

DAYbreaks



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Daily Reflections for
Lent and Easter

RON ROLHEISER, OMI

PRAYER

Lord God, this Lent wash away all my doubts about your love for me, for others, and for all your creation, that I may proclaim your goodness. Teach me to become perfect as you are perfect, in all my ways.

May I, with your help, come to see and love in others your own image and likeness, especially in those I find difficult. May my Lenten observance help me to enter into the dying and rising Jesus, that I may experience and share with others your joy, and that I may rejoice with a new song in my heart together with all your children. Amen.

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First Edition



ASH WEDNESDAY

[Jesus said,] “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.”

MATTHEW 6:6

Too many of us need to see punishment befall the wicked.

For those who feel that way, knowing that good shall have its day isn't reward enough. No. The bad must also be punished.

All that worry that somebody might be getting away with something and all that anxiety that God might not be an exacting judge suggest that revenge-seekers, like the older brother in the Prodigal Son parable, might be doing a lot of things right but are missing something important inside themselves. They may be dutiful and moral but bitter underneath and unable to enter the circle of celebration and the dance.

If we feel wounded and bitter we're apt to worry that God's justice might be too lenient, with inadequate punishment accorded to the bad. The start of Lent on Ash Wednesday is a good time to give up that way of thinking forever. Doing so means less worry about God's way and more about our own incapacity to forgive, to let go of our hurts, to take delight in life, to give others the gaze of admiration, to celebrate, and to join in the dance. For us to be fit for heaven, bitterness must go.

We may have never really felt in our hearts the true and gentle words that the Father spoke to the older brother of the Prodigal Son: “My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again” (Luke 15:31–32).



FIRST WEEK OF LENT

Humility and Repentance

First Sunday of Lent

Beloved, do not look for revenge but leave room for the wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."

ROMANS 12:19

As a child on the farm, I recall seeing folks break a horse

brought in from the wild. Colts that had run free would be caught and forced to submit to a halter, a saddle, and commands. The process of breaking the horse's freedom and spirit was far from gentle, and yielded a mixed result. The horse was now compliant, but part of its spirit was gone.

That's an apt image for the journey, both human and spiritual. Life, in ways that are far from gentle, eventually breaks our spirit, for good and for bad, and we end up humble, but we also end up somewhat wounded and unable to—metaphorically—stand upright.

Because of the pain of our brokenness, we focus more on ourselves than on others, and we end up disabled. Bruised and fragile, we're unable to properly give and receive. We suffer, reluctant to share the goodness and depth of our own persons.

Perhaps when the priest blesses the congregation at the end of a liturgy, instead of saying, "Bow down for the blessing," he might say, instead, "Those of you who think you are not in need of this blessing, please bow your heads and pray for God's blessing. Meanwhile, those of you who feel beaten, broken, and unworthy of this blessing, raise your heads to receive a love and a gift that you have long despaired of ever again receiving."





SECOND WEEK OF LENT

Being a Disciple

Second Sunday of Lent

So do not be ashamed of your testimony to our Lord, nor of me, a prisoner for his sake; but bear your share of hardship for the gospel with the strength that comes from God.

2 TIMOTHY 1:8

Today, among many of us churchgoers, there is a growing propensity to self-protect rather than risk crucifixion for the world. We are well-intentioned in this, but, good intentions notwithstanding, our actions are the opposite of Jesus. He loved the world enough to let himself be crucified rather than self-protect.

Jesus' disciples were forever trying to protect him from various groups they deemed unworthy of his presence, and Jesus was forever clear that he didn't need or want to be protected.

More importantly, his disciples were also trying to protect him against persons and things they deemed as threats to him. What was Jesus' response to this effort at protection? We have his words: no more of this! But we don't have the tone of those words. Were they spoken in anger, as sharp reprimand? Were they spoken in frustration, recognizing that Peter, the rock, the future pope, had so badly misunderstood his message? Or were they spoken in that sad tone a mother uses when she tells her children to stop fighting even as the resignation in her voice betrays the fact that she knows they never will? Whatever the tone, the message is clear that his first followers didn't understand one of the central things about their master: Jesus had spent his entire ministry healing people, including healing diseased ears so that people might hear again. And, on his last night on earth the leader of his apostles cuts off the ear of someone in an attempt to protect him.

Everything about Jesus speaks of vulnerability rather than self-protection. He was born in a manger, a feeding trough, a place where animals come to eat, and he ends up on a table, "flesh for the life of the

world,” to be eaten up by the world (John 6:51). The first words out of his mouth call for metanoia, the opposite of paranoia. In the end, he gives himself over to crucifixion rather than to self-protection. That was Jesus’ response to a world that grossly misunderstood him and violently mistreated him. He opened his arms in vulnerability rather than closed his fists in self-defense.

Ideally, that’s how we should respond when the world is unfair to us. Unlike Peter, who failed to remember Jesus’ message and instinctively struck with his sword, don’t let threats erase what was central to Jesus’ teaching by responding in a manner antithetical to the gospel, hostility for hostility, immaturity for immaturity.

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*Jesus loved the world enough
to let himself be crucified
rather than self-protect.*



FOURTH MONDAY OF LENT

Instead, shout for joy and be glad forever / in what I am creating. / Indeed, I am creating Jerusalem to be a joy / and its people to be a delight.

ISAIAH 65:18

The deep truth that God loves us unconditionally lies at the heart of our faith. We believe God looks down on our lives and says, “You are my beloved child. In you I take delight!” We do not doubt the truth of that, we just find it impossible to believe.

Unless we are extraordinarily blessed, we rarely, if ever, experience unconditional love. Mostly we experience love with conditions: Our parents love us better when we do not mess up. Our teachers love us better when we behave and perform well. Our churches love us better when we do not sin. Friends love us better when we are successful and not needy. The world loves us better when we are attractive. Our spouses love us better when we do not disappoint them. Mostly, we have to measure up in some way to be loved.

Many of us also have been wounded by supposed expressions of love that weren't love but were expressions of self-serving manipulation, exploitation, or even abuse. We wither under that and become the walking wounded, unable to believe that we are loved and lovable. We know God loves us, so how can we make ourselves believe it?

Deep down, below our wounded parts, the child of God who still inhabits the recesses of our soul knows that he or she is made in God's image and likeness and is special, beautiful, and lovable.



FIFTH THURSDAY OF LENT

God said to Abraham: For your part, you and your descendants after you must keep my covenant throughout the ages.

GENESIS 17:9

After the Last Supper, Jesus goes into the Garden of

Gethsemane, where he prays in great agony and, in the face of every kind of resistance within himself, ultimately accepts what his Father asks of him: sacrifice and death.

Scripture says his agony takes place in a garden, archetypically a place of love, where a prince and princess meet to kiss in the moonlight, the place of our dreams, the paradise Adam and Eve lost for us.

Jesus sweats blood there, not as the great teacher or magus, nor as the great king or shepherd, nor even as the great conqueror of sin and death as the divine warrior, but as the great lover. In the Garden, Jesus makes the decision to accept something—what will guide his love. This decision costs him blood.

My own dad (who taught me many of the things I trust most deeply about faith and life) used to say, “If you want to keep a commitment, any commitment, you can do it only if you are willing to sweat blood in a garden. To be true to what’s asked of you, sometimes you have to make a decision for value that goes against every emotion in your heart. Dad understood what’s at stake in the Garden. Tragically, for the most part, we no longer do.”



EASTER

Gratitude

For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ your life appears, then you too will appear with him in glory.

COLOSSIANS 3:3–4

In John's Gospel, we are told the story of Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary, who were very close friends of Jesus. Here's the story:

The sisters of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, sent word to Jesus that “the man you love is ill” with the implied request that Jesus should come heal Lazarus (John 11:3). Jesus’ reaction is curious. He doesn’t rush off to try to heal his close friend. Instead he remains where he is for two days longer while his friend dies. Then, after Lazarus has died, he sets off to visit him. As he approaches the village where Lazarus has died, he is met by Martha and then later, by Mary. Each, in turn, asks him the question: “Why?” Why, since you loved this man, did you not come to save him from death?

Why is it that God invariably seems absent when bad things happen to good people? Why doesn’t God rescue his loved ones and save them from pain and death? The answer to that question teaches a very important lesson, namely that God is not a God who ordinarily *rescues* us but is rather a God who *redeems* us. God doesn’t ordinarily intervene to save us from humiliation, pain, and death. Rather, he redeems humiliation, pain, and death after the fact.

Simply put, Jesus treats Lazarus exactly the same way as God the Father treats Jesus. Our Savior is deeply and intimately loved by his Father, and yet his Father doesn’t rescue him from humiliation, pain, and death. In Jesus’ lowest hour—when he is humiliated, suffering, and dying on the cross—he’s jeered by a thief being crucified who says, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us” (Luke 23:39). But there’s no rescue. Instead, Jesus dies inside the humiliation and pain. God raises him only after he dies.

That is one of the key revelations inside of the resurrection, and it’s

the one we perhaps most misunderstand. We are forever predicating our faith on, and preaching, a rescuing God, a God who promises special exemptions to those of genuine faith. Have a genuine faith in Jesus and you will be spared from life's humiliations and pains! Have a genuine faith in Jesus and prosperity will come your way! Believe in the resurrection and rainbows will surround your life!

Jesus never promised us rescue, exemptions, immunity from cancer, or escape from death. Instead, he promised that, in the end, there will be redemption, vindication, immunity from suffering, and eternal life. In the meantime, we will experience the same kinds of humiliation, pain, and death that everyone else suffers.

The death and resurrection of Jesus reveal a redeeming God, not a rescuer.



*For God did not send his Son
into the world to condemn
the world, but that the world
might be saved through him.*

JOHN 3:17

Drawing on Scripture, literature, and personal experience, Fr. Ron Rolheiser shows God's love is unconditional—God so loves us that he gave his only Son. The death and resurrection of Jesus reveal a redeeming God, not a rescuing one. And that redemption comes through forgiveness.

For each day of Lent through the second Sunday of Easter, *Daybreaks* invites us to pray and reflect. Fr. Ron's daily reflections challenge us to be more loving and forgiving Christians.



RON ROLHEISER, OMI, is an internationally renowned spiritual author, speaker, and community builder.

He has a master's degree in theology from the University of San Francisco, and a PhD and an SThD from the University of Louvain, Belgium. Fr. Ron is a member of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate and is president of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio.



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