

LENTEN DEVOTIONS

LIFTED UP in LOVE



INSPIRATION FROM

HENRI J. M. NOUWEN

ASH WEDNESDAY

mold me

Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love...

Joel 2:13

That is the great conversion in our life: to recognize and believe that the many unexpected events are not just disturbing interruptions of our projects, but the way in which God molds our hearts and prepares us for his return.

(Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Out of Solitude*, 56)

O gracious Christ, walk with me through these days of Lent. In your abundant mercy, mold me more and more into your disciple. Amen.

THURSDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

Gentle and Humble

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

Matthew 11:29

But your heart is gentle and humble. You do not force; you do not pull or push; you do not coerce. You want us to come freely to your heart and trust that we will find there the peace and joy we most desire.

(Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Heart Speaks to Heart*, 22)

Lord Jesus, teach me the gentle, humble way. Lead me to that rest of body, soul, mind and spirit that only you can give. Amen.

FRIDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

A New Spirit

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

Psalm 51:10

Come and know that I have come to give you a new heart and a new spirit, yes, even a new body in which the struggles of your life can be seen as signs of beauty and hope. (Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Heart Speaks to Heart*, 25)

A new body? It is a human, a Lenten thing to do—attempting to jump to the end without traversing the path between *now* and *then*.

King David's multilayered sin occasioned Psalm 51. Nathan's finger pointed at David's iniquity-tarnished spirit: "You are the man!" (2 Samuel 12:7). That man threw himself before the Lord with a contrite heart: "Do a new creation work in me, Lord. Create in me a clean heart; infuse me with a new and right spirit like unto your own" (Psalm 51:10, paraphrased)

The heart-need is first. The spirit-need accompanies. Then the body. Lenten fasting touches all three in the grace of God. With a shadow of ash on our foreheads, we begin here. Contrition and confession. Lenten work. Create, O God. You wrestled with Jacob (Genesis 32:24-25). Wrestle with me. Like Jacob, I might come away with a limp. But also a blessing, and the blessing is so much more.

Dear Lord, create in me a clean heart for you. Amen.

SATURDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

Commingled Seasons

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

John 1:14

Your heart is not a heart of stone but a heart of flesh; your heart of flesh is not narrowed by human sin and unfaithfulness, but is as wide and deep as divine love itself. (Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Heart Speaks to Heart*, 22)

Christmas, Lent and Easter all seem to be present in today's selected passages. One cannot kneel at Christ's cradle without kneeling at his cross. To kneel at either is to kneel in amazement with the women outside an empty tomb. The Son of God took upon himself human form, became flesh with us, among us, for us. Christmas holds hands with Good Friday and Easter.

The heart of God changes our heart through the Gospel of Jesus. Joseph of Arimathea placed Jesus in a tomb hewn from the rock. Jesus, the Rock, was entombed in rock. With hardened hearts, the tomb would be our ultimate destiny. But the Word became flesh to redeem our heart. It is a heart of flesh again, according to God's original vision. And we have new life. Human sin and unfaithfulness were buried with Christ, who became sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21), and we arise sin-free. So we believe. We trust. We follow Jesus.

It was Christ's divine love that softened our hearts. They are stone no more.

Lord of all, keep our feet on the Way of the softened heart in Jesus. Amen.

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

God Is Love

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tested by the devil.

Luke 4:1-2

Your heart is broken, the heart that did not know hatred, revenge, resentment, jealousy or envy but only love, love so deep and so wide that it embraces your Father in heaven as well as all humanity in time and space. (Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Heart Speaks to Heart*, 36)

Our Lenten time is an intentional time in the wilderness. We invite the Spirit's company and direction. It is a time of introspection. We examine and confess the truth of our sinfulness. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the light of the Scripture illuminates the darker places deep within. It is with the Scriptures that Jesus rebutted the devil.

The Holy Spirit leads us in our wilderness time, as the Spirit did with Jesus. In the Prophets, the Lord God remembers Israel's wilderness time with affection, even longing. We may be tempted to think the Lord engages in a bit of revisionist history. Not so. The Lord remembers us with love. God is Love, and his love in the person and work of Jesus displays the open heart of that love.

In the open heart of God in Christ, God cannot help himself. He loves us. Are you experiencing the wildness today? The Spirit sings on the dry wind, seeking to fill you with the reminder of God's heart of love. For you.

Thank you for not being heartless toward me, O Lord. As you love me, so teach me to love in Christ. Amen.

MONDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

The View from Our Knees

For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it but sin that dwells within me.

Romans 7:19-20

When we dare to care, then we discover that nothing human is foreign to us, but that all the hatred and love, cruelty and compassion, fear and joy can be found in our own hearts. (Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Out of Solitude*, 42)

It is tempting to glide past passages like Romans 7:19-20, for these words confront us with reality: the reality of our sin. They are Lenten words, yes. But they speak of our sinful condition in every season of the year. Part of the work of Lent is to bring us back again even to this hard truth. Lent brings the truth of sin into sharp focus. Lent takes us to our knees. And by God's grace, we discover that we see more clearly on our knees than we do on our feet.

We see ourselves more distinctly with the help of Scripture and fathers and mothers in the faith. We understand that God always sees the truth about us. "While we still were sinners..." St. Paul reminds us (Romans 5:8). Still, Christ came. Still, Christ comes. Still, Christ speaks to us of the world in us. Still, Christ speaks his word, "Come."

Christ is still talking to the world *in* us and to the world *through* us. For that, we give him Lenten thanks. On our knees.

Holy God, help me to stay on humble Lenten knees throughout the year. Amen.

TUESDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

Woe

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful but inside are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of uncleanness.

Matthew 23:27

Often you will catch yourself wanting to receive your loving God by putting on a semblance of beauty, by holding back everything dirty and spoiled, by clearing just a little path that looks proper. But that is a fearful response—forced and artificial. (Henri J. M. Nouwen, *With Open Hands*, 17)

After the Fall into sin, Adam and Eve hid from God in Eden, afraid and ashamed (Genesis 3:8). It was the first fearful response in humankind's relationship with our God. Sadly, it was not the last. Over time, we have become more refined in our fear. The forced and artificial fearful response is designed to trick the Lord, and fool us. Woe to us!

God came in the person of Jesus Christ. He was often received with a first-century version of Nouwen's words. Christ saw the truth. We are walking tombs—dressed in such finery—walking death, attired with a wardrobe of false beauty, presenting what was untrue as though it was verity of verity about ourselves. Woe to us!

It can be hard to trust. It feels risky. Can we reveal our true selves and not be reviled? Yes, when the one we trust is the Lord. Yes, when we understand that Christ saw through to our true selves. Yes, when we, on our knees, understand that, nevertheless, Christ came among us, for us. He came to save us, to turn death to life.

Jesus, your love for me is unfathomable. May the Spirit work a Lenten work of stripping away deadly pretense and returning me to you, trusting. 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 several of his published works, listed below, all of which are available through www.henrinouwen.org.

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