

INTRODUCTION

Lately I've noticed that the daily news wears me out. The way current events are presented, you'd think we live in a land of jaded, pessimistic, even angry neighbors. How could this be true in such a favored nation as ours?

It seems healthier—and more in keeping with our faith—to live hopefully. While this may seem an odd mood for our season dedicated to penitence, Lent naturally flows in the direction of hope's fulfillment. Prophets predict dire consequences but always leave a door open onto a better future. Disciples doubt and falter, then Jesus returns to forgive and lift their faith higher. Enemies scheme and attack, yet even death is deprived of its sting. Lent has its sinister moments, to be sure. Still, walking through the valley of shadows with Jesus means we have nothing to fear.

Psalm 124 contains these comforting lines:

*We escaped with our lives
like a bird from the fowler's snare;
the snare was broken, and we escaped.* (Ps 124:7)

How often you and I escape from bitter circumstances! Some are of our own invention. At other times, we manage to survive injury, disappointment, and moral testing that came unbidden. Escape frequently comes in the form of divine rescue: God's messenger frees us from the snare we're in. Let's spend this season deepening our commitment to freedom as people of hope in a world seriously in need of rescue.

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The Holiness of Now

*Behold, now is a very acceptable time;
behold, now is the day of salvation.*

» 2 CORINTHIANS 6:2

Lent summons us to embrace the now and to take it seriously. Salvation's not a past memory or future hope: many of us need saving right where we stand! Thankfully, divine rescue always arrives in present tense. Think of the personal snares surrounding you today. Fear or anger, physical pain or mental anxiety, money worries or relationships in jeopardy—all these and more take our freedom away. Is deliverance from daily distress possible? Saint Paul says it's not only possible: God desires this for us.

We enter Lent as a holy time in which to do penance and to receive grace. Please don't dismiss these as pretty words without meaning. Holiness is possible—*for you*. Penance is necessary—because we all do what we wish we hadn't. Grace is tangible—since heaven reaches for us as we reach outward for relief. This is a holy hour. Take off your shoes and know God is here.

For Contemplation

It's time to determine my spiritual practice for this season.
How will I pray and give alms? What will I surrender,
and what will I take up?

Prayer

*Lord, help me to take a minute every day this Lent
to recognize I'm in your presence.*

DEUTERONOMY 30:15-20 · LUKE 9:22-25

Decide How to Decide

“Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live.”

» DEUTERONOMY 30:19

Choices, choices. We make them using all sorts of scales by which to determine each decision. Is this good value for the dollar? Is it healthy? Will we feel better? Will it make us more cool or more lovable? Do we need it? How much do we want it?

Katharine Drexel, whose feast is today, was the richest woman in the country upon the death of her banker father in the late 19th century. This timid young woman longed to slip away to a convent and leave the headache of the fortune to others. Her spiritual advisor told Katharine to start her own community instead—and to keep control of the inheritance. Poor saints are legion, rich ones as rare as camels passing through the needle’s eye. Not long after the Civil War and the troubled legacy of the Trail of Tears, Mother Katharine chose to spend her millions on racial justice, providing education and job training to Black and Native Americans. Some said it wasn’t a white woman’s concern. Katharine made reparation her business.

For Contemplation

Using Katharine Drexel’s standard of discernment, what does this generation demand that I do with what I have?

Prayer

*Lord, open my mind, my heart,
and my hands to your will.*

ISAIAH 58:1-9A · MATTHEW 9:14-15

Making Our Fast Make Sense

*Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your wound shall quickly be healed.*

» ISAIAH 58:8

Give up a hamburger today, and so what? In a society with a multitude of dietary options, no bacon with our eggs on Lenten Fridays doesn't amount to much. Some of us will be tempted to skip such a meaningless pseudo-sacrifice. If you're normally not a meat eater, Friday abstinence is even more pointless.

Consider adopting a Friday sacrifice that has teeth for you. Vegetarians might surrender another food staple. Omnivores and vegans alike might assign a particular intention to their Friday abstinence. This Friday, the feast of Casimir of Poland, we might consciously reflect on our world's need for peace. Fifteen-year-old Casimir, called upon to fight a war to assume his throne, refused to take up arms. Risking his father's disapproval and disgust, he died throneless, dedicating his short life to prayer and to the relief of the poor. Our society could surely use more peacemakers who refuse to sow the seeds of division in our ongoing culture wars.

For Contemplation

I abstain today from *(my sacrifice here)* and also from violent words and divisive speech.

Prayer

*Lord, make me a channel of your peace
in my thoughts, words, and actions.*

Losers Welcome

“I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners.”

» LUKE 5:32

Life is one great contest. Survival of the fittest, right? The rivalry starts early. We compete for grades in school and for points in sports. We compete for our parents’ attention, and maybe we feel the need to compete for love. We join the contest for the best neighborhood lawn, the flashiest car, the most enviable entertainment center. The workplace is one more situation in which we feel the need to achieve a higher rung, a better position, a bigger paycheck.

Even the realm of religion may become a contest: to say more Rosaries, attend more church services, or keep ourselves more spiritually pure than our neighbors. We competitive ones dread the idea of losing or being viewed as losers. The “L” word is so unbearable, we may prefer to deny that we’re sinners. Yet, Jesus came into this world for sinners, not winners. Maybe we should get comfortable with the idea of our imperfection and embrace our moral failings (which are considerable, if we let ourselves think about it). By all means, strive for holiness! And readily admit when you miss the mark.

For Contemplation

Here’s my fearless moral inventory: _____.

I confess my sins and ask for forgiveness.

Prayer

Gracious God, have mercy on me, a sinner—whether I like it or not.

Who Are We Talking To?

For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

» ROMANS 10:13

Prayerful people may spend an hour daily contemplating sacred mysteries. Monastic types, even more. But even if we pray the full Liturgy of the Hours, opening the breviary a whopping five (or even eight) times a day, that still leaves most hours to engage other conversations. With so much time on our hands, who are we talking to?

When we're not calling on God's name, we may be yammering with quite another companion. If you're a big talker, you may carry on conversations with the butcher, the baker, and the woman who makes candles at the street fair. Or you may keep a TV, radio, or podcast going as a barrier against the silence. Even introverts engage in daylong conversations with their favorite sparring partner: themselves. All this talk might be harmless; then again, it might not. Gossip, hate speech, and rehearsing grievances are all conversations with the Tempter. Grand silences safeguard the time of those seeking sanctification. A little quiet might help.

For Contemplation

When you say or hear something that doesn't offer hope, put a penny in a jar. How heavy is the jar at day's end?

Prayer

*Your word, Lord, brings life. Help me refrain
from being a carrier of deadly words.*

LEVITICUS 19:1–2, 11–18 · MATTHEW 25:31–46

Cherish the God of the Poor

*“Whatever you did for one of these least
brothers of mine, you did for me.”*

» MATTHEW 25:40

Marriage counselors caution that if we don't like our future spouse's friends and family, it's not a good match. People we love come complete with micro-communities we embrace along with them. To really draw close to someone, spend time in their orbit. If we only drag others into our world, we succeed merely in communicating ourselves.

If we seek to draw close to God, we're choosing to be united with the people God passionately cares about. Across the Bible, God's passion regularly focuses on the poor. God hears their cry. The small, the weak, and the meek are the apple of God's eye. If we avoid the disadvantaged, life with God won't be a good match. If we'd rather spend our money at the mall than on the needy, we're claiming another God and naming our true religion. Perpetua and Felicity, two early martyrs honored today, found in their mutual love of God a rare sisterhood between servant and mistress. Discover a new family with God's beloved.

For Contemplation

Do I love the God of the poor as much as the God of going to church? How do I show this?

Prayer

Jesus, help me recognize your face in those in need.

ISAIAH 55:10–11 · MATTHEW 6:7–15

A Word We Can Trust

*[My word] shall not return to me empty,
but shall do what pleases me.*

» ISAIAH 55:11

I'm a suspicious advocate of silence. As a catechist, my work relies on a flow of words written and spoken. Maybe this makes me more aware of the limitations of language. There's danger in choosing the wrong words or getting an instruction askew. It's easy to be misunderstood or to do harm in a teaching with the best of intentions. We're all aware of the materials with which the road to hell is paved.

Which is why I resonate with today's saint, John of God. When John heard the preaching of the holy man John of Avila, he was so moved it nearly drove him mad. His penitential behavior became so extreme, he was hauled off to a mental hospital. John of Avila himself visited him there and advised that he do something more spiritually profitable. Which he did: caring for the sick and the poor.

That makes perfect sense. God's word is never fruitless. We recognize genuine holiness by the good it does for others.

For Contemplation

Which Scripture verse deeply inspires me?

How can I strive to make it my motto?

Prayer

Lord, only you have the words of everlasting life.