

## INTRODUCTION

Let's imagine for a moment that he was talking to us.

I admit that is not the first place my mind naturally goes. Each year as I hear the scriptures of Lent, with their repetitious confrontation of sin and call to conversion, the voice inside my head gets turned up to full volume: *But that's wrong. He doesn't know my circumstances. It doesn't make sense in today's economy or politics. That doesn't address the situation I'm in. He must be speaking to other people because fundamentally I am a good person, or at least really trying to be. Look, I am reading a Lenten reflection booklet, for goodness' sake!*

But this Lent let us imagine that the voices of Jesus and the prophets really are directed toward us at this moment in history. If we do, we can expect a difficult conversation to ensue. The readings of Lent are one prolonged examination of conscience. If we take this exam seriously, we are not going to come off looking good. Sometimes in order to enable me to remain open to a particular scripture passage, I draw myself a chart with two columns. On the left, I list all of the ways this reading is "just wrong" about me and my nation. I list all the ways it doesn't apply. (This is generally pretty easy to do.) But then in the right column, I list at least one way it *might* be true about me and my nation—a way in which it *could* apply. (And often, I can find more than one.) I find this lessens my resistance and keeps me attuned to listening, which is, in the end, the beginning of any conversion experience.

In the first reading every Passion Sunday, we hear from the prophet Isaiah, "Morning after morning he opens my ear that I may hear; and I have not rebelled, have not turned back" (Is 50:4). The passage goes on to say things that will remind us of Jesus and how faithful

he was in following God's voice. But when we arrive at Holy Week this year, may these words be true of us in a whole new way. For it is only when we have fully awakened to our sin, opened our ears and our hearts to Christ's mercy, that we can fully enjoy the Easter message that Jesus—by his Cross and Resurrection—defeats sin and sets us free to live a radically new life.

Even now, says the LORD,  
Return to me with your whole heart,  
With fasting, weeping, and mourning;  
Rend your hearts, not your garments,  
And return to the LORD, your God.

*~Joel 2:12*

# WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 14

## ASH WEDNESDAY

### BEGIN

*Be silent. Be still. Pray, "Open my heart, O Lord."*

### PRAY

Create a clean heart in me, O God; give back to me the joy of your salvation.

*~Psalm 51:12, 14*

### LISTEN

*Read Matthew 6:1–6, 16–18.*

Do not blow a horn before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets to win the praise of others.

*~Matthew 6:2*

*Should We Blow the Trumpet or Not?*

In today's first reading, the prophet Joel exclaims, "Blow the trumpet in Zion! Proclaim a fast, call an assembly." Between "the porch and the altar," he wants the ministers to weep publicly before God with tears of repentance. Everyone from elders to infants and newlyweds is to stop what they are doing, gather, and beg God's mercy.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus tells people not to blow a horn, not to pray in synagogues and on street corners, and not to change their appearances. Instead he wants people to pray in secret, to give in secret, and to fast in secret.

So what gives?

Scripture scholars believe Joel lived around five hundred years before Jesus in a time of environmental

disaster. Locusts and drought had brought the people to the edge of despair, and the prophet calls for a communal conversion of life. Jesus observed that these same practices—prayer, fasting, and almsgiving—which earlier prophets such as Joel had espoused, had become mere public show, done to gain peer approval. They were no longer signs of a true change of heart. Jesus then calls for authentic personal conversion of life, with its outward signs at least somewhat hidden.

Which are we called to this Lent? According to the lectionary, we are called to both. By setting these readings side by side, the Church reminds us that the hard work of conversion entails two dimensions. At a societal level, we need to take a good, hard look at our lives with one another and in relation to the global community. At a personal level, void of sanctimoniousness and public righteousness, each of us needs to take a good, hard look at our own lives and relationships. It is not a question of communal versus individual conversion. This season calls us to both.

#### ACT

I will spend time reading the newspaper today and considering around what issues we as a nation need to undergo a conversation. Then I will ask two people who know me well, “What’s one thing you see me doing (or not doing) that is keeping *me* from living life fully?” I will sit with the responses I receive and jot down some notes.

#### PRAY

Open my eyes, LORD, to both the communal and personal conversion you invite me to this Lent.

# THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 15

## THURSDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

### BEGIN

*Be silent. Be still. Pray, "Open my heart, O Lord."*

### PRAY

The LORD watches over the way of the just.

*~Psalm 40:6*

### LISTEN

*Read Luke 9:22–25.*

If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

*~Luke 9:23*

### *Choose Life and Pick Up Your Cross*

I once heard a newspaper editor bemoan a jumbled story one of his reporters had submitted: "That's not right!" he exclaimed. "That's not even wrong!" As a onetime writing teacher and now a homiletics professor, I sympathize. Nothing irks me more than a mixed, muddled message.

Today's readings seem to present us with such a quandary. From Deuteronomy, we hear, "I have set before you life . . . and death. . . . Choose life then that you and your descendants might live." Then, in the gospel, we hear, "Pick up your cross and follow me. . . . For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it." Internally I scowl, *So which is it, God? Choose life, or pick up the cross? Make up your mind.*

But then I think of a news story about a mother and her teen daughter together in Washington, DC, at the annual March for Life. The mother described being

terrified when she learned she was expecting her daughter, unsure how she, as a single mom, would ever care for her. The woman had come within hours of terminating the pregnancy when she somehow found within herself the courage to go on. She never regretted it. In that moment, choosing life and picking up the cross—two options that seem so diametrically opposed—merged into one mystery.

Most of us haven't encountered that mystery—what the Church refers to as the paschal mystery—quite so literally as this woman. But I have no doubt there are times in your life also when choosing to do what was right has required tremendous personal sacrifice even as it simultaneously touched what is deepest and truest in you and ultimately bore life. It is a mystery you've known and can bear witness to. Anticipating the profound conversion this season will ask us to embrace, call to mind times when you have chosen life by picking up your cross. Remember the courage you found within yourself then; trust it will be there again now.

#### ACT

I will think about a time when “choosing life” meant “picking up the cross.” I will reflect on how well I bore that cross. Was I courageous?

#### PRAY

Stir within me, O LORD, the courage needed to embrace the paschal mystery in my life right now.

# FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 16

## FRIDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

### BEGIN

*Be silent. Be still. Pray, "Open my heart, O Lord."*

### PRAY

This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly . . . and not turning your back on your own.

*~Isaiah 58:6-7*

### LISTEN

*Read Matthew 9:14-15.*

The disciples of John approached Jesus and said, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast much, but your disciples do not fast?"

*~Matthew 9:14*

### *Prophetic Fasting*

Fasting is an ageless, widespread practice around the globe encouraged by health professionals and almost every religious tradition. Its purposes are numerous; and its value, obvious: cleansing the body, alleviating depression, increasing a sense of solidarity with the poor, creating hunger for God, and bringing the body under the control of the will. The list goes on. And yet, with the exception of the forty days he spent in the desert at the start of his ministry, Jesus himself does not seem to have fasted, at least not in the traditional sense of the term. This oddity did not escape the observation of his religious peers. Indeed, it is something he and his disciples are queried about and criticized for multiple times in the gospels.

In today's gospel, Jesus indicates that his decision to partake generously of food and drink is part of his mission, which is to proclaim the kingdom of God. The prophets had said that in the fullness of the kingdom, the blind would see and the deaf would hear. And so Jesus gives signs of this fullness in his miracles. The prophets also said that in the fullness of the kingdom, there would be feasting as at a wedding. And so Jesus gives witness to this in his eating and drinking. This doesn't mean that Jesus didn't fast. He did; but this too he did "prophet style."

"This is the fasting that I wish," Isaiah preaches in today's first reading, "releasing those bound unjustly . . . setting free the oppressed . . . sharing your bread with the hungry . . . not turning your back on your own." When defining fasting in these terms, we see that Jesus' whole life was a fast, and that while occasionally abstaining from food and drink has many worthy physical and spiritual benefits, our primary mode of fasting should be acts of justice.

#### ACT

Today I will choose an act of prophetic fasting to engage in this Lent—such as performing an act of justice on behalf of someone who is hungry, homeless, or imprisoned; donating or personally becoming involved in a charity; or joining a parish-wide Lenten effort. Whatever I choose, I will make sure that it gets on my calendar.

#### PRAY

Teach me to fast as you fasted, O LORD.