



A SEASON FOR
GOODNESS'
SAKE

GOD'S LENTEN
CALL TO HOLINESS



INTRODUCTION

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BE GOOD WHILE I'M GONE

One of the most familiar instructions of parents to their children is the heartfelt exhortation to good behavior. When parents leave children with a sitter or grandparents, their parting words include expressions of love and a fervent reminder: “Be good!” Teachers leaving a class with a substitute provide detailed lesson plans, including tips about the special needs or abilities of students. During Lent we reflect on the gospel and listen attentively to the Lord’s “lesson plans” at the Last Supper. We are given due cautions, parting hopes, and a final prayer for unity—in parental verbiage, “no fighting!” At the Ascension, Jesus does not chide the disciples for their desertion at the cross, but bids them to spread the good news. His final words are not parting shots, but inspiration: “Behold, I am with you always!” Wise parents and teachers do not bid children to focus on failures in their absence, but on exhibiting their best behavior. Lent is not a time to dwell on our sins, but a season to refine our virtues as a springboard to greater goodness and faithful service while the Lord is away.

—Jerry Welte

GROUNDED IN HUMILITY

You have made us little less than a god;
crowned us with glory and honor. —Psalm 8:6

Humility is hard to master, for its path is a narrow one. While Jesus is “meek and humble of heart,” he also proclaims himself “the way, the truth, and the life.” Similarly, Christ berates the Pharisee who sings his own praises in the temple, but then bids us to let our light shine before all. The term *humility* can mean “lowly,” but also “down to earth,” grounded in the *humus* or dust from which we came. Just as there is peril in self-promotion, so is there danger in strident self-deprecation. Authentic humility freely acknowledges strengths and weaknesses. When we are confronted we rightly apologize, so why do we feel an instinctive obligation to downplay compliments? Someone praises a job well done and we make light of it: “It was nothing.” Actually, it wasn’t nothing. It was a grace and a gift. Perhaps the truly humble person simply smiles and replies, “Thank you.”

Lord Jesus, open my eyes to my faults and my virtues.

Thursday after Ash Wednesday

THE REDEEMER IN US ALL

It is mercy I desire, not sacrifice. —Matthew 9:13

Catholics often instinctively begin Lent by deciding what to give up, but sacrifice is not the first order of business. The more pressing concern is to identify what is lost or missing from our lives. The sacrifice comes afterward as a way of facilitating this recovery project. I give up TV or internet, not to punish myself, but to make room for the prayer, service, or family time that I lack. To improve a friendship, a workaholic takes more time off, while to recapture fading romance, a drifting couple schedules date nights. Sacrifice is essential to a successful Lent, but as a means to a higher purpose. Our Redeemer did not carry the cross as an exhibition in spiritual endurance, but to restore divine

justice and mercy to our world. We do not please the Lord by sacrifice as much as by sacrament. The truest sign of a successful Lent is our embodiment of Christ in redeeming lost life.

Holy Redeemer, may my sacrifice restore a merciful heart.

Friday after Ash Wednesday

HOLINESS IS NOT A COMPETITION

Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. —Luke 18:19

We are said to belong to the human race, but life is not a contest. Our Lord prayed that we might all be one, yet our experience of Church includes incentives to distinguish or distance ourselves. In the Catholic school of my childhood, each good behavior was publicly rewarded with a star next to one's name. Each day that bulletin board symbolically announced to the class those who were the "better students." Church hierarchy assigns ranks to holiness by naming clerics as "reverend," "very reverend," or "most reverend." These practices serve a function, but they risk the perils of saintly competition. A Facebook post rightly observed, "Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future." The greatest among us is the last of all and the servant of all. Christ's disciples do not climb the ladder of spiritual success, but form the circle of holy communion.

Meek and humble Lord, may we walk together to your kingdom

Saturday after Ash Wednesday

SLY AS A FOX

Be shrewd as serpents and simple as doves. —Matthew 10:16

Faith has earned a reputation—sometimes justifiably so—for being gullible, naive, or simple-minded. In reality, Christianity is as shrewd in goodness as wickedness is foolhardy in evil. Jesus was quickly wise to the snares of the Pharisees: "Why are you testing me?" The Lord was a master of the sly response that made its point without springing the

trap: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s;” “Let the one without sin cast the first stone.” Thomas More refused to acknowledge the Church of England or Henry VIII’s remarriage, but wisely avoided stating his objections: “In silence is my safety under the law.” When told at trial that he has his life in his hands, the saint deftly replies: “Then I’ll keep a good grip on it!” The holy are in no rush to die, but remain pure and clever in spreading the gospel.

God of wisdom, make us shrewd and innocent in faith and life.

First Sunday of Lent

DEVIL IN DISGUISE

You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test! —Luke 4:12

Jesus defeats Satan in the desert and farmer Jabez Stone retains his bartered soul in *The Devil and Daniel Webster*, but not everyone triumphs over the devil’s wiles. This is largely because deals with the devil appear benign at the start. We rarely choose evil as evil, but rather as an apparent good. The grotesque demons of horror movies are the exception, not the rule. Satan typically comes to us in disguise. A character in the film *Broadcast News* explains: “Nobody is going to be taken in by a guy with a long red pointy tail. He will be attractive...nice and helpful...never do an evil thing. He will just bit by little bit lower our standards.” Lent is a time to review the compromises we have made in life and faith. As we unmask the devil, we raise the bar of our standards to the higher plane of the gospel.

Faithful Lord, teach me to live the gospel without compromise.



THE EMPTY CUP

Tired from his journey, Jesus sat down there at Jacob's well. —John 1:6

I was a full-time caregiver for nine years before my wife's death. Many caregivers serve longer. During that time I discovered the enduring power of love, but I also learned humbling lessons about its limits. We live in a popular culture of super heroes, but humans do not reside in comic books. Disciples have a tremendous capacity for giving, but we are not Wonder Women and Super Men. We must feed and restore our bodies and spirits. I learned that if I did not get time off, my patience would wear thin and my caregiving would suffer. The length and frequency of restorative breaks will vary for each giver, but even Jesus got tired and had to sit down to rest. Saint Paul insisted that "love never fails," but surely he also realized that one cannot give from an empty heart or pour from an empty cup.

Good Shepherd, lead me to restful waters to restore my soul.

Tuesday of the First Week of Lent

PLAYING SECOND FIDDLE

Not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends. —Luke 15:29

Imagine a dedicated, career violinist playing second chair to a young prodigy who skips rehearsal, parties hard, and wanders into concerts late. We know that the parable of The Prodigal Son bends over backwards to underscore the mercy of God, but the fate of the faithful brother nonetheless sticks in the craw. Perhaps it would not rankle if it did not resonate with experience. We all know people at work, in families, or in parishes who give above and beyond the call of duty yet seem unappreciated. Perhaps a biblical scholar will someday unearth an ancient text with an unpublished parable of The Faithful Daughter or The Dutiful Son. Until then, those who play second fiddle in life guard against bitterness and find goodness its own reward. Just as we forgive

ourselves when pardon is not offered by others, so do those who serve without thanks duly acknowledge themselves.

Gracious God, may we embrace unseen givers with your love.

Wednesday of the First Week of Lent

THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

The kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these. —Matthew 19:14

A troubling reality of contemporary life is children growing up too fast. Cable television, the internet, interaction with siblings or friends, and checkout magazine displays have accelerated the graduation of children from the age of innocence. Religion, even with the best intentions, is sometimes too eager to displace childlike innocence with “the age of reason.” There is a delicate balance to be maintained here, along with an awareness of the unique development of each child. The world has changed, so we must protect and instruct our charges accordingly. Moreover, each child matures at a different pace, so we should not schedule them to suit our wishes or placate our fears. In the end, we don’t want children to prematurely lose their wide-eyed wonder at the beauty of life. Before we teach them about their capacity for sin, we first engrain in them their inherent capacity for goodness.

Divine Infant, show us the innocence that draws us to goodness.

Thursday of the First Week of Lent

DRIVING TEST OF FAITH

A Samaritan traveler who came upon him was moved with compassion.
—Luke 10:33

There are many courteous motorists on the road, but this species is vulnerable to drivers who behave as if the primary mission of others is to stay out of their way. Perhaps driving has become a measure of our humanity and a road test to earn a license in discipleship. Followers of Christ do not travel with the presumption that everyone journeys

carefree through this world with equal levels of skill, confidence, or direction. The driver in front of us might be lost, afraid, ill, young, elderly, worried, or confused. The one behind us may be late for work or rushing to an emergency. Christians take to the highways of life with the humility that transcends “me first” and the empathy that recognizes human frailty, not to mention road hazards like construction, weather, and accidents. In a society in a hurry to get somewhere, there is no better destination than the state of compassion.

Jesus the Way, help us be patient, compassionate travelers.

Friday of the First Week of Lent

NO GOOD DEED GOES UNPUNISHED

If I have spoken the truth, why do you strike me? —John 18:23

Once I parked in a handicapped space in a full commuter lot to be on time for jury duty. I left a note on the car, but the judge would hear none of my protests and reinforced the ticket. Most of us have known similar moments of being penalized for trying to do the right thing. Jesus is a poster child for this sobering universal truth—set out to save the world and get crucified for your trouble. Countless justice and peacemakers have been ostracized, imprisoned, or assassinated for their heroic deeds. Even the church has excommunicated or executed truth-tellers like Galileo and Joan of Arc. Sometimes the good are hailed in this life, but more often they verify another haunting truth: “Only the good die young.” As we commit ourselves to the gospel, we should not expect a key to any city but the City of God.

Loving Savior, strengthen us to bear the weight of virtue’s cross.



FOOTPRINTS OF GOD

I place my law within them and will write it upon their hearts. —Jer 31:33

Early in life I learned about the stain of *Original Sin* and my predisposition to evil. Thirty-two years after my birth in sin, I read a book by Matthew Fox called *Original Blessing*, insisting that I was also born in grace and steeped in goodness. This was a startling and life-transforming revelation, but truthfully it was not entirely new. My religion teachers had already explained the indelible marks left on our souls by the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Orders. When we speak of “amazing grace,” perhaps there is no better example than an imprint of goodness that cannot be erased. When we lose our way, those sacramental signs remain to seal us in grace and call us to holiness. Like the breadcrumbs left by Hansel and Gretel, these indelible marks of grace are like the footprints of God on our souls that we can follow to lead us back home.

Holy God, sign us with grace and seal us in love.

Second Sunday of Lent

SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMERS

He was transfigured before them; his face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light. —Matthew 17:2

Popular Hollywood movies chronicle the adventures of *Transformers*, robots that can alter their shape to combat evil. Playing with corresponding toy action figures can introduce children to the notion of spiritual transformation. My wife sometimes observed—honestly rather than cynically—that people don’t change very much. Perhaps such reservations are fueled by an “all or nothing” image of change. We hold up St. Paul as a model of miraculous, instantaneous conversion, but most people change by degrees. Lent is a season to reshape our souls bit by bit to serve the Lord’s purposes. If a hulking robot can become a speeding race car as needed, so might idealistic disciples gradually grow more compassionate. True believers change the world by praying to be

transformed themselves according to the words of an old song: “Bend me, shape me any way you want me; you got the power to turn on the light.”

Transfigured Lord, shape us by degrees into agents of good.

Monday of the Second Week of Lent

GETTING OUR SOUL’S WORTH

My soul rests in God alone. —Psalm 62:2

In the comedy *O Brother Where Art Thou*, a young man sells his soul to the devil for guitar expertise. When asked why he would do such a thing, he explains with a shrug, “I wasn’t using it.” We might sell a soul that isn’t much use to us, but how do we measure its worth? In the physical world, we know the value of our bodies by how well we care for them. Moreover, we know the personal value of a thing—a family, a car, a friend, a house—by how much time and effort we invest in it. The same principle is true in the spiritual world. We learn the value of our souls by how well we care for them and how often we nurture them through prayer and service. We always like to get our money’s worth; let us strive to get our soul’s worth as well.

Faithful God, may my soul find its value and rest in you.

Tuesday of the Second Week of Lent

INTRODUCING YOUR BETTER HALF

His disciples were amazed that he was talking with a woman. —John 4:27

There is spiritual wisdom to be found when married people introduce a spouse as “my better half.” Authentic holiness assumes the traits of our opposites in gender, personality, and spirituality. Ideally, aggressive males or females are called to integrate the feminine trait of gentleness. Similarly, so called “mousy” women or men do well to gain assertiveness. The *Meyers Briggs* personality test ranks on a scale between several sets of opposite traits like introvert/extrovert or thinking/feeling. This point is not to proclaim either side “the winner,” but

to provide a path to the wholeness that is holiness. The subsequent goal is to integrate one's opposite or weaker pole so that extroverts practice good listening and intellectuals process emotions. Opposites attract in part because souls naturally gravitate to completion. Lent is a time to introduce ourselves to our other half so that all may meet our "better whole."

Triune God, reveal the grace of the unrealized part of me.

Wednesday of the Second Week of Lent

ACTIONLESS ACTION

Offer no resistance to the one who is evil. —Matthew 5:39

Christ's gospel exhortation to "turn the other cheek" can sound more like a call to be doormats than bracing good news. Jesus bid us to be non-violent, but also relentless in making justice. At the Dharassana Salt Works in India, Gandhi's followers knew that the British would beat them away with clubs, but they boldly marched forward without offering resistance or retaliation. The result for the British empire was not victory, but a loss of moral standing. The Lord preached the value of what the Taoist religion calls *Wu Wei*, or "actionless action." Like water flowing effortlessly over rocks, actionless action smooths coarse stone without violence, resistance, or wasted energy. The actionless action of turning the other cheek has toppled empires and reshaped societies. Surely it can be utilized to "cast down the mighty from their thrones" and usher in the reign of God.

Prince of Peace, teach us how to act with peace and justice.



SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL

Judas, would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss? —Luke 22:48

Jesus Christ Superstar portrays Judas as a disciple compelled to betrayal by fate and providence. Modern life has revealed the complexity of moral character explored in the stage play *Wicked*. Hollywood followed suit by introducing tainted antiheroes like Dirty Harry and sympathetic villains like the Phantom of the Opera. Just as history tends to demythologize heroes, faith does the same with villains. When we find ourselves laughing at Bad Santa, sympathizing with Walter White, or pulling for Butch Cassidy, we recall that there is nothing humorous or admirable about “breaking bad.” It is not so difficult for the grind of virtue to lend itself to boredom, resentment, or envy. Faith understands the complexity of misfortune and circumstance, so disciples ever strive to redeem and reform. Meanwhile we harbor no illusions that evil is sympathetic. Darth Vader was redeemed, but Judas was not. In the end, we each choose the path to light or darkness.

Redeemer Lord, dispel our illusions with the light of truth.

Friday of the Second Week of Lent

IF A CHRISTIAN FALLS IN THE FOREST

Go to your room and pray to your Father in secret. —Matthew 6:6

Philosophers ponder the question, “If a tree falls in a forest, does it make a sound?” Do the interactions of the physical world have any impact if no one is around? The same question applies to the realm of the spirit. Do private actions—whether good or evil—effect the world beyond? In defense of personal freedom, people insist, “I can do what I want in the privacy of my own home.” Freedom has real value, but faith takes a larger view by extolling the efficacy of private prayer and action. The liturgy is built on communion, the truth that we are all connected like a spiritual internet. Consequently, we also profess that private sin wounds the body of Christ. Every candle that goes out makes the world

a little darker. Every good act—even unseen or unheard—makes the world brighter and the reign of God closer.

Holy Spirit, may your wind and fire spread collective goodness.

Saturday of the Second Week of Lent

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

I say to you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. —Matthew 18:22

Early in life we learn about the harsh and benign reality of habits. Parents and teachers dutifully chide children not to leave their toys out, run with scissors, or put off homework. All the while, mentors strive to engrain positive behavior in their charges. Soon the young discover their capacity to form good habits like a healthy diet, good hygiene, and regular exercise. Good and bad deeds are habit forming. Every holy and evil action establishes a pattern of behavior that is deepened with each repetition. Modern children might practice putting aside electronics for physical or imaginative play, while busy adults rehearse stopping to smell the roses. The Lord's command to constant forgiveness is not about higher spiritual math, but the practice required to form an unbreakable habit: wash, rinse, repeat. Like human doctors who continue to “practice medicine,” fallible Christians never fail when they practice the gospel.

Constant Lord, give us the grace to practice your healing ways.



THE FEMININE WELL

Many of the Samaritans of that town began to believe in him because of the word of the woman who testified. —John 4:39

Women have a long history of being marginalized in church and society. My mother prepared the altar linens for Sunday Mass but could not stand in the sanctuary for the Eucharist. Women report the strange phenomenon of having their rejected ideas suddenly adopted when later presented by a man. Paul instructs the Corinthians that “women should keep silent in the churches” and modern men are mocked if they “cry like a girl.” Christ unsettled his followers by embracing the feminine: “His disciples were amazed that he was talking with a woman.” Jesus knew that the church would never be fully holy without drawing from the well of feminine graces: empathy, nurturing, intuition, emotion, hospitality, etc. St. Paul hails the ministry of another “invisible woman” of faith: “I commend to you Phoebe, our sister, for she has been a benefactor to many and to me as well.”

Living Water, may we draw from the holy well of feminine grace.

Monday of the Third Week of Lent

IT'S ALL ABOUT US

This is how you are to pray: Our Father in heaven. —Matthew 6:9

My sister has a mock tee shirt that boasts, “It’s all about me!” Of course, there are also people who give too much, implicitly professing, “It’s all about you!” Spock informs Captain Kirk: “Logic clearly dictates that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few...or the one.” Jesus predated this wisdom by suggesting that we pray best when we expand a “me and God” faith by saying, “Our Father” rather than “My Father.” Anyone who grew up with siblings knows that the needs of the larger family take precedence. Catholic social teaching calls this pillar of faith *The Principle of the Common Good*. A commitment to the common good means that I do not pray for fair weather during a drought,

text while driving, or pull a fire alarm for laughs. Catholic teaching bids us to employ the common good as the yardstick for measuring success in holy prayer and action.

Our Father, may we gladly and freely act for the common good.

Tuesday of the Third Week of Lent

DISPENSING THE BEST MEDICINE

I have told you these things so that my joy may be in you. —John 15:11

During a recent phone call to my brother, his grandchildren's nearby unbridled laughter provided a heartening soundtrack to the entire conversation. If laughter is the best medicine, children's laughter may be the most infectious, endearing, and healing prescription of all human remedies. A review of the great Christian art of the Renaissance reveals the common theme that almost no one is smiling. Due seriousness is quite appropriate for Lent, but there is a danger that it can descend into a gloominess that is antithetical to the gospel. We joke about harsh realities like aging and death, not to be irreverent, but simply to retain perspective. Faithful disciples take themselves seriously, but also learn to have a sense of humor about life and human folly. Let us find time during our Lenten observance for the laughter of children around us and the joy of the child in each of us.

Childlike Lord, as we show children love, may they bring us joy.



THE WHEAT AND THE WEEDS

If you pull up the weeds you might uproot the wheat along with them.
Let them grow together until harvest. —Matthew 13:29

One challenge of gardening is the tendency for weeds to grow near healthy plants. The same is true in the garden of the soul. Our vices are closely related to our virtues, so that uprooting the former may threaten the latter. Jealousy and emulation, vanity and self-respect, determination and stubbornness, patience and apathy, assertiveness and aggressiveness are all twin sides of the same spiritual coins. I often warned my students that our greatest weakness is also our greatest strength, just as our stellar virtues double as Achilles heels. As an introvert, I have the still waters that run deep, but am also slow to speak my thoughts aloud. If I am fearful, let me prune my fear into proper caution. Instead of repressing my anger, let me trim it into the holy outrage of zeal. Wise spiritual gardeners prune their faults rather than removing them so that healthy roots flourish and deadly plants wither.

Jesus the Vine, may holy pruning reap a harvest of goodness.

MEA BONUM

I have toiled harder than all of them;
not I, however, but the grace of God that is with me. —1 Cor 15:10

Catholics are well-rehearsed in the art of taking blame. At every Mass we confess, “*mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.*” Society has adapted a counterpart to this self-admonishment in the phrase “my bad.” When it comes to credit, however, we tend to follow Paul’s lead in giving the glory to God. We don’t wallow in pride, but we might take pause when our examinations of conscience produce only lists of failures. Perhaps Lent allows us to balance the monastic tradition of the *Chapter of Faults* with a “chapter of credits.” This notion calls to mind the story of the farmer reaping a harvest months after laboriously clearing a stony field. When a neighbor observes how much God has blessed the land, the

farmer replies, “True, but God wasn’t doing too good till I got here.” Virtue is a human partnership with God. Faith has no problem acknowledging “my good” or my part in this holy cooperation: “Through my good; through my gracious good!”

Graceful God, work with me as I continue to work with you.

Friday of the Third Week of Lent

THE ISOLATION OF SAINTS

Jesus then said to the Twelve, “Do you also want to leave?” —Matthew 6:67

Goodness can be a lonely business. Messiahs, whistle blowers, soldiers, peacemakers, and prophets can find themselves isolated on their respective battlefields. Jesus learned this bitter lesson after his teaching on the Eucharist caused numerous disciples to drift away. He knew it even more forcefully as he looked down from the cross. We learn it when we “speak truth to power,” only to find ourselves suddenly speaking alone. The plight of life’s crusaders calls to mind the comedic John Wayne impression of a general sending his troops into battle: “You’re going on a dangerous mission; some of you won’t be coming back. I sure wish I could go with you, but I can’t seem to shake this cold!” Those who endure the isolation of saintliness take heart in the faith that their spirits will be gathered into the company of the saints, a holy communion that can never be disbanded.

Lord Jesus, walk with us when we feel the loneliness of faith.

Saturday of the Third Week of Lent

WASHING BEFORE HOLY MEALS

This man welcomes sinners and eats with them. —Luke 15:2

It has become common practice in many parishes to celebrate the sacrament of Reconciliation prior to First Eucharist, but it was not always that way. The early church celebrated Reconciliation only after the adult catechumens were fully initiated through Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist. The sacrament of forgiveness was not considered

reconciliation with God, but with the Body of Christ, the Church. As one of my mentors expressed it, “You cannot be reconciled to a table to which you do not yet belong.” Jesus ate with sinners, then bid them to “go and sin no more.” It is Christ’s dinner invitation to Zacchaeus that elicits a vow of reparation. It means little to send children to their rooms without dinner unless they have already sat at the family table. Once we taste the bread of life, we gladly repent to preserve our place at the Lord’s Supper.

Bread of life, may our holy communion lead us to repentance.

Fourth Sunday of Lent

THE BLIND SPOT

If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you are saying, “We see,” so your sin remains. —John 9:41

Motorists know all about the hazard of driver side blind spots. The latest cars are equipped with devices that sound a blindside warning, but our souls do not beep when our eyes miss the truth about a person or situation. Ironically, spiritual blind spots grow from both bad and good seeds. Hatred is blind, but so is love. We strain to see the good in our enemies or the fault in our beloved. We also have blind spots in our self-image. Those with poor self-esteem struggle to recognize their gifts, while egotists overlook their failings. Self-righteousness is the blind spot that most concerned our Lord. Doctors can remove cataracts, but excising conceit is a more delicate operation. To cure myopia, we first must heal our souls. Lent is an invitation to angle our mirrors for perspective and look out our windows for a clearer view.

Light of Christ, widen our vision to see others as they truly are.

Monday of the Fourth Week of Lent

GOODNESS ISN’T PAROCHIAL

I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith. —Luke 7:9

Like many baby boomer Catholics, I proudly attended parochial school and was implicitly warned to steer clear of “the publics.” The

grace of this experience was being schooled in a faith community and grounded in a parish church. There was a downside to this blessing, however, in the tacit suggestion that faith and grace were confined to Catholic borders. Jesus sat with Samaritans and hailed the surpassing faith of a Roman centurion. Trappist monk Thomas Merton spent the latter years of his life studying Eastern religions and Gandhi quoted the Christian Gospels. There are striking parallels between the sacred writings of great world religions and the gospel. We can treasure our parochial school memories while still embracing the symbiotic grace of the ecumenical movement ushered in by Vatican II. Perhaps St. Paul wrote it best: “We are no longer Jew or Greek (Catholic or Public), for we are all one in Christ Jesus.”

God of all, gather us in one Lord, one faith, and one baptism.

Tuesday of the Fourth Week of Lent

WHEN IDOLS FALL

Before the cock crows today you will deny me three times. —Luke 22:61

A heartbreaking part of the coming of age process is discovering the fallibility of our heroes. When an admired official is arrested, a beloved pastor is removed, or a sports icon is banned from the game, something in us requires a recalibration of our world view. To simply discard them as personal or social outcasts is to forget that they are sisters and brothers in faith, not to mention our own fallibility: “There but for the grace of God go I.” Still, faith is by no means a call to blithely excuse wrong. It may be possible—even commendable—to forgive fallen idols, but also to advocate for prison, rehabilitation, and reparation. Falls from grace form a Bermuda triangle of sin, crime, and disease. Christians are called to redeem the sin, punish the crime, and cure the disease.

Faithful God, give us the wisdom to forgive and to redeem.

POOR EXCUSES

Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.
—John 8:7

Rationalization is a great enemy of virtue. We all are called to heed the Spirit's voice guiding us to the right path. Yet, each of us is also prone to hear that sly, demonic siren that justifies temptation as a benefit. The default script of rationalization is familiar to us all: "I deserve this;" "they were asking for it;" "a little bit won't hurt;" "everybody's doing it." The Pharisees no doubt took great pains to justify stoning and the one who lit the fire under Joan of Arc surely told himself he was doing what was best. Pope Francis recently reaffirmed the principle of Catholic moral teaching called *The Primacy of the Individual Conscience*, explaining that priests must inform Catholic consciences, but not replace them. This is the difference between the sacredness of a well-formed conscience and the poor excuses of one seduced by the siren of individualism and rationalization.

Good Shepherd, teach us to recognize your true, guiding voice.

HOLIER THAN THOU

Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees,
you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. —Matthew 5:20

Several years ago, I saw the burial place of Thomas Merton, the celebrated Trappist monk, theologian, and writer. The most striking thing about his grave is that it is not striking at all. There is nothing to distinguish it from the graves of the other monks buried near him. Despite his renown and accomplishments, he was laid to rest as one among many. This is a model for holiness laid out in the gospel. Jesus condemned those who sought to distinguish themselves as holier than others. In the vision of Christ, the surest way to decline in spiritual stature is to seek singular glory. Spiritual climbers often rise by stepping on others, but the truly righteous grow in holiness by reaching down to

pull up the outcasts, the downtrodden, the lost, and the weak.

Holy God, instill in us the glory of being one among many.

Friday of the Fourth Week of Lent

TROUBLEMAKERS FOR CHRIST

Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth?
No, I tell you, but rather division. —Luke 12:51

Our distaste for trouble is well documented in familiar colloquial expressions like “Don’t give me any trouble!” or “Stay out of trouble!” It would stun a class to hear a teacher instruct: “For homework tonight I want you to go out there and make trouble.” Such an assignment should not shock disciples of Christ, however, for dissent is an undeniable and challenging part of the Lord’s commission. Jesus is a peacemaker, but he understands the contentious nature of the gospel: “From now on a household of five will be divided.” Social justice activists down through the ages have followed Jesus in making holy trouble to expose evil and reform society. The figures we honor most—like apostles—are often those who have spent the most time in prison. We know people who make trouble for the fun of it, but troublemakers for Christ strive to create a more just and peaceful world.

Prince of Peace, give us the courage to make trouble for justice.

Saturday of the Fourth Week of Lent

HEEDING OUR REVIEWS

Along the way Jesus asked his disciples,
“Who do people say that I am?” —Mark 8:27

It is a well-known adage that “everyone is a critic.” Even casual audiences conclude their television viewing with a tacit review. As we ask ourselves what we think of a show, we might also wonder, “What does the show think of us?” Television is carefully matched with audience profiles based on researched demographics. Thus, the content and

commercials of a program form a mirror reflecting the presumed character and tastes of the viewer. The evening news appears to assume an audience more captivated by mayhem than inspiration. Morning talk show segments and ads suggest a preoccupation with celebrity life and personal appearance. Tabloid television caters to a rabid crowd that delights in the tawdry. Sports broadcasts teeming with beer commercials apparently presume a juvenile, “party on” fan base. In Lent we wonder with Jesus, “Who do they say that I am?” We then ponder if our reviews broadcast a critical call to conversion.

Creator God, may we look for good in the world and ourselves.

Fifth Sunday of Lent

LIVE AND IN PERSON

Lord if you had been here,
my brother would never have died. —John 11:21

Human tragedies elicit heartfelt outpourings of “thoughts and prayers” from near and far. Faith knows the efficacy of such spiritual communion, for many prayers are offered by individuals not in a position to act. Still, in times of need we rightly ask whether we are called or able to do more. Sometimes “thoughts and prayers” can be a way of keeping a comfortable distance. When we love both spouses in a divorce, know a dear friend who is homeless, or have a grieving neighbor, personal engagement is challenging. Jesus held Lazarus in prayer from a distance but didn’t resurrect him until he showed up in person. Our faith is based upon the sacramentality of personal presence. Jesus gave us the Eucharist so that we might tangibly know his abiding presence. We too should pray always, but not overlook the prospect that we are also called to do something in person.

All present God, make us living sacraments of your love.

DOCTORS WITHOUT BORDERS

As he was entering a village, ten lepers met him.
They stood at a distance from him. —Luke 17:12

Poet Robert Frost wrote, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” How times change. These days conflicting ideologies have precipitated another civil—or uncivil—war, erecting an invisible wall between left and right the way we once divided north and south. Good people dare not mention certain topics without risking alienated families, ruined friendships, or shouting matches. It reflects no bias to state, “There is something in the gospel that doesn’t love a wall.” Jesus spent his life breaking down barriers by eating with sinners, talking with women, and curing lepers. Today the Lord might update The Good Samaritan with a parable of The Good Conservative or The Good Liberal. Faith strives to resolve differences peacefully while maintaining the delicate balance between respect and principle. Christ bids us to reach across isles, fences, and walls. As disciples of the divine physician, we are all “doctors without borders.”

Lord of all, may we heal division with your inclusive ways.

OPTICAL ILLUSIONS

I tell you truly, this poor widow put in more than all the rest. —Luke 21:3

Public officials often gauge virtue using the political science of optics. While planning campaigns, candidates carefully weigh how each action will look in the eyes of the media and the public. The science of optics has given birth to the dubious modern phenomenon of the “photo opportunity.” Now when we see a governor cradle a baby or tour a hurricane site, we are left to wonder like an old commercial: “Is it real or is it Memorex?” Faith doesn’t put much credence in optics. Jesus wasn’t fooled by the optical illusion of the wealthy offerings in the temple. He knew that the poor widow’s two small coins were worth far

more in the sight of God. When pondering a call to action, Christians do not ask how it looks, but discern how it feels and what it accomplishes. At the end of the day, we need not worry about our image in a camera as much as our reflection in the mirror.

True God, inspire us to be good even when it doesn't look good.

Wednesday of the Fifth Week of Lent

THE INVALID IN US ALL

The Pharisee spoke this prayer to himself, 'O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity.' —Luke 18:11

I worked at a parish that did not have designated handicapped pews so that the disabled could sit amidst the assembly. This made perfect sense, for honest reflection reveals that everyone is handicapped. Some disabilities are obvious, while others remain unseen. Veterans can be paralyzed from the waist down, but disciples may be too afraid to stand up for the truth. Down syndrome involves mental disability, but so does obstinance. The blind need canes or dogs, while the prejudiced require sensitivity training. We have prosthetic limbs for injured athletes, but what restores spiritual amputees incapable of reaching out? Once we identify a person as “in-valid,” we risk subtly presuming ourselves to be valid by default. Lent is a “hunting season” for our hidden disabilities. Once we name them, we restore our humble solidarity with the physically handicapped and admit our common need for handicapped pews and the healing of Christ.

Divine Physician, heal the disability in us all with your touch.

Thursday of the Fifth Week of Lent

THE GIVING AND TAKING TREE

Judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy.
—James 2:13

Nature provides a potent model for the exercise of goodness in our symbiotic relationship with trees. We exhale the gas trees require and inhale the oxygen they provide. Symbiosis is a gracious bartering of

goods, whether physical or spiritual. This amazing model of benign co-operation goes wrong, however, when one side gives or takes too much. We witness this dilemma in human relationships as well. Just as in nature, there are givers and takers among humans. We idealize selfless giving, but one-way relationships are not sustainable over the long haul. Many potentially successful marriages, businesses, and friendships have been ruined by overly selfish or selfless partners. Even charity provides grace to givers as we hear them remark, “I got more than I ever gave.” Faith calls us to “be like a tree,” not in order to leave, but in order to equitably exchange the blessings of God with all creation.

Gracious God, teach me how to give and take your blessings.

Friday of the Fifth Week of Lent

THE SEVEN LIFE-GIVING VIRTUES

Over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection. —Colossians 3:12

I learned about the seven deadly sins and memorized the ten commandments in Catholic school. I was also taught about the eight Beatitudes, but not with equal fervor. My moral tutelage often began with the negative. Eight of the ten commandments involve avoiding sin rather than doing good. The season of Lent is like a refresher course in goodness, a study in virtue. St. Paul provides a pivotal lesson in Colossians: “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, put on heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.” To these five he adds, “Let peace reign in your hearts” and “be thankful.” This list of seven is neatly wrapped in the general instruction to “put on love,” like a single garment in which all virtues are woven together. We need not forget the seven deadly sins to commit these seven life-giving virtues to memory and practice.

Holy God, may your virtues be sealed in our hearts and actions.

NAMING OUR DEMONS

What I do, I do not understand. For I do not do what I want,
but I do what I hate. —Romans 7:15

We can certainly be surprised by the Spirit in us, but we may also be shocked by our demons. We might be calling friends, meeting colleagues, or visiting relatives when hurtful words suddenly spill from our lips. Afterwards we realize that we have wounded someone and wonder, “Where did that come from?” Saint Paul struggled with this mystery in Romans and concluded: “It is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.” Perhaps we can take this wisdom one step further by tracing our atypical behavior to its roots. One potential source of trouble for me is my sense of humor. I’m told it is a good one, but when I trust it too much, I can elicit frowns rather than laughter. We have sacraments to name the graces of God in our lives so that we may realize their power. It behooves us to identify our demons as well, for such naming gives us more power over them.

Faithful Lord, cast out the demons in me that hurt others.

Passion (Palm) Sunday

WHAT GOOD IS SUFFERING?

He learned obedience from what he suffered. —Hebrews 5:8

One danger of Holy Week is that we fall into the trap of honoring the suffering of Christ more than his virtue. Suffering elicits a variety of responses in the human heart. Some people gain compassion or wisdom from their pain, but others succumb to bitterness or despair. Lenten zeal for spartan self-denial can detour into a tacit inference that God is more pleased by misery than service. Some people welcome Easter so that their loved ones will cease being so testy. Suffering for truth and justice is redemptive, but there is no intrinsic value in suffering for its own sake. Jesus was not good simply because he suffered; he suffered simply because he was good. We judge the value of suffering the same

way we assess people: “By its fruits you will know it.” We lay aside the crosses that nurture self-pity, moodiness, or anger to take up the crosses that elicit love and justice.

Crucified Lord, guide me to suffer for goodness’ sake.

Monday of Holy Week

STANDING UP TO BULLIES

Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, handed him over to be crucified.
—Mark 15:15

In the wonderful film, *Gifted*, a young math genius confronts a bully who trips a student on a school bus: “You should not be laughing; you did a mean thing to a little kid!” When the bully dares her to act, she smacks him with a textbook. The movie makes it clear that hitting is wrong, but her uncle nonetheless asks the principal, “Weren’t you proud of her?” Pilate could have learned a lesson from that girl, but instead turned Jesus over for crucifixion with a lavabo ritual pretending innocence. We live in an age that has seen school bullies joined by internet bullying, hazing, and various forms of harassment. Jesus bids us to “put away our swords” in the face of violence, but also to take a clear stand against the cowardice and hypocrisy of bullying. When we see others being crucified, we too are called, not to wash our hands, but to come to the aid of the weak, small, and helpless.

Lord Jesus, may we wash away cruelty with kindness.



A NEW LEASE ON LIFE

I came that they might have life and have it more abundantly. —John 10:10

As an apartment dweller, I know all about leases. Each year I receive a letter explaining the timetable for renewal, the updated rent, and the penalties for breaking the rules. Renewing a lease is an invitation to review personal plans, commitments, and priorities. Like apartment living, Holy Week is tainted by tearful farewells, broken commitments, and penalties for residents who challenge the ways of our earthly dwelling. The Triduum invites us to review the cost of discipleship. The security deposit is faith, the rent is the cross, the amenities include holy communion, and death serves notice that we not permanent residents in this world. At the Easter Vigil we sign our new lease as we renew our baptismal vows and joyfully welcome new tenants. On Easter Sunday we celebrate a new lease on life and the promise of our eternal dwelling place in the house of God.

Gracious God, welcome us home to love's permanent dwelling.

Wednesday of Holy Week

THE SORROWFUL MYSTERY OF LOSS

Jerusalem, how many times I yearned to gather your children
as a hen gathers her brood, but you were unwilling! —Luke 13:34

Christianity is conceived in rejoicing, but it is born in loss. Ecclesiastes reminds us, “There is a time to weep and a time to laugh.” We typically count our blessings, but faith and humanity sometimes require us to process our losses: lost loves, lost causes, lost dreams, lost health, and lost lives. There is no shame in this, for Jesus wept over lost Jerusalem, lost Lazarus, and likely even lost Judas. Soldiers, widows, refugees, addicts, divorcees, amputees, caregivers, and the homeless share a bittersweet communion in knowing what they had once is now gone. We cope by gazing at old pictures, clutching cherished mementos, or visiting the hallowed ground of fond memories. We are not alone in these

rituals, for loss is a universal human experience, though seldom doled out equally. In faith we join our comrades—sharing stories, tears, and embraces—in this noble, haunting solidarity of the sorrowful mystery of loss.

Good Shepherd, may we find elusive, mysterious gain in loss.

Holy Thursday

A HOLY COMMUNION

Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body,
for we all partake of the one loaf. —1 Corinthians 10:17

It is not easy to experience communion in a restaurant these days. Televisions surround tables, music duels conversation, and diners eye cell phones between morsels of food and story. The family dinner, when it happens at all, may mimic this disjointed milieu. Imagine the Lord washing our feet to the tune of Adele, breaking the bread of life during Monday Night Football, or calling for unity while the disciples take cool selfies. Holy communion requires a personal presence that is diminishing in our society like an endangered species. Popular culture will not cooperate in providing this sacred space, so we must actively carve it out like chopping a clearing in a jungle or taking shelter in a storm. The Lord sought out a quiet, intimate setting to gather his disciples without interruption or distraction. Sharing food at home or at church is a sacred experience that demands the same commitment to presence if we are to achieve holy communion.

Bread of Life, nourish us with the food of personal presence.



THE SECOND GREATEST LOVE

Standing by the cross were his mother and his mother's sister,
Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala. —John 19:25

It was John Milton who wrote: “They also serve who only stand and wait.” Mary most certainly agreed as she stood weeping by the cross of her son. Jesus taught that the greatest love of all is to lay down one’s life for a friend, but perhaps the second greatest love is to be that friend watching your beloved die before your eyes. Keeping vigil by the crosses, bedsides, or trials of our loved ones surely requires a noble and searing allegiance. The heartbreak arises from the inescapable reality of one’s helplessness. To stand by the cross is to keep faithful vigil in the face of evil and suffering that cannot be altered or undone. We rightly honor heroic first responders who rescue people from harm, but we should reserve great esteem for God’s heroes who stick around even when there is no rescue or happy ending in sight except for tearful, abiding presence.

Crucified Savior, brace me to offer the love of helpless witness.

Holy Saturday

SAVING A WORLD

I guarded them and none of them was lost except the son of destruction.
—John 17:12

In board rooms after takeover bids, locker rooms after pivotal games, and living rooms after interventions, the contenders gather for assessment. Jesus made a bid to take over the world with love, to defeat death, and to free us from sin, so perhaps he too reflected on his mission in the aftermath. Christ had many successes, but even he could not save everyone. If it is literally true that “darkness vanishes forever,” as the *Exultet* proclaims, we would not require candles at the Easter vigil or in life. The sun will gloriously rise on Easter morning, but the moon—as always—will follow suit. Our defeats in battle remind us that we cannot save every child, student, relative, or neighbor. Yet, we boldly arise

from our tombs, eager for the next good fight. We may not win every battle or game, but in Christ we can win the campaign and celebrate the holy season of God's Easter reign.

Lord of life, strengthen us to rise from our tombs for justice.



THE SUN IN THE CLOUD

We know that Christ, raised from the dead, dies no more;
death no longer has power over him. —Rom 6:9

In the digital age, we upload precious data to *The Cloud* for safekeeping and remote access. Oddly, the resurrection of Christ is like that. Once raised from the dead, everything vital about Jesus—his life, light, grace, and Spirit—are forever preserved in the heavens. The digital cloud still relies on physical servers susceptible to failure, but the meta-physical cloud can never be lost or corrupted. Christian mystics refer to this phenomenon as *the Cosmic Christ*. The risen Lord has transcended earthly limits to dwell eternally in the cosmos, like an uploaded spiritual file that may be accessed anytime or anywhere. In mortal life it is a liability to have one's "head in the clouds." In faith, however, having our risen Lord, Master, and Sun in the cloud is a surpassing gift. This Easter grace is captured in the poem *High Flight* by John Gillespie Magee: "O I have slipped the surly bonds of earth and danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings."

Risen Lord, may we share your light forever stored in the clouds.

