

# MOVING TOWARD THE CROSS

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REFLECTIONS ON THE WRITINGS OF  
FREDERICK BUECHNER



**Creative  
Communications  
Sample**

BY MARTINE E. MARTY

# Ash Wednesday

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For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. *1 Peter 2:21*

“Because that is the way love works, and when someone we love suffers, we suffer with him, and we would not have it otherwise because the suffering and the love are one, just as it is with God’s love for us.” (*The Hungering Dark*, 14)

“Call waiting!” That phoned message alerts us to put a first call “on hold” so we can answer the second. During Lent many “first” messages are to be put on hold so that the single call of God in Jesus Christ can get through to us. The “call” is to repent, which means that we are to undergo a change of heart. The credentials of the caller matter here: Christ has suffered, and suffers now. But as Frederick Buechner reminds us: he calls us *in love* to suffer with him. That could be a forbidding message, but we pay attention because he will lead us, and we need only to follow. Buechner stresses the love which motivated Christ to suffer and to beckon us to suffer with him. We are graced to follow him, wherever his call leads us. Other calls can wait. We have turned to the cross of Jesus, and will stay on the path set before us, with God’s help.

**Lord, help us give priority always and only to the call of Jesus. Amen.**

## Thursday after Ash Wednesday

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Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life.” *John 6:35*

“Jesus said, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God,’ and in the end every word that proceeds from the mouth of God is the same word, and the word is Christ himself.” (*The Hungering Dark*, 32)

Following Jesus through daily trials and dangers can be—shall we say, it is—strenuous, so we need sustenance for our course. In most cultures, that comes with eating bread, often called the basic staff of life. Jesus points to himself and identifies himself as the bread of life, the most nourishing sustenance of all. We are guided to “live by” every word he utters, because “every word” here means not a dictionary full of choices, but hearing only Jesus, the one, the same Word.

How can this be? The Word is Christ himself. If the Word proceeds from the mouth of God, it is always Christ himself. Neglecting him or evading him is therefore denying “the bread of life.” That denial would lead to spiritual starvation, the loss of life. Jesus as the bread of life offers abundance, vitality and health, so we welcome him eagerly. It would be hard, even impossible, to think of any challenge today in which his presence will not satisfy.

**Lord, we are hungry and you are the Bread of Life: we would be fed.  
Amen.**

## Friday after Ash Wednesday

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For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. *1 Corinthians 1:18*

**N**oah looked like a fool in his faith, but he saved the world from drowning, and we must not forget the one whom Noah foreshadows and who also looked like a fool spread-eagled up there, cross-eyed with pain, but who also saved the world from drowning.” (*The Hungering Dark*, 42-43)

Who wants to be seen as a fool? Most people have a horror of being embarrassed. Preoccupied as we may be with the busyness of life, we may not have stopped to think of how foolish our faith, so serious to us, can look to others. Faith focuses utterly on the cross, an ancient instrument of torture that, in the Gospel stories, is the focus of a life-giving event.

However we regard it, it looked foolish to many, including St. Paul, who spoke of it as “folly.” But no sooner do we look at the cross and its apparent foolishness than we come to recognize that our powerful God uses it in a life-saving way. Buechner has us ponder the story of Noah, who looked foolish in the face of a predicted flood but who survived, as, in faith, shall we. Now it is our turn to survive, so that we can serve the God who is never foolish and is always power-full.

**Lord, give us the wisdom to see beyond what the world calls foolishness. Amen.**

# Saturday after Ash Wednesday

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Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross.

*Hebrews 12:1-2*

**J**oy is where the whole being is pointed in one direction, and it is something that by its nature a man never hoards but always wants to share. The second thing is that joy is a mystery because it can happen anywhere, anytime, even under the most unpromising circumstances, even in the midst of suffering, with tears in its eyes. Even nailed to a tree." (*The Hungering Dark*, 102)

Thinking about his suffering to come led Jesus to be full of sorrow. Sorrow? How dare the biblical writer see Jesus enduring the cross not with horror but with joy? Are we out of our minds to think we can endure indignity and pain *with joy* like his? Yet those who have moved toward their crosses with him have recognized a particular kind of joy.

Buechner catches us off guard with his assumption that, in the promise of such joy, we will also have enough left over to share. We may be stupefied by the promise that, like Jesus, we can experience joy and endure suffering with him. Yet we have millions of precedents in those who through the ages endured because, through tears, they saw the figure on the cross who empowered them, as he empowers us, to face surprising turns in life ... *with joy!*

**Lord, let us, with you, see the experiences with faith in life as joys.**

**Amen.**

## The First Sunday in Lent

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Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who ... humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

*Philippians 2:5-8*

# Monday, the First Week in Lent

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Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you.

*John 14:27*

Grant us thy peace, Lord, which the world can neither give nor take away, thy peace that exists only in the eye of the storm, the heart of the battle. Grant us finally the joy of the man on the cross." (*The Hungering Dark*, 102)

In many Christian gatherings, people "pass the peace." They do so because as Jesus parted from his disciples he left them with the promise of peace. He knew how confusing the word of peace can be. Through the centuries we have seen too many peace treaties broken and, in daily life, tension and conflict obscure hopes of lasting peace.

We think today of what *he* meant as he said he was giving peace *not as the world* gives it. Buechner knew and wrote that, as we stay in the world of storm, we need a kind of peace that could weather it. We need a kind of peace that outlasts battle, even in its heart and in its heat. This is because the word from the cross comes with the authority of the Father of Jesus who brings "the peace which passes understanding."

**Lord, grant us your peace so that we can meet whatever comes in our lives. Amen.**

# Tuesday, the First Week in Lent

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When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.

*Luke 9:51*

When the wedding feast [at Cana] was over, he set his face toward Jerusalem and started out for the hour that had not yet come but was to come soon enough, the hour when he too was to embrace the whole earth and water it with more than his tears." (*The Hungering Dark*, 94)

Look up in a dictionary the phrase "to set one's face," and you will find that almost always it pictures a person setting his or her face *against* some thing, person or place. This is done, we read, "with determination." Very different is the direction of the face of Jesus, as he, with determination, purposes to go to Jerusalem, where he will suffer and from where he will be "taken up."

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Move toward the cross of Christ this Lent with Frederick Buechner, one of the greatest Christian theological minds of our time. Each day of Lent, thought-provoking quotes from Buechner's beloved works are paired with insightful reflections by preeminent religious commentator and biblical scholar Martin E. Marty, accompanied by Bible readings and prayers. Let this depth of wisdom draw you ever closer to the very heart of Christ the crucified.

**Frederick Buechner** is a theologian and the author of more than 30 published books and has been an important source of inspiration and learning for many readers. His work encompasses different genres, including fiction, autobiography, essays and sermons, and his career has spanned six decades. Buechner's books have been translated into many languages for publication around the world.

**Martin E. Marty, Ph.D.**, served as a professor at the University of Chicago Divinity School for 35 years before retiring in 1998. He has been a columnist and senior editor for *The Christian Century* magazine since 1956 and has authored over 60 books.