

# Taking Lent <sup>to</sup> Heart

Stories and Reflections for Lent



Fr. Thomas J. Connery

## Ash Wednesday

# 40 Days of Opportunity

Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

– 2 Corinthians 6:2

Happy Ash Wednesday? I was visiting one of our deacons in the hospital. I had a pleasant chat with him and his wife. At the end of our visit, I offered a prayer and blessing and then headed home. The elevator arrived, and I stepped back to let a worker step out with his cleaning supplies. He thanked me and wished me a good night. I uttered “thanks,” and as I stepped into the elevator I blurted out, “Have a Happy Ash Wednesday.” He looked startled and confused and asked, “What was that?” I repeated, “Have a Happy Ash Wednesday.” He thought for a moment, smiled and answered, “Oh yeah, you have a Happy Ash Wednesday as well.”

Happy and Ash Wednesday are not typically words we join together. If you take Lent to heart, you may be approaching it with a bit of fear and reluctance. Those 40 days can seem like four months when you are giving up your favorite dessert. Lent is a joyous occasion. We have the opportunity to grow closer to Christ. We have the chance to grow spiritually and to diminish or eliminate those unhealthy habits we may have ignored. I, for one, am looking forward to Lent. Admittedly, I don't always like it, but I know it is for the best. Together, let's begin this holy season with eager anticipation that God is going to work in our lives. I can't wait to find out what God has in store for us.

Heavenly **FATHER**, here we go; another Lent begins. I want this to be a good one, a game changer. So often it doesn't turn out that way. I don't always follow through on my plan to improve my spiritual life. I run out of gas and fall back into my old habits. Help me with the Holy Spirit to take to heart your invitation to grow closer to your Son. If I get even a little closer, it will be a wonderful 40 days. Let me begin. What do I plan to do these next 40 days of Lent? **AMEN**.

**Reflect on an area that you need to work on this Lent.  
Decide what you will do. Bring it to prayer.**

Thursday after Ash Wednesday

# The Weight of the Cross

[Jesus] said to all, "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."

– Luke 9:23

Writer Flannery O'Connor says that when she was young, her family would occasionally visit a nearby convent. One of the sisters would come out to hug her. Each time the sister held Flannery to her body, the cross that the nun was wearing around her chest would press into Flannery's cheek and leave its imprint.

That's one cross that made quite an impression. Sometimes, however, you wonder if the cross has made any impression at all. Following Jesus is more than singing happy songs or believing God is going to bless your endeavors. Following Christ does not promise success. Following Christ means that you are going to carry a cross. Walking with Jesus does not mean having a smooth path; rather, it can be quite cumbersome. Jesus makes it quite clear. Being his disciple is not for the weak. You will have to deny your very self. What I want takes a back seat. I say yes to Christ and no to everything and everyone else. As difficult as that may appear, there is a peace and strength when we do it in Christ. What we surrender, we gain back in him.

**FATHER**, I act surprised when I find that I have to suffer for my faith. I always thought that you would give me a smooth path, that I would go through life without any serious problems. After all, I have trusted in Jesus. I realize now that faith isn't an excuse for a soft and easy life. It is quite the opposite. I have to go against the grain. I have to go against my selfish desires. I must say no to myself. It is not easy, Father. I often resist it. Help me to carry my cross in union with your Son Jesus. **AMEN**.

**What is it that I must deny myself  
in order to follow Christ more closely?**

## Friday after Ash Wednesday

# Living Out Our Faith

Sharing your bread with the hungry,  
sheltering the oppressed and the homeless;  
Clothing the naked when you see them,  
and not turning your back on your own...  
Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer,  
you shall cry for help, and he will say: Here I am!

– Isaiah 58:7, 9

Check out these rather unusual attention-getting announcements:

- In an Acapulco hotel: The manager has personally passed all the water here.
- An Indiana shopping mall marquee: Archery tournament—Ears pierced.
- In a Florida maternity ward: No children allowed.
- We do not tear your clothing with machinery. We do it carefully by hand.
- Lost: small apricot poodle. Reward. Neutered like one of the family.

Perhaps you too did a double take to make sure you read the above correctly. We also need to read again the prophet Isaiah's words to us. His admonition needs to grab our attention. Faith is not merely believing in a set of tenets that have no affect on how we live. We are to put our faith into practice. These words apply not to the select few, those whom we may consider the saints. We, by our baptism, are challenged to live out our faith. Lent is a perfect time to begin.

**FATHER**, I tend to worry only about my needs and problems. I can't believe that you want me to care for those in need. There are too many, and there are others who are better at it. I know this doesn't hold up before you. Even with my little, I have something to give. I will strive to be generous and put others first. This Lent I begin in earnest. In the name of Jesus, our Savior. **AMEN**.

**This week, go out of your way for someone in need.**

## Saturday after Ash Wednesday

# Keep Holy the Sabbath

If you hold back your foot on the sabbath  
from following your own pursuits on my holy day...  
Then you shall delight in the LORD...

– Isaiah 58:13, 14

One Sunday morning, a woman made a quick run to the local grocery store for some milk for breakfast. Waiting in line she noticed the man in front of her loaded with eggs, bacon, orange juice and bagels. She thought of saying to him, “It’s pretty obvious what you’re doing for breakfast this morning.” But she decided to hold her tongue. Good thing she did, for the lady behind her had a newspaper and toilet paper (Earl Klement, *Reader’s Digest*).

What are you doing on Sunday? Is it any different from any other day? Sunday is still the Lord’s Day. Though we do not live under the law, we hold in high regard Sunday as a day of rest. Attending church should be a given, but it doesn’t stop there. It is a day to rest and unwind, to escape from our daily routine or need-to-get-things-done attitude. God did not give us the Sabbath to restrict us but to give us life. You can’t go at 5,000 rpm all the time. Enjoy Sunday. Spend it with family and/or friends. No useless work. You don’t have to shop. Just enjoy the day. There are six days to get things done; Sunday is the day to rest and renew one’s energy.

**FATHER**, I get caught on the hectic treadmill of life. I like getting things done. Slowing down is not an option. I may not realize it now, but it is unhealthy. You gave us six days to work; I know that should be enough, but I like to squeeze in one more task. Worst of all, so often I get so busy that I don’t even have time to worship you. When I think about it, it sounds crazy. Help me get my priorities right. Let me enjoy and relax each Sunday that you give me. **AMEN**.

**Determine today that Sunday will be a day  
of rest and a day to attend church.**

## First Sunday of Lent

# Change Our Hearts, O God

For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.

– Romans 10:10

Eleanor Roosevelt was riding in an elevator when a drunk man got on. He weaved and blinked as he stared at her and then blurted, “Shay lady, you’re the homeliest woman I ever saw.”

Indignant, she responded: “And you’re the drunkest man I ever saw.” With a smirk on his face, he muttered, “Yeah, but I’ll be sober tomorrow.”

Lent is a time for change. We can be different. We can change our ways. Admittedly, it won’t happen overnight. We will not wake up a changed person. It will take work. It will take effort, and most of all, it will take God’s grace. That is what is exciting about Lent. Lent offers us the opportunity to turn our life around. I think we all have a dissatisfaction with some area in our life. Lent beckons us to do something about it. God’s grace is available.

**FATHER**, I am off to a good start. I feel the excitement and the possibilities that this Lent will be different. I am going to be better; I am going to change. I feel it. Please don’t let me whimper out and go back to my old ways. I want to be a better Christ follower. I want to have your peace in my heart. I want to be a better person. Send your Spirit upon me. I am ready and willing. **AMEN.**

**Share with one person your Lenten resolution.**

**Be accountable to him or her.**



Monday, First Week of Lent

## For the Least Among You

“Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.”

– Matthew 25:45

Have you ever studied for an exam and when the day of the test arrives, you look over the questions and suddenly realize you studied the wrong material? You can't very well leave the page blank, so you put down what you know even though it does not apply to the question. Somehow you hope to either confuse or dazzle the teacher by the depth of your knowledge. If nothing else, you hope to give the teacher an indication that you did study but you mistakenly studied the wrong material. I am not sure how you made out, but it rarely, if ever, worked for me. A wrong answer is a wrong answer.

I am afraid we may get the same response from God when we face him on Judgment Day. We will present our case of faithfulness: I gave to the building fund, gave up meat for Lent and even joined one of the church sodalities. It may be all good and well, but that is not what God requires. As we read Matthew 25, we are given what I like to call the test questions. There is no ambiguity. This is what God expects. If you cared for those in need, you cared for God. It is that simple yet, so many of us are studying the wrong material.

**FATHER**, thank you for revealing your heart to me. Thank you for letting me know what you expect the followers of your Son to do. There is no mystery; there is no guesswork. I just have to commit to putting them in action. I can love you by loving those who are the least in the world. If I do that, you will consider it done for you. It sure sounds easy. Help me to follow through on your wishes. In Jesus' name I pray. **AMEN**.

**Read Matthew 25 and choose one work of mercy  
that you will do this Lent.**

Tuesday, First Week of Lent

## Praying From the Heart

In praying, do not babble like the pagans, who think that they will be heard because of their many words.

– Matthew 6:7

I love talking to my mom. She appreciates my phone call. Thanks to cell phones, I call her several times a day. As much as I enjoy hearing her voice, there are times when I have to tell her, “Mom, I just need an answer, not your daily schedule.” It begins with a simple question such as, “What’s for dinner?” Mom proceeds to give me this long and detailed explanation. I find out what’s on sale, about her lack of freezer space and how many coupons she has collected. She will explain why she can’t go shopping in the morning because she has crocheting class, and she hopes my brother is in a good mood for he will be her driver. Exhausted, I finally have to interrupt and remind her that I just want an answer to the simple question “What’s for dinner?” Admonished, she then replies, “I don’t know.”

How often that resembles our prayer style. If one Hail Mary is good, ten is better. We rattle off the prayer without paying attention to what we may be saying. Or we may choose to speak in our own words, reminding God how bad our situation is and the dreadful consequences that will follow. In case God is not listening, we repeat it over and over. Not necessary; less is better. Effective prayer is a sincere prayer that trusts in God’s care for us. Spending time in prayer is not measured by the amount of words we may say but by the intention of our heart. We can spend an hour in prayer saying very little. Prayer is being mindful of God’s presence and allowing God to speak to us.

**FATHER,** I talk too much. I foolishly think that I have to remind you of everything, and to prove the sincerity of my prayer, I need to repeat it over and over. I know you enjoy it when we approach you in prayer, but we don’t have to monopolize the conversation. I can just spend time in your presence, confident of your care and love for me. You know everything and you know my needs. May I rest securely in my trust in you. **AMEN.**

**When you pray today, just sit quietly,  
mindful that you are with God.**



## Wednesday, First Week of Lent

# Trust in God's Mercy

...the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast and all of them, great and small, put on sackcloth.

– Jonah 3:5

The schoolchildren were going to confession. Fr. Doug suggested that they write their sins down on a piece of paper so they would remember what to tell the priest. The following week a child came to confession. The priest could hear the child unfolding his paper, and then the young boy began, “I lied to my parents, I disobeyed my mom and dad, I fought with my brothers and...” Then there was a long pause followed by a small angry voice, “Hey, this isn’t my list” (*Reader’s Digest*).

We have to give credit to the people of Nineveh. They not only knew their list of sins, but more importantly, they repented of them. They took God’s warning to heart. Turn away from your sin; turn to God. Too often we live in denial. We no longer call sin a sin. We rationalize; we excuse or explain it away. The first thing you need to do to change your ways is to admit that you need to change your ways. Lent is not a time to beat yourself up in condemnation, but a time for honest admittance of one’s sinfulness. Like the people of Nineveh, turn to God, and he will show his mercy.

**FATHER**, I want to have a good Lent. I want to change. I want to be a better Christ follower. I want to live an authentic life. Despite my desires, I often fall short. I will make no excuses. I will accept responsibility. I will admit my sin. Most importantly, I will turn to you. Grant me a humble and contrite heart that seeks your forgiveness. I no longer want to depend on myself, but I want to trust in your mercy. You will not disappoint. I ask this in the name of Jesus my Savior.  
**AMEN.**

**Tonight, at prayer, make a good  
examination of conscience.**

# Taking Lent to Heart

Stories and Reflections for Lent



**TAKING SOMETHING TO HEART** means to hold it close, reflect upon it and allow it to become a cherished part of us.

We Christians take to heart the message of Jesus—the Good News. While this is a lifelong process, Lent is an especially appropriate time to slow down and allow that Good News to penetrate our heart. We strive to discern a deeper meaning of the passion of the Lord and the joy of Easter that is to come.

As Father Connery reminds us in this light, heartfelt and thought-provoking booklet, Lent provides us with “40 days of opportunity.” Those 40 days are far from being all somber and serious. Father Con-

nelly’s delightful anecdotes bring many truths into sharp focus and some may even cause you to laugh out loud.

“Lent is a joyous occasion,” Father Connery says. “We have the opportunity to grow closer to Christ.”

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