Daily Bread

Homiletic starters and scriptural reflection points for each day of the month

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The Lectionary provides a kind of spiritual script for the universal church that keeps us, literally, all on the same page as we journey through the liturgical seasons. These short reflections, written by four authors who meet regularly to share the readings, are intended to help daily preachers and others who pray from the assigned scriptures each day to orient themselves to the Living Word addressed to the church in the world. Authors are identified by their initials, with short bios provided on the last page.

March 2016

Third Week of Lent (continued)

Tues., March 1: Dan 3:25, 34-43; Matt 18:21-35

Peter approached Jesus and asked him, "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him?" Most of us can remember a time in our lives when an important relationship was broken because of betrayal, dishonesty or an unkind remark. It was personal. It was unfair. And the hurt went so deep that we feel like we can't forget, much less forgive. Did Jesus mean we are to forgive someone who hurts us 77 times, but on the 78th we can retaliate? Most scholars agree that Jesus never intended for us to keep score. Instead, Jesus wanted our willingness to forgive to come from our experience of God's forgiveness. Instead of trying to forgive and forget, which we're never quite able to do, we gradually learn to forgive and move on. *Guide us, Holy God, on our journey toward genuine forgiveness and reconciliation.* JL

Wed., March 2: Deut 4:1, 5-9; Matt 5:17-19

Take care and be earnestly on your guard not to forget the things which your own eyes have seen, nor let them slip from your memory … but teach them to your children and to your children's children. Long before the scriptures were written down and printed, the stories of our faith were told and retold, from father to son and mother to daughter. Likewise, we are all teachers of the faith, whether or not we have ever taught Sunday school. We teach children by our words, our actions, our attitudes, our example. *May we be mindful of the lessons we are teaching others, O God.* JL

Thurs., March 3: Jer 7:23-28; Luke 11:14-23

Every kingdom divided against itself will be laid waste and house will fall against house. Those of us who live in the United States are in the midst of the presidential campaign. Over and over again we see the candidates' commercials, which very clearly delineate one side from another and divide the nation against itself. We do this in the church, as well; one branch is sure it has the truth, and others are vilified. But Jesus prayed for us to be one. Why? Because any group divided against itself is expending tremendous energy to keep the division alive. Imagine the good that could be accomplished if we worked with each other rather than against each other. *May we recognize that we are more alike than not, O God.* JL

Fri., March 4: Hosea 14:2-10; Mark 12:28-34

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love God, love neighbor: these commandments are well known. But how often do we forget or ignore those final words: "as yourself"? According to Jesus, we are *commanded* to love ourselves. Loving yourself does not mean that you become self-centered and egotistical. Instead, it means that you see yourself as a beautiful, beloved child of God — unique, precious and valuable. For Jesus, love of God, others and self form a never-ending circle that begins and ends with God. God loves and accepts us. We respond by loving God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind. We live our love for God by loving neighbor and self. *By our deeds, by our very lives, may we live our love for God, neighbor and self.* JL

Sat., March 5: Hosea 6:1-6; Luke 18:9-14

Jesus addressed this parable to those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else. The Pharisee is the model of faithfulness and piety. He devoted himself to the law of Moses. Meanwhile, tax collectors in Jesus' day were hated, for two reasons: They were collecting taxes for the Roman government, and it was assumed that the job involved dishonesty, even extortion. Sometimes, we are like the Pharisee — self-centered, proud, quite sure that God is terribly pleased with our faithfulness. But at other times, we are like the tax collector — all too aware of our shortcomings and deeply needing God's strength and guidance and mercy. *O God, help us to recognize the sin in ourselves instead of being so quick to judge others.* JL

Fourth Week of Lent

Mon., March 7: Isa 65:17-21; John 4:43-54

There shall always be rejoicing and happiness in what I create. It saddens me when tragedy strikes and I hear people express the sentiment: "It must have been God's will." People even said this to my mother upon my father's sudden death. Was it God's choice to make us suffer? Of course not! Over and over, scripture tells us that God does not desire our pain or wish to punish us for our weaknesses. Instead we are urged to turn to God as the source of life, wholeness and joy *amid* the turmoil of our lives. As disciples of Christ, we are called to be messengers and instruments of this same life and hope. *You have turned our mourning into dancing, my God. For this I give you thanks.* **MJ**

Tues., March 8: Ezek 47:1-9, 12; John 5:1-16

Do you want to be well? When Jesus asks the lame man by the Bethesda pool this question, it sounds like a no-brainer. But is it really? How often do we ask for healing for persistent weaknesses, but secretly find comfort in their familiarity? Changing long-held behaviors is scary and leaves us vulnerable when we step into the unknown. True healing only begins when we give permission for the "healing waters that flow from the sanctuary" of Christ to refresh and make whole the wounds within us. It is offered, not forced upon us, and we need to step into its flow with both feet, without knowing its depth or direction. *Give us the courage, O Lord, to accept and to trust in your healing touch.* **MJ**

Wed., March 9: Isa 49:8-15; John 5:17-30

Can a mother forget her infant? … Even should she forget, I will never forget you. These verses from Isaiah often come to mind when I visit my mother, who lives with Alzheimer's disease. In the building where she now lives, I see female residents cradling dolls like babies in their arms. Many no longer remember the names or faces of their own grown children, but they have not yet forgotten how to nurture. In time, they will forget even this powerful instinct. What comfort it is to know that even if they forget who God is, or even their own names, God will never forget them or who they are. *When we neglect to acknowledge you, O God, thank you for never forgetting or abandoning us.* **MJ**

Thurs., March 10: Exod 32:7-14; John 5:31-47

You do not want to come to me to have life. My husband has noted that people do not always value services or gifts that have been bestowed without cost. Charging a fee for something, even a nominal one, seems to give it greater worth to the recipient. The same could be said of our faith. We are often willing to spend a great deal of time and money on secular solutions to our mental and physical concerns, but do not avail ourselves of quality time to rest in God's healing presence, either in prayer or simple silence. God's love is available 24/7 and is freely and abundantly given, yet we sometimes undervalue its power. *O Lord, help us to slow down long enough to absorb your gifts of peace and wholeness.* **MJ**

Fri., March 11: Wis 2:1a, 12-22; John 7:1-2, 10, 25-30

They [did not] count on the recompense of holiness nor discern the innocent souls' reward. My mother once claimed that a guilty conscience was like a pebble in your shoe. It is so persistently annoying that the only remedy is to stop what you're doing and fix the problem. Like the people in today's reading from Wisdom, I sometimes go to incredible lengths to justify or minimize my "screw-ups." Only when I summon the courage to deal with my mistakes head-on does the heavy burden of guilt begin to ease. I have found that there is no greater sleeping medication than a mind that is at peace with its soul. As St. Augustine wrote, *"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."* **MJ**

Sat., March 12: Jer 11:18-20; John 7:40-53

Does our law condemn a man before it first hears him and finds out what he is doing? As I write these reflections, our world has been shaken by abhorrent violence perpetrated against innocent people in Paris. While many people around the world gather together in prayer and solidarity with the victims, other voices are calling for revenge, even upon equally innocent people simply because they are Muslims. Like Nicodemus in today's Gospel, we need to counter knee-jerk reactions of fear and hatred with voices of calm and reason. Our faith calls us to stand against all violence and to work toward a justice rooted in mercy. *Do not let our minds close or our hearts harden in fear, O Lord, but give us the courage to love more deeply.* **MJ**

Fifth Week of Lent

Mon., March 14: Dan 13:1-9, 15-17, 19-30, 33-62; John 8:12-20 (or John 8:1-11 if Year A readings were used on Sunday)

Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her. The scene of Susanna and the Elders, in which Daniel rescues a young woman from false accusations of adultery, is paired with the account of Jesus' rescue of a woman guilty of adultery. Daniel refuses to join the mob: "I will have no part in the death of this woman!" Jesus respects the dignity of the woman who stands before him. Susanna is saved by her innocence as her accusers are confounded by their own lies; the woman is saved by the mob's guilt, as they slink away. "Has no one condemned you?" Indeed, who am I to judge? *I love you, Jesus, with all my heart.* **MD**

Tues., March 15: Num 21:4-9; John 8:21-30

Whenever anyone who had been bitten by a serpent looked at the bronze serpent, he lived. The Pharisees assume that when Jesus says, "Where I am going you cannot come," he's contemplating suicide. In fact, Jesus is planning something even more unexpected: "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I AM." He applies to himself the image of the snake Moses made when seraph serpents were biting the rebellious Israelites. That such a repellent image is the revelation of God leaves the door open for us to find Christ in any and every moment, no matter how ugly. *Lord, you know me and you love me; show me your way!* **MD**

Wed., March 16: Dan 3:14-20, 91-92, 95; John 8:31-42

The truth will set you free. Even when threatened with the fiery furnace, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego will not bow to King Nebuchadnezzar, because "our God can save us." Then they add the words that have inspired folks for centuries when they are faced with impossible odds: "But even if our God will not save us, know, O King, that we will not serve your god!" Jesus resists the same kind of pressure; he does not yield an inch from "the truth that I heard from God," even though "you are trying to kill me." Lent reminds us that faith in our God saves us, no matter what the outcome of our crises or challenges may seem to be. *Dear God, give me strength to live your truth!* **MD**

Thurs., March 17: Gen 17:3-9; John 8:51-59

Abraham rejoiced to see my day; he saw it and was glad. Abraham, "the father of a host of nations," is such a huge presence in the whole history of Israel that it's sad to see Jesus' foes dismiss their own heritage: "Abraham died." Their charges are becoming more and more reckless: "Now we know that you are possessed." But Jesus gives as good as he gets: "If I should say that I do not know the Father, I would be like you, a liar." Ultimately, Jesus plays the Yahweh-card: "Before Abraham came to be, I AM." Blasphemy! "So they picked up stones to throw at him." Do I have any appreciation for the transcendent conflicts Jesus actually endured? *Dear Jesus, let me finish this Lent more committed to your cause.* **MD**

Fri., March 18: Jer 20:10-13; John 10:31-42

You, a man, are making yourself God. As his enemies closed in for the kill, Jesus might have had Jeremiah's persecution in mind: "I hear the whisperings of many: 'Terror on every side! Denounce! let us denounce him!' " Jesus is at a loss; nothing's working. They call his words "blasphemy," and even raising Lazarus from the dead only makes his foes more determined to kill him. Lent is ending and we're more confused than ever. Aren't we supposed to be feeling better, holier? Jesus returns to his roots, across the Jordan, "where John first baptized." Can he find his purpose again? Let me stay with Jesus while I find my own roots. It's not too late to start all over again. *I love you, O Lord; you are my only strength.* **MD**

Sat., March 19: 2 Sam 7:4-5a, 12-14a, 16; Rom 4:13, 16-18, 22; Matt 1:16, 18-21, 24a or Luke 2:41-51a

Solemnity of Joseph, husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary

You are to name him Jesus. Today's feast makes a lovely prelude to Holy Week. Joseph is the last in a long history of fathers, all the way back to Abraham, even to Adam, whose faith blesses this moment: "Do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home, for it is through the power of the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her." Joseph does not say a word in the Gospels, but perhaps when Jesus grasped the cross, he remembered how Joseph taught him to make even the roughest wood a thing of beauty. *Joseph, teach us to make our lives a beautiful thing for God.* **MD**

Holy Week

Mon., March 21: Isa 42:1-7; John 12:1-11

You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me. What will we do differently this week? Will we slow down, pray more, set aside time for the Triduum and really experience the summit of the liturgical year? Jesus reminds us that the busyness, the craziness and the concerns that keep us from focusing on him will always be there. Let's step away from our normal routines this week, the distractions and excuses, and plan time just for our Lord. Now we gather around Jesus, serve him like Martha, recline at table with him like Lazarus, and lavish him with love and devotion like Mary. *Let's fill our homes with the fragrance of his glorious presence.* **PR**

Tues., March 22: Isa 49:1-6; John 13:21-33, 36-38

Amen, amen, I say to you, one of you will betray me. While Jesus speaks of Judas, he hints at Peter's impending denial and suggests the other disciples may falter, too. They are oblivious to Judas' blatant plotting. It's just as hard to acknowledge such failings within ourselves. How long does it take for us to recognize when we slip, let alone outright deny Jesus? We don't see ourselves actively undermining the Lord, but neither did Peter, who one moment was willing to lay down his life for Jesus and the next was denying any association with him. It's a fitting challenge for each of us today. *Give me the grace to follow you, Lord.* **PR**

Wed., March 23: Isa 50:4-9a; Matt 26:14-25

What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you? Judas receives 30 pieces of silver to betray his friend. By his thinking, quick money is more important than an everlasting relationship with Jesus. How much value do we place on our bond with the Lord? What do we accept in place of an intimate connection with him? Each time we let temporal desires take his place, we essentially haggle his price. We negotiate his worth by short-term logic. In the end, we risk trading an eternal covenant for a contract filled with loopholes and limitations. *Jesus, give me the strength to value you above all else.* **PR**

Thurs., March 24: Exod 12:1-8, 11-14; 1 Cor 11:23-26; John 13:1-15

Mass of the Lord's Supper

Do you realize what I have done for you? Can we fathom what Jesus Christ has done for us? We know he gave himself freely to atone for our sins and to ensure our salvation. We profess that in the Eucharist, our union with Christ intensifies. But while we are on earth, can we ever fully *know* the saving gift Jesus instituted in the Eucharist and fulfilled on the cross? Jesus guides us to a deeper understanding through his actions. He models what we should do and how we should live, even if we don't quite get it right now. He assures the disciples that they will understand later, and offers us the same promise. *Lord, help us to follow your example and trust that when we are finally united with you in your kingdom, we'll truly comprehend.* **PR**

Fri., March 25: Isa 52:13–53:12; Heb 4:14-16; 5:7-9; John 18:1–19:42

Good Friday of the Lord's Passion

And bowing his head, he handed over the spirit. It's easy to look at the cross in despair. That's certainly what those who persecuted and crucified Jesus wanted. They sought to shame, discredit and silence him. Yet even his torment and death reflected his mission. He didn't buckle under pressure and pain. Stripped, bloody and vulnerable, he still taught, loved and forgave, comforting both friends and criminals and exonerating his executioners. He modeled how to place complete trust in the Father's promises. Even in our darkest hour, no matter what anguish we experience, there's no better path than to follow the Father's will and put our suffering in his hands. *We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.* **PR**

Sat., March 26: Vigil Readings

Easter Vigil

They found the stone rolled away from the tomb; but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. Death is not the end of the story. Darkness does not win. Our Lord lives. Some people still call it a nonsense fairy tale, but we know better. Still it's tempting to want to run to the tomb like Peter does upon hearing the women's puzzling and glorious news — not in doubt, but to be amazed at the power of the Almighty and to leave all pain and anxiety there. So roll back the stone, bury your fears, seal the entrance and walk away in faith and hope. *He is risen. Alleluia.* **PR**

Octave of Easter

Mon., March 28: Acts 2:14, 22-33; Matt 28:8-15

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went away quickly from the tomb, fearful yet overjoyed, and ran to announce the news to his disciples. "Fearful yet overjoyed." I suspect this is a common response to the good news. There is a deep-down quickening of new soul life within us when we hear the true truth. But along with that quickening is the flutter of fear: What will this true truth mean for my life and for the lives of those precious to me? What if, for instance, we cannot escape the idea that "welcome the stranger" includes people foreign to us, people who may worship God by a different name, people who bear a resemblance to those we fear? What if even suggesting that the Gospel requires the risk of such hospitality means we might be shunned by our friends and family who disagree? Fear certainly. But joy, too. Because the truth is the truth and it does set us free. *For courage, clear thinking, and more courage, we pray.* **PBS**

Tues., March 29: Acts 2:36-41; John 20:11-18

Jesus said to her, "Mary!" I have sympathy for pastors and teachers who are poor at remembering names. It means so much to be addressed by one's name, and leaders who struggle with that skill (I'm one of them) often know it. But even if names escape us, we can stop and be attentive to those placed on our path. We can realize that there may be no chance meetings, and that each person we encounter — the teller in the bank, the person who delivers our mail, someone just standing in line with us — is someone to whom we can give undivided attention and thereby the feeling of being known and valued, if only for a moment. *For the grace to love as Jesus loved, we pray.* **PBS**

Wed., March 30: Acts 3:1-10; Luke 24:13-35

Then the two recounted what had taken place on the way. The Emmaus story is the stuff of great drama: confusion, heartbreak, a dash of humor ("What sort of things?" asks Jesus, who knows perfectly well; and the final "aha" enlightenment as Jesus explains the scriptures and is recognized). It's a story that illustrates what it is to be human, no matter the chronological or cultural distance between us and those two disciples on the road. It's the same road. Within any congregation, there is bound to be a manifestation of each of these moments — some are in the midst of confusion or heartbreak; some experiencing a certain lightness of being; some ready for the truth of the Gospel. If we preach this story, we can minister to everyone, counseling the currently blessed to be grateful and assuring those in dark times that darkness passes. *For those to whom we are called to minister, we pray.* **PBS**

Thurs, March 31: Acts 3:11-26; Luke 24:35-48

Now I know … that you acted out of ignorance. …. Repent, therefore, and be converted. In this passage there is evidence of incredible forgiveness and incredible humility. Peter is addressing those who participated in, at least by their silence, the execution of his friend and savior, but he does so with loving honesty and the promise of comfort and salvation. The story is concluded in the next chapter: Many who heard Peter are humbled by the truth and accept baptism and forgiveness. Every one of us has the opportunity, at some point, to participate in this chain of mercy. Let's pray that we accept the invitation to forgive and to be forgiven. *For the grace to live mercy, we pray.* **PBS**

Daily Bread Authors

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