

# Not by Bread Alone

*Daily Reflections for Lent 2021*

Mary DeTurrís Poust



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## Introduction

It's easy to think, as we begin yet another Lenten journey, that we know the drill. We've been here before; we know what's coming. But the truth is that Scripture is a living thing, always new. I know this firsthand because every time I sit down to write a Lenten reflection about a Scripture passage I've heard or read too many times to count, something jumps out at me and makes me say, "How did I not notice that before?" We hear every Scripture reading differently depending on where we are on our life journey, our spiritual journey, or maybe just what side of the bed we woke up on that day. God meets us where we are, and, if we're paying attention, we can hear God, see God, recognize God in unlikely places, in stories we think we know. When we take time to listen for the still small voice, a scene, a sentence, a word calls out to us as if surrounded by blinking neon lights along a dark highway, and we are found, even if only for a few minutes.

Today we take the first steps on a path through the desert of Lent. Maybe we've been here many times before; maybe this is an entirely new experience for us. It doesn't really matter, because the best way to approach this journey is as if for the first time every time. Be prepared to be surprised and amazed, confounded and comforted. The daily readings from Scripture will be our spiritual GPS through the twists and turns of this season. Every time we think we know exactly where we're headed, we're likely to take a wrong turn and

need to recalculate. That's okay. Give yourself permission to be less than perfect. We are not striving for perfection but for a prayer practice that will become like a well-worn sweater, something we long to put on when we roll out of bed, when we get home from work, when we just need to feel safe.

This book of reflections won't magically make that kind of prayer grow in your life, but I hope it can be a catalyst to something deeper. The reflections and meditations and prayers grow out of my own journey. To be honest, there were many days when I sat down with a set of Scripture readings and could not imagine what I might have to say that could be helpful to you. But, after sitting with the Scriptures, reading and rereading, taking them for a walk, sharing a cup of coffee with them as the sun rose outside my window, something always found its way off the page and into my heart, like a delicate shoot pushing through the cold, hard earth of winter into the warmth and light of spring.

Thank you for letting me lead you on this prayer journey for the next forty-plus days. I am so humbled and grateful to walk with you as a sister in faith. Know that as you read through these pages, I am reading and praying with you and for you. Every book of reflections I write is a gift I cherish, because every book takes me deeper into my own pilgrimage to the heart of Christ. Today I begin again with you, knowing that I cannot know what's ahead, even when I think I do, but trusting that the Spirit will lead me exactly where I need to go. Take my hand, take a deep breath, and let's begin.

# Reflections

## The Brink of Possibility

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

**Scripture:**

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. (Matt 6:6)

**Reflection:** When was the last time you went into your room, closed the door, and prayed wholeheartedly? I don't mean those times when you walked into your room to get ready for bed and let fly a string of "God help me" supplications as you pondered another day at work or a particularly difficult decision you knew was ahead. I mean real, silent, single-minded prayer in a dedicated space for a dedicated time in a dedicated way. Chances are, it's been a while. Life is demanding. Time is precious. Solitude is almost nonexistent. And yet, here we are, at the very beginning of Lent being told to do just that—to make the time and space for God, to be intentional about focusing on prayer, to worry not about appearances but about what lies at the heart of the matter, even if no one else knows we're doing it. Lent is a time to take stock and start over. As we stand on the brink of forty days in the desert, we know we're on the cusp of possibility, a chance to get this right once and for all. How much do we want that? Do we want it enough—do we want

God enough—to step outside our routine, find a quiet space, and pray as if our life depended on it? Because it does.

**Meditation:** Imagine that this Lent comes with a fresh, blank slate. You can create whatever your spirit most desires. How will you fill the empty space? Will you waste it on spiritual junk food—platitudes and pleasantries that look impressive but hardly scratch the surface of your soul? Or will you dive deep into this season, urged forward by a desire to carve a new path through the weeds of worldliness that threaten to choke out God’s love and mercy? This path is not easy, but it is sure. Today we begin, one step at a time.

**Prayer:** My God, I cannot see you through the dense fog of the daily demands that clamor for my attention, but I sense your presence in my life, swirling around me. Give me the wisdom to seek you first, always, even when the world is barking outside my door, asking for more than I have to give. For just this moment, I want to remain with you, outside the world’s view, locked only in your holy gaze.

## **A New Equation**

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

**Scripture:**

What profit is there for someone to gain the whole world yet lose or forfeit himself? (Luke 9:25)

**Reflection:** On day two of our Lenten journey we are, once again, focused on turning away from worldly success, worldly desires, worldly ideas. And while that sounds enticing and maybe even noble, it's anything but easy. We live our lives in the world. We are human. We don't really know any other way, unless we choose the Way. When we do that, when we follow Jesus, everything changes. We are no longer worried about gaining the world but about gaining heaven. We stop putting the focus on self and, in the process, discover the very self we've been searching for since the day we were born. We cannot know God, we cannot know ourselves, if we are following the roadmap the world sets out for us. It is only when we throw away the map and tap into the divine direction that has been preprogrammed into each one of us that we can truly navigate our way successfully through this life and into eternal life. Today's gospel reminds us in blunt terms that the Way will require suffering, that discipleship comes at a price. That's certainly not the way of our world. According to the world's standards, suffering and success cannot co-abide, but God

invites us to try that equation on for size and create a new standard.

**Meditation:** Does today's gospel spark a little discomfort? Jesus' admonition that we take up our cross daily can be challenging. What would it feel like to lose my life for Jesus—maybe not literally but in other ways? What would that require? It would probably require some radical change, if not in my routine, then certainly in my attitude. But I'm guessing routines would need to change as well. Put away the smartphone and dial into prayer. Skip the trip to the mall and focus instead on building up the kingdom in my heart, in my home, in the larger world. Considering the many troubles in our world, it may seem like anything we do wouldn't really matter. But, if we start where we are right now, we do our part to create a shift that will echo out into the universe.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, give us courage to bear whatever crosses come our way. Help us to view suffering not as empty pain, as the world does, but as a pathway to a deeper understanding of our total dependence on you.