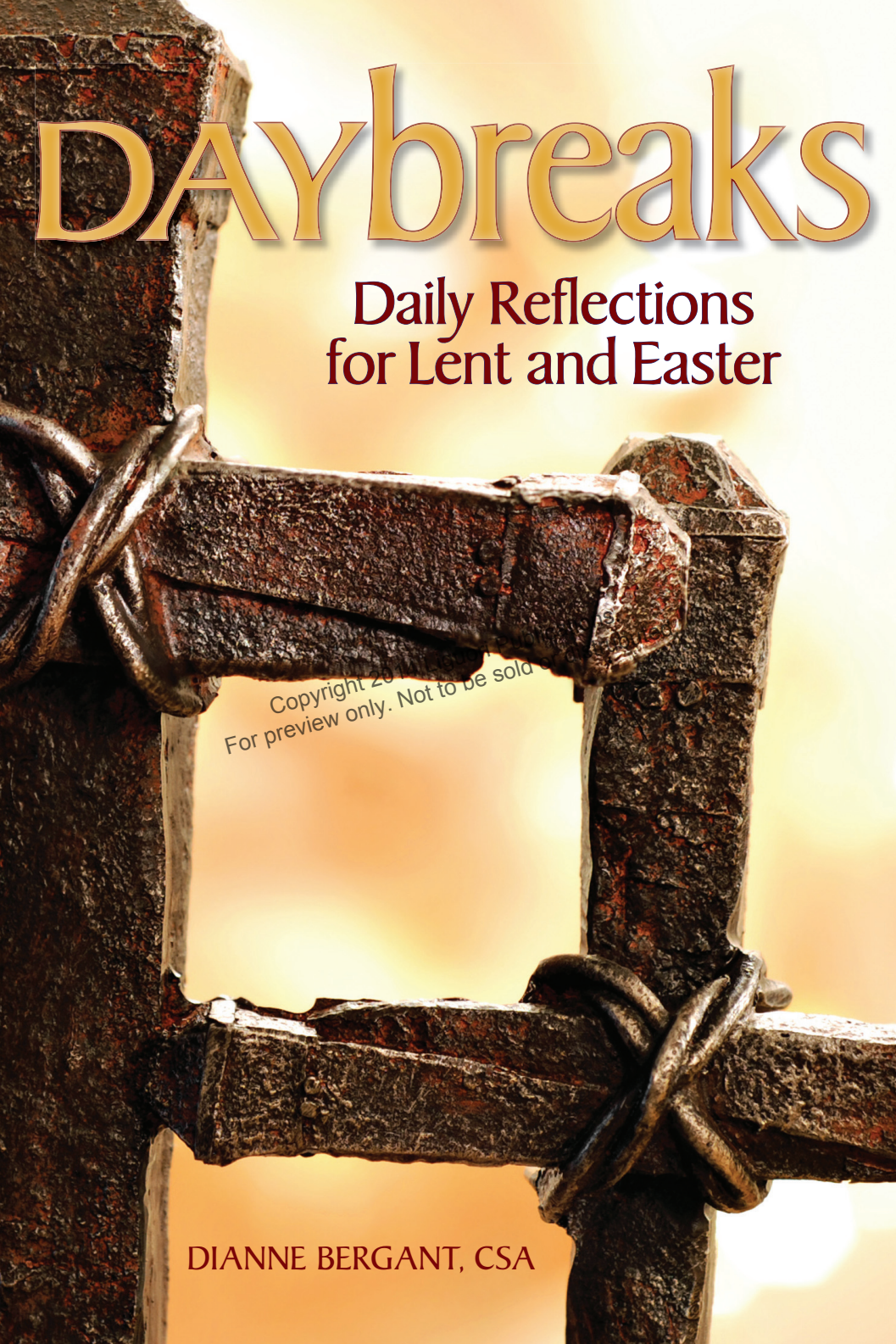




DAYbreaks

Daily Reflections
for Lent and Easter

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DIANNE BERGANT, CSA

Lent is a time to consider the graciousness of God toward us despite our own sinfulness. The reflections in this booklet provide us with examples of this goodness evident at various times in the history of the chosen people. They find their culmination in the blessings won for us by Christ Jesus. Without denying our human weaknesses, we are invited to contemplate God, not our sinfulness. Only after we are seared by the fire of divine love will any kind of penance be seen in its proper light. Finally, the passion of Jesus is presented as the freely given gift of himself for the salvation of all.

The Easter reflections remind us of the overwhelming love God has for us. Jesus was sent to earth to bring us all to heaven. The resurrection is the triumph of divine power on earth, and the community is the place where we continue to experience the effects of this power. The Easter season proclaims aloud the fact of eschatological fulfillment. Begun at the empty tomb, it continues on the roads of our lives, at the tables where we commune with God and with each other. It dissipates our fears and strengthens our resolve. Easter is the season of unbounded joy, of realized hope, of heartfelt gratitude, and of firm determination.

Return to God With Your Whole Heart

The opening words of the *Daybreaks* daily prayer (Joel 2:12–13) set the tone for the entire season of Lent. God actually pleads for our hearts. The reading further encourages us to reform our lives, not out of fear of punishment but because we have been unfaithful in our relationship with God, who is described in Joel 2:13 as “merciful” and possessing “steadfast love.” These two words are associated with covenant, that intimate and loving relationship into which God has invited us. What is astonishing is that God is “merciful” with “steadfast love” in the face of our sinfulness, not because we are righteous.

When any loving relationship is severed, we strive to reconnect, to reestablish the bond that united us. True, at times we might bring gifts in an attempt to repair what has been severed. However, it is our desire to be reunited that is important, not the gift. Penance should be seen as an expression of our desire to repair the severed bond, not as payment of a debt, any more than bringing flowers to an alienated loved one can actually pay for the pain we may have caused. The disposition of the heart is what is important, not the flowers.

Jesus warns us against performing religious acts in order to be seen by others and be thought of as pious (see Matthew 6:1–6, 16–18). We must bring our gifts to God, not parade them in public, any more than we would act out reconciliation with alienated loved ones in public.

Choose Life

Moses advises the Israelites to “choose life” (Deuteronomy 30:19), but Jesus directs every disciple to “take up his cross,” even if this places his life in jeopardy (Luke 9:23). What are we to make of these conflicting messages?

Actually, both passages speak about choice. The ancient Israelites are standing on the threshold of the land of promise. Moses tells them that before they enter it, they will have to decide how they will live in that land. Will they follow the way of life laid out for them in the commandments, regardless of how demanding those statutes might be? Or will they concede to the standards of the cultures they are about to encounter?

Jesus does not direct his disciples, or us, to choose death. He has taught us all to be faithful to the values of the reign of God. This is the way of life to which we must continue to commit ourselves, even if this commitment causes us to pay a dear price. The cross he would have us take up is the price we might have to pay for our fidelity. So, both readings summon us to “choose life,” even at the cost of death.

There are many values in our society that are really not values, ways of thinking that do not conform to the values of the reign of God. Attachment to violence and vengeance, conspicuous consumption and greed, exclusiveness and biases of every kind are simply a few examples. Lent is a time for making decisions. When we follow Jesus’ example and stand against negative values, we are really choosing a different way of living: a way known as the reign of God

DAILY PRAYER

Return to me with
your whole heart...
Rend your hearts,
not your garments,
and return to the
LORD, your God,
for he is gracious
and merciful,
slow to anger,
abounding in
steadfast love,
and relenting
in punishment.

JOEL 2:12-13

The Real Fasting Challenge

Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, God lays out an interesting and challenging program of fasting. It includes: “releasing those bound unjustly...setting free the oppressed...sharing your bread with the hungry, bringing the afflicted and the homeless into your house, clothing the naked...” (Isaiah 58:6–7). This message advocates what the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* calls the corporal works of mercy, or what we today have come to think of as acts of social justice. The biblical writer does not disdain fasting. It has its place. However, the sacrifice and self-denial that commitment to works of mercy requires far exceeds any self-denial that fasting might entail.



Furthermore, such acts of mercy accomplish far more good in the lives of others than fasting does.

Works of mercy also call forth a different image of God than does personal penance. Though the Israelites did, at times, characterize God as a demanding judge, their primary image of God was one of kindness and compassion.

The prophets often directed the people to act toward others as they believed their God had acted toward them: tenderly and with understanding. So, while fasting might remind the people of their human weaknesses and their need of reparation, generosity toward others would remind them of God’s goodness.

Finally, Jesus instructs his disciples that there is a time when fasting is appropriate, and there is a time when it is not. Sometimes it is up to us to discern the right time.

An Open Heart for All

In Jesus' day, tax collectors were looked upon with contempt. They were, after all, agents of the despised, occupying Romans, and the taxes they exacted benefited Romans, not the Jews. Furthermore, tax collectors were not salaried, and so they survived by adding fees to the taxes. Since there was no scale for such levying, tax collectors often demanded exorbitant fees. It is no wonder the Jews hated them. Finally, the tax collector in Matthew is named Levi, indicating that he was a Jew himself and, because of his involvement in this hated profession, the people probably considered him something of a traitor. Jesus not only associated with this tax collector, but he actually invited him into his inner circle of disciples.

This story sketches three modes of behavior. Jesus is open-hearted toward one whom the community considers unworthy. He extends an invitation to follow him and live a different kind of life. Levi is also open-hearted. He leaves his former life behind when Jesus calls him to follow. He then gives a great banquet to celebrate his newfound life with Jesus. The Pharisees and their scribes are closed-hearted. They are so tied to what they consider propriety that they cannot rejoice in Levi's good fortune, and they actually criticize Jesus for his graciousness.

Which mode of behavior do we follow? Are we accepting of people, regardless of their circumstances in life? Are we open to opportunities to reform our own lives? Or are we quick to judge some because of their evident unworthiness and others because of their goodwill? Which choices do we make during this Lent?

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Are we accepting of people,
regardless of their circumstances in life?



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The Model Set Before Us

Like every biblical story of sin, the story of Adam and Eve begins with an account of divine graciousness. God first created man and woman as pieces of art and then provided these earth creatures with the nourishment and beauty of the natural world. Not satisfied to be humble earth creatures, the man and his female companion desire to be like gods, “knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:22). This is the universal and perennial sin. And who has not fallen into that same trap? We set our own personal laws to govern our lives, we seek to control others, we reject God, and we enthrone human ingenuity.

While sinfulness cannot be denied, how much greater is God’s grace? Despite humanity’s wickedness, God saved Noah and his family along with all creation. Jesus’ story begins with his resistance to temptation. Indeed he is placed before us as an example to strengthen our own resistance. Adam and Eve failed, we fail, but Jesus remains faithful. At last, someone was totally faithful to God. Jesus is the model set before us this Lent.

✿ God first created man and woman as pieces of art and then provided these earth creatures with the nourishment and beauty of the natural world.

Closer to Holiness

Is it possible to be holy, as God is holy? If so, what does holiness mean? Are we called to flee to the wilderness, fast rigorously, or deny ourselves the pleasures of life? Are we to spend our days in prayer and meditation? While all of these pious penitential practices are commendable—at least at the right time and under the appropriate circumstances—we are also called to other Lenten pursuits. Through Moses, the Israelites are told to be holy and deal with each other with honesty, patience, and acceptance, to love others as they love themselves (see Leviticus 19:1–2, 11–18). Jesus instructs his disciples in the same spirit (see Matthew 25:31–46).



He tells them to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, comfort those who suffer in any way. When they act in this way, they actually give birth to the reign of God. When we are holy as God is holy, when we are filled with the spirit of Jesus, we will care for those among us who are in need.

If we think of Lent as a time of penitential practices, we should commit ourselves to the kind of penance that will really make a difference. The works of mercy are not always easy. They often call for great self-sacrifice. However, when we perform them, we lead ourselves and the world a little closer to holiness.

Total Transformation Through Prayer

We all know the Our Father. Many of us know this prayer so well that we may forget its meaning when we pray it. First, we address God as the source of our life—not merely as our Creator but as our parent, with all of the intimacy this implies. We acknowledge that God is “in heaven,” beyond the limitations that circumscribe our own lives. Then we honor and praise God’s name, God’s very being. We ask for a challenging reality—that the harmony, goodness, and peace we associate with God might be established in our world during our lifetime.

When we pray this prayer, we remember that our own selfless endeavors help establish the reign for which we so desperately yearn. We then pray for our needs and ask for forgiveness (never hard to do). However, this petition suggests that our own willingness to forgive others should be the standard employed in our being forgiven. Although God’s forgiveness of us isn’t contingent on our willingness to forgive, God does demand that we forgive—always, even when it’s hard.

Finally, we pray for perseverance, for we know that we so easily compromise our best intentions. When we pray this well-loved prayer, we commit ourselves to a program of total transformation. Pray it today, hearing the words and realizing what you’re saying.

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Grace for the “Unworthy”

Sent to convert the Ninevites, the mortal enemies of ancient Israel, the prophet Jonah ran away. He could not bear the idea that God’s mercy might be extended to people he hated. However, God’s goodness toward Nineveh would not be thwarted. The prophet was literally spat up onto the shore of the city. Grudgingly, he was forced to preach repentance. And, much to his chagrin, the Ninevites were open to his message, repented of their evil ways, and demonstrated their repentance by fasting.

The reason for the prophet’s reluctance isn’t clear, but the text focuses on the Ninevites’ penitence, a point for us to consider

during this Lenten season. It demonstrates that God’s mercy is extended to all people. Jonah’s story includes people he (and we) might think are not worthy of God’s graciousness. But then, who is? It is, after all, graciousness, and graciousness is not earned: It is freely given.

It is often difficult for us to rejoice in the good fortune of those we consider our enemies. However, this is precisely the message of the story of Jonah. He did not want the Ninevites to be blessed by God. He would rather see them unhappy and suffering for their hostility toward him and his people and their obvious rejection of God. But God would not have it. Divine mercy was extended, it was accepted, and the Ninevites were reconciled with God.



Our **Daybreaks** Scripture for Lent begins with “return to me....” Throughout this season, we examine our relationships, especially with God, and start to rebuild a connection of love and redemption. Biblical scholar and author Dianne Bergant, CSA, illustrates how God’s love is found in people and places, as well as throughout the Bible. Using examples and the perfect model of Jesus, we are led to see our lives in the light of Christ’s death and glorious resurrection.



Daybreaks offers a daily reflection to help us focus on God’s eternal grace and mercy. Each reflection takes only a few moments to read, but the messages can last a lifetime. Allow **Daybreaks** to enhance your faith and touch your heart during this call to conversion, the journey of Lent and Easter.

Dianne Bergant, CSA, is the Carroll Stuhlmueller, CP, Distinguished Professor of Biblical Studies at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, where she currently works in the areas of biblical interpretation and theology. Her many publications include *Preaching the New Lectionary*, Volumes A, B & C (Liturgical Press); *The Word for Every Season*, Years A, B & C (Paulist Press); and contributions to the *New Collegeville Bible Commentary* (Liturgical Press).

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