

Not by Bread Alone

Daily Reflections for Lent 2020

Michelle Francl-Donnay



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Introduction

I began writing these reflections on the summer solstice, on the day my hemisphere of the earth is flooded with as much light as it can bear. Every day that passes after the solstice, I'm more aware of the light slipping away, of the days growing inexorably dimmer, and my longing for the light to return grows stronger.

Lent enkindles similar feelings in me. My soul feels dimmed, diminished. I long for the Light that set me aflame at my baptism, yearn to be purified again in its crucible and gentled in its warmth. So Lent sends me searching for light in the Scriptures, in my prayer, and in my sisters and brothers. For light is how God broke into the world in the first place. Let there be light, he said. He offered the life of his Son to be the Light of the human race. A light to shine in the darkness, a light the darkness cannot overcome. Light is what heralded the resurrection, an angel whose arrival shook the earth, shining as bright as lightning in the dimness of a garden at dawn.

I pray in Lent for God's light to break into my life, to light the path forward. But Lent's light is more than what we receive. It's about who we are, and what we should be about. In his poem "Sowing Light," Alden Solovy turns a line from Psalm 97—*Light is sown for the just* (v. 11)—back on itself. Light is what the just must sow, in healing, in blessing, in love, prays Solovy. This is the light we are given. This is the

light we must sow. This light, we will hear in the Easter *Exsultet*, will never be dimmed in the sharing.

This Lent, let us long for light: for the light sown in us, for the light sown by us, for the Light sown for us, for a light that will set us aflame. Let us long to be light itself.

Reflections

Abandoned to Grace

Readings: Joel 2:12-18; 2 Cor 5:20–6:2; Matt 6:1-6, 16-18

Scripture:

[W]e might become the righteousness of God in him. (2 Cor 5:21b)

Reflection: The Latin version of the opening prayer for Mass today uses the word *inchoare*, from which we get the English “inchoate,” suggesting the barest hint of a beginning, a sketch of what might be built on this foundation, a plan for the days to follow.

The start of my Lent always feels full of plans, spiritual and otherwise. I have plans for penance and time with God; there are liturgical plans and rehearsals; plans for how my students and I will reach the end of the semester. Most of these plans will come to fruition more or less as I laid them out. My sixty-odd general chemistry students will learn to calculate the pH of an acidic solution. I will go to confession more often and give up tucking a bit of chocolate into my lunch for forty days. There will be a chaotic rehearsal for Holy Thursday and a moving celebration of the Easter Vigil. No mystery here, just my regular forty-day foray into spiritual renewal.

But I wonder if with all these plans, however reasonable they might be, I’m entirely missing the point of what Lent

celebrates: the mystery that is Christ's walk to Jerusalem, into his passion, death, and resurrection, into an unimaginable reality. In a letter to Ascanio Colonna, St. Ignatius of Loyola noted, "There are very few people who realize what God would make of them if they abandoned themselves into his hands, and let themselves be formed by his grace." Can I cease making of Lent an organized campaign to banish sin from my life and instead abandon myself entirely to God's mysterious working? Can I simply fall into Lent, unsure of how I will emerge, other than with arms outstretched?

Meditation: How can you leave space for God to work in your life this Lent? What aspects of your life are you willing to abandon entirely to God's grace? Take a few moments to pray for the grace to let go of your desires for this time and enter into what God desires for you.

Prayer: Grant us the courage, O Lord, to abandon ourselves entirely into your hands for these Lenten days. Give us the joy of your Holy Spirit, and sustain us with your Word.

Facing the Cross

Readings: Deut 30:15-20; Luke 9:22-25

Scripture:

“If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” (Luke 9:23b)

Reflection: I regularly take up a cross. As an altar server I often carry the cross in procession. I stand at the end of the main aisle, holding a cross that is taller than I am by half and weighty enough to feel it in my shoulders as I raise it high so that it can be seen above the heads of the assembly. And as I lead the procession down the aisle, I cannot help but think about the less literal crosses that I will have to lift in my life. Will they make my shoulders ache? Will I be able to balance them as I walk? Where must I take them?

My eyes inevitably go to the enormous painting of Christ crucified that hangs above the century-old marble altar in my parish church. Each time I hold the cross aloft, I am brought face-to-face with Christ’s suffering, face-to-face with Christ in the tabernacle, face-to-face with Christ in the people of God assembled there. I walk without a hymnal, so the only words I have to take along for this journey are what are already in my heart and head. I will surely falter on the second verse. Clothed in white, a reminder of my baptismal garment, hands and face raised up, I walk. I walk toward

boundless mercy. Will this be what my last walk will be like, from this life into the next, stripped of words and pretenses, face-to-face with God and surrounded by those who have gone before me—praying not to falter? Take up your cross, says Christ, and follow me, for this is the road to eternal life, and I will not let you fall.

Meditation: To carry a cross is not just to bear the weight but to have a destination. Where are the crosses you carry taking you? What are you walking toward?

Prayer: Grant us, O Lord, the grace to take up the crosses that present themselves to us this day. And at the end, may we once more lift up the cross and in the company of the saints and angels follow you into eternal life.

Light Breaks Forth

Readings: Isa 58:1-9a; Matt 9:14-15

Scripture:

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your wound shall be quickly healed. (Isa 58:8)

Reflection: I have a bowl of water-worn rocks on my desk, picked out of streams and off beaches as far away as Japan and as close to home as New Jersey. When the afternoon light coming through the attic window is just right, some of them seem to glow with an inner light of their own. As a scientist, I can explain the phenomenon: the light is being reflected, not like a mirror from the surface, but softly scattered in all directions by millions of microscopic cracks within the rock. This light seems to linger around the rocks. I want to cradle them in my hands and let their warmth soak in, easing the aches in body and soul.

In his song “Anthem,” poet and songwriter Leonard Cohen wrote that the cracks in everything are how the light gets in. Like my rocks, which would not luminesce without the myriad crevices between the crystals allowing the light to move within them, the cracks within our hearts are how the Light gets in.

Isaiah encourages us not to seal up our fractured hearts or to polish the outsides to a high gloss, but rather to make

more cracks, to break open our hearts, so that the Light can get in—and out again. The light isn't meant to merely illuminate what is around us, but to be a light that surrounds us, easing the aches of sin's burdens, sustaining us. The light that Isaiah imagines breaking forth from our crushed hearts is the light by which we see each other, that we might untie the thongs of those unjustly bound, clothe the naked, and feed the hungry.

Meditation: What faults are you tempted to wish polished away? How might they instead become spaces for the light of Christ to enter in and be reflected to those in need?

Prayer: Accept as a sacrifice, O Lord, our broken hearts and our crushed spirits. May your light spill forth from within us, that we might warm the hearts of those in despair and tend the wounds of the world.

To Ride on the Heights

Readings: Isa 58:9b-14; Luke 5:27-32

Scripture:

Then you shall delight in the LORD,
and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth.
(Isa 58:14b)

Reflection: On a very hot and sticky summer day, I took an afternoon walk along a section of the Appian Way where the two-thousand-year-old road descends to the crater floor of a dormant volcano, laced with vineyards and olive groves. At the crossroads I decided to take the path up to Arricia, perched on the edge of the old crater. The path is steep, climbing sixteen stories in less than a quarter of a mile. I was hot, thirsty, and uncertain if I had taken the correct fork early on. I was nearly ready to give up any chance of a view and walk back the way I had come when I turned a last corner and popped out into a seventeenth-century street behind Sancta Maria dell' Assunta. In front of me was a very modern sign: "Ascensore, 1 euro." Elevator, 1 euro. I needn't have walked at all.

There would have been no choice when Isaiah was writing. The only way to reach the heights of the earth, to catch a glimpse of the breathtaking enormity of the world around one, was to walk up to them, on trails that were hot and

dusty, or cold and steep and windblown, huffing and puffing. It can be hard to imagine in these days of trams and express elevators how inaccessible the high places could be. We are being promised something unimaginable to Isaiah: that we could ascend to such heights with ease.

Today we are facing Lent's heights, walking paths that demand much of us and promise more. But we walk knowing that it is not solely our efforts that will bring us at last to the mountaintop where we can delight in the Lord, but that we can and must turn to God and ask for a lift. Jesus has come, not for the self-righteous but for those who need his help.

Meditation: What heights do you seek during this Lenten season? What perspective do you need to find in your life? Where are you tempted to try to walk the trails alone and without help? Can you ask the Lord to carry you up to the heights so that you can see the view?

Prayer: Lord, renew our hearts this Lent. Give us the courage to ask for your help to walk once again in your path, for we can do nothing without your care.