



LENT YEAR

B

FROM EXODUS TO EASTER

MY DAILY JOURNEY THROUGH LENT

*Living
the Eucharist*[®]



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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DESIGN AND LAYOUT ■ Pensaré Design Group, LTD

COVER IMAGE ■ © Photononstop / SuperStock

Nihil Obstat: Rev. Christopher Begg, S.T.D., Ph.D., Censor Deputatus.

Imprimatur: Most Rev. Barry C. Knestaut, Auxiliary Bishop of Washington, Archdiocese of Washington, February 7, 2011.

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Published by Paulist Evangelization Ministries
3031 Fourth Street, NE, Washington, DC 20017
www.pemdc.org

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REV. FRANK P. DESIANO, CSP

Introduction

If we think of our Christian lives as a complex of journeys, then Lent throws light on all of them—and each week of Lent forms an essential part of our pilgrimage. Our ultimate journey, of course, heads toward the fullness of life, the Kingdom of God. Within that larger journey lie our life journeys of conversion, our various vocations, our relationships, and the particular journey of dying to ourselves so we can live for others.

Lent throws light on these journeys because it spans the time from Ash Wednesday, when we bluntly recall our mortality and need for conversion, to Easter, when the light of Christ's resurrection shines anew in our lives. The Church symbolizes this journey by asking us to return to the desert, where Moses led the Jewish people and where Jesus was tested. Lent, in this sense, is a journey from the Exodus of the desert to the glory of Easter. Yet each week of Lent serves its particular purpose: to advance the process of dying and rising in ourselves and our Church.

This booklet of reflections helps point out the way in which each week of Lent can be seen as a journey, from our weekday lives to the upcoming Sunday celebration of the Eucharist, which seeks to shape those daily lives. Each reflection touches on either a part of the Mass or a dimension of the Scripture readings for the Sunday that follows, helping to focus our journey through Lent from Sunday to Sunday. This can increase our faithful sharing in Sunday's worship.

The Lenten Sunday readings all have their larger vision. The ones we proclaim this year, in Year B, all allude to the great covenants God has made with humankind out of God's gracious love. Each Sunday the readings ask if, having heard anew God's commitment to us, we will commit ourselves again to the One sent to us, Jesus. As we express that recommitment, in Jesus' Spirit, in the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist, we re-confirm our place on the ultimate journey in God to the fullness of life.

Each day offers a reflection, a question, a suggestion for concrete action, and a prayer. As you reflect each day, see this as a discipline to alert you to the larger call, to which we all are invited to respond: how Sunday Mass involves us in the life and mystery of God and, in this way, sheds light on what life is all about.

We have included the Sunday readings along with the psalm response in each of the daily reflections. Plan to read and pray over these readings sometime during the week as you prepare for Sunday Mass. Many Catholics include reading the Scripture passages for Sunday Mass as part of their weekly spiritual exercises and find that this habit nourishes their souls. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in making the weekly practice of reading and praying over the upcoming Sunday Mass readings a habit of the heart for you.

Monday

Although this week begins in Ordinary Time, it will shift powerfully to the season of our Catholic liturgical year, Lent, when we prepare to proclaim, enact, and take more deeply to heart the drama of the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

REFLECTION

We know how it is when we have tickets to a big event, how our mind keeps leaping forward and our imagination tries to anticipate what's going to happen and how it might feel.

We've certainly seen this when young people get ready for something like a prom, a once-in-a-lifetime celebration of their school achievement and, more importantly, of their growing up. While we expect young women to obsess over dresses and shoes, we are more than surprised to see even young men worry about how they will look. We've also felt this ourselves, when we've gotten tickets to a show or a concert; we're humming tunes the whole week before.

This week is filled with anticipation. Lent is about to begin. Wednesday we will hear the solemn invitation, as the ashes are blessed, to undertake the practices of this spiritual period with seriousness. We will hear the prophet Joel on Wednesday ask us to return to God with all our hearts, to get beyond our "business-as-usual" approach to faith so that we get to its real substance.

QUESTION

Can you think of ways you have been "away" from God, so that Joel's invitation to "return" to God makes sense to you?

ACT

Decide how you will organize Ash Wednesday so you will get the most out of that day and its orientation to the season of Lent. What service will you be able to attend? What will you read in preparation? Will you invite anyone along with you?

PRAYER

Lord, I get caught up in daily routine. I lose track of how you are working in my life and how you invite me in a special way into relationship with you. Help me to put this relationship with you above all my other tasks and concerns. I pray this in the name of Jesus and his Spirit. Amen.

READINGS FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Genesis 9:8-15; Psalm 25:4-5, 6-7, 8-9; 1 Peter 3:18-22;
Mark 1:12-15

PSALM RESPONSE: Your ways, O Lord, are love and truth to those who keep your covenant.

Tuesday

The first Sunday of every Lent begins with the story of the temptations of Jesus. This year the story of the temptations is set in the context of the story of Noah, the great follower of God whose faithfulness saved him, and his family, from the great flood.

REFLECTION

In many places throughout the Catholic world, today is called *Carnival*, the social celebration of a kind of excess in preparation for Lent. People throw beads in New Orleans, they dance and have marvelous exhibitions in Brazil, and all over the world people think of a small bit of extra enjoyment before Lent starts.

So the narration of God's covenant with Noah, which we will hear this Sunday, might strike us as something of a down note. After all, the story of Noah is, in part, the story of God's massive disappointment in humankind, such that God "repented" that we were even created. God wanted to start over. God wanted to push *Delete* when it came to human beings.

But the story does not stop there. It tells us that there is a shred of Noah, a speck of faithfulness, in every one of us, and that God sees it. God makes a covenant with all of humankind—not just one people or certain kinds of people—to affirm our lives. The rainbow in the sky comes to represent God's commitment to human life—the whole point of the story of Noah!

Jesus' temptations, like the story of Noah, also show us what is lurking inside of us...whether we fall for illusions of power and pleasure, or whether we find our fulfillment in God, the only place it can be found.

QUESTION

How do you resonate with Noah's faithfulness to God?

ACT

Try to identify in yourself what aspects of the news you pay attention to. Does a crisis always seem looming to you? Notice how many times "rainbows" are reported. And how often you see them.

PRAYER

Gracious God, your message of hope rises above the valleys of doom in our lives. May the rainbow of your peace break our temptations toward war. May the rainbow of your compassion break through our greed. May the rainbow of your promise shine in times of tragedy and disaster. Help us to trust in you beyond all our fears of destruction. Amen.

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PSALM RESPONSE: Your ways, O Lord, are love and truth to those who keep your covenant.

Ash Wednesday

As Lent officially begins, the Church takes on a more somber tone. From now until Easter, it will be mostly purple vestments, and no one will hear *alleluia* in our Catholic churches.

REFLECTION

Ashes have a rather macabre feel about them, particularly when we think of the Lenten phrase that echoes the Book of Genesis: you are dust and to dust you will return. We happily forget that life is relatively short; it's not pleasant to be reminded of this.

Yet the tone is more than morbid; it is, rather, a tone of hope and blessing. As the priest extends his hands over the ashes, he prays to God for us, the faithful. "[I]n your kindness pour out the grace of your blessing on your servants who are marked with these ashes." And he then speaks about celebrating the Paschal Mystery of Jesus.

Ash Wednesday, and Lent for that matter, are not primarily about self-pity, as if someone thought it would be valuable to wallow in shame and self-remorse. Rather, we need to own our sins; we need to stop kidding ourselves about the patterns that lead us into sin. What we need is a time for reflection and insight.

Forgiveness, however, has to go beyond remorse. Someone may feel incredibly sorry for what he or she did to me; but only when I get a sense that the person intends for it not to happen again, that change has happened, will reconciliation become possible. So Lent calls us beyond the self-pity and recrimination that keep us stuck in our sin. It calls us, beyond remorse, to change.

QUESTION

What do you imagine the mark of ashes on your forehead might be saying to your neighbors?

ACT

Decide on one change that will be your object of reflection and intention during this Lenten season. Make a list of ways you will track the change in your life.

PRAYER

Lord, may the ashes not remain on the surface of my forehead; may the meaning of the ashes penetrate into my mind and heart. May the reminder of the shortness of life help me face, and conquer, those temptations that continue to beset me. I pray this in Jesus and his Spirit. Amen.

READINGS FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Genesis 9:8-15; Psalm 25:4-5, 6-7, 8-9; 1 Peter 3:18-22;
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Thursday

After we bring our gifts of bread and wine to the altar, every Mass moves to the Preface of the great Eucharistic Prayer, which comprises the second great part of the Mass (the Word is the first great part). Prefaces hold up for us spiritual themes of God's love and our response in praise. In this Sunday's preface, the priest will say or sing, "[E]ach year your faithful await the sacred paschal feasts with the joy of minds made pure."

REFLECTION

As many of us have gradually moved away from a more manual kind of labor into work that often entails sitting at desks and staring at computers, it has gotten harder for us to know how tired we actually become. Digging for eight or ten hours tires our muscles; we feel it. Typing for eight or ten hours tires our brains; but we often don't feel it.

Only when we get away for a while, especially to a place of almost complete quiet, do we begin to realize how tired we actually were. If we can find a quiet spot on a beach or a little house in the mountains, with phones turned off and computers put away, we begin to sense parts of our minds that we have not felt in a long time.

The desert represented just such a place of renewal in the imagination of the ancient Jewish people. It was to the desert that God drew Israel after they escaped their slavery in Egypt; it was through the desert, for forty years, that God led Israel, assuring them of his love and sharing with them the basics of God's

relationship with them. It is to the desert Jesus goes—we will hear it this Sunday—to clarify for us the meaning of our lives.

Jesus renews our minds, and our hearts as well, by helping us discern the point of life. He comes from the desert with the first words of his Good News for us: now is the time of fulfillment because the Kingdom of God is at hand. How's that for a message to renew our minds and our hearts?

QUESTION

What tends to exhaust you most of all?

ACT

Think of a place or a time of day that you can set aside each day during Lent as an opportunity for you to refresh and renew yourself before God.

PRAYER

Lord, sometimes I just get weary because I am exhausted by the work and worries of my life. Let me find rest in you. Help me to set aside the concerns and boredom of my life so that I may be refreshed in you. Amen.

READINGS FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Genesis 9:8-15; Psalm 25:4-5, 6-7, 8-9; 1 Peter 3:18-22;
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Friday

At Sunday Mass, starting with the Our Father, the rite of Holy Communion occupies the final large section of the liturgy. Here the congregation moves from praising God because of the absolute love he has shown us in Jesus, to preparing to be united with Jesus through the sacred food and drink he offers us.

REFLECTION

The Our Father ends with words that, upon reflection, might seem strange. "...lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." In the Gospel for Sunday we will hear how Jesus was tempted; but here we pray not to be tempted. What can this mean?

We have to enter the mindset of people at the time of Jesus. For them, the world was not a stable place; rather it was fragile, shaky, and always under threat. It was occupied by evil, by forces called "Satan" or the "Prince of this World." God was doing battle with these evil forces. That battle came to a head in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus begins to battle the forces of evil when he rejects the illusions and half-truths that Satan, the tempter, urges upon him. Our prayer at Communion in the Our Father is to share in this same victory of Jesus—that we not be led into the seductions of the temptations of our lives, and that we be protected from all evil. To receive Communion is to join ourselves with Jesus in his battle, and in his victory over evil. It is to be identified with the powers that constitute a kingdom of love, and to reject being one with the forces of hate. These words are not abstractions.

We know, in our own lives, how love and hate play out, how life and death play out, how opening our hearts differs from the ways we close our hearts off.

QUESTION

Do you think of yourself as someone who worries a lot? Or are you someone who rarely gets bothered by external events?

ACT

Think of one way you clearly see evil in your life. It might be something personal, or it might be social or even environmental. Ask God to help you make a plan to limit the effects of evil in your life.

PRAYER

Forgive us, Lord, our sin, as we forgive others. For when we forgive others, the power of evil is diminished in the world. Hearts open, hatred dissolves, peace begins to reign. Lord, help us to defeat sin by the power you give us to forgive. We pray this through Jesus and his Spirit. Amen.

READINGS FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

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Saturday

The final part of the Mass, the Concluding Rites, happen so quickly we can miss the drama. This part of the Mass provides the vital connection between Church and world. We believers do not stay in the church building. We go forth into the world.

REFLECTION

“Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord.”

This is one of the ways the priest or deacon can send the congregation forth. What do we think this means, to announce the Gospel of the Lord?

In a minimal way, the phrase certainly means taking the message of the Gospel into our lives for the following week. Watching Jesus move from the desert into his active ministry, we certainly can think about the ways he brought hope to the world by the announcement of the Kingdom.

But the phrase also calls us to a fuller elaboration of its meaning—beyond a holy thought or pious reflection. If Jesus brings the Gospel in his ministry, and if we are baptized into his ministry, how are we announcing—and bringing—the Gospel to our worlds? The worlds of our families, our neighborhoods, our city, and our modern way of life? For Jesus obviously intends us to be agents of his Good News. He sends his Spirit to give us the power to be Good News.

Of course, it is overwhelming. But this is all the more reason to understand our role as disciples. We let God act through us. We rely not on our own wit and resources, but on the grace of the Mass, which abides with us throughout the week: we rely on Jesus.

QUESTION

How do you usually feel at the end of Mass? Can't wait to leave? Ready to leave and to share?

ACT

Listen extra hard to any announcements at Mass this week, or scan the bulletin carefully. See if you find in them an opportunity for you to be Good News in your world.

PRAYER

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love. Where there is darkness, let me bring light. Where despair abounds, let me be an ambassador of your hope. I pray this in the name of Jesus and his Spirit. Amen.
(Adapted from the Prayer of St. Francis)

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