

Recent and upcoming church initiatives are a good reminder that we are called to *journey together*. Faith is not something we do alone. We worship together, learn from each other, and serve those in need. Together, we are the Body of Christ. Together, we are the Church.

Pope Francis put into motion a worldwide, three-year **Synod on Synodality**. The word synod is from the Greek *synodos*, meaning to “walk together.” The process began in October 2021 and included a listening stage in which Catholics across the world shared their perspectives on the Church today. In October 2023 a synodal assembly—a gathering of bishops, religious, and lay people—met in Rome to discuss the feedback. You can learn more at <http://synod.va>.

Simultaneously, a three-year **Eucharistic Revival** will help Catholics in the United States deepen the connection between the Body of Christ we receive at Mass and our call to be the Body of Christ in the world. Next summer, a national Eucharistic Congress is scheduled in Indianapolis. See EucharisticRevival.org to learn more.

We are invited now to see Lent through these lenses, remembering we do not journey to the Cross alone, but together with our faith community.

FEBRUARY 14 ■ ASH WEDNESDAY

Switching Teams

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. —Psalm 51:10

I used to fall into the camp of people who don't like Lent because of its focus on self-denial, penance, and dryness. Now I've switched teams and look forward to it as a season for a spiritual reset. Lent commemorates Jesus' 40 days in the desert, and he went there right after his baptism when he heard the words, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11). He had 40 days alone to ponder those words! He had 40 days to think and pray about where God might lead him next and how God wanted to use him. When do I ever make time to ponder those things specifically? Not very often, and I think it would do me good to do it more.

What if we think of Lent as a time to believe in our belovedness and be open to where God is leading us? We can focus on our desire for a clean heart and a new and right spirit rather than dwell on what's “not clean”

or “not right” within us. Psychology is very clear that telling children that they are “bad” or “not good enough” is not helpful in the long term. On the other hand, assuring them they are loved and expressing hope for more goodness in their lives is more likely to help them grow and change.

If God is more loving than the best parent we can imagine, wouldn't God want this for us? So maybe the invitation from God during Lent is for a particular time of rest, intimacy, reflection, savoring, and sitting in our belovedness so that when we leave the desert, we are eager to move into whatever God has in store for us next.

FOR ACTION: How, where, and when can you set aside time this Lent to “go to the desert” to be alone with God? What will help you look forward to such time, rather than resist it? What can you put into place to set yourself up for faithfulness to your practice?

FEBRUARY 15 ■ THURSDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

Journeying Together

I've been lucky enough to attend some silent retreats, and one of my favorite times is mealtime. At first, I thought mealtimes would be the most difficult part. How could we eat together without talking? It turns out it's at breakfast, lunch, and dinner when I remember I'm not the only one on a conscious spiritual journey. I may not know a thing about what the other retreatants are praying about, but I know they are also there listening for God's voice.

Besides entering into Lent together, the worldwide Church is in the midst of a three year reflection on “synodality” called for by Pope Francis. This period reminds me of those retreats because synodality comes from the Greek word for “journeying together” and that's what this Lent and synod period are. We begin with the belief that the Holy Spirit lives within and speaks to every one of us. The Holy Spirit doesn't just communicate with priests, bishops, and popes; the Holy Spirit communicates with those who attend Mass each week and those who only attend on Christmas and Easter. The Holy Spirit communicates with fallen-away Catholics who don't go to church anymore or go to a Protestant church instead. The Holy Spirit even knows how to communicate with the “Nones” and those who are “spiritual but not religious.”

Just like on retreats, the Holy Spirit is in charge and our job is to listen and respond accordingly. What might the Holy Spirit be asking of us, individually and as a Church? Where does the Spirit want to guide us? What are we being asked to change or leave behind? Is the Spirit wanting to surprise us or perhaps disrupt our comfortability? Church leaders (including women and lay people this time!) have been pondering these questions on a grand scale since their month-long meeting in Rome last October. Let's join them in listening for the Spirit this Lent and paying attention to what others say they hear from the Spirit, too.

FOR REFLECTION: Who else do you know who is entering into an intentional time of prayer and spiritual practice this Lent? Keep them with you in spirit, especially if you ever feel alone on this journey.

FEBRUARY 16 ■ FRIDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

Be Bold In Your Fasting

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? —Isaiah 58:6-7

Because I gave up sugar, chocolate, and desserts in some form or another for so many Lents, these are still the first things that come to mind when I think of Lenten fasting. Then I come to this reading, and Isaiah squashes that idea. My skipping a brownie for dessert doesn't do a thing for the poor unless I bake brownies and take them to a homeless person.

This is one of those Scripture readings we may wish to avoid because it needles at the conscience, which may not feel good but ultimately is a good thing. We may not be enslaving anyone personally, but how many of our daily or weekly purchases contribute to businesses or industries that pay people less than a living wage or endanger their health? That's a modern version of slavery. I may not come across a naked person on a typical day, but how many people could I clothe with the extra clothes in my closet? And how many people (including children) slaved away making my clothes in an unsafe factory for 12 hours a day and barely any pay? That last one, "hiding yourself from your own kin" is something many

of us are guilty of when we don't check up on elderly relatives or keep up with our parents or siblings.

God is clear in this passage: fasting isn't just for our own sake but for the sake of others who are treated unjustly or don't have enough to meet their daily needs.

FOR PRAYER: God, help me be bold in my fasting this Lent; may my sacrifice lessen the suffering for someone else.

FEBRUARY 17 ■ SATURDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

“He Tapped Me!”

After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up, left everything, and followed him. Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them. —Luke 5:27-29

A member of my prayer group who had never prayed by imaginatively placing himself in a Bible scene (like St. Ignatius taught) decided to try it with this passage one day. The following week, he gushed about the experience. “I imagined I was working at the tax booth, and Jesus tapped me! He tapped ME to follow him!” he exclaimed with surprise and delight. Next the man imagined Jesus coming to his home for the party he threw in his honor. He felt amazed and joyous that Jesus wanted *him* as a follower.

Can you imagine Jesus tapping *you* to follow him? He does! What might he want to say to you when he invites you? What are your gifts (social, emotional, intellectual, physical, material, etc.) that Jesus wants to use to bring about more healing, justice, and mercy in the world?

FOR ACTION: Read this Gospel story (Luke 5:27-32) and ask the Holy Spirit to help you imagine yourself in this scene. What does Jesus say to you?

Was It a Coincidence?

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news!” —Mark 1:14-15

In all of the Gospels, it's evident that Jesus and John the Baptist have great affection and respect for each other. So what would Jesus have felt knowing John was arrested and imprisoned? Jesus would have known that prisoners are sometimes tortured and that the authorities could easily manufacture trumped-up charges leading to the death penalty. Jesus might very well have feared for John's life. (We find out later in the Gospel that Herod executed John for calling out the ruler of the land for marital infidelity.) So how long was it after Jesus heard the news about John's arrest until he began proclaiming the “good news”? Was it a coincidence that he began preaching publicly for the first time soon after John's arrest? How did Jesus move from his worry and fear for John personally—and his probable anger at the state's injustice—to being able to proclaim good news? What made him so confident that “the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near,” even though he was watching the government destroy John's life? Somehow Jesus' grief and fear for someone he loved was transformed into his ministry of mercy and healing. How did that happen?

FOR REFLECTION: Do you hold any fear, worry, or anger about an injustice that God might want to transform? Is God inviting you to work for change or healing in some particular way?

Some Things to Fast From

You shall not ... —Leviticus 19:11-18

Some Christians mistakenly believe Jesus came up with the commandment “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” when, in fact, he was quoting from the last verse of today's passage in Leviticus. Immediately before it comes a list of “thou shalt nots,” some of which are among the Ten Commandments (“You shall not steal”), but some of which aren't. If you haven't decided what to fast from this Lent, this list offers plenty of good sugges-

tions. Even if you *have* decided what to fast from, the list provides plenty of other good suggestions too! Some of them might be easy to obey (personally, I've never been tempted to put a stumbling block in front of a blind person), but probably all of us can find other things in this list we need to work on, individually and as a community or nation.

FOR ACTION: Read Leviticus 19:11-18 today. Ask yourself honestly how God might be inviting you to change or do something differently going forward this Lent.

FEBRUARY 20 ■ TUESDAY, FIRST WEEK OF LENT

An Ancient Story

Give us this day our daily bread. —Matthew 6:11

If you don't know the story of the Israelites gathering manna in the desert each morning for their daily food (Exodus 16), you are missing the reference Jesus made when he taught his disciples to pray for their daily bread. This period of Eucharistic Revival in the United States is a perfect time to remind ourselves of that story. When the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness and on the brink of starvation, Yahweh rained down manna every morning. The Lord directed the people to gather only as much as they needed for the day and not to store it up because they could trust God would provide what they needed the next day, too. (When they tried to store it up because they were worried they wouldn't have enough in the future, it bred worms and became foul.) So when Jesus encourages us to pray for our daily bread, it's implicit that we are not to hoard what we are given (or what we think we've earned) but use it for our daily needs and then share the rest with others. While society's way is to take, hoard, and consume, Jesus' way is to give thanks, share until everyone has enough, and trust we'll be given more when we need it.

FOR ACTION: Read all of Exodus 16 today to learn the story Jesus knew so well when he taught about daily bread.

A Banquet, with Crusts

We cannot love God unless we love each other, and to love we must know each other. We know Him in the breaking of bread, and we know each other in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone anymore. Heaven is a banquet and life is a banquet, too, even with a crust, where there is companionship.
—Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness*

Dorothy Day, the co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement in New York City, knew what she was writing about after sharing thousands of meals with friends, co-workers, volunteers, and poor and homeless people. In her years of organizing and providing meals at the Catholic Worker, she had experiences of relaxed companionship and engaging conversations around the table with friends and strangers alike (a banquet). She also had plenty of experiences of sharing meals with drunk, high, or mentally disturbed people who couldn't carry on a coherent conversation yet were hungry and desperate for the food the Catholic Worker provided (the crust). In the ordinary and extraordinary encounters, she learned to spot Christ as people ate together, just as the two disciples on the road to Emmaus recognized Jesus when they sat down for a meal with him.

Some who see Jesus in the Eucharist fail to see him in “the crusts” of imperfect people around them. Others find it easier to see Christ out in the world among his people yet struggle to experience him in the Eucharist. Thankfully, there is no right or wrong way to come to know Jesus because he is able to draw people to himself in many ways, at many different meals.

FOR REFLECTION: Where is it easiest for you to experience Christ? Where is it most difficult?

Enlarge Your Tent

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. —Matthew 7:12

During the ongoing synod, Pope Francis has called for us to “enlarge the space of your tent.” Jesus didn't use this exact phrase (found in Isaiah 54),

but his manner of relating and preaching taught a similar message. He was born as a man into the Jewish religion, which strove to stay separate from non-Jews to maintain their holiness. Yet very early on in his ministry, Jesus began rubbing shoulders with fallen-away Jews, “unclean” Jews, sinful Jews, women, children, and all manner of people who weren’t Jews—Gentiles of all stripes and religions. When he spoke the Golden Rule, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you,” he didn’t qualify it with any disclaimers (e.g., if they haven’t committed any crimes, if they agree with you religiously, if they agree with you politically, if they are citizens of your country). The welcome space under Jesus’ tent was immense—in fact, too big for some people’s liking—which is what ultimately got him killed.

FOR PRAYER: Reconciling God, help me enlarge the space of my tent, trusting that I don’t need to agree with or even like the people I share a tent with. Soften my heart so that I treat others as I want to be treated and leave the judging to you.

FEBRUARY 23 ■ FRIDAY, FIRST WEEK OF LENT

A Challenge to Reconcile

If you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. —Matthew 5:23-24

Good preachers sometimes preach what *they* need to hear, and it also happens with me and my writing. I was headed halfway across the country to visit my parents recently to help out after a long spell of medical challenges. I didn’t presume I would see my sister—who lives just five miles from them—because I hadn’t seen her on any of my visits in the last several years. After a falling out, I had given up reaching out because she kept turning down offers to reconnect.

Then, this Gospel reading came up. I knew I would be attending church with my parents while visiting, and I realized I couldn’t sit in the pew with any integrity knowing my sister was only a few miles away if I didn’t try to reach out again. I prayed about it for days, asking God to give me the language to express that I wanted to be reconciled with her. I finally sent a text, hoping something might have changed. Unfortunately, it hadn’t.

I don’t know if and when reconciliation will happen, but at least I can approach the altar now, knowing I’ve left the door open.

FOR REFLECTION: Is God inviting you to take steps towards reconciliation with someone? If you don't feel ready for that, can you at least begin to pray for them—and yourself—to be open to reconciliation in the future?

FEBRUARY 24 ■ SATURDAY, FIRST WEEK OF LENT

“You Can’t Hate Someone...”

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” —Matthew 5:43-44

I know Kristin from the staff of a nearby church, and I've come to have great respect for her faith life. She'll occasionally tell me about a person she's been hurt by or is angry with in her family or at work. Sometimes, she secretly hopes she won't have to see or deal with that person again (maybe they'll move!), but she still prays for them, even if she feels no warmth toward them. She says she's realized, “You can't hate someone you're praying for.”

Our hearts may not be moved to feelings of love for someone who has wronged us, but we can ask for God's grace of humility, courage, and forgiveness to come upon us. We can pray for the other person even if we don't feel like praying for them or don't know *what* to pray for them. We can continue praying for them even if they refuse to be in a relationship with us after our efforts to reconcile. If we keep praying for them, we'll surely discover what Kristin realized, “You can't hate someone you're praying for.”

FOR ACTION: Turn to Jesus and talk to him as if to a friend about any person(s) you have trouble loving. Ask him for help to be more loving.

Pool of Sadness, Pool of Joy

I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living. —Psalm 116:9

This verse seems so straight-forward, but sometimes we leave Mass or close our Bible only to make choices that are like walking in the land of the dying. Most of us know what things are good for us and help us to walk in the land of the living: taking care of our bodies with good food, sleep, and exercise; being mindful of what kind and what amount of news and social media we consume; surrounding ourselves with people who love and care for us; moving outside of ourselves to be of service to others; etc. Yet we continually sabotage ourselves by doomscrolling when we're already feeling down or anxious about the state of the world, staying up too late playing games on a screen, calling on the wrong people for company, putting poison into our bodies that will make us feel worse tomorrow, etc.

My spiritual director once told me he had the image that I have two swimming pools in front of me: a pool of sadness and a pool of joy. He said he saw me sometimes wading in the pool of sadness even when I could have chosen to splash in the pool of joy. The above verse reminds me of that image. More often than not, I have a choice about where I'll swim. Yes, God will be with me, and with all of us, when we are swimming in the pool of sadness or walking through the valley of the shadow of death. Sometimes, we get thrown into the pool of sadness because of circumstances out of our control. Yet God *wants* us to swim in the pool of joy or walk in the land of the living whenever humanly possible. Many times we have the freedom to choose which pool, and which land, we want to inhabit.

FOR ACTION: What can you do today that will point you toward the land of the living? Call a friend? Take time to do nothing but rest with God? Do something joyful? Get outside in nature? Do it!

Kindergarten Teachers

Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back. —Luke 6:38

One day, when my daughter Madeleine was about seven years old, our neighbor Pat surprised us with some homemade pie on an otherwise ordinary Tuesday night. A few days before that, she had loaned us some garden tools; the week before that, her husband Dell had brought us some other baked goody. After Pat left the pie with us, Madeleine said matter-of-factly, “Pat and Dell must have had good kindergarten teachers!” “Why do you say that?” I asked. “Because they’re really good at sharing, and that’s mostly what kindergarten teachers teach,” she said.

When Madeleine noted their generosity like that, I realized I grew up with a mindset of scarcity that didn’t trust that if I gave, I would receive in return. Maybe it has something to do with having to fight with three siblings for my share of the popcorn, the toys, control over the TV channel, parental attention, etc. We always kept track of what everyone else got and compared it to what we got. (“She got 11 M&Ms and I only got 10!” “You let him play on the computer for 35 minutes but only let me play for 30 minutes!” and on and on, ad nauseam.) My instinct is to protect what I have in case there’s not enough to go around. I have to consciously practice trusting that if I give, something else will be given to me in the future. Sharing is an exercise and a discipline when I’m tempted to withhold or skimp on sharing what I have. But I want my daughters to internalize what Jesus is teaching here, so I’m practicing sharing our food, home, possessions, talents, and our time. Luckily, along the way, I’m also noticing how much others share those things with us, too. I’m finally starting to see that the measure I give is the measure I get back.

FOR PRAYER: All-bountiful God, help me notice the generosity of others and the abundance of creation all around me. May I use those as inspirations to be more generous myself.

Pick Something to Change

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. —Isaiah 1:16-17

Isaiah and his fellow prophets consistently called for individual and societal justice when they were active more than 2,000 years ago. When we read their writings now, their challenges work the same way. Are there evil things we do as individuals that we need to cease? Do we cheat at work? Cheat on our spouse or partner? Pay employees less than a living wage? Use excessive natural resources? Perhaps this Lent is the time to “cease to do evil” and do what we know is good and right instead.

If we aren’t committing some individual evil, though, there is plenty of other work Isaiah calls us to do to address the societal evil (social sin) rampant around us. Unjust systems and structures in our culture mean greater suffering for some individuals, even if we personally aren’t causing them to suffer more. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, “There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they’re falling in.” There are plenty of causes we can choose from to rescue people, defend them, and plead for their safety. What issue or group of people most touches your heart? Is it the foster care system and foster kids? Migrant workers? Public school education? Developmentally disabled adults? Teenage moms? You may not be able to fix the whole system, but you can still work at pointing out the evil and working for justice.

FOR REFLECTION: In reading the above passage, what call most stands out for you? How might God be moving you to take action?

Accountability Check

Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your

servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave.
—Matthew 20:25-27

In calling for the worldwide synod, Pope Francis has been clear that he wants Church leaders to take a listening stance toward everyone in the Church, especially those who are often relegated to the status of the least. Unfortunately, some church leaders are guilty of “lording it over” their flocks, just as some secular rulers do. Jesus’ hard teaching here is a good accountability check for us as individuals and as a hierarchical church. Is our work and ministry one of service and humility, or have we slipped into a pattern of ruling others because we think we know what is best for them and believe we have greater power and authority than they should?

FOR PRAYER: Jesus, give me greater humility and a sense of service in my dealings with others, especially those who may be “under” me professionally or socially.

FEBRUARY 29 ■ THURSDAY, SECOND WEEK OF LENT

Are You Rich?

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.
—Luke 16:19-21

A friend of ours, a retired man who raised four kids with his wife on their middle-class salaries, told me he was discussing this passage in a prayer group once. He told the group (all of whom were also middle-class), “We’re that rich man! We have far more than we need to survive.” That touched off a firestorm as others declared that, no, they weren’t equivalent to the rich man in the parable because they weren’t rich. My friend countered that they are a lot closer to the life of the rich man than they are to the life of Lazarus, covered with sores and literally dying for a scrap of food.

I don’t know how the debate ended, but the story reminded me of another friend who once suggested that when I am envious of what others have or what they can afford that I can’t, I can change my perspective by comparing down, not up. Instead of focusing on what people “above me” have, I should call to mind people “below me” economically. When I do that, I instantly feel rich because not only does my family live in our own house

with a roof that doesn't leak, but my husband and I don't have to share a bedroom with our kids. We have central heating. We have running water and electricity. We know we'll eat three full meals a day. We have a closet full of clothes. We don't have to worry about getting assaulted or shot in our neighborhood. There are clean, safe public schools nearby. When I look at it this way, I know that even though some people are wealthier than we are, I am extremely rich compared to the billions of other people in this world who don't have all the things I do. The question is, then, what do I do about the Lazaruses at my gate?

FOR ACTION: Go through your day today trying to notice and give thanks for all the things you have or have access to that make you rich compared to so many others. Be on the lookout for the Lazaruses around you and share what you can with them.

MARCH 1 ■ FRIDAY, SECOND WEEK OF LENT

A Parable for Today

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the scriptures, 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'? Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom." —Matthew 21:42-43

When most people think of their parish, place of work, family, or local community, they can probably come up with a name or names of people they consider cornerstones of the parish or particular group. What makes that person a cornerstone? What "earned" them that influence or recognition? Did they come to it honestly? Or was it some combination of wealth, power, family name, or prestige that gained them their place? Are they using their cornerstone position to "produce the fruits of the kingdom," or are they reaping discord or injustice?

There are plenty of wonderful, honest, humble servant leaders among us, and there are some who are not. Jesus experienced both kinds of leaders in his Jewish community, and his parable about the vineyard tenants (Matthew 21:33-45) was an indictment against the latter. The Pharisees knew Jesus was speaking about them and their mistreatment of others, and they were appalled at the suggestion that God had in mind "rejected" people to be the true cornerstones of the community. What groups of people might

Jesus work into this parable if he told it today? Who are the Pharisees in our church and society now? Who are the ones being rejected?

FOR ACTION: In thinking about your parish and faith community, who are the people relegated to the margins? Who are the people whom the leaders are ignoring or trying to silence? What action can you take to listen to and elevate the voice of one of the rejected ones?

MARCH 2 ■ SATURDAY, SECOND WEEK OF LENT

Check-in Time

If you made specific commitments to prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, how are those going now that we are at the end of the second week of Lent? God isn't grading us on these, but invites us to these practices so that we (personally and communally) can have a fuller, richer life. "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly," Jesus said (John 10:10). He didn't say, "Instead of doing something enjoyable, you should slog through more prayer time this Lent." Nor did he say, "I want you to feel self-pitiful as you give up coffee/sweets/alcohol for 40 days," or "You should feel guilty about how much you have, so you should give more away."

If we take Jesus' words at their face value, what gift is God offering as you make time for prayer? A greater sense of peace or calm? A new strength to face something difficult? What new or different kind of abundance is coming to you because of what you decided to "give up"? (For example, when I give up scrolling through Facebook at night, I have more time in a warm, comfortable bed with my husband, which is a gift God wants me to enjoy.) Finally, what gratitude or pleasure are you experiencing in giving to others less fortunate than you or in aligning your Christian values with how you use your resources?

FOR PRAYER: Ask the Holy Spirit to shine a light on how God is touching your heart this Lent.

Sabbath Freedom

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. —Exodus 20:8-10

When I was growing up, “remembering the sabbath day” simply took the form of going to Mass as a family. I remember vaguely wondering how the commandment to rest on the Sabbath got translated into “thou shalt go to Mass on Sundays.” However, I didn’t give it much thought until I heard biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann speak about the Sabbath as being a counter-cultural revolt against empire. When the Hebrew slaves refused to work for Pharaoh on the Sabbath, they slowed down his economy, an economy that prized profit over people. When, for centuries, Jewish people in pagan societies refused to work one day a week, they challenged the assumption that if we stop working, the world will stop turning.

We follow a Savior who grew up in a family and a religion that practiced trusting that not only is it okay to rest, but that there is holiness in resting and *God wants that for us*. When we give ourselves freedom from work (and soccer games, birthday parties, or house chores) for one day a week, we discover there is freedom for other things: naps, pleasure reading, playing board games, crafting, leisurely connection with friends and family, more time for reflection and prayer, etc. Rebecca Solnit, the child of a Jewish father and Irish Catholic mother, writes that honoring the Sabbath “is an act of outright revolt against the shouts that we should be doing something/do more/do more faster that are all around us.” She also points out that “If you’re sick or injured and healing or growing a new life inside you or just worn out, please notice that that thing known as ‘doing nothing’ is when you’re doing the utterly crucial and precious work of growing and healing and restoring.”

Jesus reminded his followers that “the Sabbath is made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath.” Let’s reclaim the counter-cultural nature of the Sabbath and honor it as we were meant to so that we can receive the blessings of rest and healing that God wants to give us.

FOR ACTION: What would feel like true rest for you today that would create space for God to give you healing or restoration? Do it! (Conversely, don't do what won't give you rest.)

MARCH 4 ■ MONDAY, THIRD WEEK OF LENT

Longings As Prayer

*As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.
—Psalm 42:1*

It wasn't until young adulthood that anyone taught me that longings for good things are longings for God and that those are a form of prayer. I'm not talking about longing for a particular food at dinner time or a new car but about longing for healing and wholeness for an addicted loved one, or for the safety and peace of a friend in a dangerous situation, or for a lonely child to find love and acceptance at school. On a macro level, when we are furious about injustice and long for all to be treated with dignity, we are longing for God. When a school teacher aches for the students who come to school hungry, she is longing for God and the Kingdom Jesus talked so much about.

We don't usually equate these feelings with prayer, but they are because they are honest, spontaneous movements of our heart and our heart's desire for God's goodness. These feelings are our spirits groaning within us when we don't have words. Saint Paul wrote about this way of communicating with God. "But the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit" (Romans 8:26-27).

FOR PRAYER: What are you deeply longing for these days? Let yourself notice that feeling(s), and let it be your prayer today.

MARCH 5 ■ TUESDAY, THIRD WEEK OF LENT

Which God Do You Believe In?

In anger, his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. "This is how my heavenly Father will treat

each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”
—Matthew 18:34-35

I know I'm not the only one to be disturbed by the closing verses of this passage when Jesus appears to liken his Father to a torturer who uses threats to scare us into forgiving others. (Could you truly forgive someone if you do it out of fear anyway?) This troubling image of God is unlike most other teachings about God which Jesus shares in the other Gospels. In fact, this picture of a God who extorts good behavior through fear of punishment is particular to Matthew's Gospel, which suggests that maybe we should study it more closely.

Matthew's Gospel is the most fire-and-brimstone, hellfire-and-damnation Gospel. Sadly, some people—and some particular Christian denominations—latch onto Matthew's Gospel only and ignore the other three, which paint a picture of a more forgiving, patient, and merciful God. A friend of mine grew up in a church that preached Matthew's God all the time, and he spent his childhood being terrified of God. It wasn't until he became an adult and heard stories from the other Gospels that he came to experience a loving, forgiving God.

TO PRAY: Pray the Lord's Prayer slowly and intentionally, especially focusing on the lines about forgiveness.

MARCH 6 ■ WEDNESDAY, THIRD WEEK OF LENT

Walking Together

Lenten practices (prayer, fasting, and almsgiving) always strike me as counter-cultural in the best sense. In a world that insists on action and productivity, we take time out to pray. In a world that tells us to accumulate, consume, and eat more (“Do you want to super-size that?”), we intentionally pause and ask ourselves what we genuinely need. In a society that prizes individual ownership and stockpiling possessions, we commit to sharing what we have.

It can sometimes seem lonely striving to do all these things if you're surrounded by others who don't show evidence of doing them. In those times, I find it heartening to remember that literally millions of Catholics worldwide ARE practicing prayer, fasting, and almsgiving right now. Pope Francis keeps calling for us to “walk together” on our faith journey, and it helps me to know I'm not walking alone.

FOR ACTION: What counter-cultural but truly Christian act can you do today, knowing that you're not the only one intending to do good today?

MARCH 7 ■ THURSDAY, THIRD WEEK OF LENT

Silence

O that today you would listen to his voice... —Psalm 95:7

Recently, I was reading *Silence* by Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk and Nobel Peace Prize winner who is considered the “father of mindfulness.” I knew from hearing interviews that he had a deep love and respect for Jesus and the Gospels. His writings about our need to carve out some silence in our days so that we can hear God’s “still, small voice” struck me as thoroughly Christian. We can get so caught up in wanting to hear God’s voice “out there” that we forget God often communicates with us in our hearts: in silent nudgings, through insights, emotions, desires, and memories. These communications are usually felt or intuited, not “heard,” but it’s hard to catch them if we don’t intentionally make time for silence so that we can notice what it is we’re feeling or intuiting.

FOR ACTION: When and where can you go today to seek out or create some silence in your life?

MARCH 8 ■ FRIDAY, THIRD WEEK OF LENT

From “Awful” to Thanksgiving

One of my spiritual direction clients says she often goes through her day thinking it’s “awful, the worst ever” until she does the Examen prayer at night. It’s a prayer in which St. Ignatius urges the pray-er to look back over their day for how God has been present and active, internally and externally. This client says the prayer often moves her from thinking “Awful!” to “I have so much to be thankful for. Yes, it was hard, but there were ‘angels unawares’ helping me.”

As we near the end of the third week of Lent, take some time today to review your past week (or maybe the Lenten season so far) to see if you can catch how God has been working in you and through you. Maybe it’s obvious (you feel a lot freer now that you’ve given up x,y, or z), or perhaps

it's been very subtle (because you're taking some time to be with God each day, you feel an underlying peace despite a very tough life situation). Celebrate and savor how God is working in you, and ask for what you want going forward this Lent.

FOR PRAYER: Spend your prayer time today reviewing your week and letting your graced experiences solidify in you.

MARCH 9 ■ SATURDAY, THIRD WEEK OF LENT

From Gratitude to Self-Restraint

Giving thanks implies not only recognition of the gift but of the Giver... The practice of gratitude can, in a very real way, lead to the practice of self-restraint, of taking only what we need. —Robin Wall-Kimmerer

So often we forget that the word *eucharist* means “thanksgiving” in Greek, and we narrow its meaning to the sacrament ritualized at Mass. In fact, in the days of the early church—just weeks, months, and years after Jesus’ resurrection—when the first Christians came together to celebrate the Eucharist, they were literally sharing a meal at someone’s home while telling stories of Jesus. The book of Acts tells us that other people noticed the joy of those early Christians as they shared food across racial, ethnic, and socio-economic lines. Then, at some point, they developed into gatherings where people of means brought what they had to share with those who didn’t have enough. “There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need” (Acts 4:34-35). In this time of Eucharistic Revival, what if we re-claim this spirit of the Eucharist in the early church so that it reaches outside the walls of the church building, influencing our practice of gratitude and inspiring us to share more of what we have?

FOR ACTION: Turn your attention today to giving thanks for everyone and everything you think of. Notice how a spirit of thanksgiving can free you from taking more than you need so that it will be available to others who need it more.

In This Way

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. —John 3:16

In modern times, we tend to understand this famous verse in the sense of “For God loved the world SO much...” when, in reality, the original text meant “For God loved the world so—in such a way/in this way/in this manner—that he gave his only Son...” It’s not that God required Jesus to be tortured to death to redeem humanity, but that God loved us *in such a way* that God was willing to allow Jesus to become human, even though he would be vulnerable to human free will and human evil. Just like any parent who loves their child “in such a way” that they allow them to venture away from home and out into the world despite the dangers, God was willing to “sacrifice” Jesus in that way. Just like any human parent, God did not want his son to be harmed and murdered, but God accepted that possibility because sometimes humans do that to each other.

God could have left us to our own devices in the world, never sending Jesus to earth and choosing to stay at a distance, on high, while we destroyed each other. Instead, God loved us *in this manner* that he shared his only child, despite the pain it would entail.

FOR PRAYER: Mother and Father God, help me feel and understand the generosity and vulnerability you accepted in sharing your son with us.

Forward, Not Back

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating. —Isaiah 65:17-18a

There are times when it is necessary and appropriate to re-visit experiences, places, or relationships that harmed us or caused us pain so that we can find closure and healing. Yet, we can be obsessive about re-living or re-hashing negative events or conversations to the point of creating more

suffering for ourselves. We can let ourselves re-live the past so often that we no longer live in the present and can't receive the gifts available to us now.

Isaiah gave some good therapeutic advice to the Israelites who had been traumatized by their capture and exile. He didn't ask them to pretend that nothing bad had happened (he acknowledged that and grieved with them earlier in the book). But at some point, he asked them to turn their thoughts back to the present, where God was already busy creating a new life for them, and where they could look forward to being free again.

FOR PRAYER: God of hope, help us to know when to re-visit painful things in our past and when to let them go so that we can look forward to a future with healing.

MARCH 12 ■ TUESDAY, FOURTH WEEK OF LENT

We Need Works, Too

If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. —James 2:15-17

Did you commit to some form of almsgiving this Lent? How has it been going so far? Have you found joy, lightness, or a new perspective in giving of your money or material goods? Who has your almsgiving aided?

There's a reason almsgiving is included with our devotions to prayer and fasting during this season; it reminds us to look outside of ourselves. Almsgiving challenges us to "walk the walk" and not just "talk the talk." What good does it do God or God's people if we spend hours a day praying and fast from all manner of earthly pleasures but forget (or choose not) to provide for another's physical needs? Giving a panhandler a granola bar, a gift card to a coffee shop, or \$10 or \$20; donating to a clothing drive; taking food to a lonely neighbor; or cleaning out the garage and passing along items we no longer use to a person who can use them are opportunities for us to demonstrate our faith through works.

FOR ACTION: Whether or not you've made a specific commitment to almsgiving this Lent, how else can you demonstrate your faith by a good work today?

A Reactive Audience

For this reason they tried all the more to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God. —John 5:18

Have you noticed how reactive the religious authorities were when Jesus taught and healed? Especially in this section of John's Gospel, there's a sense that the leaders aren't even trying to understand what Jesus wants to communicate. They jump on him and find fault every time he speaks up. They take offense when they feel targeted rather than listen more deeply to hear what he's really saying. They find reasons to dismiss, discredit, and ultimately silence him. Why? Because they were threatened that they would lose their power when Jesus challenged the status quo.

Pope Francis' biggest emphasis throughout the synod process has been to challenge and encourage everyone in the Church to listen more thoughtfully, especially to those we don't fully agree with. He has shown his willingness to let everyone have a voice, from appointing lay people and women as voting members for the first time to meeting with members of the LGBTQ community and survivors of clergy sexual abuse. He arranged for all the participants to be seated at circular tables (and he joined them) rather than tables in straight lines facing a particular leader. He has continually called for an attitude of open and receptive listening so that we can hear the truth in everyone's experience rather than reactively shutting down people we don't understand or agree with. The Pharisees missed experiencing the Holy Spirit in new and expansive ways because they didn't want to listen closely to Jesus. Pope Francis doesn't want us to miss out on how the Holy Spirit works in and among every person.

FOR ACTION: Is there someone or a group of people you respond to reactively or dismissively rather than genuinely trying to understand what they want to communicate? Commit today to listen to them with new openness and curiosity the next time you encounter them.

What Are We Attached To?

They have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it. —Exodus 32:8

For some of us, idolizing modern-day golden calves comes in the form of striving for material things, whether it's more clothes in the closet, another car in the garage, a bigger house in a particular neighborhood, or more money in a retirement portfolio. We believe in God, but we hedge our bets and try to provide for our comfort and security with these other things. It's not much different from the Israelites who worshiped Yahweh but, *just in case*, also worshiped the golden calf.

For others of us, the golden calf is invisible, but there nonetheless: a diploma from a specific school, professional prestige, recognition in our community, even health, beauty, or physical fitness—whatever it is that helps us to feel more accomplished, influential, or proud. Our attachment to these things can also mislead us into equating our security with them, not God.

FOR REFLECTION: Is there anything you pursue relentlessly or try to hold onto tightly that gets more of your attention than trying to live as Jesus demonstrated, living simply and loving others as yourself? Ask God to give you more freedom from any unhealthy attachments.

God and Disasters

As my friend Molly likes to say, “God does not send the disaster, but God will sure use it.” She had a lot of time to think about whether she truly believed this as she was battling a rare cancer when her two children were young. She's thought about it as she reflected on her childhood living with a mentally ill mother and then an alcoholic stepfather. She's thought about it when processing her brother's mysterious death in another country. And she's thought about it while counseling countless other individuals struggling with terrible things that happen to them.

Her phrase seems to fit how Jesus addressed people suffering from mental or physical health crises, the death of a loved one, poverty, or injustice. He

never told them they deserved what happened to them, that they brought it upon themselves, or that God was punishing them because of x,y, or z. He always tried to communicate that God doesn't want us to suffer: God wants wholeness, healing, and grace for everyone. But because we live in an imperfect and sinful world, suffering happens, sometimes at the hands of other humans and sometimes from natural disasters. And when it does, God is right there with us, working to bring about good from the disaster, even if we can't see or feel it for years to come.

FOR REFLECTION: Thinking back on something very difficult that you have experienced, can you identify how God used that experience to shape you into the graced person you are today?

MARCH 16 ■ SATURDAY, FOURTH WEEK OF LENT

Taking Stock

As we end the fourth week of Lent today, take some time to look back on how God has been working in your life this past week. Where did you experience any peace, joy, trust, or love? How did God strengthen or comfort you in a difficult moment? What new insights or growth did you experience? When did you notice that you were cooperating with God? Thank God for these graces!

Also, how did God work *through you* this week? When did you speak an encouraging word, spend time with someone who was suffering, provide for someone else's physical needs, or express your love to others?

Likewise, take this opportunity to notice those times when you fell short of God's hopes for you. Whom did you neglect? When did you do or say something hurtful? Were you unfaithful to yourself? To whom did you fail to be loving? Ask for God's forgiveness for those times.

FOR PRAYER: Oh, God, you give me so many graces. Please help me receive them fully and use them to build your kingdom on earth. As I notice those places where I am not loving, help me to be more generous and free.

Still Fearful

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live. —John 11:25

Do we truly believe what Jesus says here? If we do, why are so many Christians afraid of dying when the foundation of our faith rests on the belief that out of death comes new life? I understand that we might be fearful of a long, painful death, or that we might be panicked or unbelievably sad about leaving loved ones behind. Yet I suspect that many of us do everything medically feasible to stave off death as long as possible because we are just plain fearful about what, or if, anything comes next.

This is ironic considering the strong emphasis in the New Testament that Jesus has *freed us from death* (for example, see Hebrews 2:14-15 and 1 Corinthians 15:54-55). We haven't yet come to trust what all the saints and mystics have taught—that those who die meet a Lover, not a dictator—or what an Algerian monk said before his captors killed him, “What do we have to fear after all? To be thrown into the tenderness of God?”

FOR REFLECTION: When you think of dying, what are you most fearful of? Can you accept that you are fearful but still try to trust these words of Jesus?

Sacred Geography

He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. —Psalm 23:2-3a

Theologian Beldan Lane writes about “landscapes of the sacred,” the notion that we all have a particular geography we are most drawn to for its unique beauty, positive memories, comfort, and familiarity. It is in these landscapes where we can most easily relax and feel ourselves safe and connected to God. For some, it is in the mountains covered with aspens; for others, the many moods of the ocean or the expansive, green plains. For the psalmist who penned Psalm 23, it seems to be green pastures near fresh water where God was most easily encountered.

FOR PRAYER: In your imagination now, visit your favorite place or landscape. Recall what about this place makes it so appealing to you. Let yourself rest there for as long as you want, allowing the Lord to be with you and restore your soul.

MARCH 19 ■ TUESDAY, FIFTH WEEK OF LENT

We Need Ordinary Saints

If the word “saints” only brings to mind people who lived centuries ago in a distant place, it may be time to re-evaluate our definition of saints. Just as Lent isn’t about renouncing worldly things for the sake of asceticism, saints don’t have to renounce worldly goods. You may have seen the following poem of unknown origin, which has been mis-attributed to Pope Francis or Pope John Paul II: “We need jeans and sneaker saints. We need saints who go to the movies, listen to music, and hang out with their friends. We need saints who put God first and work hard in college. We need saints who seek time to pray every day and know how to fall in love with purity and chastity or who devote themselves to their chastity. We need modern-day saints, 21st-century saints spirituality embedded in our time. We need saints committed to the poor and necessary social change. We need saints who live in the world, sanctify themselves in the world, and who are not afraid to live in the world. We need saints who drink Coke and eat hot dogs, who are internet users, who listen to iPods. We need saints who love the Eucharist and who are not ashamed to have a beer or eat pizza on the weekend with friends. We need saints who love cinema, theater, music, dance, sports. We need sociable, open, normal, friendly, joyful, fellow saints. We need saints who are in the world and know how to taste the pure and good things of the world, but without being worldly.”

According to this sentiment, do we know some saints? Can’t we strive to be one too?

FOR PRAYER: Lord, help me live my everyday life being as saintly as I can in the typical places I find myself, savoring the good things this world offers me without being of this world.

Modern Furnaces

“Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods and you do not worship the golden statue that I have set up? Now if you are ready ... to fall down and worship the statue that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire. —Daniel 3:14-15

We may not be in danger of being thrown into a blazing furnace if we don't idolize what our society and culture say we should idolize. However, people are still punished in this country every day for not worshiping America's golden statues. Kids who choose not to burn themselves out in competitive sports are sometimes castigated (by other kids and sometimes parents) for quitting. Teens who don't dress fashionably feel the sting of social judgment. Parents who let their kids range freely in the neighborhood instead of signing them up for enrichment classes or camps can be judged for their parenting philosophy. Citizens who protest racism are sometimes labeled un-American or unpatriotic. Those who fight for a consistent life ethic can be vilified. Families who don't conform to the mom+dad+two biological children “ideal” are sometimes thrown into a furnace of judgment or suspicion. Our society still has plenty of idols we worship (sometimes unconsciously) and plenty of ways we punish people for not bowing down to our modern golden statues.

FOR REFLECTION: When have you been judged or punished for not worshiping someone else's idol? When have you insisted that others worship something you hold as sacred?

Yes Instead of No

So often, Lent is focused on what we are saying “no” to or what we think we should be saying “no” to. These six weeks are an excellent chance to practice saying no to things for good reason (no to participating in the rumor mill, indulging our judgmental nature, purchasing and consuming more than we need and the earth can support, etc.). But our God is a God of life,

and God gives us Lent so that we may ultimately have new life and have it in abundance (John 10:10).

What are you getting to say ‘yes’ to because you are saying ‘no’ to something else? More sleep, better health, more time with your family because you say no to screen time? More peace or a sense of agency because you are saying ‘no’ to watching or reading too much bad news? More of a sense of meaning and connection because you said yes to a volunteer opportunity? Or maybe a greater appreciation for simple things because you are choosing not to buy products mindlessly? Celebrate how these decisions are bringing you new life!

FOR PRAYER: Lord, keep my eyes open to all the ways you offer me new life and help me continue to say yes to them.

MARCH 22 ■ FRIDAY, FIFTH WEEK OF LENT

Names for God

The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.
—Psalm 18:2

There are so many names for God in the Bible that it’s a shame we almost exclusively call God “Father.” The fact that so many names and descriptions were used in the oral traditions and writings produced over more than one thousand years is a gentle reminder that no single word will ever capture the fullness of who God is. The Psalmist who wrote today’s verses felt free to describe and praise God in ways that fit their experience of who God was for them.

FOR PRAYER: Get out a pen and paper and write down as many names for God and Jesus as you can think of. Add any new or untraditional ones that describe who God has been for you. Then spend some time quietly reciting the name of God that most appeals to you right now—in praise, thanksgiving, or supplication.

He Didn't Waste His Time

So from that day on they planned to put him to death. Jesus therefore no longer walked about openly among the Jews, but went from there to a town called Ephraim in the region near the wilderness, and he remained there with the disciples. —John 11:53-54

From the beginning of Scripture, we get the sense that Jesus didn't waste his time. He had an urgency about him as he preached that the Kingdom of God is at hand—now! Part of that surety came from the fact that Jesus knew once he started preaching publicly, he wouldn't have a long life. (That may have been the reason Jesus asked the people he healed to keep it quiet so he would stay off the radar of the authorities for as long as possible.) Knowing he didn't have long to live didn't mean he worked all the time, though. He still regularly went out to the desert to be alone and pray. He enjoyed many good meals with friends and strangers alike (so much so that some accused him of being a glutton and a drunkard). He still went out for boat rides and visited different towns.

Once Jesus knew he only had a very short time left, he *definitely* didn't waste his time. He spent his last few days on earth mostly with his friends: talking, praying, singing, touching, and being touched by them (washing their feet, letting Mary anoint him). He left them with his final teachings. He shared a last, memorable meal with them.

FOR ACTION: If you knew you would die within a week, what would you still want to do? Can you do it this week? What would you NOT spend your time doing? Can you not do that?

What About His Loved Ones?

Just like people who have loved ones receiving hospice care or nearing death in a hospital or care facility, Jesus' friends and family knew he didn't have many days left, but they didn't know precisely when the end would come. He told them openly he was going to Jerusalem where he would die, so I imagine during that last week when they ate with him they wondered

how many meals they had left together. When they went to sleep at night, they probably wondered if tomorrow would be his last day on earth. How many burning questions did they have left that they wanted to ask him? I imagine they must have been desperate to touch and hug and hold him as much as they could.

As we begin Holy Week and hear the entire Passion story read at Mass, we might get so caught up in what happened to Jesus that we don't think about what it was like for those who loved him. We know from the Gospels that Jesus was deeply sad and afraid as he approached the end. His apostles and all the others close to him must have felt the same, besides feeling utter confusion about what was about to happen. How were they caring for Jesus and one another leading up to his arrest and trial? Maybe they took turns preparing food, packing provisions, and perhaps even finding burial supplies. Maybe they slept in shifts so Jesus wouldn't have to be alone. Although by some accounts the apostles deserted Jesus, we know that others stayed with him until he took his last breath: his women friends, Joseph of Arimathea, and the one known as "the Beloved disciple." They stayed together and leaned on one another as they awaited and then witnessed their friend's death. The witnessing process may have been brutal, but it was more bearable because they didn't have to do it alone.

FOR REFLECTION: If you are accompanying someone who is dying, whom can you reach out to so you are not alone as you do the hard work of witnessing a loved one's decline? Or, do you know someone who is dying or is accompanying someone who is dying to whom you can offer support?

MARCH 25 ■ MONDAY OF HOLY WEEK

She Didn't Wait Until He Died

Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume... "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me." —John 12:3, 7-8

A friend whose partner died after a long battle with cancer washed and anointed her body immediately after death, then kept her body at home for three days so that loved ones could come to say their goodbyes. Until re-

cently in American history, this was customary, and it's still done in many less-medicalized cultures worldwide.

Many people in Jesus' day would have had experiences with washing and anointing the bodies of the deceased. I wonder how often they wished they had been able to do so for someone before they died but didn't have the opportunity.

In this passage, Mary of Bethany doesn't wait until Jesus dies to reverence and bless his body. Even though she probably knew she would draw criticism for such an intimate act, she didn't let that stop her from following her heart. For his part, Jesus could receive the gift in the spirit it was given, while he was still alive.

FOR ACTION: How can you show someone extravagant love today so that you don't regret missing the opportunity after they die?

MARCH 26 ■ TUESDAY OF HOLY WEEK

Pay Attention

The poet Mary Oliver wrote, "Pay attention, be amazed, and tell about it." We are re-living Holy Week right now because those around Jesus did just that. They paid attention and were amazed by how Jesus conducted himself, especially during the last week of his life, and they told others about it. (Scholars generally agree that the accounts of Jesus' Passion and death were the first stories written down about him.)

There are more details about Jesus' final week than we can focus on during one Holy Week. So, instead of trying to do the impossible, pay attention to which part(s) of the story you are drawn to this year. Is there a specific character, action, speech, emotion, or verse that particularly catches your attention? Trust that the Holy Spirit is raising it to your awareness because there is a gift in it for you. What might God want you to notice, learn, or receive from it?

TO PRAY: God, help me to pay attention to what you want me to notice, to feel amazement, and to tell others about it.

He Didn't Run It By His Friends

Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What will you give me if I betray him to you?" They paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him. —Matthew 26:14-16

Judas had been living and traveling with Jesus and the other 11 disciples for months, even years. When Jesus sent the disciples out two by two to proclaim the good news and heal others, Judas was one of them. He would have been present, and probably even helped, when Jesus fed the crowds. Judas experienced so much with the other 11, and presumably, they loved and trusted each other. Yet those 11 were all shocked to find out later that Judas betrayed Jesus to the chief priest. What happened? How did he go from friend to betrayer?

What we know is that the Tempter worked in secret. Judas, when tempted to turn Jesus in, didn't discuss it with his friends. He didn't bring his quandary to his community for their trusted opinions and input. He didn't run it by anyone else to check if he was off course. He kept it a secret, and the Tempter works evil with secrets not brought into the light.

TO PRAY: Jesus, you constantly preached the need to do things and say things "in the light." Help us resist the Tempter who wants us to do things in the dark.

Equal, Not Subservient

So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. —John 13:14-15

It sometimes seems like our society can be divided into two groups: those who generally get served by others and those who do the serving. Some get served at a restaurant, while others cook, serve, and clean up after them. Some have their house cleaned, while others do the cleaning. People pick up packages on their porch after someone else shopped for the groceries

and delivered them. A person lounges in their yard and garden that someone else mowed and weeded. Some receive massages, manicures, or pedicures that others provide.

Many of us take turns being on the giving and receiving end of service, but it's not unusual for people to be in one role or the other much more often, especially in their work lives. The interesting thing about Jesus' foot-washing lesson, though, is that Jesus wants to eliminate the hierarchy where one person or group of people is usually subservient to another. He wants equality where *everyone* takes turns receiving and serving others. Each one has their feet washed, and each one washes feet. No one remains on the giving or receiving end because we all need to receive sometimes (even Jesus received a version of a foot-washing when Mary anointed him), and we all need to give sometimes.

FOR ACTION: Are you more often in the role of serving others or being served? Look for a way today to be in the opposite role, either letting yourself receive the gift of someone else's service or serving someone you don't normally serve.

MARCH 29 ■ GOOD FRIDAY

Good Friday Today

Anyone who has seen a movie or dramatization of Jesus' crucifixion has no doubt been disturbed and even sickened by the scene in which the soldiers nail Jesus to the cross. It is a healthy reaction to an ancient form of torture. If this moment in Jesus' Passion affects you, be grateful, for it should. It means you still have a heart.

One of the terrible realities of our time is that there is still horrific torture being perpetrated around the world: in Sri Lanka, Africa, the Middle East, countries near and far, and sometimes unseen in our own cities and neighborhoods. Any emergency room doctor or therapist can tell tales of the cruel ways people invent to harm others, and many of them last more than the hours that Jesus hung on the cross. Good Friday is still happening today.

Perhaps this anniversary of Jesus' death is an invitation to grieve, to cry, to let ourselves be distressed and disturbed, and to feel the pain, loneliness, and suffering of those suffering now. We don't have to do it alone, though, because Jesus showed he was willing to suffer with us.

FOR PRAYER: Try to make it to a Good Friday service today so you can pray with others who feel the suffering of this day. If you can't, set aside some time to read the Passion story at the end of any of the Gospels. Ask to feel God with you as you go through this somber day.

MARCH 30 ■ HOLY SATURDAY

Waiting

Holy Saturday is often viewed as a relief after the solemnity of Good Friday and a chance to look forward to tomorrow's festivities. Maybe it's filled with dyeing Easter eggs, snitching some hidden chocolate while filling the kids' Easter baskets, and getting the fancy Easter clothes out of the closet. For Jesus' friends and family on the first Holy Saturday, though, the day was filled with inconsolable weeping, probably intense fear of being hunted down and arrested, and crushing shame for those who had betrayed or abandoned Jesus. They couldn't breeze through the day because they couldn't imagine the coming Resurrection.

FOR REFLECTION: Whatever you're doing today to prepare for Easter tomorrow, be mindful of those who have recently experienced a loved one's death or some other suffering who can't fathom what resurrection might look like. If you are one of those people, be gentle with yourself today as you remember the grief of Jesus' friends and family.

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