

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Henri Nouwen was one of the most innovative and influential spiritual writers of the past century. His vision of spirituality was broad and inclusive, and his compassion embraced all of humankind. Nouwen wrote 39 books on spirituality and the spiritual life that have sold millions of copies and been translated into over 20 languages. The passages quoted in this booklet are taken from certain of his published works, listed here, all of which are available through [www.henrinouwen.org](http://www.henrinouwen.org).

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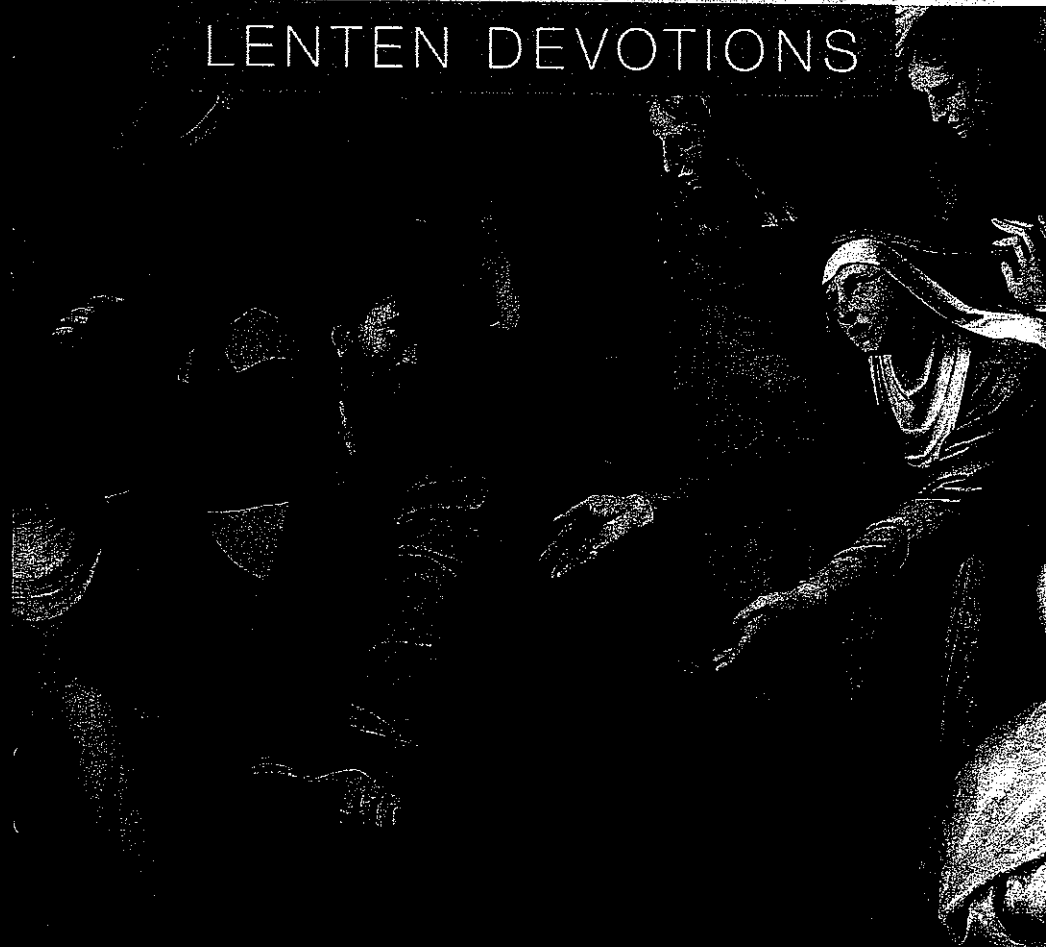
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HN9

# THE SAVING PASSION

## LENTEN DEVOTIONS



INSPIRATION FROM

# HENRI J. M. NOUWEN

Ash Wednesday  
A TIME TO WEEP

Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

Psalm 30:5

*Weeping and mourning are considered by many people as signs of weakness. They say that crying will not help anybody. Only action is needed. And still, Jesus wept over Jerusalem; he wept also when he heard that his friend Lazarus had died. Our tears reveal to us the painful human condition of brokenness; they connect us deeply with the inevitability of human suffering; they offer the gentle context for compassionate action. (Walk With Jesus, 52)*

Forgiving Lord, cleanse us of our sin and guilt, and fill us with joy every morning. Amen.

Thursday After Ash Wednesday  
LAID LOW AND LIFTED UP

Humble yourselves ... under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time.

1 Peter 5:6

*Jesus was stripped so that we would dare to embrace our own poverty and the poverty of our humanity. In looking at our impoverished selves and the poverty of our fellow human beings, we come to discover the immense compassion that God shows to us. (Walk With Jesus, 65)*

Gracious God, strip me of everything that displeases you, and restore my dignity as your beloved and forgiven child. Amen.

Friday After Ash Wednesday  
CROSS PURPOSES

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

John 3:14-15

*"The Son of Man," Jesus says, "must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him" (John 3:14-15). He is lifted up as a passive victim, so the Cross is a sign of desolation. And he is lifted up in Glory, so the Cross becomes at the same time a sign of hope. (Jesus, A Gospel, 101)*

To those standing around the cross on that Friday, its purpose appeared to be humiliation, degradation and death. But God's purpose for the cross was at cross purposes with the world. His design was for Jesus to be lifted up in glory, as he defeated the powers of darkness and death.

God's ultimate purpose that day was to make it possible for us to be lifted up to the glory of eternal life, through faith in our crucified Savior.

Our life's purpose is still at cross purposes with the world, which sees the cross as a symbol of degradation and defeat. But we who are lifted up with Christ see beyond the cross to the empty tomb and a new, purposeful and eternal life.

Lord Jesus, we thank you for enduring the worst human humiliation possible so that you might lift us up to a new and eternal life with you. Amen.

Saturday After Ash Wednesday

## HE KNOWS OUR SECRETS

God ... knows the secrets of the heart.

*Psalm 44:21*

*Jesus reveals himself to us as the Good Shepherd who knows us intimately and loves us. But do we want to be known by him? Do we want him to walk freely into every room of our inner lives? Do we want him to see our bad side as well as our good, our shadow as well as our light? (With Burning Hearts, 58-59)*

What a blessing it is to know and be known by God. But do we really want to be fully known by him? It's disconcerting or even frightening to realize that God knows the secrets of our hearts. He knows everything we have tried to hide from other people, from him and even from ourselves.

What a blessing it is to know that our Good Shepherd accepts us as we are, with all of our fears and flaws and failings. He sees us as we were and as we are, and loves us nevertheless.

As we live in his grace and forgiveness, we are enabled to accept and embrace others around us who are struggling with their own fears and faults and failures. We are accepted and forgiven by God, in order to be his accepting and forgiving people.

All-knowing God, you know the secrets of our hearts, and yet you accept us as we are, with all of our faults and failures. Help us to be your accepting and forgiving people. Amen.

First Sunday of Lent

## OUR DEADLY INFECTION

Moses made a serpent of bronze, ... and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

*Numbers 21:9*

*What Moses raised in the desert as a standard was a bronze serpent, healing everyone bitten by snakes who looked up at it (Numbers 21:8-9). The cross of Jesus is likewise the standard of healing, not just healing from physical wounds, but healing from the human condition of mortality. (Can You Drink the Cup?, 48)*

The Israelites were deathly afraid of the serpents. Many were dying from their poisonous bites. But God offered them a cure. When they put their trust in God and looked up in faith at the image on the pole, they were healed.

All of us are dying from the poisonous bite of sin, which entered the world through the treachery of that serpent in the Garden of Eden. But there is a cure for our deadly infection. When we look in faith to Jesus on the cross, we are healed from the human condition of mortality.

There is no other cure. Some people think that sounds too easy. For others, the message of the cross seems like foolishness. But to those who accept God's cure, "Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:24).

Gracious God, thank you for providing the cure for our deadly infection through the cross of Christ. Amen.

Monday, First Week of Lent

## A CLEANSING AND RENEWING FLOOD

One of the soldiers pierced his side, ... and at once blood and water came out.  
John 19:34

*I look at your pierced side, and I see not only blood coming out, but water as well. Like blood, water too can be a sign of destruction. The great flood in Noah's time and the countless floods throughout human history show that clearly. But the water that flows from your side is a life-giving water. Not only is it a water that cleanses me from sin, but it is also water that brings me into a new land, a new home, a new community. (Heart Speaks to Heart, 42)*

The breath of life is gone from his limp body. When the soldier pierces Jesus' side, blood and water flow from the pericardium around his heart.

Jesus' blood and water, sanctified by his sacrifice on the cross, now offer us cleansing and new life. Scripture assures us, "The blood of Jesus ... cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). Jesus promises us "living water" (John 4:10).

The latter promise is made visible in the life-giving water of Baptism, when God's grace floods over us, cleansing us of all that separates us from God and creating a new and right spirit within us.

Both assurances are made visible in Holy Communion, where Jesus' blood is poured out anew for us—breathing new life into our dry bones. Inspired and empowered by the Spirit of Christ, we go forth each day to flood the world with his love and grace and truth.

Living Lord, flood us anew each day with your cleansing and renewing power. Amen.

Tuesday, First Week of Lent

## POWER-FILLED WORDS

The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword.

Hebrews 4:12

*The Word of God is always sacramental. In the book of Genesis we are told that God created the world, but in Hebrew the words for "speaking" and for "creating" are the same word. Literally translated it says, "God spoke light and light was." For God, speaking is creating. When we say that God's word is sacred, we mean that God's word is full of God's presence. (With Burning Hearts, 45-46)*

Words have power—power to encourage and lift up, but also power to tear down and destroy. During recent years, we have seen powerful figures in our society brought down from their pedestals and disgraced by their ill-chosen words.

God's power-filled words of law are able to bring us down in humility and repentance, as we look into the mirror of our lives and see all of our blemishes and blunders.

But God's word is a double-edged sword. His Gospel words of mercy and grace lift us up and give us renewed strength and purpose. As we take to heart God's sacred words of promise and hope, we are filled anew with his grace-filled presence, which empowers us to be his beacons of light and hope and healing, in the midst of a dark and decadent world.

Creator God, fill us with your presence and power, so we may be your beacons of light and hope and peace in the world. Amen.

Wednesday, First Week of Lent

## SPIRITUAL HEARTBURN

They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us ... while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

Luke 24:32

*It is important to know that, although these words, read or spoken, are there to inform, instruct, or inspire us, their first significance is that they make Jesus himself present to us. On our journey, Jesus explains to us the passages that are about himself. Whether we read the book of Exodus, the Psalms, the Prophets, or the Gospels, they are all there to make our hearts burn. (With Burning Hearts, 44)*

Their hearts were aching and broken as they slowly walked back to Emmaus on that Easter afternoon. They had so hoped that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah.

But as they listened to the stranger who had joined them on their journey, they experienced spiritual heartburn. He revealed to them insights from the Scriptures, which made clear that the Messiah would have to suffer and die before he entered his glory.

As we read and hear God's Word with an open heart and mind, the Holy Spirit transforms our headaches and heartaches into spiritual heartburn. He grants us new insights into God's plans for our world and new awareness of his purpose for our lives.

As we meet people whose hearts are aching and breaking, may we share Gospel words and deeds of love which make Jesus present to them.

Lord Jesus, may our hearts burn within us as you open the Scriptures to us.  
Amen.

Thursday, First Week of Lent

## THE CUP OF BLESSINGS

Now that we have been justified by his blood, [we] will be saved through him from the wrath of God.

Romans 5:9

*Jesus made the cup of God's wrath into a cup of blessings. That's the mystery of the Eucharist. Jesus died for us so that we may live. He gave himself away for us, so that we can live in community. He became for us food and drink so that we can be fed for everlasting life. That is what Jesus meant when he took the cup and said: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood poured out for you" (Luke 22:20). (Can You Drink the Cup?, 68)*

On Calvary's cross Jesus satisfied God's wrath against the sin and disobedience of humanity. On the evening before, in the Upper Room, Jesus had already transformed the cup of wrath into a cup of blessings as he prepared a sacred meal for his disciples in all generations. In his Holy Supper he becomes for us food and drink, feeding us with the bread of life.

The mystery of the Eucharist is revealed by St. Paul, "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?" (1 Corinthians 10:16).

In this meal we are doubly blessed. We are united with Christ in faith and united with each other in one body—united in spirit and mission.

Loving Lord, thank you for draining the cup of God's wrath and offering us, in exchange, your cup of blessings. Amen.

Friday, First Week of Lent

## GIVEN FOR YOU

[Jesus said,] This is my body, which is given for you.

Luke 22:19

*Jesus is God-for-us, God-with-us, God-within-us. Jesus is God giving himself completely, pouring himself out for us without reserve. Jesus doesn't hold back or cling to his own possessions. He gives all there is to give. "Eat, drink, this is my body, this is my blood ... this is me for you!" (With Burning Hearts, 67)*

Jesus never holds back on sharing his blessings with us. On the cross he gave himself completely, as "the atoning sacrifice for our sins and ... the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2). In the Lord's Supper he gives his body and blood personally—"for you," thereby assuring you that he is for you, with you and within you.

Day by day, Jesus gives us all there is to give—everything we really need for this life and for the life to come. In grateful response to our Lord's gifts and blessings, we are moved to give all that we have and all that we are in the service of our Savior—never holding back.

Our sacrifices are tiny by comparison. But our Lord magnifies our gifts of time, talent and treasure and uses them for his good and gracious purposes.

God-with-us, we are so grateful that you are always for us and with us and within us. Guide us and empower us to live each day with you, for you and for others. Amen.

Saturday, First Week of Lent

## THE BREAKING OF BREAD

He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.

Luke 24:30-31

*The stranger [on the road to Emmaus] didn't say that there was no reason for sadness, but that their sadness was part of a larger sadness in which joy was hidden. The stranger didn't say that the death they were mourning wasn't real, but that it was a death that inaugurated even more life—real life. (With Burning Hearts, 40-41)*

On Easter afternoon, the risen Christ met two of his grieving followers. However, their sadness was so deep that they didn't recognize him—until he revealed himself in the breaking of bread.

Sometimes our sadness and struggles can be so deep and debilitating that we no longer are able to recognize the presence of Jesus. When deepening shadows overcast our life, we, like the Emmaus disciples, need to invite the risen Christ to come and stay with us in the midst of our doubts and despair. And he will. His sure promise is, "I will never leave you or forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5).

Our Lord invites us to join him often at his table for the breaking of bread. And even if we have difficulty recognizing his presence, he recognizes us. And that is enough.

Risen Christ, come to us and remain with us, especially in times of sadness, when your joy is hidden from us. Amen.

Second Sunday of Lent

## OUR MISSION AND MESSAGE

Our Savior Christ Jesus ... abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

2 Timothy 1:10

*Forming a community with family and friends, building a body of love, shaping a new people of the resurrection: all of this is not just so that we can live a life protected from the dark forces that dominate our world; it is, rather, to enable us to proclaim together to all people, young and old, white and black, poor and rich, that death does not have the last word, that hope is real and God is alive. (With Burning Hearts, 86)*

Forming a community of Christ's people is not just so we can live a life protected from the dark and dangerous forces that dominate our world. We have a critical mission and a vital message to share.

Our mission is to reach out with genuine kindness and care to all people, young and old, white and black, poor and rich—welcoming them warmly into our community of faith.

Our message is that death does not have the last word. Hope is real. God is alive. For Christ has destroyed the powers of darkness and death, and brought us into a new and immortal life with him. In our weekly worship and daily devotions, our Lord fills us anew with the joy and peace and purpose which can be found nowhere else.

Christ Jesus, we praise you for calling us into your community of faith. Move us to share with others the good news that hope is real and you are alive. Amen.

Monday, Second Week of Lent

IN THE WORLD  
BUT NOT OF THE WORLD

[Jesus prayed], "I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one."

John 17:15

*The invitation to a life of prayer is the invitation to live in the midst of this world without being dropped in the net of its wounds and needs. The word "prayer" stands for a radical interruption of the vicious chain of interlocking dependencies that lead to violence and war and for an entering into an entirely new place. (Peacework, 32)*

In his prayer to his heavenly Father on the Thursday of Holy Week, Jesus prays for his disciples in every age. He doesn't ask that we would be spared the inevitable trials and troubles of life in this world. Rather, he prays that we would be protected from the forces of evil which can easily deceive us or overwhelm us.

Jesus' desire is that we would be in the world but not *of* the world. He calls us to be genuinely involved in the struggles of this world, serving as instruments of God's healing and help and hope among wounded and broken people. But we must guard against getting so entangled in the net of the world's wounds and needs that they might consume us or disable us.

Lord, grant us your grace and guidance so that we may faithfully serve wounded and broken people. Amen.

Tuesday, Second Week of Lent

## LIVING A FRUIT-FULL LIFE

[Jesus said], "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit."

John 15:5

*On the evening before his death he says to his friends, "Make your home in me, as I make mine in you. ... Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty" (John 15:4-5). This divine dwelling place enables us to live as peacemakers in a hostile world like sheep among wolves. In his words of farewell Jesus leaves no doubt about the nature of the world his followers have to live in, but he also assures them that they can live in the world with peace. (Peacework, 33)*

How do we cultivate a more fruitful life? The spiritual nutrients we need flow from the source, the vine of Christ. When we remain firmly attached to Christ, his Spirit continually flows into us and through us. That enables us to nurture and share generous portions of the fruits of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23).

When we live in Christ, these fruits of the Spirit become for us not an addendum, but a way of life. The love of Christ compels us to respond to others with kindness and faithfulness, to reach out to those in need with gentleness and generosity, to respond to difficult people and situations with patience and self-control and to reflect Christ's love and joy and peace in all that we say and do.

Blessed Redeemer, fill us with the fruits of the Spirit so that we may live a fruitful life in your service. Amen.

Wednesday, Second Week of Lent

## BEARING MORE FRUIT

Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.

John 15:2

*God wants to prune me. A pruned vine does not look beautiful, but during harvest time it produces much fruit. The greatest challenge is to continue to recognize God's pruning hand in my life. Then I can avoid resentment and depression and become even more grateful that I am called upon to bear even more fruit than I thought I could. (Jesus, A Gospel, 91-92)*

God's Spirit moves us to desire to bear more fruit for Christ's kingdom. But Jesus indicates that, like grapevines, we must be willing to be pruned if we want to be more fruitful disciples.

Pruning can be painful. But pruning is necessary if we are to serve as God's faithful prophets and peacemakers in a hostile world where—because of our mission and message—we will inevitably encounter hardships, pressures and even persecution.

It's hard to be grateful for God's pruning hand in our life. And yet, God uses our struggles in his service to help shape us into a more fruitful branch on his vine. We don't always see the fruits of our efforts right away. But when we abide in Christ and he in us, our labor for the Lord will be blessed. And in God's good time, he will produce an abundant harvest.

Faithful God, prune me where necessary so that I may live a more faithful and fruitful life in your service. Amen.



Thursday, Second Week of Lent

## OUR WORSHIP LIFE

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Acts 2:42

*The Eucharistic event reveals the deepest human experiences, those of sadness, attentiveness, invitation, intimacy, and engagement. It summarizes the life we are called to live in the Name of God. Only when we recognize the rich network of connections between the Eucharist and our life in the world can the Eucharist be "worldly" and our life "Eucharistic." (With Burning Hearts, 13)*

The first fellowship of believers after Pentecost gives us a pattern for our worship life in the family of Christ. We, likewise, receive the faith, encouragement and partnership we need for our mission when we devote ourselves to being part of a vibrant worshipping community where we share God's Word, the breaking of bread, prayer and a Christ-centered, caring fellowship.

In our worship life, we come together to be enriched, renewed and strengthened by the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit inspires us to go forth to our vocations and ministries, to be the face of Christ in the midst of all of our daily life and daily relationships.

When we worship the Lord "in spirit and truth" (John 4:23), our worship life will serve as the prelude to a full and productive life in the service of our Savior.

Holy Spirit, enrich our worship life with your life-giving and life-renewing presence and power through your holy Word and Holy Supper. Amen.

Friday, Second Week of Lent

## MAKING ALL THINGS NEW

The one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new."

Revelation 21:5

*They had left their village, followed that stranger and his friends, and discovered a whole new reality hidden behind the veil of their ordinary activities—a reality in which forgiveness, healing, and love were no longer mere words but powers touching the very core of their humanity. The stranger from Nazareth had made everything new. He had made them into people for whom the world was no longer a burden but a challenge, no longer a field of snares but a place with endless opportunities. (With Burning Hearts, 23-24)*

The disciples had left everything behind—all that was familiar and comfortable—in order to follow Jesus (Matthew 19:27). But in doing so, they discovered an entirely new reality, one in which his love and forgiveness and healing power reigned supreme. Life was no longer a stifling burden but rather a refreshing challenge, filled with endless opportunities.

Likewise, when we follow Jesus in faith, we discover refreshing new challenges and opportunities. He uses us as his agents of love and forgiveness and healing in the midst of the world in which we live and work and worship.

It is unlikely that we 21st-century disciples will have to leave behind everything that is familiar and comfortable. But we must be willing to shed any excess baggage or pet sins which will hinder us in carrying out the mission that our Lord lays before us.

Lord Jesus, transform our burdens into opportunities for sharing your love and kindness and forgiveness, wherever you may lead us. Amen.

Saturday, Second Week of Lent  
**A LIFE WORTH LIVING**

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.

2 Corinthians 5:17

*A life that is not reflected upon isn't worth living. It belongs to the essence of being human that we contemplate our life, think about it, discuss it, evaluate it, and form opinions about it. Half of living is reflecting on what is being lived. (Can You Drink the Cup?, 26)*

What makes a life worth living? How do we evaluate the purpose and worth of our past, present and future? It depends in part on whether we are living in the morning, noontide or evening of our life. But it ultimately depends on where Christ is in our life. Is he at the center of our life, confined to the borders of our life or barely noticeable at all?

When we live in Christ, with Christ and for Christ, we are a new creation. We have a new sense of worth as a precious child of God. We have a new sense of purpose as ambassadors for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20). And we have a new focus in life as beacons of Christ's light and grace and truth in all of our daily life and daily relationships.

Living Christ, grant us a new sense of worth and purpose in life, as we focus on sharing your light and love and mercy in all we say and do. Amen.

Third Sunday of Lent  
**THE MAN OF SORROWS**

He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering.

Isaiah 53:3

*Now I look at the man of sorrows. He hangs on a cross with outstretched arms. It is Jesus, condemned by Pontius Pilate, crucified by Roman soldiers, and ridiculed by Jews and Gentiles alike. But it is also us, the whole human race, people of all times and all places, uprooted from the earth as a spectacle of agony for the entire universe to watch. (Can You Drink the Cup?, 35)*

The people of Israel in Jesus' day looked forward to the coming of a Messiah who would drive out their hated Roman rulers and restore peace to the land.

But centuries before, Isaiah had prophesied that God's Messiah would be a suffering servant Savior. Jesus clearly fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy. He was despised and rejected by others—ridiculed by Jews and Gentiles alike. He was filled with sorrow—weeping over Jerusalem because of its wretched spiritual condition and tragic fate (Luke 19:41). He was a man of suffering—enduring horrible torment at the hands of Pontius Pilate and the Roman soldiers.

But the good news, as Isaiah also prophesied, is that Jesus the Messiah was “wounded for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was [placed] the punishment that made us whole. And by his bruises we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5).

Promised Messiah, we praise you for enduring such suffering and sorrow in our place, so that we may know no suffering or sorrow beyond the grave. Amen.

Monday, Third Week of Lent  
**THE CUP OF SORROW**

[Jesus prayed,] "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want."

Matthew 26:39

*Jesus' cup is the cup of sorrow, not just his own sorrow but the sorrow of the whole human race. It is a cup full of physical, mental, and spiritual anguish. It is the cup of starvation, torture, loneliness, rejection, abandonment, and immense anguish. It is the cup full of bitterness. (Can You Drink the Cup?, 35)*

What was in that bitter cup? Jesus had come to the Garden of Gethsemane to wrestle with his heavenly Father in prayer. He knew that his cup of sorrow would be filled with more than horrendous physical suffering. His cup was filled to the brim with the sin and guilt of all humanity, including yours and mine. It was more than a human being could bear.

Nevertheless, Jesus willingly went to Calvary to face, not only the horror of crucifixion, but also the horror of hell—dread hours of separation from the Father. But Jesus was forsaken on the cross so that we would never have to fear being forsaken by God. We can always count on God's sure promise, "I will never leave you or forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5).

Sorrowful Savior, we praise you for enduring the bitter suffering and dreaded separation so that we never have to fear being forsaken by God. Amen.

Tuesday, Third Week of Lent  
**HE DRANK IT TO THE DREGS**

Jesus cried with a loud voice, ... "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Matthew 27:46

*Jesus didn't throw the cup away in despair. No, he kept it in his hands, willing to drink it to the dregs. This was not a show of willpower, staunch determination, or great heroism. This was a deep spiritual yes to Abba, the lover of his wounded heart. (Can You Drink the Cup?, 37)*

Jesus was at the point of human despair. Always before, the Father had answered his prayers with power from on high. But this time was different. Heaven was silent. His cries went unanswered.

However, Jesus didn't throw the cup away in despair. Instead, he drank it to the dregs. He knew there was no other way to atone for the sins of the whole world. Only his sacrifice would be sufficient (1 John 2:2).

When we are close to despair because of overwhelming distress and anguish, we know that our cries will be heard. Jesus was forsaken by the Father so we would never be separated from his love and help and hope. No matter what dreadful things may fill our cup, our Savior will take the cup from us and drink it to the dregs.

Lamb of God, when we are close to despair, take our cup of misery, drink it to the dregs, and refill it with your love and strength and peace. Amen.

Wednesday, Third Week of Lent

## CAN YOU DRINK THE CUP?

Jesus said to them, ... "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?"

Mark 10:38

*Jesus' unconditional yes to his Father had empowered him to drink his cup, not in passive resignation but with the full knowledge that the hour of his death would also be the hour of his glory. His yes made his surrender a creative act, an act that could bear much fruit. (Can You Drink the Cup?, 50)*

James and John were brash enough to ask Jesus for the top positions in his kingdom. They boldly asserted that they could drink the same cup that Jesus was about to drink. But they couldn't even imagine the horrors that would be in that cup.

Soon after Pentecost, they would begin to drink little sips of suffering. But it is only because the Father empowered Jesus to drink that entire cup of shame and suffering that they, or we, can endure the pressures and trials that come with bearing his cross.

Are you and I able to drink his cup? Yes and no. There is no way we could manage more than a sip. But when we surrender to his grace, our Lord will empower us to take up our cross daily and accomplish great things for his glory.

Gracious Lord, thank you for drinking that cup of shame and suffering so that we can enjoy your cup of blessing—now and forever. Amen.

Thursday, Third Week of Lent

## SHARING IN OUR SUFFERING

We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but ... one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.

Hebrews 4:15

*When we say "Christ has died," we express the truth that all human suffering in all times and places has been suffered by the Son of God who also is the Son of all humanity and thus has been lifted up into the inner life of God. There is no suffering—no guilt, shame, loneliness, hunger, oppression, or exploitation, no torture, imprisonment or murder, no violence or nuclear threat—that has not been suffered by God. (Jesus, A Gospel, 111)*

When Nouwen confronts the perplexing issue of human suffering, he doesn't ask the usual question, "Why?" Instead, he points us to Jesus, who has suffered and been tested and tempted in every way that we have. The difference is that he never gave in to temptation and sin.

That doesn't answer *why*, but it shows us *who* can truly sympathize with our weaknesses and struggles. The Son of God fully empathizes with us. Therefore, we can approach God's throne of grace with boldness and confidence, knowing that we will "receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

Suffering Savior, grant us relief from our suffering. And help us to alleviate the suffering we see, as well as the hidden suffering all around us. Amen.

Friday, Third Week of Lent

## SHARING IN HIS SUFFERING

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.

Philippians 3:10

*Communion with Jesus means becoming like him. With him we are nailed on the cross, with him we are laid in the tomb, with him we are raised up to accompany lost travelers on their journey. Communion, becoming Christ, leads us to a new realm of being. It ushers us into the Kingdom. (With Burning Hearts, 74)*

To know Christ is much more than factual knowledge. It is to see him with the eyes of faith. It is to be transformed by the power of his resurrection, which enables us to share his cup of suffering by becoming like him in his sacrificial service.

Through our baptism into Christ's death and resurrection (Romans 6:3-5), and our trusting faith in him, we are raised up to share in the suffering of others around us. Their struggles become our struggles. Their pain becomes our pain. Their needs become our passion.

And when there seem to be no easy solutions and words seem hollow, we sit quietly with them, sharing in their suffering, until the time comes to share together in the healing power and peace of the risen Christ.

O Christ, as you share in our suffering, help us to share in the suffering of others. And grant us your peace. Amen.

Saturday, Third Week of Lent

## A CUP FULL OF GRACE

The Word became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth.

John 1:14

*Dear Lord Jesus, you, the eternal Word, through whom all things came into being, you became flesh among us so that you could speak with us, walk with us, pray with us, yes even die with us. You became a human being among other human beings so that nothing human would be alien to you, so that in everything, except sin, you could be like us. (Heart Speaks to Heart, 21)*

Advent and Lent seem distant from each other in theme and focus. And yet you cannot separate Jesus' cradle from his cross. He was born to die. It was all part of the Father's plan. Our loving God determined that there was no other way to pay the price of sin. There was no other way to reconcile us to himself than through the sacrifice of his Son (2 Corinthians 5:18).

At just the right time in God's plan, the eternal Word became flesh. Jesus came to live among us and die for us, in order to share with us a cup filled with God's love and grace and truth.

And when we drink the cup of God's grace to the brim, day after day, we understand the need for Jesus' suffering. And with God's help, we can swallow the suffering that we must endure until we share in his eternal glory.

Eternal Word of God, fill us to the brim with your love and grace and truth. Amen.

Fourth Sunday of Lent

## A BROKEN HEART

When [the soldiers] came to Jesus, [they] saw that he was already dead.

John 19:33

*I look at your dead body on the cross. The soldiers, who have broken the legs of the two men crucified with you, do not break your legs, but one of them pierces your side with a lance, and immediately blood and water flow out. Your heart is broken, the heart that did not know hatred, revenge, resentment, jealousy or envy but only love, love so deep and so wide that it embraces your Father in heaven as well as all humanity in time and space. Your broken heart is the source of my salvation, the foundation of my hope, the cause of my love. (Heart Speaks to Heart, 36-37)*

A modern autopsy might list blood loss or asphyxiation as the cause of Jesus' death. But we could rightly say that he died of a broken heart. His heart had been slowly breaking throughout his years of ministry, as he anguished over the stubborn refusal of the religious leaders to admit their legalistic hypocrisy and to recognize his Messianic mission.

From Gethsemane to Golgotha, his spiritual anguish was exacerbated by physical agony and torture beyond our human comprehension. The soldiers were surprised when they pierced his heart to discover that he was already dead. But we are not surprised. We know that when his mission was accomplished, Jesus, of his own will, "gave up his spirit" (John 19:30).

Our faith rests on the blessed assurance that his heart was broken, forming the source of our salvation, the foundation of our hope and the cause of our love.

Loving Savior, we thank you that you died of a broken heart—broken for us and for our salvation. Amen.

Monday, Fourth Week of Lent

## THE STING OF DEATH

"Death has been swallowed up in victory. ... Where, O death, is your sting?"

1 Corinthians 15:54-55

*Jesus was crushed by the powers of death, but his death removed death's sting. To those who believe in him he gave power to become children of God, that is, to participate in the life where death can no longer reach. By his death, Jesus was victorious over all the powers of death. (Walk With Jesus, 76)*

Jesus did not escape the grip of death. And neither can we. Death is still the enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26). But it is an enemy whose power has been destroyed by Christ's victory over death.

However, no matter how strong our faith in the risen Christ is, death still stings. It can be a crippling sting for those who mourn the loss of their soulmate or child or treasured friend. But the ultimate sting of death has been removed by our loving and merciful God, who "gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:57).

This marvelous assurance from God's Word softens the sting of death. We can trust God's sure promise of eternal life for all who live by faith in the Christ of Calvary and the empty tomb.

Victorious Savior, we praise you for your victory over the powers of death and the grave. Comfort and strengthen us when death's sting seems to be more than we can bear. Amen.

Tuesday, Fourth Week of Lent

## CLOSE TO THE BROKENHEARTED

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit.

Psalm 34:18

*O compassionate Lord, your heart is broken because of all the love that is not given or received. All the people of the past, the present and those yet to be born can look up at you and see their anguish and their agony on your cross. (Heart Speaks to Heart, 39)*

Sooner or later most of us suffer through the pain of a broken heart. Our heart may be broken by someone we loved and trusted. Or our spirit may be crushed by the crippling illness or dementia or death of a loved one—someone who brought love and light and laughter into our life. There is a saying, “Time heals all wounds.” But a broken heart isn’t easily mended.

However, there is One who is able to mend our broken hearts and save us from despair when our spirits are crushed. Jesus took on our human nature and identified fully with us, so he could understand our brokenness, empathize with us when our spirits are crushed and heal our broken hearts. His heart was broken on Calvary’s cross so that ours could be healed forever.

Faithful Lord, your heart was broken for us. Stay close to us with your care and compassion, especially when our hearts are broken and our spirits are crushed. Amen.

Wednesday, Fourth Week of Lent

## BIND UP THE BROKENHEARTED

The Lord ... has sent me to ... bind up the brokenhearted, ... to comfort all who mourn.

Isaiah 61:1-2

*Thank you, Jesus, for the mystery of your broken heart, a heart broken by us and for us, that has become now the source of forgiveness and new life. The blood and water flowing from your side show me the new life that is given to me through your death. It is a life of intimate communion with you and your Father. But it is also a life that calls me to give all that I am in the service of your love for the world. (Heart Speaks to Heart, 44)*

Isaiah looks forward to the coming of the Messiah, who will bind up the brokenhearted and comfort all who mourn. That was and still is what Jesus does for us and for all who seek his forgiving love and healing power.

Each day, Jesus sends us out on the same mission. Our compassionate Lord fills us with compassion for those whose hearts have been broken and whose lives have been turned upside down by the cruel realities of life in our broken world.

As we walk with others through their dark valleys, with Christ behind us, before us and beside us, he gives us ears to listen, hearts to care and good news to share, as we bind up the brokenhearted, comfort all who mourn and offer new hope in Christ to those who have lost hope.

Compassionate Lord, we thank you for healing our wounded hearts and minds. Open the eyes of our heart to see the brokenhearted who need your love and healing touch. Amen.

Thursday, Fourth Week of Lent

## GOOD GRIEF

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

Romans 12:15

*And as we feel the pain of our own losses, our grieving hearts open our inner eye to a world in which losses are suffered far beyond our own little world of family, friends, and colleagues. It is the world of prisoners, refugees, AIDS patients, starving children, and the countless human beings living in constant fear. Then the pain of our crying hearts connects us with the moaning and groaning of a suffering humanity. Then our mourning becomes larger than ourselves. (With Burning Hearts, 28)*

“Good grief” can be an exclamation. Or it can be a precious insight into ways that God can use our own experiences of grief as avenues of help and hope for others who are living through a time of pain and loss.

When our experience of heartbreak connects with another grieving heart, we are able to mourn with them in a beneficial way. For we not only can sympathize with them, we can feel their pain and loss. We can offer more than tired clichés, we can sense when it’s time to listen, time to share hope-filled words, time to weep with them or time to sit in silence with them.

Jesus wept at the grave of Lazarus. He continues to weep with those who weep. He continues to comfort all who mourn. In his good time, for those who grieve, he restores the joy and peace which the world cannot give.

Lord of hope, use our grief experiences as avenues of hope and healing for those who mourn. Amen.

Friday, Fourth Week of Lent

## GODLY GRIEF

[Jesus said,] “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

Matthew 5:4

*But in the midst of all this pain, there is a strange, shocking, yet very surprising voice. It is the voice of the one who says: “Blessed are those who mourn: they shall be comforted.” That’s the unexpected news: there is a blessing hidden in our grief. (With Burning Hearts, 28)*

Grief can not only be good, but also godly. The unexpected news that Jesus shares in this Beatitude is that there is a blessing hidden in our grief and pain as we turn to God’s Word for relief.

The comfort God offers us is not the shallow “don’t worry, be happy” attitude which the world offers. Human happiness depends on people and circumstances beyond our control. But the eternal joy and peace which God promises to his people are anchored in the cross and empty tomb.

Scripture offers numerous words of comfort and hope for God’s people in times of grief and pain. Perhaps none is more comforting than Jesus’ assurance, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live” (John 11:25). And when we have been comforted, we comfort others with the consolation we have received from God (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

God of comfort, help us to see your blessings hidden in our grief and pain. Amen.



Saturday, Fourth Week of Lent

## DEATH DOES NOT HAVE THE LAST WORD

Just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, so Christ ... will appear a second time ... to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

Hebrews 9:27-28

*Jesus' death reveals to us that we do not have to live pretending that death is not something that comes to all of us. As he hangs stretched out between heaven and earth, he asks us to look our mortality straight in the face and trust that death does not have the last word. (Walk With Jesus, 70-71)*

We can't escape it. No matter how well we care for our bodies through exercise, good nutrition and a healthy lifestyle, there comes a time when we must face our own mortality.

But just as death did not have the last word with Jesus, so because of his sacrifice on the cross for our sins and our salvation, death does not have the last word with us. Jesus assures us, "Because I live, you also will live" (John 14:19).

For those who live and believe in Jesus, death is not a dead end, but rather the gateway to a new and glorious realm, where the Good Shepherd himself "will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 7:17).

Victorious Lord, we praise you for conquering death, and opening for us the gate to eternal life with you. Amen.

Fifth Sunday of Lent

## OPEN MY EYES, LORD

Jesus ... got up from the table ... and began to wash the disciples' feet.

John 13:3-5

*I am looking at you, Lord. You have said so many loving words. Your heart has spoken so clearly. Now you want to show me even more clearly how much you love me. Knowing that your Father has put everything in your hands, that you have come from God and are returning to God, you remove your outer garments and, taking a towel, you wrap it around your waist, pour water into a basin and begin to wash my feet, and then wipe them with the towel you are wearing. (Heart Speaks to Heart, 28)*

Suddenly by faith I am there with you in the Upper Room on that Holy Thursday evening. I am looking at you, Lord. I don't understand why you are washing my feet, but I know you want to show me how much you love me.

After this humble act of service, you share your message, "You also ought to wash one another's feet" (John 13:14). What do you mean? It must be more than a ritual we repeat once a year. You are calling us to a daily ministry, where we immerse ourselves in the crying needs of others around us and around the world.

Open my eyes, Lord, to see those whose feet I need to wash, no matter how difficult the task may be. Give me the love and faith and courage to get my hands dirty and my heart broken in your service.

Open the eyes of my heart, Lord, and enable me to see you in others whom I need to serve. Amen.

Monday, Fifth Week of Lent

## MORE THAN AN EXAMPLE

I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.

John 13:15

*After washing his disciples' feet, Jesus says, "I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you" (John 13:15). After giving himself as food and drink, he says, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). Jesus calls us to continue his mission of revealing the perfect love of God in this world. He calls us to total self-giving. (Jesus, A Gospel, 85)*

Washing his disciples' feet is a poignant example, which moves us to give of ourselves in selfless service to the lowliest of Jesus' sisters and brothers (Matthew 25:40).

However, Jesus' life of sacrificial service is much more than an example for us. He came to earth to "give his life [as] a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). Jesus went to the cross to pay the ransom price that we could never hope to pay in order to rescue us from the powers of darkness and bring us into his eternal kingdom.

Thankfully, we are not asked to offer our lives as a ransom. The ransom was fully paid by Jesus. But we are saved to serve, as we give our lives in selfless devotion to those who need to receive the touch of Christ's love through us.

Loving Savior, we thank you for your example of humble service, but we especially thank you for giving your life as a ransom for us and all people. Amen.

Tuesday, Fifth Week of Lent

## INVITED TO THE TABLE

Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world. ... Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

John 13:1

*I am looking at you again, Lord. You stand up and invite me to the table. As we are eating, you take bread, say the blessing, break the bread and give it to me. "Take and eat," you say, "this is my body given for you." Then you take a cup, and, after giving thanks, you hand it to me, saying, "This is my blood, the blood of the new covenant poured out for you." Knowing that your hour has come to pass from this world to your Father and having loved me, you now love me to the end. (Heart Speaks to Heart, 29)*

I am looking at you again, Lord. You invite me to your table for the meal of your new covenant, a meal which you ask me to receive and share often with the members of your family of faith. And what a meal it is! You promise to be present each time in and with the bread and wine, sharing your grace and forgiveness.

How can this be? Will I ever fully comprehend this mystery? Or do I just need to trust that your words and promises are "trustworthy and true" (Revelation 21:5)?

I will take your word for it that in this sacred meal you are showing me the full extent of your love, fulfilling your promise that you will love me and be with me "always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let us through this meal be blessed. Amen.

Wednesday, Fifth Week of Lent

## NOW IT BEGINS

Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, in whose house the scribes and the elders had gathered.

Matthew 26:57

*Jesus is handed over to the caprices of his enemies. Things are now no longer done by him, but to him. He is flagellated, crowned with thorns, spat at, laughed at, stripped, and nailed naked to a cross. He is a passive victim, subject to other people's actions. From the moment Jesus is handed over, his passion begins, and through this passion he fulfills his vocation. (Jesus, A Gospel, 90)*

Now it begins! All of Jesus' life and ministry was a prelude to the unfolding injustice and brutality which would soon lead to a cruel cross. The spitting, slapping and striking blows which he endured in the palace of the high priest would soon escalate to the cruelest forms of torture that the Romans had devised—flogging and crucifixion.

But should we lament the horrors of his suffering and death? This was his vocation, his purpose for coming into the world. Three times Jesus told his disciples that he would be "mocked and flogged and crucified" (Matthew 20:19).

Jesus endured the worst suffering that humanity could devise so we would never have to suffer for our sins or suffer beyond the grave.

Suffering Savior, we are eternally grateful for your willingness to be mocked, flogged and crucified so that we would never have to suffer for our sins or be separated from you. Amen.

Thursday, Fifth Week of Lent

## THE WRONG QUESTION

Jesus answered, ... "For this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"

John 18:37-38

*Jesus stands before Pilate. He is silent. He does not defend himself against the many charges made against him. But when Pilate asks him, "What have you done?" he says, "I came into the world for this, to bear witness to the truth; and all who are on the side of truth listen to my voice" (John 18:35-38). The truth of which Jesus speaks is not a thesis, or a doctrine, or an intellectual explanation of reality. It is the very relationship, the life-giving intimacy between himself and the Father of which he wants us to partake. (Walk With Jesus, 9-10)*

Whether Pilate asked Jesus inquisitively or sarcastically, he asked the wrong question. The key question all people need to answer is not "What is truth?" but rather "Who is truth?"

Many people suggest that there are many sources of ultimate spiritual truth. The offense and stumbling block of the cross (1 Corinthians 1:18-25) is Jesus' revelation that *he* is "the way, and the truth, and the life," the only way to eternal life (John 14:6).

The truth of which Jesus speaks is not an alternate explanation of reality. And when we listen to his voice and follow him in faith, we know that we belong to the truth.

Faithful Lord, lead us to follow your way, to know your truth and to receive the fullness of your life. Amen.

Friday, Fifth Week of Lent

## LIFT UP THE FALLEN

They led him away to crucify him. ... They came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross.

Matthew 27:31-32

*Jesus, God-made-human, falls so that we can bend over him and show him our love and compassion, but we are too busy with other things even to notice. God, whose hands molded the universe, gave shape to Adam and Eve, touched every suffering person with tenderness, and who holds all things in love, became a human person with human hands asking for human hands. But those very hands were left open and pierced with nails. (Walk With Jesus, 58)*

We see Jesus fall on the way to the cross. We may wish we could have been there to help carry his cross. But when we lift up our eyes and hearts in faith, we will see countless opportunities to take up his cross and lift up the fallen.

All around us we see people who have fallen. Some have fallen in pain. Others in shame. Some have fallen away from God and his redeeming love. All of them need to be lifted up with kindness and compassion. But often we are too busy with other things even to notice.

Simon was compelled to carry Jesus' cross. We are not compelled by those in authority. We are compelled by the love of Christ, which propels us to lift up the fallen and serve them in his name.

Merciful Lord, forgive us for neglecting the fallen. Help us to see and assist those who need lifting up. Amen.

Saturday, Fifth Week of Lent

## SIMON, DID YOU KNOW?

They compelled a passer-by ... to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus.

Mark 15:21

*Jesus suffered this with us as he fell. He calls us now to truth that both his and our falling are a true part of the way of the cross. Maybe all we can do when we fall is to remember that Jesus fell and is falling now with us. That remembrance may become the first inkling that there is hope. (Walk With Jesus, 47)*

Simon, did you know? Did you know who this Jesus was, whose cross the soldiers compelled you to carry? Did you stay at Calvary and hear his final words—extraordinary words of love and forgiveness, even for his enemies?

Simon, did you stay the 50 days until Pentecost? Were you and your sons among those pilgrims from Cyrene whom the Holy Spirit led to faith in the risen Christ on Pentecost? (Acts 2:10). Did you and your sons carry the Gospel to north Africa, as tradition tells us? Was your son, Rufus, and his mother, among the faithful believers who were later commended by Paul? (Romans 16:13).

Simon, because of you and countless others who spread the Gospel message, we know who Jesus is.

Lord Jesus, we are eternally grateful that the Holy Spirit has led us to know that you are the Son of God and Savior of the world. Fill us with zeal to spread the Gospel message. Amen.

Palm Sunday

## THE PEAK OF HIS POPULARITY

The great crowd ... took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."

John 12:12-13

*Jesus drank the cup of life. He experienced praise, adulation, admiration, and immense popularity. He also experienced rejection, ridicule, and mass hatred. At one moment people shouted "Hosanna"; a moment later they cried: "Crucify him." Jesus took it all in, not as a hero adored and then vilified, but as the one who had come to fulfill a mission and who kept his focus on that mission whatever the responses were. (Can You Drink the Cup?, 88)*

It was perhaps the peak of Jesus' popularity. A great throng that had gathered for the Passover festival accompanied him into Jerusalem with shouts of "Hosanna" to the promised Messiah.

However, Jesus was headed to Jerusalem not to receive the praise of people but to receive a crown of thorns. Five days later, another crowd would be shouting "Crucify him!" And their voices prevailed. But through it all, Jesus kept his focus on his mission—to defeat the powers of darkness, so we might live in his light and peace forever.

As we journey through life toward our final destination, it is tempting to seek the praise, popularity and wealth which this world offers. Following Jesus may mean ridicule and rejection. But what we accomplish for him and his kingdom will be eternally worthwhile.

Triumphant Savior, help us to focus on offering you praise, rather than seeking it for ourselves. Amen.

Monday of Holy Week

## THE CURSE OF DEATH

[Jesus] emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, ... and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Philippians 2:7-8

*You, eternal Word of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, one in being with the Father, you showed me your divine love by taking on human flesh, living our human life and dying a human death—a death on a cross. But your love is stronger than death. Your divine love breaks through the prison of death and destruction and becomes manifest again in your risen body. (Heart Speaks to Heart, 50)*

He who was and is "God from God, Light from Light," as the ancient creed asserts, emptied himself—not of his deity but of his divine glory and exalted position. In utter humility, Jesus took on the nature of a slave.

His complete obedience to God's plan of salvation, as well as his overwhelming love for the human race, led Jesus to experience the ultimate humiliation of a degrading death on a cursed cross.

Jesus endured the cursing of the crowd and the curse of death on the tree of the cross so that we would be set free from the prison of death and destruction and rise with him to a new and victorious life.

Humble Savior, we praise you for removing the curse of death from the cross and transforming it into the life-giving source of your forgiveness and salvation. Amen.

Tuesday of Holy Week

## UNEXPECTED WORDS

Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

Luke 23:34

*As he hung dying in complete powerlessness, nailed against the wood of a tree, there was no bitterness, no desire for revenge, no resentment. Nothing to cling to. All to give. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains only a single grain, but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest" (John 12:24). By being given away for others, his life became fruitful. (Walk With Jesus, 70)*

The expected words from people nailed to a cross would be words of cursing, hatred and revenge. But from the lips of Jesus came unexpected words. As he gazed at those responsible for his crucifixion and who had been heaping insults on him, he prayed, "Father, forgive them."

It's not easy to forgive those who are hateful and hurtful to us. It can be as hard as nails, as hard as the nails of the cross.

But our Lord's forgiving love moves us to forgive those who are unkind to us, especially those who malign and insult us because of our faith in Christ and our stand for God's truths. By God's grace we are able to respond to them—not with bitterness or vengefulness, but with unexpected words and actions, filled with kindness and forgiveness. God's kind of love and kindheartedness hold the power to heal, restore and reconcile.

Father, grant us a forgiving spirit, filled with your loving and merciful kindness. Amen.

Wednesday of Holy Week

## UTTER HUMILIATION

When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes.

John 19:23

*Jesus was stripped. The soldiers threw dice to decide which of them would have his garment (see John 19:24). Nothing was left to him. He, the image of the unseen God, the first-born of all creation, in whom all things were created in heaven and on earth, everything visible and everything invisible, thrones, ruling forces, sovereignties, powers—he it was, being stripped of all power and dignity and exposed to the world in total vulnerability. Here the greatest mystery of all time was revealed to us: God chose to reveal the divine glory to us in humiliation. (Walk With Jesus, 63-64)*

Jesus was utterly humbled and humiliated. He was stripped not only of his clothes but also of his power and dignity. Crucifixion was the Romans' ultimate form of degradation. Pilate's sign was the last indignity, mocking the Messiah, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" (John 19:19).

But that shameful scene reveals the mystery of God's infinite love for us human beings. God chose to reveal his divine love and glory in the suffering and shame of the cross. Jesus endured the shame of being stripped of his clothes and utterly humiliated, so we would never be stripped of our ultimate dignity as redeemed children of God.

No matter what humiliation or indignities you may endure in life, you have God's assurance that you are one of his beloved and forgiven children. There is no greater dignity than that!

Crucified Savior, thank you for enduring the suffering and shame of the cross, so we can live as cherished members of your family, now and forever. Amen.

Holy/Maundy Thursday

## WHAT KEPT YOU THERE?

Standing near the cross of Jesus was his mother.

John 19:25

*Jesus met his mother as he was being led to his execution. Mary did not faint, she did not scream in rage or despair, she did not try to prevent the soldiers from torturing him more. She looked him in the eyes and knew that this was his hour. In Cana, when she had asked his help, he had put some distance between them and said: "Woman, ..., My hour has not yet come" (John 2:4). But now his sorrow and her sorrow merged in a deep knowledge of the hour in which God's plan of salvation was being fulfilled. (Walk With Jesus, 28)*

Mary, what were you thinking, as you watched the soldiers nail your son to the cross? Why did you stay and watch him suffer such torture? What kept you there? Was it a mother's profound love? Was it also a deep faith that still trusted the promise of the angel to you that your child would be the Son of God (Luke 1:35)?

Jesus, what kept you there? Those nails and ropes could not hold the Son of God to the cross. It had to be love that kept you there, a love you expressed so poignantly, as you provided for your mother's care in your dying moments (John 19:26-27).

Above all, it was your unfathomable love for us and all humanity that kept you there as you paid the price that we could never hope to pay so that we could live with you forever.

O Jesus, we praise you for your immeasurable love, which held you to the cross so that we might be embraced by you forever. Amen.

Good Friday

## THREE DREAD HOURS

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.

Mark 15:33

*Jesus was nailed to the cross, and for three hours he was dying. He died between two men. One of them said to the other: "We are paying for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong" (Luke 23:41). Jesus lived his dying completely for others. The total exhaustion of his body, the abandonment of his friends, and even of his God, all became the gift of self. (Jesus, A Gospel, 109)*

It was a terrifying experience for those at Calvary during those three dread hours of darkness. The crowd at the cross thinned out as the thick darkness rolled in. Only a handful of Jesus' faithful followers remained. Those responsible for his crucifixion were getting anxious.

One person was rejoicing—the repentant criminal for whom Jesus had promised paradise. But the man on the middle cross was enduring an agony beyond human imagination. He was going through hell (and eventually, literally did!) as he experienced a wrenching separation from the love and support of his heavenly Father.

Why did Jesus have to suffer such torment? He experienced the hell of being abandoned by God, so we would never have to fear that God might abandon us. God's Word assures us that nothing will ever "be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39).

Faithful Jesus, we are eternally grateful that you were forsaken, so we would never be forsaken. Amen.

Holy Saturday

## WAITING IN SILENCE

The women ... returned [home], and prepared spices and ointments. On the Sabbath they rested.

Luke 23:55-56

*Of all the days in history, Holy Saturday—the Saturday during which the body of Jesus lay in the tomb in silence and darkness behind the large stone that was rolled against its entrance (Mark 15:46)—is the day of God's solitude. It is the day on which the whole creation waits in deep inner rest. This divine silence is the most fruitful silence that the world has ever known. From this silence, the Word will be spoken again and make all things new. (Walk With Jesus, 88)*

The faithful women from Galilee remained at the cross throughout his time of darkness and dying. They stayed till dusk to see how Jesus' body was prepared for burial and where it was laid. They would return early on Sunday to finish the men's hasty work, and properly anoint the body of their beloved Master.

As they grieved, resting in silence on the Sabbath Day, they couldn't imagine the Easter surprise that awaited them. It seemed as if there was no light on the horizon, only darkness and despair.

When we face dark and troubling times in our lives, we need to wait patiently for God's solitude to be broken. In his good time, joy will return, as the Lord of life enters our darkness and leads us into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9). In the meantime, we pray and rest and wait.

God of hope, help us to wait patiently for your will to be done—on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

Easter Sunday

## RECOGNIZING JESUS

Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord.

John 21:12

*Today I was thinking how nobody recognizes Jesus immediately. They think he is the gardener, a stranger, or a ghost. But when a familiar gesture is there again—breaking bread, inviting the disciples to try for another catch, calling them by name—his friends know he is there with them. (Jesus: A Gospel, 119)*

It was the third time Jesus had appeared to his disciples after his resurrection. Why didn't they recognize him immediately, especially after they cast their nets at the stranger's command and hauled in 153 fish?

As they joined him for breakfast on the shore of Lake Galilee, they knew it had to be Jesus. He was the same but yet, somehow different in his glorified body, just as we shall be when the risen Christ transforms our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body (Philippians 3:21).

When we, by God's grace through faith, recognize the risen Christ as our Lord and Savior, it makes all the difference in the world—all the difference for our plans and purposes in life, all the difference to our doubts and fears, all the difference to our pain and tears, and all the difference to eternity.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.