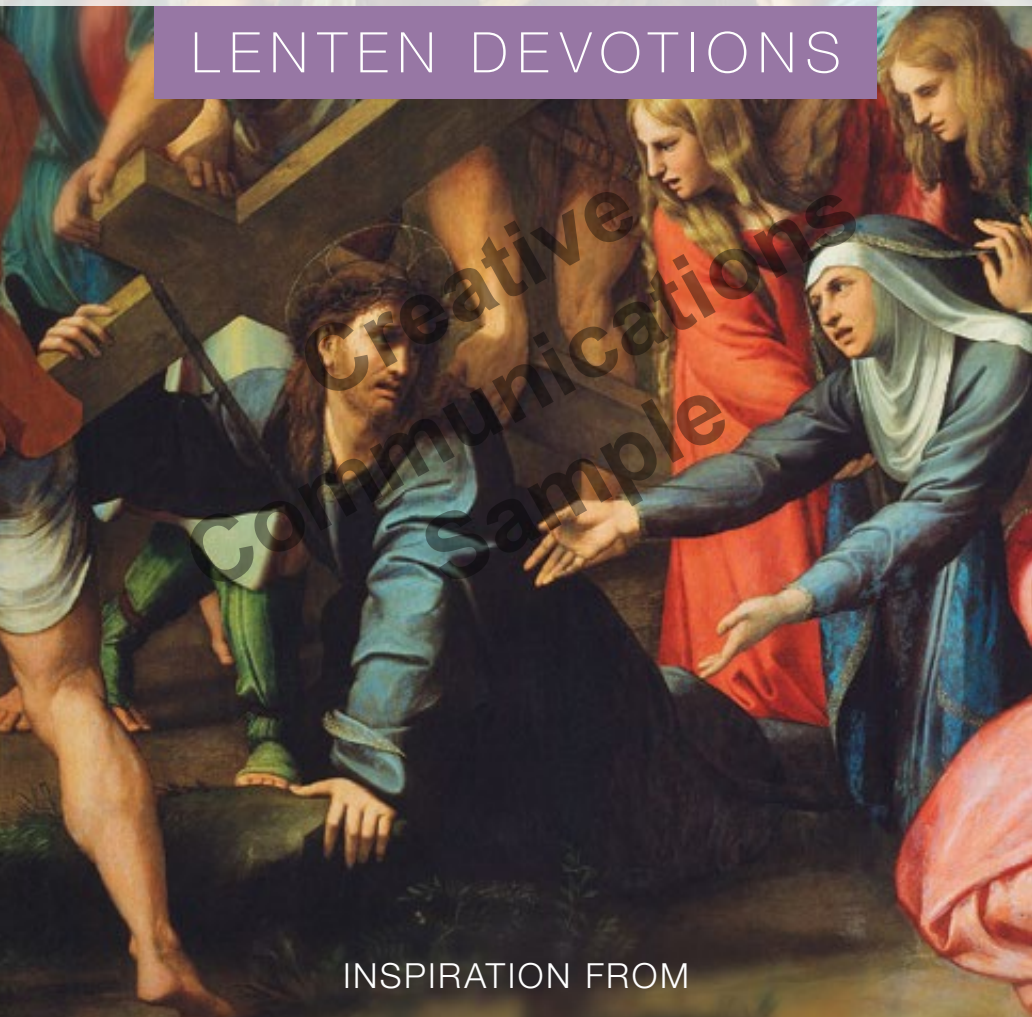


THE SAVING PASSION

LENTEN DEVOTIONS



INSPIRATION FROM

HENRI J. M. NOUWEN

Ash Wednesday

A TIME TO WEEP

Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

Psalm 30:5

Weeping and mourning are considered by many people as signs of weakness. They say that crying will not help anybody. Only action is needed. And still, Jesus wept over Jerusalem; he wept also when he heard that his friend Lazarus had died. Our tears reveal to us the painful human condition of brokenness; they connect us deeply with the inevitability of human suffering; they offer the gentle context for compassionate action. (Walk With Jesus, 52)

Forgiving Lord, cleanse us of our sin and guilt, and fill us with joy every morning. Amen.

Thursday After Ash Wednesday

LAILOW AND LIFTED UP

Humble yourselves ... under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time.

1 Peter 5:6

Jesus was stripped so that we would dare to embrace our own poverty and the poverty of our humanity. In looking at our impoverished selves and the poverty of our fellow human beings, we come to discover the immense compassion that God shows to us. (Walk With Jesus, 65)

Gracious God, strip me of everything that displeases you, and restore my dignity as your beloved and forgiven child. Amen.

Friday After Ash Wednesday

CROSS PURPOSES

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

John 3:14-15

“The Son of Man,” Jesus says, “must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him” (John 3:14-15). He is lifted up as a passive victim, so the Cross is a sign of desolation. And he is lifted up in Glory, so the Cross becomes at the same time a sign of hope. (Jesus, A Gospel, 101)

To those standing around the cross on that Friday, its purpose appeared to be humiliation, degradation and death. But God’s purpose for the cross was at cross purposes with the world. His design was for Jesus to be lifted up in glory, as he defeated the powers of darkness and death.

God’s ultimate purpose that day was to make it possible for us to be lifted up to the glory of eternal life, through faith in our crucified Savior.

Our life’s purpose is still at cross purposes with the world, which sees the cross as a symbol of degradation and defeat. But we who are lifted up with Christ see beyond the cross to the empty tomb and a new, purposeful and eternal life.

Lord Jesus, we thank you for enduring the worst human humiliation possible so that you might lift us up to a new and eternal life with you. Amen.

Saturday After Ash Wednesday
HE KNOWS OUR SECRETS

God ... knows the secrets of the heart.

Psalm 44:21

Jesus reveals himself to us as the Good Shepherd who knows us intimately and loves us. But do we want to be known by him? Do we want him to walk freely into every room of our inner lives? Do we want him to see our bad side as well as our good, our shadow as well as our light? (With Burning Hearts, 58-59)

What a blessing it is to know and be known by God. But do we really want to be fully known by him? It's disconcerting or even frightening to realize that God knows the secrets of our hearts. He knows everything we have tried to hide from other people, from him and even from ourselves.

What a blessing it is to know that our Good Shepherd accepts us as we are, with all of our fears and flaws and failings. He sees us as we were and as we are, and loves us nevertheless.

As we live in his grace and forgiveness, we are enabled to accept and embrace others around us who are struggling with their own fears and faults and failures. We are accepted and forgiven by God, in order to be his accepting and forgiving people.

All-knowing God, you know the secrets of our hearts, and yet you accept us as we are, with all of our faults and failures. Help us to be your accepting and forgiving people. Amen.

First Sunday of Lent

OUR DEADLY INFECTION

Moses made a serpent of bronze, ... and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Numbers 21:9

What Moses raised in the desert as a standard was a bronze serpent, healing everyone bitten by snakes who looked up at it (Numbers 21:8-9). The cross of Jesus is likewise the standard of healing, not just healing from physical wounds, but healing from the human condition of mortality. (Can You Drink the Cup?, 48)

The Israelites were deathly afraid of the serpents. Many were dying from their poisonous bites. But God offered them a cure. When they put their trust in God and looked up in faith at the image on the pole, they were healed.

All of us are dying from the poisonous bite of sin, which entered the world through the treachery of that serpent in the Garden of Eden. But there is a cure for our deadly infection. When we look in faith to Jesus on the cross, we are healed from the human condition of mortality.

There is no other cure. Some people think that sounds too easy. For others, the message of the cross seems like foolishness. But to those who accept God's cure, "Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:24).

Gracious God, thank you for providing the cure for our deadly infection through the cross of Christ. Amen.

Monday, First Week of Lent
A CLEANSING AND
RENEWING FLOOD

One of the soldiers pierced his side, ... and at once blood and water came out.

John 19:34

I look at your pierced side, and I see not only blood coming out, but water as well. Like blood, water too can be a sign of destruction. The great flood in Noah's time and the countless floods throughout human history show that clearly. But the water that flows from your side is a life-giving water. Not only is it a water that cleanses me from sin, but it is also water that brings me into a new land, a new home, a new community. (Heart Speaks to Heart, 42)

The breath of life is gone from his limp body. When the soldier pierces Jesus' side, blood and water flow from the pericardium around his heart.

Jesus' blood and water, sanctified by his sacrifice on the cross, now offer us cleansing and new life. Scripture assures us, "The blood of Jesus ... cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). Jesus promises us "living water" (John 4:10).

The latter promise is made visible in the life-giving water of Baptism, when God's grace floods over us, cleansing us of all that separates us from God and creating a new and right spirit within us.

Both assurances are made visible in Holy Communion, where Jesus' blood is poured out anew for us—breathing new life into our dry bones. Inspired and empowered by the Spirit of Christ, we go forth each day to flood the world with his love and grace and truth.

Living Lord, flood us anew each day with your cleansing and renewing power.
Amen.

Tuesday, First Week of Lent

POWER-FILLED WORDS

The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword.

Hebrews 4:12

The Word of God is always sacramental. In the book of Genesis we are told that God created the world, but in Hebrew the words for “speaking” and for “creating” are the same word. Literally translated it says, “God spoke light and light was.” For God, speaking is creating. When we say that God’s word is sacred, we mean that God’s word is full of God’s presence. (With Burning Hearts, 45-46)

Words have power—power to encourage and lift up, but also power to tear down and destroy. During recent years, we have seen powerful figures in our society brought down from their pedestals and disgraced by their ill-chosen words.

God’s power-filled words of law are able to bring us down in humility and repentance, as we look into the mirror of our lives and see all of our blemishes and blunders.

But God’s word is a double-edged sword. His Gospel words of mercy and grace lift us up and give us renewed strength and purpose. As we take to heart God’s sacred words of promise and hope, we are filled anew with his grace-filled presence, which empowers us to be his beacons of light and hope and healing, in the midst of a dark and decadent world.

Creator God, fill us with your presence and power, so we may be your beacons of light and hope and peace in the world. Amen.

Wednesday, First Week of Lent

SPIRITUAL HEARTBURN

They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us ... while he was opening the scriptures to us?”

Luke 24:32

It is important to know that, although these words, read or spoken, are there to inform, instruct, or inspire us, their first significance is that they make Jesus himself present to us. On our journey, Jesus explains to us the passages that are about himself. Whether we read the book of Exodus, the Psalms, the Prophets, or the Gospels, they are all there to make our hearts burn. (With Burning Hearts, 44)

Their hearts were aching and broken as they slowly walked back to Emmaus on that Easter afternoon. They had so hoped that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah.

But as they listened to the stranger who had joined them on their journey, they experienced spiritual heartburn. He revealed to them insights from the Scriptures, which made clear that the Messiah would have to suffer and die before he entered his glory.

As we read and hear God’s Word with an open heart and mind, the Holy Spirit transforms our headaches and heartaches into spiritual heartburn. He grants us new insights into God’s plans for our world and new awareness of his purpose for our lives.

As we meet people whose hearts are aching and breaking, may we share Gospel words and deeds of love which make Jesus present to them.

Lord Jesus, may our hearts burn within us as you open the Scriptures to us.
Amen.

Thursday, First Week of Lent

THE CUP OF BLESSINGS

Now that we have been justified by his blood, [we] will be saved through him from the wrath of God.

Romans 5:9

Jesus made the cup of God's wrath into a cup of blessings. That's the mystery of the Eucharist. Jesus died for us so that we may live. He gave himself away for us, so that we can live in community. He became for us food and drink so that we can be fed for everlasting life. That is what Jesus meant when he took the cup and said: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood poured out for you" (Luke 22:20). (Can You Drink the Cup?, 68)

On Calvary's cross Jesus satisfied God's wrath against the sin and disobedience of humanity. On the evening before, in the Upper Room, Jesus had already transformed the cup of wrath into a cup of blessings as he prepared a sacred meal for his disciples in all generations. In his Holy Supper he becomes for us food and drink, feeding us with the bread of life.

The mystery of the Eucharist is revealed by St. Paul, "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?" (1 Corinthians 10:16).

In this meal we are doubly blessed. We are united with Christ in faith and united with each other in one body—unified in spirit and mission.

Loving Lord, thank you for draining the cup of God's wrath and offering us, in exchange, your cup of blessings. Amen.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Henri Nouwen was one of the most innovative and influential spiritual writers of the past century. His vision of spirituality was broad and inclusive, and his compassion embraced all of humankind. Nouwen wrote 39 books on spirituality and the spiritual life that have sold millions of copies and been translated into over 20 languages. The passages quoted in this booklet are taken from certain of his published works, listed here, all of which are available through www.henrinouwen.org.

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