

SUNDAY, MARCH 1

FIRST WEEK OF LENT

BEGIN

Lord, open my lips and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.

PRAY

Blessed is the one whose fault is removed, whose sin is forgiven.

~*Psalm 32:1*

LISTEN

Read Matthew 4:1–11.

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.

What We Give Up

If we think these forty days are hard on us, look at what Jesus did for forty days and how God's Word, intense prayer, and sheer willpower can conquer temptation. This gospel reading reminds us that Christ had to struggle with very human needs and desires. He understands what we are going through—not just during Lent but always.

But what exactly *are* we going through? What temptations are we fighting? Not long ago, Google decided to find out. The search engine looked at online searches containing the terms "Lent" and "give up." It then broke down the results state by state. The most popular item, in eight of fifty states, was meat. Alcohol came in second, in seven states. Six states were giving up sweets or sugar. The list, of course, is hardly exhaustive.

As we begin our journey into Lent, we might want to ask ourselves what other temptations are calling out to us that more directly keep us from following the way of Christ more fully. Are we being tempted to condemn others too easily? Do we feel dark joy when others stumble, fall, or fail? Do we too easily believe the worst about others, instead of looking for the best? Are we preoccupied with gossip or snapping at others online? Perhaps these are the things we *really* need to give up.

But know this: whether we're trying to do without chocolate, alcohol, or meat, or an inflated ego, pettiness, gossip, or judging others, the sacrifice is well worth it. Because what we give up during this season is nothing compared to what we can receive if we open ourselves to God's saving grace.

ACT

Today, I will seek the best in others. I will resist judging their weaknesses and find ways to appreciate and affirm to them their strengths.

PRAY

Be merciful, O Lord, for I have sinned. Give me a spirit that helps me give up those things that are keeping me from you, and help me grow in generosity. Amen.

MONDAY, MARCH 2

FIRST WEEK OF LENT

BEGIN

Lord, open my lips and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.

PRAY

“Be holy, for I, the LORD your God, am holy.”

~*Leviticus 19:1-2*

LISTEN

Read Matthew 25:31-46.

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

Christ's Favorite Virtue

Before he became the cardinal archbishop of New York, Timothy Dolan was the rector of the North American College in Rome. He used to give regular talks to the seminarians, which were collected in a book called *Priests for the Third Millennium*. In one of the talks, Cardinal Dolan quotes a retreat conference given by the Passionist scripture scholar Barnabas Ahern.

Fr. Ahern asked, “What do you suppose was Jesus Christ’s favorite virtue? Was it faith? Was it hope? How about charity or justice?” All of those are contenders. But Fr. Ahern had something else in mind. Christ’s favorite virtue, he suggested, was humility, and he made a persuasive argument.

Again and again in the gospels, Christ chose the most humble and preached compassion for the smallest, the weakest, and the sickest. The gospels offer a

reassuring message for all of us who feel unworthy, or fall short; they offer this blessed hope: Jesus often found *more* among those who, in the eyes of the world, seemed to be *less*.

Today's gospel passage, Matthew 25, calls on us to do the same: to seek out those whom others ignore, to help those who are shunned, and to lift up those who are put down. In doing so, we ourselves can exercise humility, that most favorite virtue, and find kinship with others.

Lent is a chance for us to acknowledge and embrace humility. We began this season with ashes on our brows, to show our mortality. What else can we do to show our compassion for others? What can we do to show solidarity with all who suffer?

Jesus reminds us that this is one of the greatest things we can do, because in caring for them, we care for him.

ACT

Today, I will look for Jesus in all those I encounter, in every situation, and look on them with love.

PRAY

Be merciful, O Lord, for I have sinned. Help me to see you in all people and love them as I love you. Amen.

TUESDAY, MARCH 3

FIRST WEEK OF LENT

BEGIN

Lord, open my lips and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.

PRAY

I sought the LORD and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears.

~Psalm 34:6–7

LISTEN

Read Matthew 6:7–15.

“When you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret.”

Inner Sanctum

Dr. Andrew Newburg, of Philadelphia’s Thomas Jefferson Hospital, has studied the positive impact of prayer on the human body. He told *NBC News* several years ago that prayer has a distinct and mysterious ability to change us: “You become connected to God. You become connected to the world. Your self sort of goes away.”

Isn’t that what we try to achieve during Lent? This is a time for seeking to be more “connected to God,” giving ourselves more to him and to others. It is a season for renewal, recommitment, and returning to God with our hearts. What Newburg described suggests just why prayer is a cornerstone of our Lenten practices, and in today’s gospel reading, Jesus offers his followers—and us—the definitive prescription for prayer. It is probably the best-known prayer in the world, one whose first two

words sum up so much of what connects us to God: “Our Father.”

But Jesus does more than just give us the words to say; he also gives us the way to say them, privately, in our “inner room . . . in secret.” The deepest expression of our devotion to God needs to happen in solitude, where we speak and God listens—and where he speaks and *we* listen.

At this early moment in the Lenten season, this scripture speaks of the power of prayer to bring about intimacy with God, a new sense of belonging to him and even, as Newburg suggested, a way to be changed. In our broken human condition, if we truly want to be healed, prayer may be just what the doctor ordered.

ACT

I will try today to pray as simply and honestly as I can. I will find a quiet corner, my “inner room,” and open my heart to God just for a few moments. What will he say to me? I will be listening.

PRAY

Be merciful, O Lord, for I have sinned. Guide my thoughts, words, and deeds to bring me home to you, where I long to be. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 4
FIRST WEEK OF LENT

BEGIN

Lord, open my lips and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.

PRAY

A heart contrite and humbled, O God, you will not spurn.

~Psalm 51

LISTEN

Read Luke 11:29–32.

“This generation is an evil generation; it seeks a sign, but no sign will be given it, except the sign of Jonah.”

Repent!

Reminding his listeners about the story of Jonah, Jesus was summoning memories of a great prophet who was sent to warn the people of Nineveh. Along the way, Jonah encountered a storm at sea and ended up spending three days in the belly of a giant fish (in popular lore, a whale). Only after he survived did people listen, believe, and repent. But this is more than just a fish story. By comparing himself to Jonah, Jesus was foreshadowing his own three days in the tomb. Yet he was doing more than following in the footsteps of that prophet; he was also continuing the message of John the Baptist with a clarion call to repent. It may not have been a message a lot of his listeners wanted to hear. Do we?

During these first days of Lent, this passage can give us a jolt: “This generation is an evil generation.” But

maybe that's what we need to hear. Maybe right about now we need to be pulled back to the sackcloth-and-ashes attitude of last week's Ash Wednesday. Maybe now we need to remember what it's all about.

Let's take these words of Jesus as words of warning—but also words of hope. We can be more than what we have been. Let's make the sign of Jonah that sign we saw in the mirror on Ash Wednesday, the ashes that mark us as mortal and remind us, whether we want to hear it or not, that we will one day be dust.

What will we do about it? And what will we do with the time we have now?

ACT

Jesus, like John the Baptist before him, is calling on his followers to repent. This day, I will do a fearless moral inventory and ask myself again, What do I want to change about myself during the rest of Lent? How have I fallen short? How can I be more than I am?

PRAY

Be merciful, O Lord, for I have sinned. Help me recognize what I need to change, and give me the courage and help me trust in your mercy to become the person you want me to be.