

A Time for the Indescribable Generosity of God

The phrase from Joel “even now...return to me with your whole heart” (Joel 2:12) sums up the meaning of Lent. Lent is a time when we simplify our lives, make space for God, and throw open the doors and windows of our hearts to a love that knows no pause. We take less time for things that keep us busy and take more time for things that keep us whole and loving. We put in God’s hands the tough things: our struggles within ourselves and with others, our need to love and give of ourselves more. We discover that there is no sorrow or struggle that does not carry within it the seed of a blessedness that makes all things brand new.

Lent is a great time to allow God to convince you of his friendship. During Lent, we take part in reflection and self-denial to enable us to experience the indescribable generosity of God.

In these reflections, we will journey with Jesus through Lent. It will be, I pray, a journey in which our lives will be transfigured just as surely as Jesus, Moses, and Elijah were transfigured on the holy mountain.

These meditations are not so much about knowing information about Jesus but letting him connect with you. You can rediscover him as a physician, the best physician, who can bring you a deep and everlasting cure for all that ails you.

Older than the mountains, deeper than their roots, wider than the heavens, and stronger than all your loss is the love that Jesus manifests in this lenten season.

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Open the Door of Your Heart to the Lord

“But when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you.”

[MATTHEW 6:16]

Personal prayer is an essential part of our lives, especially during Lent. Prayer is not something we do but something we allow God to do: simply to love us.

One especially vivid early memory gives me an image of prayer. My mind returns to the simple white stucco house my grandparents lived in. The first thing I saw every time I entered their tiny living room was a sentiment-filled picture of Jesus knocking on the door of a house with his staff. The door was special; it had no outside latch. Under the picture was a written explanation. It said that Jesus stood at the door of our hearts knocking, but he would not barge in or open the door himself. He was gentle; he respected our freedom. He wanted to be invited in. All we needed to do was open the door.

Our hearts have many doors and many rooms. The art of Christian prayer is the art of learning to open those doors to the endless beauty of our Eternal Lover.

ACTION • Joel says: God “is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love” (Joel 2:13). Place your palm over your heart as a sign of your opening your heart this Lent to loving others the way God loves you.

PRAYER • *Dear Lord, help me to open my heart to you this Lent by letting my day-to-day living be saturated in your merciful love.*

Take Up Your Cross

"If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." [LUKE 9:23]

During the World War II bombing of London, people with nervous disorders found unexpected health by forgetting their own troubles and ministering to the terrible needs of victims of the air raids. Often, the reason that many of us have no get up and go, no liveliness, no joy, is that we are living too much for ourselves and not enough for others and for God.

The truth is that reaching out to others will all too often not be an easy pathway. We tend to want to live a spiritual life that is free of dust and heat, thirst and weariness. Lent reminds us that Jesus lived a human life through hardships. Like him, we are called to serve others when it is hard to do. Yet, it is only in the middle of that difficulty that we can experience perfect joy. As the sun in the morning drinks up the mists, so does the sun of living the Gospel drink up the stench and fog of selfishness over our hearts. God will lead us in each act of kindness. We have a mission; we have a Sender who helps us carry the cross we are daily called to bear.

ACTION • Sense Jesus standing behind you. He grasps each of your shoulders with his nail-scarred hands. Through his grasp, his love fills you full. Now, stretch out your hands, palms up, as you feel that love pass through your outstretched hands to all people.

PRAYER • *Dear Lord, may your enormous love for me inspire me to take up the cross and love others.*

Set Free the Oppressed

Is this not...the fast that I choose: ...Setting free the oppressed...sharing your bread with the hungry...? [Then] your wound shall quickly be healed.

[ISAIAH 58:6-8]

When I was a young man in the late 1960s studying to be a Presbyterian minister in the days before I became Catholic, I learned a hard lesson. I attended Belhaven, an all-white Presbyterian College in Mississippi. It was the days of Mississippi burning. The Ku Klux Klan rampaged throughout the state. Content with the Christian atmosphere on campus, my heart was centered on finding spiritual fulfillment.

A trip by bus from home changed all that. African Americans sat in the back, whites in the front. A middle-aged African American woman was sobbing uncontrollably in the back of the bus; perhaps she had just lost a loved one. I thought, *I am studying to be a minister—maybe I should go sit with her and comfort her*, but fear kept me from doing it. Would they think I was a civil rights worker? Would I be beaten for it? I stayed in my seat.

Soon after returning to Belhaven, I had a vivid and almost frightening dream. I was on the bus again. This time it was Christ sobbing, and he said to me in a firm but caring tone, “Eddie, find me in the back of the bus or you won’t find me at all.”

After that, I joined the civil rights movement, marched against the Klan, and helped integrate my campus. I found Christ in a richer way than when I was just looking for fulfillment.

ACTION • Do something for someone who is in need or hurting.

PRAYER • *Lord, your glory was loving those whose need was so evident. Help me find joy by doing the same.*

Rest in God's Mercy

*Lord, you are good and forgiving,
most merciful to all who call on you.*

[PSALM 86:5]

There is an early story about St. Francis that I love. Francis, just a little guy, was walking along a dusty road with his spiritual friend Masseo. Out of the blue, Masseo asked, “Francis, why you? Why is the whole world following after you? Let’s face it, Francis, you are not handsome: you are nothing much to look at. You are not an eloquent speaker. You are not well educated. Why, Francis, is the whole world following after you?” Francis paused a moment and then answered: “The Most High looked down from heaven and couldn’t find anyone more foolish, more going his own way, and he had mercy on me. That is so that what I do could be seen as coming from the Most High and not from me.” Francis went on to change the world.

As Pope Francis has told us, the church is not the gathering of the pure ones but a “hospital for sinners.” God picks those who need forgiveness. Even the Apostles were a flawed and motley crew who, bathed in mercy, transformed the world.

ACTION • Think of a time when you were thoroughly forgiven by a friend or family member. What did that mercy feel like? Did it feel pure and warm? Remember that God’s forgiveness is infinitely greater. Think of a time when you felt forgiven by God and bathe again in his mercy.

PRAYER • *Lord, your mercy is not only an encounter with forgiveness; it is also an exquisite joy. Remind me to share my failings with you this day and bathe once more in your mercy.*

Experience God's Grace

For if by that one person's transgression the many died, how much more did the grace of God and the gracious gift of the one person Jesus Christ overflow for the many. [ROMANS 5:15B]

Many years ago, Deacon Robert Herrmann and I led a retreat for deacons in the Midwest. Most of the deacons seemed relaxed. One deacon, Jack, however, was downcast, the world weighing on his shoulders. Rather than simply listening, he took notes fervently, as if his life depended on it.

Earlier in the retreat, Jack had mentioned that he was burned out by all the demands on him in his parish. He had been treating his spiritual exhaustion by working hard to learn the best methods of prayer and reading heavy tomes on spirituality, but he found little relief in this. After the talk, Deacon Robert led a meditation. In the meditation, we met Jesus in a meadow, handed him our problems, and relaxed in his embrace.

Tears ran down Jack's face as he participated in the meditation. Afterward, he said that through the meditation, he realized that we do not have to work hard to experience God's love but rather relax in his embrace.

Spirituality and prayer are about grace, letting God do what he wants to do most, which is simply to love us.

ACTION ■ You are in a field. Jesus is standing in front of you with a smile of welcome on his face. He asks you to name a few of the burdens you are carrying. Then he holds you in a long, lingering embrace. Your problems dissolve.

PRAYER ■ *Dear Lord, teach me to learn the ways of your grace, letting go of my struggles to find you and instead letting you find me.*

Serve One Another

“And the king will say to them in reply, ‘Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.’” [MATTHEW 25:40]

One of the most difficult things for people to understand is that Jesus came to serve and not to be served. In serving others, Jesus was witness to the fulfillment of that great commandment.

Sometimes we easily achieve a sense of satisfaction in praying and in worshiping God. However, when we do this, we miss something truly extraordinary. It is impossible to touch God. God is infinite, and no mortal being can touch an infinite being. Yet, in serving one another, in being for one another, we are touched by God.

Remember to love the “least” of these: the marginalized, the ill, the abandoned, the outcast, the impoverished, those holding on to the world by a few blades of grass. In meeting them, you meet God. In loving them, you learn to love the parts of yourself that are outcast, abandoned, and impoverished. This all may seem like a heavy load to be carrying. But remember: Jesus carries that load with you and his burden is light, giving rest to the stressed and strained parts inside you.

ACTION ■ Think of some of the times you have experienced God’s kindness and write about them. What can you do to share kindness with others?

PRAYER ■ *Dear Lord, who served us to the utmost, help us to see you and love you in the hungry, the imprisoned, the elderly, and the outcast.*

Cry Out to the Lord

*“The LORD is close to the brokenhearted,
saves those whose spirit is crushed.”*

[PSALM 34:19]

In times when we are brokenhearted and life seems untogether, even frightening, God is far closer to us than we may realize. When we feel things are hopeless, God is right there waiting. Jesus knew times when he felt broken too—in the Garden of Gethsemane, when his followers did not truly understand who he was, and when he was met with the cold hatred of the religious elite.

What happens in those times in which you feel desperate, even abandoned? This is what I hope happens for you: that you storm heaven, that you cry out, “Help me, Lord! Oh, help me, Lord.” Pouring out your desperation, your loneliness, your insecurity to God is among the greatest acts of faith you can ever engage in. Turning to God when things seem dark or dim around you draws him like flower blossoms draw bees.

Just like a mother delights in placing a child on her lap so as to feed and caress him, or as a daddy kneels before a bed with a child, teaching her the Our Father, so God delights in treating you with the same tenderness, calm, and nurturing whenever life seems to crush you.

ACTION ■ Think of a time when you were brokenhearted and someone you trusted comforted you. In your imagination, let Jesus comfort you in the same way.

PRAYER ■ *Dear Lord, sometimes I feel so worn down. Please help me to root myself in prayer and Scripture, to feel your peace even in the middle of the stress and chaos. Amen.*

Repent When You Fail God

“There is something greater than Jonah here.”

[LUKE 11:32B]

Jonah issued a call for the inhabitants of Nineveh, who had gone far astray, to repent. Covering themselves in sackcloth and ashes, they fasted. They turned mightily to God, their hearts changed, and God showed them great mercy.

One greater than Jonah, Jesus, now offered an all-encompassing mercy that Jonah could not even conceive of. The Greek New Testament word for repentance, *metanoia*, means change of heart, a transfiguration of the essence of our entire being, a new birth, an openness to turning to God who alone can transform.

God does the heavy lifting in repentance; we just need to grasp his hand. Making daily acts of contrition and sorrow when we feel we have failed God or others is a key element in having a daily nearness to God.

In his diary, St. John XXIII writes that if after failing God in any way he made a quick act of sorrow, he could proceed with his day joyfully, “as if Jesus had given [him] a kiss.” Experiencing the depths of God’s forgiveness in our inner core heals our emotional hurts and plants in our hearts a love of neighbor and creation.

God’s kiss of mercy helps suck the poison from our wounds.

ACTION ■ Think of someone who needs God’s mercy and say a short prayer for them.

PRAYER ■ *Dear Lord, guide me to open my heart to your mercy every minute of every day.*

Turn to God in Prayer

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds.” [MATTHEW 7:7–8]

Does God answer prayer? Of course! Does God answer our prayers always in the way we would like? Of course not. Like any loving parent, God, too, must answer, “Not now” or even “No.” In this passage, Jesus says to us, “Hang in there.”

At first, this does sound like prayer is a magic lantern, but the deeper truth is that there is a maturing progression in prayer. Initially, our prayers are childlike. We ask, but as we pray over a lifetime, we move into prayer as seeking and ultimately knocking. Maturing faith understands that the world doesn’t exist to serve our needs, but that we exist to serve others. Through prayer we move from asking—to seeking—to knocking until the door is opened. Prayer life with God is communion with a dear friend. Prayer life with God is knowing that our Divine Friend always comes through.

He is the one who yearns to be found. May we always seek with our whole hearts.

ACTION ■ Put out your hands in a beckoning gesture. See Jesus come to you. He hands you a piece of paper with words written on it: “Seek me for my own sake, and I will open the door.” You hold it next to your heart and commune with the one who always answers.

PRAYER ■ *Dear Lord, help me to move beyond just my own needs in my prayer.*

Wait for the Lord

*I wait for the LORD, my soul waits
and I hope for his word.*

*My soul looks for the LORD
more than sentinels for daybreak.*

[PSALM 130:5-6]

When I think of the kind of waiting this psalm calls us to, I think of my Cherokee Indian grandfather, Pop. A baptized Christian, he held on to the values of his culture. He lived in a small cottage on a high bluff overlooking the Chattahoochee River, a stunningly beautiful sight. Pop knew how to wait. He would often take long walks along the bluff and through the woods. He slowly looked at the river and at all he saw. Once, when he was slowly watching, I asked him, “What are you doing, Pop?” He answered, “I’m looking at what is in front of me.” “Why? Why are you looking at what’s in front of you?” I probed. “Because,” he said, “when you look long enough, it shimmers and you see the glory.” When we learn to wait before God, life can shimmer for us too.

In Lent, wait on tiptoes for Christ’s living, suffering, death, and resurrection. After hostility, there will be forgiveness; after estrangement, reconciliation; after oppression and dehumanization, justice; after death, homecoming and resurrection. Let us wait for him more than sentinels for daybreak.

ACTION ■ Think of a time when as a child you waited for Christmas or a birthday. Let that remind you how to wait for God this Lent.

PRAYER ■ *Lord, may I wait on tiptoes, with my whole heart attentive to you, as I watch you journey through the lonesome valley to Easter.*

Love the Outcasts

“For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have?”

[MATTHEW 5:46]

You find the Lord not only in your heart but also in others, especially those who are most rejected, the ones other people look away from: the vulnerable ones, the rejected ones, the helpless ones. Jesus is close to the unborn, the elderly, the imprisoned, the sick, the disabled, those whom people readily ridicule and reject. Find these outcasts and love them, and you will find Jesus and love him.

Every era has its outcasts—lepers, prostitutes, the physically ill, the elderly with dementia. Loving them can be difficult, and it seems to offer us no benefits. But Jesus came for these outcasts, and he came for you. Maybe parts of yourself are outcast. Maybe you carry shame for things you felt, thought, or did. Jesus loves you, and he can heal those shamed areas of your life if you will but trust him with them. Jesus’ love is a risky love. If you let the fire of his love touch you, you risk spending and giving as he spends and gives. Only the grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies becomes fruitful.

ACTION ■ Imagine someone you know who is an “outcast,” someone you find difficult to love. As you look at that person, imagine Jesus placing a hand on your shoulder, passing on to you the strength to love. Let the caring in your heart flow out to the person. See that person surrounded by your love the way light surrounds a lit candle.

PRAYER ■ *Lord, help me to love all those you love, not just the people who are easy to love.*