### **Readings for February 22, 2023 -- Ash Wednesday**

Return to Me

### *Our Lenten readings urge us to be awake and paying attention. They also urge us to be aware of our motivation. It’s not only* ***what*** *religious acts we are performing, but* ***how*** *we are performing them. Also,* ***why*** *we are doing them matters deeply.*

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#### **Opening Prayer**

#### Enlarge my heart, Oh Lord, that you may enter in. Amen.  *(Dorothy Day, Servant of God)*

**Reading 1: JL 2:12-18**

Even now, says the LORD, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning; Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the LORD, your God. For gracious and merciful is he, slow to anger, rich in kindness, and relenting in punishment. Perhaps he will again relent and leave behind him a blessing, Offerings and libations for the LORD, your God. Blow the trumpet in Zion! proclaim a fast, call an assembly; Gather the people, notify the congregation; Assemble the elders, gather the children and the infants at the breast; Let the bridegroom quit his room and the bride her chamber. Between the porch and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep, And say, “Spare, O LORD, your people, and make not your heritage a reproach, with the nations ruling over them! Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’”
Then the LORD was stirred to concern for his land and took pity on his people.

**Reading 2: 2 COR 5:20—6:2**

Brothers and sisters: We are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him. Working together, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says: *In an acceptable time I heard you, and on the day of salvation I helped you.* Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

**Gospel: MT 6:1-6, 16-18**

Jesus said to his disciples: "Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them; otherwise, you will have no recompense from your heavenly Father. When you give alms, do not blow a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets to win the praise of others. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing, so that your almsgiving may be secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you. "When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on street corners so that others may see them.

Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you. "When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites. They neglect their appearance, so that they may appear to others to be fasting. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you may not appear to be fasting, except to your Father who is hidden. And your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you."

Related Reflections

**A Caregiver’s Reflection for Lent:**

Today is Ash Wednesday, and with it comes the stark reminder that we are dust...and to dust we shall return. Scientists tell us that everything we are, and everything in the universe, originated from stardust, the remnants of dying and exploding stars. And, each day, stardust nourishes our soil, the food we eat, and the air we breathe, making us over and over again... allowing us to think, to feel, to move, to grow, to care. The practices of Lent - fasting, prayer, almsgiving and reconciliation - are rooted in awareness of these humble beginnings.

“Return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping and mourning.” We hear these words from the Book of the Prophet Joel today. These are not things we do easily on command, but they come unbidden, with gut wrenching ache, when caring for a loved one. The weeks before and during my husband started on home hospice care, I could not eat. My attention was totally focused on making sure his pain medicine was regular and effective, providing water, preventing falls, and preparing something he could eat; listening, watching, observing for signs of change or pain. In between caregiver visits and phone calls I wept tears of anxiety and fear, anger and sadness, helplessness and eventually tears of acceptance.

Fasting and weeping do have a way of bringing us home, reminding us who we are, and whose we are. They empty us out. And, if we are attentive, this emptiness provides space for God. In this space we awaken to the beauty and wonder that we are. Once we stop trying to make things better or different, we awaken to Christ within.

Fasting and weeping reminded me then, as they remind me today, that I am dust.... beautiful, shimmering stardust.... but still dust. The breath of God animates this dust. Breathing in, I say “yes,” breathing out, I say “thank you.”

Diane Jorgensen, Creighton University – www.onlineministries.creighton.edu

**Never Alone**

God is always with me, residing in my inner chapel that I carry with me wherever I go. God’s friendship and presence within me is an unshakable gift of companionship and one of the main reasons I can hope in the first place. I am never alone, because God is with me. I know and believe this in my bones because of my own experience of God’s presence in my life and also from the hours and hours of listening to people’s prayer experiences in spiritual direction.

The Holy Spirit is our advocate given to us “to teach [us] everything.” (John 14:26) As we are reminded in Romans 8:26, the Holy Spirit groans on our behalf, comes to aid us in our weakness, and intercedes for us when we do not know the words to pray.

What comfort to know that when we seek to grow in a relationship with God, the Holy Spirit is working with us in our steps forward. When we are feeling weak, the Holy Spirit supports our efforts to overcome temptations. When we do not know the words to pray, the Holy Spirit is praying with us and for us.

Take comfort in these promises of God, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, for we are not and never will be alone. *(Becky Eldredge - www.ignatianspirituality.com)*

**From Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM:** Coming on the heels of a season of joyous festivity, from Christmas and New Year’s to Mardi Gras, Lent is an opportunity to cleanse the palate so that we can taste all—the bitter and the sweet. This season calls us to witness the good and the bad—and to own our own responsibility and potential for being agents of both.

Lent is about looking deeply within and simultaneously experiencing gravity and wonder. In my book Wondrous Encounters: Scripture for Lent, I describe the invitation to know ourselves and God more fully: There are two moments that matter. One is when you know that your one and only life is absolutely valuable and alive. The other is when you know your life, as presently lived, is entirely pointless and empty. Lent is about both. The first such moment gives you energy and joy by connecting you with your ultimate Source and Ground. The second gives you limits and boundaries, and a proper humility, so you keep seeking the Source and Ground and not just your small self.

**Human and Divine:** St. Teresa of Avila said that we find God in ourselves, and we find ourselves in God. Authentic spirituality seeks to facilitate this knowing of self and God. I believe that only when humans realize and embrace their wholeness—their smallness and their greatness at the same time—will there be any in-depth transformation. Lent is about being human and divine. Though we are made of dust, we are called to participate in the divine creative dance.

Jesus showed us how to walk the human-divine path through self-emptying. It is the journey of death and resurrection, with life taking ever new shapes and forms. Even as we face our little ego deaths, we trust that resurrection inevitably follows if we walk through fall and winter. New beginnings invariably come from old falsities that are allowed to die. We know that the story ends in resurrection. After Lent, Easter! Weeping may endure for the night, but joy comes in the morning (Ps 30:6).

**Desire to be Transformed:** The word Lent comes from the Old English lencten, or springtime. Resurrection is not a one-time anomaly in the body of Jesus, but the pattern of reality. The Trinitarian flow is mirrored in every atom and circulatory system, the change of seasons and substances, and all the orbits and cycles of the stars, planets, and galaxies. We are a dynamic universe echoing a very dynamic God. **Most of us were taught that God would love us if and when we change. In fact, God loves us so that we can change.** Loved people have the courage and the energy to imagine new things. The experience of being loved creates in us the desire to be transformed. Yes, even the desire is a gift.

**Discussion Questions**

If I’m focused on choosing as Jesus chose, or trying to have my actions be a mirror of what Jesus showed us, I must get to know Jesus better. How can I do that?

What would I want to “pare down” in my life to help me live more simply, more humbly, as Jesus did?

How challenging is this for you?

Do I feel that my Lenten practices will bring glory to God, or just glory to me?

How is your prayer life? Is it done out of devotion and desire, or out of obligation?

 What is my main hope for my relationship with God during this Lenten season?

***“Jesus, may all that is you flow into me.”***