

Not by Bread Alone

Daily Reflections for Lent 2018

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Introduction

Last fall my students and I walked part of the Kumano Kodo, an ancient network of pilgrimage trails in rural Japan. The terrain was rough and wildly overgrown, the paths sometimes edging along steep cliffs. We learned to keep a sharp eye for the stones marking the trail to avoid wandering off the track.

The psalms and scriptural texts laid out for Lent mark a pilgrimage through time rather than space, walking us through the high points of God's relationship with his people. They encourage us to explore the history of our own relationship with God. Where have I missed the markers on the way, and what experiences have taken my breath away?

I encourage you particularly to pray with the psalms. These were the poem-prayers that Jesus turned to in his own life and ministry. Psalm 37, verse 11 rings out in the Beatitudes near the start of Matthew's gospel: "But the poor will inherit the earth, / will delight in great prosperity." Christ's last words on the cross come from Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" Listen to the psalms as they are sung. Search out different musical settings. Try Gregorio Allegri's shattering version of Psalm 51, which is the first psalm sung in Lent and the last on Holy Saturday night, or the same psalm set to the chant tones of Joseph Gelineau, SJ, sung by an English boys' choir. Pray them aloud, too, letting the Word that is God breathe in you.

There is a beauty as well as a wildness to Lent's path. God tells Israel in Isaiah, "I lay your pavements in carnelians, / your foundations in sapphires" (54:11). The readings marking our way along the days of the Lenten season are indeed like gemstones. Build your Lent around them, lay your life on their foundations, and together let us follow them on toward Easter.

Reflections

A Time to Notice

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

Scripture:

“Take care not to perform righteous deeds
in order that people may see them . . .” (Matt 6:1a)

Reflection: “Do you know you have something on your forehead?” wonders the student in the front row of my general chemistry class. Inwardly, I wince, hearing again the morning’s gospel: “when you fast, / . . . wash your face, / so that you may not appear to be fasting.” Another student nudges her and whispers, “It’s Ash Wednesday.”

Every year I struggle with this paradoxical start to Lent, with the what and the why of Lenten penitence. None of this is required today. I was not obliged to go to Mass, or to let the gritty ashes be rubbed on my forehead. I could have taken the gospel to heart and washed my face before I went to class. Yet I have chosen to wear my faith—my penitence—on my face today, knowing there will be whispered “whys” swirling around my classroom.

Perhaps I am torn because I recognize Lent is a time of noticing, rather than being noticed. To stand back, sit down, empty out, and notice why and how I pray, where I am needed, who I should be.

“Why?” asks Jesus in the gospel. Why do you pray, fast, give alms? To be noticed? To be applauded? To be witness? Or to become? To become the face of Christ to your neighbor.

Lent calls us beyond the giving up of small luxuries, or even necessities, but through that emptying of ourselves and that carrying of others to become Christ. “Where is their God?” cried those who saw Israel’s travails in the first reading. God is among us, in our neighbors, in our hearts. Would that you could read that on my face every day.

Meditation: What do you notice about the ways in which the gospel rubs against your everyday life? How might your Lenten practices make smooth those edges, let God be more apparent in you? Who might God be calling you to become this Lent?

Prayer: Merciful and compassionate God, open our hearts so that we might recognize your son in each other’s faces, and in our own. Make known to us the paths we must walk, and sustain us in our Lenten journeys.

Whose Life Do I Choose?

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

Scripture:

“I have set before you life and death,
the blessing and the curse.

Choose life . . .” (Deut 30:19b)

Reflection: The choices set before me on any given day rarely seem as weighty as what Moses is offering the people of Israel. Chicken or fish for dinner tonight? White shirt or black turtleneck? Neither seems the stuff of life and death, a blessing or a curse—though admittedly it’s a blessing to entertain such choices at all, to have clothes to wear, food in the freezer, enough and more to sustain my life.

Given so much and facing truly inconsequential choices, it is easy for me to think as I listen to the first reading that yes, I long ago chose life and its blessings, then plunge into my daily round of teaching and housework. Yet as I listen this morning, I hear the choice I make is not just for me, but has consequences for others. Choose life, cries Moses, “that you and your descendants may live . . .” Nor is this a one-time choice of some nebulous good; as the passage just before this in Deuteronomy points out clearly, the choices God offers us are not hidden in heaven, or across the seas, but are always near to us, in our hearts and on our lips.

What are the choices set before us today? Pope Francis quoted the bishops of Brazil in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*: Take up daily the joys and hopes of all, but most particularly of those living on the margins and those who lack for the necessities of life. Those who have an abundance should tune their ears and consider the poor as “one with ourselves.” This is the choice set before me, not my life or death, but to choose to notice and respond to the difficulties of those around me who are hungry and homeless, fleeing war or natural disasters.

What life do I choose today, for me, but above all for the poor?

Meditation: Consider what daily habits you have, or might develop, that keep you attentive to all God’s people. What choices might you make today to bring life to those who you are aware are hungry, in need of shelter or care?

Prayer: With your Word on our lips and in our hearts, O Lord, help us to choose life in abundance: for ourselves, for our families, and for all the people of God.

Battle to Keep the Fast

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

Scripture:

“This, rather, is the fasting that I wish:
releasing those bound unjustly,
untying the thongs of the yoke; . . .

Sharing your bread with the hungry . . . ” (Isa 58:6-7)

Reflection: As I approach the age where I am no longer bound to the Lenten fast, I have to admit to a sense of relief. For most of my life, the prescribed fast was not a struggle, but over the last few years I have found the discipline an increasing challenge. I’m tempted to keep only to the letter of the law—leading to midnight raids on the refrigerator. I’m irritable and, frankly, by the end of the day, irritating as well, as I descend into the mire Isaiah describes: “quarreling and fighting, / striking with wicked claw.” It’s become all about me, a battle to keep the fast, a brawl with my own temper.

Certainly wrestling with hunger sharpens my sense of the experiences of those whose hunger gnaws at them day and night, and—I surely hope—softens my heart, and gives me eyes to see what hunger looks like where I live. And make no mistake about it, I am a sinner, and in need of penance.

But this unsparing reading from Isaiah is demanding that I step entirely outside of myself, putting aside my own peni-

tence or my own desires to grasp the experience of hunger. Move, cries Isaiah, be at work, become the light in the darkness. Am I suffering in artificial solidarity with the hungry, for in truth I have enough to eat and more? Or am I going hungry because I have shared what I have with those who are hungry? Struggle not with your own hunger, not with your own needs, but fight for the needs of the hungry people in your cities and neighborhoods. This is the fast God requires of us.

Meditation: What is the fasting God desires of you this Lent? What particular skills do you have in abundance that you can use to actively assist those on the margins of your community?

Prayer: God of mercy and compassion, grant us generous hearts, that we might share freely with our brothers and sisters what we have in abundance. May the light of your glory be our guide.

An Invitation to Healing

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

Scripture:

“I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners.” (Luke 5:32)

Reflection: These first four days of Lent feel like a waiting room, a space to pause before we plunge into wall-to-wall Lent. A time to consider what I am to be about in this particular season. What is it that I most desire from God in this time? Who is God calling me to become?

At the start of an interview with Pope Francis shortly after he was elected, Fr. Antonio Spadaro, SJ, set aside his prepared questions and asked the pope, “Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?” There was a long silence, after which Pope Francis responded, “I am a sinner.” He went on to say, “I am a sinner whom the Lord has looked upon,” echoing a line from a homily on the call of St. Matthew by the eighth-century English monk Bede.

Listening to Luke’s account of Jesus calling Levi in today’s gospel, I recall Pope Francis’s response, “I am a sinner.” I, too, am a sinner. And because of that, the Lord has looked upon me with love and compassion. Despite all the things I have done, and have failed to do, all the times I have missed the mark, I am called to sit down with Jesus. Now. This is

not a reward for the perfect, for the sinless, but an invitation to be healed.

What is it that I desire from God, now, this Lent? Healing, certainly, but also God's intimate companionship. Who is God calling me to become? Someone who eats and drinks with him, who follows closely in his footsteps as he walks among us.

Meditation: What is it that you desire from Lent? What are one or two areas where you seek Jesus' healing? What shape might that healing take? What habits might you put in place to splint the areas until they are fully healed?

Prayer: O Lord, we desire nothing more than to be close to you. Help us to hear you when you call. Grant us the grace to know your presence in our daily life, and the strength and courage to follow you wherever you go.