

PRACTICING A HOLY LENT



Seven Ways Jesus
Shapes Our Lives

SAMPLE

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*I invite you, therefore,
in the name of the Church,
to the observance of a holy Lent,
by self-examination and repentance;
by prayer, fasting, and self-denial;
and by reading and meditating
on God's holy Word.*

ASH WEDNESDAY LITURGY
THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER

SAMPLE

Introduction

Each year on Ash Wednesday, the Church invites us to observe a holy Lent. This book grows out of that invitation.

Practicing a Holy Lent: Seven Ways Jesus Shapes Our Lives is a devotional journey structured around the Lenten disciplines named in the Book of Common Prayer: self-examination, repentance, prayer, fasting, almsgiving, reading and meditating on God's holy word, and worship. Through scripture and reflection, the book roots each Lenten discipline in the life and actions of Jesus himself.

The season begins on Ash Wednesday with self-examination, with each subsequent week unfolding one practice at a time. You'll read reflections from a variety of authors, all connected with Forward Movement in one way or another. Some are staff; others are board members or longtime supporters of the organization. All are committed to growing as disciples and followers of Christ and, with God's help, practicing these disciplines articulated in the Book of Common Prayer.

Each week, the meditations will follow a similar rhythm:

- **Sundays:** We will discuss examples from scripture about how Jesus models the disciplines.

- **Mondays & Thursdays:** We will reflect on personal stories from the authors.
- **Tuesdays:** We will explore how the Book of Common Prayer incorporates these disciplines into our liturgies and prayers.
- **Wednesdays:** We will examine the lives of saints who have embodied the disciplines across the centuries.
- **Fridays & Saturdays:** We will learn about ways to practice these disciplines in our lives.

Throughout the book, the seven practices are presented as invitations to see, for example, how self-examination can become courage, repentance can transform into freedom, and almsgiving can manifest the love of Christ. Then, in Holy Week, we walk with Jesus through praise, service, surrender, silence, waiting, and ultimately, rejoicing.

The invitation to a holy Lent is not about becoming more religious but about shaping our lives in the pattern of Christ.

—*Richelle Thompson*
Editor

Ash Wednesday — Saturday



Self-Examination

*Rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to the LORD, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
and relents from punishing.*

JOEL 2:13

SAMPLE

ASH WEDNESDAY

In the season of Lent, we echo Jesus's 40 days in the wilderness. In both Mark and Matthew, this flight into the wilderness follows close on the heels of his baptism by John, an awe-striking event where the heavens parted, and the Father's voice rained down. A human reaction to such a profound moment might be seclusion and reflection, to which Jesus goes, but I could just as easily see myself rushing back into the everyday (avoidance) or seeking solace in human sources—interpretation from those who couldn't possibly understand.

Instead, the Spirit guides Jesus into solitude and self-reflection.

We often read the confrontations between the devil and Jesus during this time as spiritual warfare from without, but we can just as easily read them as Jesus wrestling with his own impulses and understanding. He is struggling to interpret what the divine words could mean for him: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Perhaps Jesus asked of God, "If you are pleased with me, do I not deserve to eat? I could turn these stones into bread to satisfy my hunger." Or "I could throw myself from the height of the temple to loudly and publicly demonstrate the truth revealed at the river. If I am beloved, will you not support me with a demonstration of your power?"

Or even, “I could just seize power from a selfish, tyrannical system. If I am your son, why should I not rule in your name and bring justice and mercy by command?”

It is not Jesus’s will that holds these thoughts (and the potential paths they represent) at bay. It is the scriptural knowledge he has built over a lifetime that provides the safe vantage point from which to make these impulses explicit and face them head-on.

By facing his impulses and choosing to define what it will mean to be God’s Son through scripture, Jesus builds the self-knowledge and discipline to be ready to meet temptation at the end of this journey. There again he will be asked to deny his own physical needs, to refuse to be saved from pain, to freely offer up the kingdom to those whom he loves, paying an ultimate cost.

Scripture is not a shield to defend us from a broken self; it is a vantage point from which we may deeply examine that self, knowing we are not subject to what we find. Quite the opposite: by seeing honestly, we can shape our thinking, so it holds up when tested, so we are not surprised by our own reactions in difficult moments. When we already know from whence we come, we have the muscle to remain rooted in the good that God wants for us.

—*Jason Sierra*

Reflect

What parts of ourselves are we afraid to look at? How might facing them allow us to chart a path toward being the fully alive child of God we are created to be?

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THURSDAY

In order to serve on a school board, you need both a powerful “why” related to students and the community and either a dash of masochism to throw yourself into the fray or a bit of hubris to think you deserve a seat at the table (or a little of both). What I didn’t realize when I began in this role is how much self-reflection, self-awareness, and self-control would be required to make sure I remain with the better angel of love for the students we serve.

In the hot seat on the dais and on camera, things that shouldn’t feel personal and things that wouldn’t normally put me off balance do. I find myself getting caught up in the fight for what feels like scarce time, scarce attention, scarce power, trying to protect myself and my interests as I understood them when I came in, rather than letting them evolve in real time. Between elections and state law, there is not enough time, trust, or common ground to have the exploratory conversations, the banter, the spitballing that I am so used to when working on a team. So, I find myself either frozen or on the defensive, every word becoming another political choice.

This has forced me to reflect very deeply on my own patterns of thought, to understand what starts me down unproductive trails and how I can most quickly get back on a productive and helpful

path. This level of self-reflection feels most akin to exercise: identifying the weaker muscles, not avoiding them, but working thoughtfully to transform them so they can catch up and be part of a healthy whole.

I am working to transform my proclivity to dissociate in the face of conflict into a new pattern of taking ownership of the results I care about and remaining present. A dozen times per meeting, I ask myself, “What am I most invested in getting done here? How does that impact students?” Likewise, my tendency to feel victimized or helpless must be nurtured into a sense of agency. I have latched onto the phrase “I am the genesis of change” and use these words to push me out of inaction and bystander status and back into the mix.

It’s not easy to name my weaknesses, but it’s a practice I must engage if I’m going to place stepstools to get me out of the ruts I continually fall into—before I get comfortable there.

—Jason Sierra

Reflect

What is one pattern of thought that most frequently gets you stuck? What is the new pattern you want to replace it with? What stepstool (small reminder or sticky idea) can help you get unstuck fast and nurture a new pattern?

FRIDAY

Like many parents, I close a good portion of my days with a bedtime moment of connection with my son, Roland. We have taken to calling it “talk time.” It’s not planned. We never put it on the calendar or decided to make it a habit. Talk time just arises, spontaneously, from the need in him to share his reflections on the day that has passed. The lights go out, the cats begin prowling, and the feelings start to rise: Someone was mean at school; Ro felt sad when another kid got in trouble; Ro worried that *he* was in trouble. A boring assignment; a hurt foot; a fight; a bad word. The day passes in review, and we dwell together on the good, the bad, and the ugly—mostly, if I am honest, the latter two.

Roland doesn’t know that, at such moments, he is engaging in an ancient Christian practice called “self-examination.” (If I told him that, he’d probably want to stop doing it.) And yet his daily review and weighing of his heart is not so different from the practice commended to us from the long line of saints who have known that, in fact, this is the best way to offer the past day back to its giver.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola named the practice *examen*, detailing a simple exercise of drawing into God’s presence, looking back over the day with gratitude, and learning to spot God’s purposes

and presence unfolding within it all. Pope Francis characterized the central work of *examen* as “rereading the day with Jesus.” While the *examen* can include a review of the outward events of the day—the moments we wish we could do over and the blessings we received—the primary work of this time is to notice the *inward* movements of the heart.

Our English word “self-examination” makes it sound a bit like a trial we host, in which we play all the roles of defendant, plaintiff, and judge. But the practice is actually much softer—closer to Roland’s and my “talk time.” The goal is not fault-finding but rather relationship-building. In recollecting our day, we reconnect with the God who, it turns out, was with us through it all.

—Kristin LeMay

Reflect

In the brief prayer of “Surrender,” included in his explanation of the exercise, Ignatius limns the practice:

You have given all to me.

To you, Lord, I return it.

Reflect on these words. Give the day back to God, and give your heart, too. Our God wants from us nothing more and nothing less.

SATURDAY

What's the difference between a Lenten discipline and a New Year's resolution?

Well, the time of year, for one. At this point in the year, I'm a couple of months past any New Year's resolutions I've made (and probably at least a month out from forgetting the resolution entirely).

But a key difference between the two is the direction in which we're pointed. Lent is a time to examine our lives and change our habits, but the disciplines of this season are meant to lead us closer to God.

It's easy to confuse the self-examination of Lent with the drive to optimize our culture. Too often, I've approached Lent as a chance to make myself better. I've treated my discipline as a fitness challenge, a forty-day diet, a sprint cycle toward a (spiritual) productivity milestone.

There's a place for self-denial, of course, and for training yourself spiritually like Paul exhorts us to do in his letters. But New Year's resolution energy can come with a heaping helping of judgment. If I look at my life through the cultural lens of relentless growth and productivity, I'm always going to find

ways I'm falling short. And those shortcomings might not line up at all with the ways God wants me to change my life.

So, let's undertake our self-examination with self-compassion. The One who comes to be our judge looks on us with mercy and kindness. We can try, with God's help, to do the same.

—*Margaret Ellsworth*

Reflect

To refocus your reflection on God's will for your life—and not on cultural judgments or expectations—it can help to start somewhere specific. Read through the five baptismal promises in the Book of Common Prayer, starting on page 304. How are you living out your vows this year?

Read through the Decalogue and Penitential Order on page 351 of the Book of Common Prayer. Which of God's commandments are the hardest for you to follow?

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The First Week of Lent



Repentance

*The time is fulfilled, and the
kingdom of God has come near;
repent, and believe in the good news.*

MARK 1:15

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SUNDAY

Right at the beginning of Jesus's ministry, he bursts onto the scene preaching an astounding message. "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news'" (Mark 1:14b-15).

This is no soft start. Jesus is challenging his listeners to do bold things, repent, and believe in the good news. Repentance is one of those church words that we might not think about too much. For some, hearing an invitation to repent may seem like a scold. For others, it may seem irrelevant or antiquated. But repentance is at the very core of what it means to follow Jesus.

Repentance simply means to change our direction, to start over, to try again. Instead of living a me-centered life, repentance leads me to live a God-centered life. A God-centered life is rooted in love—my love of God and neighbor—and especially God's love of me.

And this brings us to the good news. Once again, it's all about love. The good news is that God loves each one of us more than we can imagine. God loves us so much that he has given us our freedom to follow his ways or to turn away. He doesn't force us to do his will. We are always free to choose.

Because we have chosen to turn away from God, we need a clean slate, a fresh start. And that's where Jesus comes in. Jesus Christ was sent into this world to show us what perfect love looks like and to manifest to us who God is. And, ultimately, Jesus gave his life for us. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus has paid the debt for our sin and opened the way to eternal life. Death and sin are defeated! Life and love are victorious. That is mighty good news. That is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

—**Scott Gunn**

Reflect

How can repentance be a way to turn toward joy and life?

MONDAY

Our entire lives as Christians are about repentance. It's something we do over and over again, every day. Maybe it's learning to forgive someone who has hurt us. Perhaps it's practicing generosity when we'd rather hoard possessions. For some of us, it might mean keeping our cool and not losing our temper at this or that.

Sometimes repentance is easy, and sometimes it takes a long time with much difficult work. It always takes God's grace to help us along the way.

A few years ago, I found myself with extra time on my hands as I recovered for several months from some medical issues. Before that, I prayed pretty regularly, but not every day. Over the course of those months, I managed to develop a habit of praying Morning and Evening Prayer every day. I'm not perfect, but I get to it almost every day! And that's not all.

I started praying the entire psalter every month. Every thirty days or so, I repeat all 150 psalms. That has been a surprising gift. Steeping myself in the psalms this way helped me realize how prevalent mercy is. Month after month, it starts to soak in.

Repenting—developing a more robust prayer life and immersing myself in the psalms—has changed me. I find it

easier to act and to think mercifully than I did before. I'm certainly not perfect! But it has made a difference.

This is the thing about repentance. Sometimes it's hard work, but in the end, it feels better to live with our lives oriented toward God. And when I fail, as I do regularly, I know that God is merciful to me. And that gives me the hope to try again the next day.

—**Scott Gunn**

Reflect

What spiritual practice or habit might help you to adopt the discipline of repentance? How will you begin to incorporate this habit into your daily life?

TUESDAY

The first step in repentance is admitting to ourselves and to God that we need to change. The church's liturgy gives us some ways to do that—both in Holy Eucharist and in our daily prayers. If you say Morning Prayer regularly, you will see this introduction to the confession of sin and absolution:

Dearly beloved, we have come together in the presence of Almighty God our heavenly Father, to set forth his praise, to hear his holy Word, and to ask, for ourselves and on behalf of others, those things that are necessary for our life and our salvation. And so that we may prepare ourselves in heart and mind to worship him, let us kneel in silence, and with penitent and obedient hearts confess our sins, that we may obtain forgiveness by his infinite goodness and mercy. (The Book of Common Prayer, p. 79)

This beautiful prayer encapsulates exactly why we pray together and why we confess our sins. It's all about praise, learning, and prayer. As we try to orient ourselves toward God, we start by naming the ways we have turned away from God. And then, after sincerely saying we are sorry and that we intend to do better, we are assured of God's mercy. If we pray alone, the assurance reads like this:

Almighty God, have mercy on us, forgive us all our sins through our Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen us in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep us in eternal life. *Amen.*

By the grace of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven, and the Holy Spirit equips us to go onward. That good news is really amazing. Day after day, it never gets old.

—*Scott Gunn*

Reflect

Take the first step of repentance. Pray to God, admitting the things that you need to change.