

REPENT & BELIEVE

DEVOTIONS FOR LENT



GREG ERLANDSON

INTRODUCTION

The word *Lent* comes from an Anglo-Saxon word meaning “spring.” While we think of Lent as a time of giving something up or making sacrifices or receiving ashes and doing penitence, it is also a time of new growth.

On Ash Wednesday, we embark on a journey of recovery and discovery. We are recovering our faith. We recover by renewing our sacraments—particularly our Baptismal promises and receiving the graces we need through the Eucharist and Penance and Reconciliation. We are also setting aside old habits—our vices, our distractedness—and recovering something elemental and foundational: our relationship with the Lord who suffered, died and rose again for us.

But there is also discovery in Lent. It is a bit like clearing the winter detritus from the garden only to discover the scented herbs already poking up from the earth or the daffodils sending up their graceful, twirling leaves in advance of their radiant flowers. Lent is our spiritual spring of discovery. Each Lent is an opportunity to come to a wholly new appreciation of God’s boundless love for us, and his offer of mercy, if only we will accept it. Just as in spring nature is transformed, this is an opportunity for us to be spiritually transformed by an ever-deeper appreciation of the mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection.

As you prepare for Lent, reread Psalm 51, a prayer for repentance: “A clean heart create for me, God; renew within me a steadfast spirit” (51:12 NABRE). This is the transformation we seek.

Like the father rushing to his prodigal son, God rushes toward us (Luke 15:11-32). May this Lenten season be a powerful encounter with our God who is always faithful and always merciful. May we repent and believe it is so.

—Greg Erlandson

REPENT AND BELIEVE

ASH WEDNESDAY

And your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you.

Matthew 6:18

Ash Wednesday is an extraordinary day in the life of the Church despite it being treated as quite ordinary. It is not a holy day of obligation. No one makes us go to Mass in the middle of the week and receive ashes. Yet, most every church today will see more of us sinners darken its doorways than on almost any holy day.

What we receive is a visible mark, a cross made of ashes pressed on our forehead in an ancient sign of penitence and humility. And we receive this exhortation: “Repent, and believe in the Gospel” (Mark 1:15). Turn your life around before you become dust, the priest tells us. Lent is the time to “repent and believe.”

And on this extraordinary ordinary day, the Church always has the same Gospel reading: Jesus tells us how we are to carry ourselves in this season of almsgiving, prayer and fasting. This is between us and God.

Today, let us focus on this ashen cross as a sign of the humility and penance we are called to this Lent. We are not dieting or gaining tax write-offs when we fast and give alms. For the next forty days, we pray so as to draw close to the Lord. Make this Lent an opportunity to quiet our noisy egos and listen for God’s voice in the stillness of our sacrifice.

Jesus, let me experience your love and mercy more deeply this Lent.

DRAW CLOSER TO THE LORD

THURSDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself...

Luke 9:23

When setting forth on our Lenten journey, the Church advises us to use three traditional disciplines as we seek to draw closer to the Lord.

The first is fasting, a spiritual and physical discipline practiced by many religions. The Church asks us to strictly fast only two days of the year: Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. But we are also challenged to abstain from meat on Fridays and give something else up for Lent that we might otherwise desire. It could be desserts. It could be screen time. It could be alcohol. Or gossip. Ideally, it is something that stretches us, that reminds us of our weakness, that turns us to the Lord.

The second is almsgiving. Scripture repeatedly encourages us to give to the widowed and the poor. There are many needs in the world today that cry out for financial resources, from our local homeless shelter to international aid organizations like Catholic Relief Services. But we can also give of our time, providing companionship to the lonely or helping a stressed parent by offering babysitting for a few hours.

The third is prayer. In our conversation with God—at Mass, in our favorite chair or walking the neighborhood—we draw closer to him. Lent is an important time to express sorrow for where we have failed but also for praise and thanksgiving for his mercy and love.

Lord, let me use this season to draw closer to you as I carry the crosses you have allowed me.

ONE + ONE + ONE

FRIDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

My sacrifice, O God, is a contrite spirit. *Psalms 51:19*

A beloved pastor of mine once said Lent was his favorite time of year. In examining where we need to improve and what we need to cast off, Lent can be a time of tremendous spiritual growth he would tell us.

This priest had a formula for our sacrifices that was easy to remember and caused us to look at our Lenten commitments a bit differently. His formula was simply one + one + one:

Give up one thing

Add one thing

Work on one sin

Perhaps we give up that after dinner drink or our favorite TV show.

Perhaps we add a resolution to go to daily Mass once or twice during the week. Or we volunteer in our parish soup kitchen.

But the real challenge is identifying that sin we should work on. Is it anger every time we watch the news? Is it selfishness or resentment when we get together with family? Is it entertainment that we know is harmful to us? Or is it just that bad language we are too quick to use when we're frustrated?

Whatever the sin, we usually know what it is that we should work on. If not, we might pray to God for a prompt. Or ask a spouse or a close friend! This first week of Lent is the time to get started.

Holy Spirit, help me to please the Lord by identifying one failing I should work on this Lent.

ADMITTING WE ARE WRONG IS TOUGH

SATURDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners. **Luke 5:32**

What Good News this is! It means Jesus came for us! On Ash Wednesday, we were urged to “repent and believe in the Gospel” (Mark 1:15). This message of repentance is a major theme of Lent. It is God calling us, inviting us, to turn toward him.

“I’m sorry” can sometimes be the hardest phrase to say. Whether to our spouse, our parent, our child or our coworker, admitting we are wrong is tough. I think this is why the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is such an ignored treasure. We just don’t like saying “I’m sorry,” even in the privacy of the confessional.

In Lent, the Church calls us to the sorrow of repentance. It urges us to see ourselves as dependent on God’s mercy and to admit we are not yet “perfect, just as [our] heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Yet, in coming to this awareness, there can be such a tremendous experience of healing. It is a curious paradox of faith that, in our penitence, our faults can bring us closer to the Lord than what we think are our perfections. In our brokenness, we are graced with God’s mercy and forgiveness—if only we avail ourselves of it. This is what we mean when we say Jesus died for us. This is why we call him our Savior.

No matter how long you’ve been away from Confession, don’t put it off any longer.

Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on me.

SHAKING OFF THE COBWEBS

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

The kingdom of God is at hand. **Mark 1:15**

Lent is not a time of punishment but a time of sacrifices freely made to discipline the soul and renew the spirit. Here we are shaking off the cobwebs of habit and laziness. Our fasting, our almsgiving and our prayers are not meant to burden us or to make us suffer needlessly.

We know God to be a merciful Father. It is his desire that we grow in our love for him and our love for others. He wants us to blossom. Our sacrifices are like fertilizer for the soul, stimulating new roots and new buds of self-awareness, gratitude and generosity.

Just a few days in on our Lenten pilgrimage, this First Sunday of Lent is a good time to take stock. How have we done so far? Do we find we've already had a stumble or two? We ate that tempting cookie. We rolled over and hit the alarm and missed Mass.

Good news! Only our heavenly Father is watching, and he wants us to get back up and start afresh this week. Perhaps we might put a sticky note up on the bathroom mirror or a rubber band on our wrist to remind ourselves of our Lenten promises.

On the other hand, now is the time to ask: Did we choose something that wasn't really challenging? Now is the time to make a course adjustment. Our goal is new growth: a deeper appreciation for God's love and Jesus' sacrifice.

Jesus, I want to draw closer to you this Lent.

WORKS OF MERCY

MONDAY OF THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

...whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me. **Matthew 25:40**

Everywhere in the Bible, over and over again, the Lord demands we treat the poor, the widowed and the orphan with justice. The Church has identified the corporal works of mercy as feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, caring for the sick, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned and burying the dead. This is love in action.

The Gospel reading today challenges us to examine how well we love the poor. It is not only about giving alms but opening our hearts and seeing not how different we are but how similar we all are in the eyes of the Lord.

Holy Spirit, set my heart aflame with love for those in need.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

TUESDAY OF THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. **Matthew 6:14**

My mother, in her 100th year and struggling with dementia, still recites the Lord's Prayer as we pray it with her. It is certainly embedded in our memories and summoned at an instant in our times of need or thanksgiving.

The challenge is not only to recite the prayer from memory but to immerse yourself in it. Today, try praying it slowly, pausing after each phrase. What phrase lingers as you conclude?

This prayer is one of Jesus' great gifts to us.

Jesus, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

PAY ATTENTION

WEDNESDAY OF THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

...the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast and all of them...put on sackcloth. **Jonah 3:5**

February 21 marks the feast of St. Peter Damian, a great 11th century reformer, hermit and church leader. He preached against the sins of the clergy and had a great impact on the renewal of the medieval Church. His life comes to mind as we consider today's verse about the life of Jonah and preaching in the great ancient city of Nineveh. (See Jonah 3:1-10.) In his first day, Jonah's prophetic call to repentance was heard and believed by not only the people of the city but even by the king, who also covered himself in sackcloth and ashes.

God has always sent prophets calling us to "repent and believe." Whether we pay attention is another matter, as even Jesus found during his preaching (Luke 11:29-32).

How human it is to think that the call to repentance is meant for other people much worse than we believe ourselves to be. This is often one of the discoveries of Lent: That it is *we* who need repentance. It is we who presume that because we are baptized and go to Mass on Sundays, we are somehow saved when we have not really let the Lord into our heart and confessed our own failings.

Today, let us pray for the intercession of St. Peter Damian for our Church, which is always in need of reform, and for ourselves.

St. Peter Damian, pray for me that I can truly repent of my sins.

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Acknowledgments

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