
lent devotional guide

LIVING INTO OUR TRUE IDENTITY



introduction

LENT IS UPON US. *What does that even mean?* In a fast-pace, full-schedule culture, Lent is an invitation to stop, to be, and to breathe. Lent is a season of emptying and filling. We empty ourselves of our attachments, distractions, and addictions so that we can find new places in our lives for the Lordship of Jesus. We empty so we can be filled. This practice helps reawaken us in Christ to experience freedom, so that we are more available to God, to others, and to ourselves. Traditionally, Lent is observed for forty days, symbolic of the forty days that Jesus spent fasting in the wilderness and being tempted by Satan. It is forty days that lead up to the Easter weekend. In this season, journeying with Jesus towards the cross, we can find ancient wisdom in the footsteps of the saints who have passed before us as we rediscover spiritual practices and fresh ways to open ourselves to the love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thanks for joining us.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

A note about spiritual practices: whether fasting or silence, meditation or the Daily Examen, these practices are not meant to be harsh impositions that somehow help us earn spiritual brownie points with God. Enter these practices with joy, not dread. Here are a couple of helpful postures to help you enjoy the journey:

- *Fake it until you make it.* Richard Rohr said, “We don’t *think* ourselves into a new way of living, we live ourselves into new ways of thinking.” Chances are high you will not feel like doing these practices—at least not after day 5 or 6. Push yourself beyond the internal resistance and stay with the practices. You won’t be a hypocrite for doing so.
- *Have no expectations of these practices.* Often we enter these practices because we hope to feel elation, gratitude, joy, or some other emotion. These practices are about formation, not elation. The most ordinary way we experience Christ is through formation, not information or super sensation. Experiences do come, many have them, but we dampen formation when we have expectations of what must happen as you try these practices.

THE JESUS PRAYER

The Jesus Prayer is a simple little prayer that is to be repeated slowly 10 – 20 times. The name of the game, however, is quality over quantity. The prayer goes like this, “Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.” The prayer is meant to remind us of our place as humans in need of God’s perpetual mercy. We stand as sinners, beloved of God, receiving his mercies that are new every morning. For more information on the history and practice of the Jesus Prayer go to:

www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus_Prayer

FASTING

Fasting is about adding clarity, not just removing something you enjoy. Nutrition science and neuroscience are proving what the Christian mystics have known all along: fasting brings mental and spiritual clarity. Fasting is about removing food, stuff, stimulation, etc. so that a greater awareness can take its place. Fasting can awaken us to the truth about our situation and ourselves even if that truth may be stone cold ugly. Go with it. Push through. There’s a deeper awareness about yourself and God on the other side of that resistance that you cannot know any other way.

THE DAILY EXAMEN

The Examen is known as a spiritual practice popularized by St. Ignatius of Loyola who founded the Jesuit religious order in the 16th century. Ignatius believed that God can be found in the nuts and bolts of everyday life. He formalized a five-point daily personal reflection.

- 1. Become aware of God's presence.**
- 2. Review the day with gratitude.**
- 3. Pay attention to your emotions.**
- 4. Choose one feature of the day and pray from it.**
- 5. Look toward tomorrow.**

The Examen is looking for the intersection of the daily activity of God in the emotional highs and lows of everyday experience. Click the link to find a list of simple questions to guide your daily self-reflection:

www.ignatianspirituality.com/19076/examen-prayer-card

BODILY PRAYERS

Form follows function. Bodily prayers are simply *external* ways we posture our physical bodies to *internally* help our souls take on a greater Jesus- shape. This would include praying humbly on your knees, praying prostrate in worship, praying with hands out in front of you to receive, praying with palms down facing the floor to release, etc. Come up with your own bodily posture to help posture your heart before God.

LECTIO DIVINA

Lectio Divina is Latin for sacred/divine reading. This is a slowed down and less heady way to approach the Scriptures. Lectio has become more popular in the last few years as a way to help balance our typically rationalistic and cognitive approach to Bible study. Lectio is a way of inviting the Holy Spirit to call your attention to a word or phrase in the Scripture passage in front of you and to find yourself in the passage to discern what God might be specifically saying to you. In its basic form, here are the steps:

- Step 1 – Read a passage three times slowly.
- Step 2 – Park on a word or phrase that you are drawn to from the passage. Reflect on the word or phrase and journal some thoughts or prayers that are coming to you.
- Step 3 – Read the passage once or twice more.
- Step 4 – Contemplate/meditate on what God might be saying to you through this passage and act on what you hear. For more go to: www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lectio_Divina

MEDITATION AND CONTEMPLATION

Let's be honest: no one starting out in the practice of contemplation enjoys it. Ready yourself for that. You often feel like you have no idea what to do; you fidget as your mind wanders. Make sure you turn off your cell phone and keep it away from your line of sight. It will win if it comes down to you and it in the same room. *Contemplation is the art of knowing what you are thinking and feeling so you can learn from what you think and feel.* Even when we do learn, we don't often like what we find. Meditation and contemplation are the practices of sitting in the things we'd rather avoid so that we can find in Christ the healing and hope we are starving for. Practically, focus on a word or phrase and maybe keep a journal of the thoughts, feelings, and ideas that come to you. Write them down, become aware of what you are thinking and feeling, and turn those into prayers of surrender and trust.

SILENCE AND SOLITUDE

God speaks through Scripture, bullhorns, billboards, other people, and a thousand other ways; however, the still small voice cannot be underestimated. Silence and solitude are the antidotes to modern culture. Our brains are physiologically wired for smart phones, texts messages, music, and the many other stimuli. Silence and solitude protest this chaos and invite us back to sit humbly in our true identity: beloved son, beloved daughter, nothing more, nothing less. These practices are painful because they deny our need to be needed or our lust to over-think. Silence is not necessarily about getting alone in our thoughts. That's more contemplation. Silence and solitude is about getting away and being still so that in the silent vacuum we might actually hear the still small voice say something big and profound to our needy hearts.

GIVING, SERVING, AND FOOT WASHING

Lent is not about giving up as much as it is about taking on. These practices are meant to empty us of our self-pre-occupation and fill us with the awareness of a deeper need for God and/or others. The practices of serving, giving, and foot washing are intentional acts of self-emptying love directed at people with attitudes or actions we'd rather not "reward" by giving, serving, or foot washing. Try it. These acts are better at forming us when we have

a natural resistance towards the person we are serving. Remember Rohr's words: "We don't think ourselves into a new way of living, we live ourselves into a new way of thinking."

Who are the people you need to serve?

Oh, why not go old-school Anabaptist and literally wash someone's feet. That just may make this Lent one for the record books!

COMMUNION

We invite you to bookend the Lenten season with the practice of Communion. What would it look like to begin the Lenten journey and end the journey celebrating the Body of Christ broken for you and the blood of Christ shed for you? Lent is a season of emptying and filling. We empty ourselves of our attachments and addictions so that we can find new places in our lives for the Lordship of Jesus to reign and sustain. We empty so we can be filled. The Eucharist symbolizes in a dramatic bodily way that Christ fills our emptiness. This Lenten season offers a challenge and opportunity for you to enter this season and end this season inviting Christ to fill or even resurrect all of your broken places with his mercy, healing, grace, and power. May you enter this mystery and come out changed.

one

READING: PSALM 51

Recently, I spent a few days on a silent, spiritual retreat to focus my attention on God. My plan was to keep my phone on airplane mode in an effort to keep my mind clear from what can often become a distraction.

It wasn't easy. I had a knee-jerk instinct to turn on my data plan in order to scroll through social media or emails. Really I'd just be doing myself a disservice. Only God and I would know. (That is unless I "liked" someone's post.)

In Psalm 51, King David knew full well that he was distracted from God and that he'd messed up. He pleaded with God to "create in (him) a pure heart." Purified: a clean, new heart that was focused on God. It's sometimes easier said than done to rid ourselves of the things that distract our head and heart. I had to ask God for help to keep my attention on him instead of turning to my phone.

We read that God ultimately "desired faithfulness even in the womb; (he) taught me wisdom in that secret place" (Psalm 51:6).

- What can this secret place look like for your today?
- Will you allow yourself to make space in your schedule, your head, and your heart to be purified in that secret place?

You might notice yourself reflexively reaching for your smartphone or the computer mouse. If you notice that happening, call on the One who creates your pure heart. Steal away moments today – instead of reaching for your phone – to focus and reflect on Jesus' using these simple words from The Jesus Prayer: "*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*"

For the next few days, fast from social media, video games, and online excess. Consider how this time can be redirected to focus on Jesus. Use The Jesus Prayer as an opportunity to focus your heart and mind on him.

Suggested Fast:

Social media, video games, online excess

Prayer Form: The Jesus Prayer

two

READING: PSALM 51

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

~Psalm 51:1-2

Do you think you could name your most colossal sin? If you were to think really hard about it, would you be able to pin point a time when you thought your sin was so big that God could never really want to love you again?

The beautiful words of Psalm 51 were born out of David's most monumental sin and failure. And you may never need to repent of adultery and murder, like David did, but at some point we all must become aware of the sin in our lives so we can confess it and repent from it.

God's mercy for us, his compassion for us, and his lavish grace for us is the antithesis of our sin. Our sin destroys. His mercy rebuilds. Our sin mars. His compassion redeems. Our sin mutilates. His grace restores.

As the result of Christ's work on the cross, when we confess and repent of our sin and the damage we have done, we are fully embraced in the loving arms of the Father.

So, today, take a moment and allow the Holy Spirit to help you examine your heart as you pray the Jesus Prayer. Recognize, confess, and repent. Then let go of that sin. God won't pin it on you anymore, so you don't need to either. You've been restored. Sit in his loving embrace.

Suggested Fast:

Social media, video games, online excess

Prayer Form: The Jesus Prayer

three

READING: PSALM 51

In the Christian calendar, the season of Epiphany precedes Lent. Epiphany is about receiving the new things that the Spirit wants to do in our lives. Lent, then, is all about working this new thing down into the core of our being so this new life gives shape to our desires, impulses, choices, and reactions.

The Lenten journey exemplifies our life-long cycling through this process of being made new—again and again and again. Psalm 51 is a rather dramatic expression of David's brokenness and request to be made new, again.

I love Eugene Peterson's take on verse 10, "God, make a fresh start in me, shape a Genesis week from the chaos of my life." God brings beauty, depth, and substance out of the chaotic overload that is our inner and outer world.

Today is the day when the Spirit of God intends to shape a Genesis week out of the ups and downs of your everyday, ordinary life. And the Spirit of God is conspiring to do the same thing in your life tomorrow and the tomorrows after that. The way this happens is somewhat mysterious and beyond our control. But we do know one thing: the Genesis week comes through our intention, or steadfast willingness, to remain available to whatever 'epiphany' God wants to reveal to us about ourselves and about himself.

- How will you make space for him to do that today?
- How will you plan space for him to do that in the tomorrows to come?

This week we are sitting with the Jesus Prayer: Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. This prayer is meant to help us stay open to our need for every day to become a new beginning with Father, Son, and Spirit.

Suggested Fast:

Social media, video games, online excess

Prayer Form: The Jesus Prayer

four

READING: PSALM 51

I've felt specifically compelled to wake up early and spend time with God. I know that it is something he is calling me to do, and yet, I've been unable to will myself to get out of bed in the early hours of every day. I know what I am supposed to do, but I have yet to do it. And though your story may be quite different from mine, I'm certain that we all have these gaps where we know what we are supposed to do, but have yet to do it. Or, perhaps worse, we know what we are *not* supposed to do, but do it anyway. These gaps, these ways in which we miss the mark, are sin. And however we want to paint it, this sin is a barrier between God and us.

The past few days, we have camped in Psalm 51, and this Psalm is a direct response from David to God when David had sinned – quite epically, I may add. And though David knew the religious system required a sacrifice, he was aware that what God wanted so much more was a repentant heart and a broken spirit.

God doesn't want us to sit in guilt and shame, but he does want us to be fully aware of the brokenness of our situation so that we can be fully attuned to our need for him and the mercy he offers. And so today, as I write, I am doing so with a repentant heart and broken spirit – aware of what I am being asked to do, and yet not having done it yet – but in my brokenness I receive mercy and grace.

- How are you experiencing brokenness today?
- What do you need to hand over to God so that

This week we are sitting with the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." This prayer is as true for me today as it is everyday, and it is a beautiful invitation to be reminded of God's great mercy for us, now and always.

Suggested Fast:

Social media, video games, online excess

Prayer Form: The Jesus Prayer

five

READING: PSALM 32

Psalm 32 is both a relief and a challenge as it invites us to live into the forgiveness God lavishly gives. Most of us like that part. The bummer about forgiveness is how it necessitates honesty with self, God, and others. And we're not so crazy about that part. Verse 2 bears a blessing for those "in whose spirit is no deceit."

Let's be honest: the human heart has mastered the art of self-deception. We tend to think we are better than we are: more generous, more loving, more forgiving, etc. Theologically, our creative self-deception is at the root of our sin problem. (James K.A. Smith's book, *You Are What You Love*, does a great job of making this point!)

Verses 3-4, describe the utter exhaustion of staying unaware of the many ways we try to make ourselves look better, feel better, or sound better than we are. Most of the time, this *better* comes by scapegoating our stuff on to someone else. Good news though: the end of verse 5 describes the joyful relief that comes as we face (with God) those parts of our inner world that we've been masking and avoiding.

For the next few days, our prayer form of focus is the Daily Examen. This practice invites us to ask some tough questions and peel back layers of deception. It's not until we can live in the light of Truth that we can experience the existential and physiological relief of God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness. *God, may we have courage to face the truth about ourselves and receive the mercy and grace we so desperately crave.*

- Do you need to get honest about something in your heart?
- What is God whispering to you today?

As you enter into a few days of Daily Examen, be aware that you are not alone in this practice. The Spirit is at work in you.

Suggested fast: Caffeine, alcohol, sugar

Prayer form: Daily Examen

six

READING: PSALM 32

I will never forget the first time someone confessed to me her struggle with a sexual sin. I was a brand new youth pastor, and though many of the students wrestled with similar things, I hadn't been there long enough for many of the others to get that honest.

I remember having nothing but love and respect for this student. She came to me cloaked in shame and embarrassment, and her vulnerability amazed me. I assured her she was loved, and journeyed with her through the difficulties of what the sin buried in her life meant. But she confessed, and that began an incredible journey to forgiveness, healing, and wholeness.

In Psalm 32:3, David writes: "When I refused to confess my sin, my body wasted away, and I groaned all day long." We all know these feelings: guilt, shame, remorse, and embarrassment. The physiological impact of unconfessed sin eats away at us. Even as a kid, we know this feeling as an upset stomach or anxious pulse. But when we speak loud our sins confessing to God and others, it lifts the burden that we've been, unnecessarily, carrying alone.

Our prayer form of focus is the Daily Examen. This practice forces us to ask some tough questions and get real.

Dear God, may we willing to embrace the vulnerability of confession to be released from the impact of sin in our lives.

- Is there an honest conversation you need to have with God or with someone else?
- What does "confession" look like in your life?

As you practice the Daily Examen today, be reminded that you are not alone, but that the Holy Spirit that lives in you is at work today.

Suggested fast: Caffeine, alcohol, sugar

Prayer form: Daily Examen

seven
READING: PSALM 32

It's a running joke among my friends that I have an unhealthy love affair with coffee. I'm an unabashed snob when it comes to how I prepare it, and I struggle to get through a day without at least a few full helpings. On the days when I'm too rushed, I feel the effects of the caffeine withdrawal promptly, and the headache is a good reminder that even the best things in life need to be taken in moderation.

In Psalm 32, we see David crying out for God's help as he makes a course correction in his life. He finds joy and freedom in returning to God's law, and remembers the physical effects of his disobedience. And in the midst of this honest and personal assessment, he asks God to protect him from future troubles. Protection is a concept we usually think of when we are opposed by some outside force, but David makes it clear that often what we need God's protection from the most is our own bent towards self-interest.

We protect the things we love and want to keep them free of anything that will take away from their essential goodness. Note how in verse 8 David is reminded that God wants to "guide him along the best pathway for your life." God's desire is for our best and that best comes from letting go of all the things that divert our attention, time, and energy from his best path for us.

This is why fasting can be such a transformative spiritual discipline. It breaks our addiction from things that, even if they are good in and of themselves (even our beloved morning coffee), we remember that our best path in life isn't walked by our own instincts but by the loving, guiding hand of God who walks beside us on our best path. Temporarily letting go of these requirements provides us with a reminder of our need for God to guide us, and that we are able to walk into our best life with the grace of God.

- What do you struggle to not over-indulge in?
- When have you found yourself struggling to remain on "the best path for your life"?

- What situations make this difficult for you?
- What habit or love affairs do you have that distract from a full life as God intended it?

As you take time for Daily Examen today, be aware that you are not alone in this practice, but the Spirit that lives in you is at work in you today.

Suggested fast: Caffeine, alcohol, sugar
Prayer form: Daily Examen

eight
READING: PSALM 23

During the season of Lent, I am reminded of how wonderful it is to be a follower of Jesus. Because of his love, I am forgiven and made new.

Life certainly brings its troubles – each day has enough of its own! – but we don't need to allow the worries of them to linger with us because they are temporary. (I know, easier said than done!)

As we continue in our walk with Jesus, he strengthens and teaches us. We become better equipped for what we face as we put our hope in him. And eventually, because of the incredible gift of Jesus' death and resurrection, we will come face-to-face with God Himself. We can rejoice as followers of Christ!

Lent can be perceived as a time of darkness, sorrow, and suffering. Jesus endured these things, and we are not strangers to them. But we must remember to hold on to the light. Easter is coming. Forgiveness and love are coming.

- What are you able to rejoice about in this season?
- Who can you share your rejoicing with?

As you practice the Daily Examen, be reminded that you are not alone in this today.

Suggested fast: caffeine, alcohol, sugar
Prayer form: Daily Examen

nine

READING: PSALM 121

As a child, I remember being astounded by the fact that God never sleeps. I just couldn't imagine it. If I stayed up even an hour past my bedtime, I would be exhausted. But not God. He never sleeps.

How could this be? As a child, this thought would hang out in my brain as I fell asleep. I would also get caught up on the idea that he could hear all of our prayers, watch over all of us at the same time, and so many other theologically deep thoughts for a kid. But I had limited God to my humanness instead of being open to trying to catch even a glimpse of understanding of his God-ness.

- How have you limited God to your own humanness?

And even though I'm much older now, I still limit God to my humanness. I was reminded of this as I read Psalm 121:3-5 which reads, "The one who watches over you will not slumber. Indeed, he who watches over Israel never slumbers or sleeps. The Lord himself watches over you! The Lord stands beside you as your protective shade."

God is always on; he will never take off his "God-hat" and retire; he doesn't punch out at five o'clock. He watches over us all the time, and he's present with us. It really is incredible. In our finite minds it can be easy to glaze over this or feel completely overwhelmed by it, but I'd like to challenge you today to be in awe of it. Be in awe of God.

- What "awes" you about God?

Take some time to praise God in that awe-filled way by incorporating some movement that allows your body to be in unity with the awe of your heart.

Suggested fast: Caffeine, alcohol, sugar
Prayer form: Bodily prayers

ten

READING: PSALM 121

I am the proud father of two girls. They're the most beautiful-funny-creative-quirky-weird-hilarious-thoughtful-sensitive-gymnastic-dancey-giggly-brilliant humans in the world.

When I was younger, I knew I'd get older (*inevitable*), have a job (*hopefully*), have a wife (*maybe*), and have kids (*possibly*). All of those things came true, as expected.

What was unexpected, however, was my own growing sense of fear of whether or not I could love these little humans well, and take care of them like they needed me to. I feared that maybe I wouldn't love them properly, wouldn't do all the right things, wouldn't say all the right things, wouldn't protect them enough, wouldn't be funny-cool-sensitive-gymnastic-y-snuggly-Jesus-y enough, and that maybe, just maybe, I wouldn't be "Daddy" enough to them.

Felt like that before? Probably. That feeling lead me to start praying consistently, every night, a common prayer for Kaitlyn and Ella which goes like this:

"God, thank you for my girls. Thank you that you love them, watch over them, protect them, and call them your own kids. And thank you that they're ours. Bless them with your peace I pray, in Jesus name."

And I still pray with them, that prayer, every night. Still.

There's this beautiful poem in the last half of Psalm 121, that talks about the surrounding presence of God: God knows us, sees us, surrounds us, watches over us, carries us, and will ALWAYS love us. Some scholars attribute it to David, keeping watch in the high hills, fearing harm, fearing death. Some say it's a soldier poem to be recited in the face of battle, of harm, and of fear. But the poem is clear:

God stays with us.
God watches over us.
God never leaves.

Maybe today, you're facing overwhelming fear. Maybe today you feel like you just can't. Maybe you feel this sense of fear that you might not do enough, have enough, are enough. Maybe today, you feel alone, afraid, and vulnerable. That's ok. God doesn't. Like the poem says: you're covered, cared for, surrounded by God. Even in the face of fear. Even in the unknown. Still. May you rest in that reality. May you know that God walks with you, loves you, surrounds you, and delights in you as his kid.

Today, our prayer form is bodily prayers. This practice invites us to embody prayers by altering our posture. May I suggest to you that as you read through the prayer below, you express this prayer physically as well as verbally.

May you fully realize the words of Psalm 121, and pray: *Lord, thank you that you love me, watch over me, protect me, and call me your own kid. Thank you that I'm yours. Cover me with your peace today. In Jesus name, Amen.*

Suggested fast: Caffeine, alcohol, sugar

Prayer form: Bodily Prayers

eleven

READING: PSALM 121

A few years ago, I "Camino-ed," that is, I hiked the final 120km of the Camino de Santiago; in English, that's the Way of St. James. The Camino is a pilgrimage in north-western Spain where people travel to from all over the globe, from every walk of life, and from every season of life. A pilgrimage is a journey to something for spiritual significance. This pilgrimage journeys to the grave of the apostle James.

A pilgrimage is a journey that is incredibly symbolic of our walk with Christ. As I journeyed across fields and over streams, through small towns, and larger cities, I was challenged, I was tired, I was distracted, I was rained on, and yes, I was even chased by wild dogs. But I was also awestruck at the beauty that surrounded me. I was strengthened with good food. I was enriched with deep conversation. And my fellow travellers encouraged me. The greeting wherever you are on the Camino is "Buen

Camino!" In English, that is "Good way!" It is a wish for your fellow traveller to have a good journey, to find their way well, and to keep going.

Psalm 121 is a psalm devoted to pilgrims going to Jerusalem, and reminds us that the help for our journey comes from God. The journeys that each of us are on have risks, hazards, and many difficulties. Perhaps we'll be chased by wild dogs (metaphorically...or literally); perhaps we'll be rained on; or perhaps we'll experience other storms, but this psalm reminds us that God is watching over us. He watches our coming and our going, both now and forever.

- Where are you in your journey today?
- What is the landscape like that surrounds you?
- Does it lead you to rejoicing, reflection, pleading, or something else?
- Where do you see God at work in your journey today?

Today, our prayer form is bodily prayers. This practice invites us to embody prayers by altering our posture. May I suggest to you that today, your prayer takes the form of a hike. Walking and praying is perfect match. As you put one foot in front of the other, you can be reminded of the way in which we rely on God day by day.

Suggested fast: Caffeine, alcohol, sugar

Prayer form: Bodily Prayers

twelve

READING: PSALM 121

When both my daughters were babies, we were stressed so much about keeping them safe. We'd lather them in sunscreen and give them big wide hats in the summer, and make sure they bundled up in multiple layers in the winter (sometimes so much so they could barely see). Maybe we went overboard, but new parents worry because they can't imagine harm coming to something they love so much. Their longing for their kid's safety is built-in.

Psalm 121 paints a vivid picture of God's desire to help us and to keep us safe from harm. We see the compassionate character of God shining through in the natural images

use by the psalmist: the imagery of the pilgrims as they traversed towards Jerusalem, a journey to the ancient city to worship God. To them, the God of the universe who is holy and powerful doesn't sit waiting to strike them down – he is filled with a desire to watch over us as a loving father. The physical imagery of this psalm isn't by accident, but a means to tie together the great reality of humanity that we are both breath and body; dust and spirit.

As you fast and pray today, know that God's desire is to be with you through the bumps and bruises of life. It can be easy as we come and go about the day to forget that the Spirit of God continues to walk with us, and his desire is for our good. Bask today in the God who never sleeps and never fails to care for us.

- When are you prone to forget that God is with you?
- How does this psalm challenge or invigorate your understanding of God's character?
- What would change in our world if people in positions of power saw God in the way he is described in Psalm 121?

So often spirituality can live only in our heads. Bodily prayer is a reminder that God knit our physical selves together and wants us to devote to him all of ourselves, not just our minds. Our bodies, frail as they may be, can become a beautiful reminder of the intimate nature of our connection to God. As you pray today, try to find ways to “embody” your prayer by praying with hands open, palms up, as a symbol of your opening to God's work in your life.

Suggested fast: TV, Netflix, extra screen time

Prayer form: Bodily Prayer

thirteen

READING: PSALM 128

Fear and obedience and blessing and prosperity? One of these things is not like the other. I grew up in a tradition of Christianity that harnessed my fear to get me to obey God. I still cringe when I read “fear and obedience” in this passage. All of these years later, I caution people against using F.O.G or fear, obligation, and guilt to get people to do x, y, or z for God or anyone else for that matter.

So what is up with this fear and obey stuff? I once heard a brilliant preacher describe the fear of God as the fear of losing the thing I love the most and can't imagine living without. For example, I deeply love my wife and children and can't imagine my life without them.

This psalm and others like it, assume joy and delight flow when we are enjoying the very thing we can't imagine living without, namely, union with God. Just like my wife, my obedience to God flows from the mutual love we share and my willful submission to God's caring leadership. No true relationship can stay together based on fear of rejection, shunning, or abandonment. Verse 1 says all are blessed who fear the lord and walk in obedience. We desire to obey and submit to the wants and desires of those we love and those we are absolutely convinced love us. Losing that is truly a fearful thought.

Today's prayer form is Lectio Divina. The practice of Lectio Divina can act as a lever to open our hearts to all of the ways God is already loving us and all of the ways that we want to love God in return. This is the heart of obedience.

Suggested fast: TV, Netflix, extra screen time

Prayer form: Lectio Divina

fourteen

READING: PSALM 128

There it was.

On the sidewalk, with no one else around, there was a Tim Horton's gift card. It was there for me. AND *Roll Up the Rim* was on. I was so happy!

Why did finding a piece of plastic change my mood?
Should I have any less joy if there was no Tim's card?
Would I be any less blessed?

We're trained to believe right circumstances lead to joy. I'll be joyful if I can have the food I want; if I can be in a good relationship; if the weather will cooperate; if my team wins. I'll be joyful *if . . . if . . . if*.

Jesus offers a different way of life. Rather than situations dictating our joy, Jesus invites us into a joy that is rooted in our life with him. Rather than joy changing based on our circumstances, a deep life with God offers a joy that reframes our outlook on whatever comes. It doesn't deny sorrow and pain, but it allows us to see light even in the midst of darkness and feel joy in the midst of grief. We can even be joyful when we discover there's no credit left on the Tim's card.

- How can you pursue this deep life with Jesus?
- What might hinder a deep life with Jesus for you?
- Can you remember, and give thanks for, a time you felt the joy of Jesus even when things were hard?

Joy is not gained by pursuing joy. It comes through a deep life with God. Lectio Divina is a way of engaging the Bible and submitting to the voice the God in it. As you do your Lectio Divina, prayerfully sit with what emerges – not analyzing it, but inviting God to speak through it. As he does, respond from your own heart. After time in conversation with God, spend some time simply resting with him.

Suggested fast: TV, Netflix, extra screen time
Prayer form: Lectio Divina

fifteen

READING: PSALM 128

What's your idea of a blessed life? We may all have a different idea of what this looks like. For some, it's a big house with a healthy family; for others it's life filled with travel and adventure; while for others, it's a life filled with toys and 'stuff,' with nothing ever going wrong or breaking down.

In some translations, Psalm 128 begins with the word 'blessed.' The writer seems to be leading us to an understanding of what a blessed life looks like. He reminds us of the essentials: food, family, house, and home – these are the fruit of our labour. But he does preface it with something else: the fear (respect or trust) of the Lord.

It might be easy to move past that to the good stuff around our table, but the psalmist says there is a prerequisite to this: full trust in the Lord. Twice we read, "Blessed is the person who fears (trusts) God."

Let's never get ahead of ourselves, convincing ourselves that the fruit comes before the planting of healthy seeds. The best seeds we can plant are the ones of full trust and reliance in a God who wants to bless us. As we continue to walk through this Lent season, life is so much more abundant when we trust in God.

- Have your dreams or goals ever gotten ahead of your trust in God?
- In what ways can you come back to the most essential seeds to plant in your life – your faith and trust in God the Father, in Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit?

Today's prayer form is the Lectio Divina. Consider reading Psalm 128 using this prayer form. May you experience joy and love today.

Suggested fast: TV, Netflix, extra screen time
Prayer form: Lectio Divina

sixteen

READING: PSALM 95

Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care. Today, if only you would hear his voice.

~Psalm 95:6-7

Have you ever wondered where entitlement comes from? When we experience entitlement it leaves a nasty lasting impression. We've all had moments of entitlement, but if what if we adjusted our default setting to thankfulness? If accomplished, it changes things from inconvenience to possibility, grief to growth, and pain to promise. This transformation is a big picture of God's mystery and beauty wrapped up in an attitude. Thankfulness is contentment meeting purpose.

God cares for you more than minds can fathom. His love for you began before time existed and it was poured out, and emptied out for you on the cross. George Herbert writes, "Love is that liquor sweet and most divine, which my God feels as blood; but I as wine."

So, today let us sit in God's pasture and listen, let us reflect and wait, "Today if only you would hear his voice" (v 7).

- What if you were more thankful than entitled?
- What if today your perspective, countenance, and faith were full-heartedly thankful?
- What if today you were not of want but of wisdom?

Psalm 95 reminds us that God is big and to be worshiped. Today, let's worship God together and move from entitled to thankful. Today purposely chose to go out of your way towards thankfulness. There are two perspectives for every moment. Reflection on the love and sacrifice of Christ is an instantaneous way to grow perspective. If you choose thankfulness, you choose kindness, compassion, and forgiveness over entitlement, selfishness, and greed.

Pray with me:

Dear God, you are to be worshipped in all your glory. You created the heavens and the earth and beyond. Before time, you planned me and you knew our church. We are thankful for your love and purpose. Today, we pray for perspective. Open our eyes to thankfulness. Amen.

Suggested fast: TV, Netflix, extra screen time

Prayer form: Worship

seventeen

READING: PSALM 95

"God is God and we are not." That is a phrase from a song by Christian musician, Stephen Curtis Chapman. Yes, that does date me, but the song still rings as true today as it did then.

Psalm 95 speaks of how great God is and all that he created. It takes us back to the creation story in the first chapter of Genesis. How awesome is our God! We are to kneel down and worship God and sing his praises. And yet, we live in a culture that worships everything but God. We put many important things ahead of our worship time. Our hearts become hardened and we turn away from God, not intentionally perhaps, but if we are honest with ourselves we have.

- What have you allowed in your life that takes away from your time with God?

Maybe it's the hours you spend watching Netflix; I know, I confess, I spend too much time binge-watching certain shows. Yes, it's easy to spend hours of your day off watching your favourite series. Like you, my ultimate desire is to draw closer to Jesus, by focusing on who God is, his majesty, his awesome power, and dwell on that for an hour versus Netflix. That way we, too, can cultivate a deeper, more meaningful relationship with our creator.

How can we put God in his rightful place of honour and glory today? Yes, you guessed it turn off your TV or your computer, or your smartphone for that matter and tune into God. Know that the God of the universe created your

life; the God who sent his son, Jesus, to live among us and show us how much God loves us.

Psalm 95:6 reads: “Come, let us worship and bow down. Let us kneel before the Lord our maker, for he is our God.”

- What are you thankful to God for today?
- How will you worship God today?

The prayer form today is worship. Worship God with your words: give thanks. Do it audibly or write them down. Worship God in song. Worship God through artistic creation. However you do it, take time today to worship God.

Suggested fast: TV, Netflix, extra screen time
Prayer form: Worship

eighteen
READING: PSALM 95

When was the last time you had music playing as you sang along in full voice because it was *that* kind of awesome day?

When was the last time you cheered at the top of your lungs because your team was on fire?

When was the last time you lost yourself in worship to the Creator of the Universe because of his goodness?

The truth is that, for some reason, the first two questions are probably easier to answer than the third. It has most likely been awhile for many of us. Not because we don't love God or want to spend time in worship, but because our lives get filled with so many other things.

Psalm 95 begins with an invitation to come:
Come, let us sing to the Lord.

What a beautiful invitation to sing our praises to God. Later, the invitation is to:
Come, let us worship and bow down.

From our voices to our whole bodies, the invitation is to immerse ourselves in worship to God; to get lost in his goodness. So, let's do it. Let's sing. Let's worship. Let's bow down. Let's throw our whole selves into worship today.

- What is holding you back from immersing yourself in worship today?
- What will help you break through, make space, get over that thing so that you can worship?

The prayer form today is worship. Worship God with your whole self. Start with your words: give thanks. Do it audibly or write them down. Worship God in song (or dance?!). Worship God through artistic creation. However you do it, take time today to worship God.

Suggested fast: TV, Netflix, extra screen time
Prayer form: Worship

nineteen
READING: PSALM 95

As a young adult, I enjoyed very much going to a concert to hear the music, shout, and even dance a little bit. (I was and am still rhythmically challenged). For me, the content of the music was not something I spent a lot of time contemplating. I cared about the beat, the volume, and the stage production.

In Psalm 95, we are called to sing for joy and to shout aloud; we are called give thanksgiving, and to come with music and song. But it is an invitation to do something because of someone.

The rock concerts I enjoyed were all about me – I was the object. In this psalm, the object of our singing, shouting, thanksgiving, and extolling with music and song is the Rock of our salvation (verse 1). He is the one who is our great God. This God who saves. The psalmist decrees that the depths of the earth are his and the mountain peaks belong to him. In simple terms, the deepest seas and the highest mountains are his.

So, the psalmist invites us on this day of Lent to remember the source of salvation. It is the Rock. It is Jesus! This Jesus is the firstborn over all creation (Colossians 1:15) and “he is Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2).

So the question is: *in what way can each of us worship him this week?* No, we don’t live in the days of the psalms; it may not be appropriate to enter your place of work with shouts and music and song, but there are other ways.

- Give it some thought: how can you find the space to enjoy God’s presence this week and worship him in an undivided way?
- It is possible in this busy world? Will you commit to do it?

Suggested Fast: TV, Netflix, Extra screen time
Prayer form: Worship

twenty

READING: PSALM 81

A few years ago I was leading some youth through a study of the Old Testament. On more than one occasion someone commented, “Man, what is wrong with Israel? Don’t they see the pattern? Why don’t they just listen to God?”

And then it hit us. *We are just like Israel.* We know what God desires for us. We know that we are to put him first. We know that he is with us. We know, but we often don’t act like it. We quickly forget to place him first, and our busy lives push him out altogether. As much as Israel was distracted by other nations, today, our phones, our tablets, our always-on-society, and our frantic schedules distract us.

What would it mean to stop and to listen? I mean to really listen for God? Have you heard from him lately? It’s not that he’s silent, we just haven’t stopped long enough to hear him. This Lenten season, let’s stop and listen for him.

Today’s prayer form is listening, silence, and solitude. And for many of us this practice is much easier said than done. So, start small. Find a quiet “alone” place. If you’re a parent of smaller children, this might need to be the bathroom or a closet. Set a timer for 5 minutes. For those 5 minutes, sit in silence, and listen. Focus on who God is. Each time a distracting thought comes in, lay it aside, and bring your mind back to Jesus. Once the timer goes off, write down what you heard him say to you.

Suggested fast: Sarcasm, negativity
Prayer form: Silence, solitude, listening

twenty-one

READING: PSALM 81

Psalms 81 starts with, “Sing for joy to God our strength. . .” The verses that follow paint a picture of the God who lifts burdens from shoulders and releases tired, dutiful hands from carrying heavy baskets. This is an expansive picture of the freedom that God gives his people, as he becomes their strength. But all of this freedom comes with a cost: we can no longer follow after the false gods.

The Psalms are full of warnings against the trusting of false gods. Why? The temptation to try and find strength and freedom from false gods makes so much sense. Verse 10 says, “Open wide your mouth and I (God) will fill it.” But in our world, we open wide our mouths and Burger’s Priest will fill it. Very little in everyday life points to God as our source of strength and the one who fills our mouths. Our culture says we provide the strength and through hard work, we fill our own mouths. Everything surrounding us is built on the façade that we are our own saviours.

This is probably why most of us feel a deep, anxious pressure as if the world is on our shoulders and our hands grow weary of carrying our own worries and fears. We were not made to be gods. We were made for songs of joy and the freedom to get our deepest needs met, ultimately, in Christ.

How? For millenia, the Christian Church has looked to the practice of silence, solitude, and deep listening to help awaken us to what we already have in Christ. What if you have everything you need and all you have to do is take the blindfold off, open your hands, and receive what you already have in Christ?

Try it for yourself. Take time, today, to listen. Withdraw to a quiet place, set a timer (try to increase it a little from yesterday), and sit in stillness and quiet before God. *Listen.*

Suggested fast: Sarcasm, negativity
Prayer form: Silence, solitude, listening

twenty-two

READING: PSALM 81

Psalm 81 ends with the verse, “I will satisfy you with wild honey from a rock.”

Honey from a rock. It’s a sweet and mysterious promise of provision in the midst of the hard wilderness. The psalmist is reminding us of the journey of the Israelites out of Egypt and the gifts and challenges that come with taking faithful steps into unknown territory with God. To walk with faith means to walk without utmost certainty in where the path will go. And yet, we are still invited to take steps – even when we feel we have lost our footing.

In this season of remembering our own journey from darkness to light, let’s intentionally move towards embracing the mystery of God, and resting in love. For when we rest in this love, we live in peace, and feast on the sweet abundance of life.

Today, the prayer form is silence, solitude, and listening. Withdraw to a quiet place, set a timer (try to increase it a little from yesterday), and sit in the stillness, mystery, and love of God.

Suggested fast: Sarcasm, negativity
Prayer form: Silence, solitude, listening

twenty-three

READING: PSALM 23

There are certain times in our lives when Psalm 23 strikes a chord. Perhaps it’s at a funeral of a close friend or a relative, or something tragic has happened in your life. The words seem to carry more weight and hang in the air... “The Lord is my shepherd,” and you think, *is he?* Have I allowed him full access to care for me and love me through the good and bad?

“Even though a walk through the darkest valley...” Do I trust Jesus with my very life knowing my life has an end? Walking in faith is all about trust and believing that God is who he says he is. Believing in the risen Jesus, the one who gives new life. To be content in him.

I went through a dark time in my life. I remember at night, my Bible beside me was open to Psalm 23. *The Lord is my Shepherd, he is with me;* and he was. I felt his presence and I knew that everything would be okay. But it was a daily step of faith to trust and believe that Jesus was there, guiding me, comforting me. We all want that.

Life is difficult and it is hard to imagine your life without the person you just lost, or the illness you are battling. Verse 4 says, “I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and staff comfort me.”

Today’s prayer form is silence, solitude, and listening. Withdraw to a quiet place, set a timer (try to increase it a little more from yesterday), and sit in stillness and quiet before God. Listen. Be still and know that he is God.

Suggested fast: Sarcasm, negativity
Prayer form: Silence, solitude, listening

twenty-four

READING: PSALM 23

Psalms 23 is probably the best known of the Psalms. It's used often, and paints an incredibly vivid image. You can feel the breeze brush across your face as you read it.

When we think of comfort and peace, our minds tend to naturally gravitate towards a picture of meadows and valleys. The purpose of this message is to help us visualize and clearly understand that God is our comforter and our peace *always*. It reminds us that God is with us as long as we live. How comforting it is to know that the God who made the heavens and the earth longs to be our comfort and strength.

- What is your natural go to for comfort and peace? How can you make Jesus your first choice?
- What helps you to find comfort in God? How can you practice that more?

God, thank you that you bring peace to us always. Help us to remember in the midst of the craziness of life that you are, and always will be, our portion and our strength. Help us to turn to you first and seek comfort in you always. In Jesus' precious name, amen.

Today's prayer form is silence, solitude, and listening. Withdraw to a quiet place, set a timer (try to increase it a little more from yesterday), and sit in stillness and quiet before God. Allow him to be your comfort and your strength. Allow him to be your peace in the midst of chaos.

Suggested fast: Sarcasm, negativity

Prayer form: Silence, solitude, listening

twenty-five

READING: PSALM 40

As I kid, I remember waking up on wintery school mornings, and hoping I'd hear it: school's cancelled. Don't get me wrong, I loved school, but there was something so sweet about a day to stay in my pajamas just a little longer, play in the snow, and warm up with a hot chocolate. It was the best news I could have heard on those youthful wintery days.

There are so many people waiting for good news. I mean, *really* good news.

The Good News of the Kingdom of God is still good news today. It is news of freedom for the oppressed, healing for the sick, compassion for those in need, comfort for the grieving, and love for the lonely. There are so many people in our world today, even in our own families, who need to know and experience this Good News of Jesus.

In Psalm 40:10, David writes, "I have not kept the good news of your justice hidden in my heart; I have talked about your faithfulness and saving power. I have told everyone in the great assembly of your unfailing love and faithfulness."

- Have you spent time contemplating the Good News of Jesus lately?
- What part of your life do you need to open up to the experience of the good news of his justice?
- When was the last time you shared God's unfailing love with someone else?

Today's prayer form is silence, solitude, and listening. Withdraw to a quiet place, set a timer (try to increase it a little more from yesterday), and sit in stillness and quiet before God. Reflect on the Good News of God's justice, faithfulness, saving power, and unfailing love.

Suggested fast: Sarcasm, negativity

Prayer form: Silence, solitude, listening

twenty-six

READING: PSALM 45

Many a love-struck teen has pledged to love another *forever*. It's a beautiful sentiment, although the one making the pledge usually knows nothing of twenty-five, twenty, or even fifteen years. What do they know of this idea of forever? That is, what forever is. An idea. And an incomprehensible one at that.

Pause for a moment. Think about time.
How long is a second? A minute? An hour?

What about a day? A week? A month? Try to comprehend a year. A decade. A century. We quickly struggle to comprehend known time. Yet we're still far short of forever. But that is how long God assures us of his rule, his blessings, his love. He is on his throne forever. He offers his blessing forever. His love (and that is what Psalm 45 is – a love song) is forever.

I can't comprehend this. And that's good. It reminds me that our God is bigger than I can understand. And when I face struggles and problems that are bigger than I can understand, I can find rest in my forever God.

- When you contemplate a forever God – continuous and never ending – what thoughts (e.g. assurances, questions, hopes) come to mind?
- Are you facing anything right now that you need to trust to your forever God?

Today's prayer form is meditation and contemplation. This is a practice of sitting quietly with God. It's not emptying our mind, but rather "being still before the Lord and wait patiently for him" (Ps. 37:7). To start, set aside one minute of quiet. Sitting still, repeat the prayer "*Lord, have mercy*" quietly aloud to help your mind stop running. Just be still before God. Sit in the quiet and listen for what God stirs in your heart. When your mind starts to run away, use the repeated prayer to re-centre.

Suggested Fast: Food
Prayer form: Meditation/Contemplation

twenty-seven

READING: PSALM 146

The world is starving for **hope**. Hope gets us out of bed in the morning. Hope is why we save money, have kids, and go to the dentist. Psalm 146 is a clarion call to hope in God as our ultimate hope.

This is a very Anabaptist poem because it warns us to not place our ultimate trust in princes (or politicians) because they cannot save, "for on the very day of their death their plans come to an end" (v4). Now re-read the beautiful list from Psalm 146 of what God does in full that princes and politicians can only do in part. Why do we so easily misplace our hope?

I want to challenge you to think about food. We are engaging in Lenten practices and fasting from food is today's suggested fast. We all have a different relationship with food: what is yours?

- Is food a place you go to find comfort (hope)?
- Is food a place you go when you are anxious?
- Is food a place you go when you are bored? Boredom can be a temporary loss of hope.
- What is your relationship to food? Is it your prince or politician?
- Does your relationship to food give you hope? How long does that hope last, if it does?

Clearly, we need food for survival and enjoyment. We can hope for a great meal, but we can't find our hope in food. Sit with this passage and these questions. Don't turn the page too quickly. Don't run. Meditation and contemplation are the practices of sitting in the things we'd rather avoid so that we can find in Christ the healing and hope we are starving for.

Suggested Fast: Food
Prayer form: Meditation/Contemplation

twenty-eight

READING: PSALM 146

It is easy to listen to the voice of the supposed expert, to be influenced by the rich and famous, or be swayed by powerful political leaders, especially when we are facing uncertainty or confronted with fearful circumstances.

Many of us are vulnerable to the lure that someone in “shining armour” will rescue us from threats of various kind; that the desire for protection or deliverance can be satisfied by that strong voice promising so much – only to be sadly disappointed when we discover these “heroes” are only frail human beings and their promises are easily broken.

The Psalmist warns against this temptation to misplace our trust in looking to the wrong source for deliverance. In Psalm 146, he wisely points out the futility of placing our ultimate trust in human leaders and their various solutions. Regardless of who it is, they are still a human being prone to error and with many limitations. Our only true source of hope, restoration, and salvation comes from God; he alone is fully able and faithful to provide what we are looking for. When all is said and done, the sole source of freedom, peace, and wholeness comes from “the Maker of heaven and earth.”

Make no mistake, there are many who desperately need freedom, healing, to know where their next meal comes from, or to have a safe place to live. So do we become cynical or live with a sense of hopelessness? Is there a way to experience the freedom and promise we greatly desire? Yes, there is! We can place our trust in God. If we are wronged, oppressed, imprisoned, on the run, burdened, or feeling alone we can be embraced by a compassionate and trustworthy God. No one is left behind or left out. God is faithful; his promises are certain.

- Am I finding that I’m putting too much stock in human leaders and their solutions or promises?
- Where do I have a significant need for hope and healing? Am I willing to look to God to provide what I long for?

In prayer, let’s meditate on the truth that God is faithful. We can place our trust in him. As you prepare to meditate: find a quiet place; set aside several minutes; quiet yourself; look at a word or short passage Scripture; reflect on it. When your mind wanders, gently return to contemplating that word (or words) and gradually let God’s peace and gentle whisper come to you.

Suggested Fast: Food

Prayer form: Meditation/Contemplation

twenty-nine

READING: PSALM 146

Do you ever start reading something (a newspaper article, blog post, or novel) and need to re-read a paragraph several times because your full attention isn’t quite there? Or maybe it is half-there and there is something about what you just read that hits you in just the right (or sometimes wrong) way at the right time?

Psalm 146:1 did that for me. I wasn’t distracted when I read it (though, I’ll admit, that happens to me often enough), but I was struck hard by the words, “Let all that I am praise the Lord.”

All that I am.

My heart. My mind. My body. My inner-monologue. My intentions. My words. My actions.

All that I am.

I must admit that sometimes “all that I am” doesn’t feel possible. I want to praise the Lord. I want to want to praise the Lord with all that I am. But some days it is hard. So on those days my prayer is just that: God, I want to want to praise you with all that I am. Help me to praise you with all that I am.

- What hinders you from full praise of our Creator?

- What would it look like for you to praise God with all that you are?
- How will you praise him today?

Today's prayer form is meditation and contemplation. Take some time to read through this psalm once again, read it in segments if that helps you to absorb it, and then meditate on the words that you've just read.

- What does God want to say to you in this moment?
- What words of praise do you have for him today?

Suggested Fast: Food

Prayer form: Meditation/Contemplation

thirty

READING: PSALM 130

I imagine we have all experienced a time in life when we have cried out to God in pain: physiological pain from a fall, an accident, or an illness; psychological or emotional pain from some type of abuse or broken relationship; or even spiritual pain of feeling distant from God.

"From the depths of despair, O Lord, I call for your help."

From the depths of despair. When or where has that been for you? What points in your life have you felt stuck, trapped, or buried so deep in the mess of life that you felt as though you were in the depths of despair?

To be honest with you, my default setting isn't always to cry out to God when I am in the depths of despair. Oftentimes, my default setting is to sleep. Sleep allows me to escape. It allows me to abandon the waking world. But the reality is that it becomes incredibly unhealthy.

The beauty of being surrounded by community – friends, family, the body of Christ – is that when we find ourselves having sunken into the depths of despair, we are prompted to call out for God's help. And when we are prompted enough, ideas get wedged into our minds. So that, when we do fall into the depths of despair, or maybe just have a really bad day, our impulse will be to call out to God

for his help first. Before sleep. Before food. Before binge-watching a favourite show on Netflix. First.

You may not be in the depths of despair today, or anywhere close, or you may be. But you are somewhere.

- Where are you calling out to God from today? Out of joy? Out of need? Out of pain? Out of concern? Out of fear?
- What happens if and when you invite God to be in that place with you right now?

Today's prayer form is meditation and contemplation. Take some time to meditate on these questions, and what God wants to speak to you in response. Sit with him for a time, and allow yourself to simply be.

Suggested Fast: Food

Prayer form: Meditation/Contemplation

thirty-one

READING: PSALM 130

"Here's a quarter, call someone who cares."

Ouch. Remember that line? Has it been said to you, or have you ever said it to one of your friends in jest? I'm sure it sounded funny at the time, and all those involved had a little chuckle because of it, but when you really think about it, it's pretty mean. If your friend really had something going on, a circumstance to navigate through, would you really tell them to find someone else to talk to because you couldn't care a less?

Psalm 130 is a reminder that we can cry out to God (no quarter necessary). The writer is obviously troubled and needs to know that God is listening, and that God is attentive. The psalmist goes on to remind himself what kind of God he is dealing with: one who forgives and forgets and doesn't keep a record of sins.

We learn through this lament that waiting is an essential part of prayer and that God is worth waiting for. We don't wait in vain, but we wait with hope. Watchmen (or sentries)

in those days were those who worked the night shift – they knew what waiting was all about. They watched the city so others could sleep in peace. It was a long shift, but they were patient in their role.

What might be most important here is that our “waiting on” and “praying to” is to a God who is known for at least three things: hope, love, and redemption.

- Do you ever feel like God is far away and he’s not as attentive as you need him to be?
- What have you been waiting for God to do? How long has it been?
- Can you trust him to be the God of hope, love, and redemption the scriptures show him to be?

Today’s prayer form is meditation and contemplation. Take some time to read through this psalm once again. Put your hope in the Lord. Feel his unfailing love. Experiencing the overflowing of his redemption. *Breathe.*

Suggested Fast: Food

Prayer form: Meditation/Contemplation

thirty-two
READING: PSALM 130

I’m a pretty trusting person. I trust that people will do what they say they will do. I trust that what people say about themselves is true. I trust that people have the best of intentions even when it isn’t fully apparent. In truth, I’ve been told that maybe, at times, I am a little too trusting.

Not too long ago, I was sitting in a café working on my laptop and sipping coffee. My keys and phone were on the table beside my laptop. I worked and sipped and sipped and worked. The café began to fill with people, and when the line shorted, I went to get a refill. I left my keys, laptop, and phone on the table. I had no problem with doing this. But, apparently, the lady at the table beside me was not as trusting. As I was about to order my coffee, she ran up to me with my keys and my phone in hand, telling me, “You really shouldn’t trust people.”

Well, I do. Guilty. And I’m okay with being a little too trusting. But then, am I when it counts?

In Psalm 130, the psalmist writes, “I am counting on the Lord; yes, I am counting on him. I have put my hope in his word.” Do I really count on the Lord? Do you?

- Do we trust him with our futures? With the present? With our children? Marriage? Relationships?
- Do we trust him with our daily needs?
- Does our hope truly rest in him alone?

Today’s prayer form is meditation and contemplation. Take some time to ask God where you put your trust, and to make clear to you in whom or what you place your hope. Invite him to help you transfer your trust, your hope, all of it, to him. Rest in his presence.

Suggested Fast: Food

Prayer form: Meditation/Contemplation

thirty-three
READING: PSALM 130

It’s *Roll Up the Rim* season in Canada which means that Tim Horton’s is booming with business, and many Canadian Christians uncertain about the ethics or morality of gambling get their fix through the purchase of coffees that may or may not win them a new car, cash, electronics, or in fact, another coffee. It’s a brilliant marketing campaign.

When you roll up the rim and discover you’ve won a free coffee, you tear away that rim and tuck the freebie into your wallet or purse until you go to redeem it. And there is something about a free coffee that tastes so much better.

It’s funny how sometimes the rim of the coffee is just another piece of garbage (or recycling!) and sometimes it’s redeemable for something much better.

It may just be that time of day that I need a coffee, and please don’t take this metaphor too seriously, it is flawed, but this idea pinged for me as I read the final verse of Psalm 130: “He will redeem Israel from every kind of sin.”

Israel could have been just another rim that was tossed away. Without God, as a nation, Israel could have been destroyed, discarded, ditched. Truly, think about it: Israel screwed up time and time again. What a disappointment. It's like seeing "try again/réessayez" appearing when you flip up your rim, over and over and over again.

Of course, for God, this must have been so much more disappointing. His kids weren't listening, they weren't "getting it," and all he wanted to do was lavish his love on them. But they kept turning away. Their sins piled high. So the psalmist reminds his hearers that the Lord "will redeem Israel from every kind of sin...His redemption overflows."

I realize that I'm camping on a Tim Horton's metaphor, but I can't help but think about how God redeems us. When we live for him, our lives are exchanged for something much better.

- What life have you been redeemed from?
- How have you experienced God's overflowing redemption?

Today's prayer activity is in the form of giving, serving, or foot washing. It may sound somewhat strange to make these things a prayer form, but allow yourself to pray continually as you give or serve.

- How can you give or serve out of the awareness of God's overflowing redemption?

Suggested Fast: Food

Prayer form: Giving, serving, foot washing

thirty-four
READING: PSALM 143

Last summer was a pretty dry one. Rains seemed to come so infrequently that, unless you kept a sprinkler on your yard a few hours each day, the lawn was brown.

I've gone through seasons where my soul feels that way. Maybe you have too. When my soul has been so dry and it longs for the refreshment of the living water.

Meditating on Psalm 143 today, I'm drawn to David's words as he captures this feeling in verse 6, "I lift my hands to you in prayer. I thirst for you as parched land thirsts for rain."

It's incredible to see what the landscape looks like when the rains come. It is transformed from dry, parched, brown, dusty land to green, lush, and alive.

When we are in seasons of dryness, it can be easy to complain and bemoan the absence of rain. And, it may seem David is complaining, but his complaints are framed as laments crying out to God. There is a significant difference between aimless complaining, and crying out to God. We may complain aimlessly about things, but there will be no return on it. Nothing changes when we complain.

However, when we take our laments, and turn them towards God in prayer, we invite him to be with us in that place and allow him to decide what we need; through prayer, he may intervene in some way, or he may help us have a heart change in regards to the thing we are lamenting.

- What have you found yourself complaining about lately? Have you taken it to God in prayer?
- Are you thirsty? Is your soul dry? Take it to God in prayer, and remember that the rain will come.

Suggested Fast: Spending money

Prayer form: Giving, serving, foot washing

thirty-five

READING: PSALM 143

I went with some friends to a waterfall on a hot August day. The heat increased our desire to be as close to the water as we could get. Bouncing cautiously from rock to rock, we got closer to the water. The footing was a bit suspect, so we were careful as we went. A friend behind me called for me to turn around so they could take my picture. As I turned, I lost my footing and slid down the side of the rock and was completely caught in a chasm. After much caution, one quick inattentive step caused me to plunge down – to what I was sure, in that moment, was my death – to a crevice that wedged me in tight, scrapped my whole body, and injured an already damaged knee. It wasn't death, but it certainly wasn't nice.

How often do these missteps happen in our every day lives? We live attuned to God in as much of our day as we can, and then we turn our eyes, just for a second, and we find ourselves in a crevice of sin. I know it happens to me more often than I'd like to admit. I display patience and grace with scores of strangers throughout the day, and then I get home, and take one quick inattentive step and end up expressing anger at my spouse or frustration with my daughter. Yikes, there's that crevice!

- What crevice have you found yourself in lately?
- Do the insides of your crevices look familiar? In what way do you need God's help to break that cycle?

In Psalm 143, the psalmist writes of his desire that God would show him where to walk. He more than desired, he needed, to be lead by God. *Step by step*. And so do we. The psalmist writes, "Teach me to do your will, for you are my God. May your gracious Spirit lead me forward on a firm footing." Let's make that our prayer today. As we serve, give, and have prayerful-other-centred eyes, let us join hearts in asking God that his gracious Spirit would lead us forward on firm footing.

Suggested Fast: Spending money
Prayer form: Giving, serving, foot washing

thirty-six

READING: PSALM 143

When we read Psalm 143 we are reminded just how honest David was with God. *Why do you think we sometimes manufacture a faith that is dishonest?*

Honest laments are a discipline that create intimacy with our Creator and Redeemer. When we lament, we gain perspective and humility. The Desert Fathers once wrote, "God descends to the humble, as water flows from the hills into the valleys." God desires our honesty and humility, and he doesn't like us more when we fake it.

When we have the courage to be honest with God, and with ourselves, we are given perspective, faith, wisdom, and generosity. When we are reunited with God through honesty, we are given the strength to follow Christ in service of him and all his creation. Christ challenges us to humble, honest servanthood over distorted self-fulfillment. Will we respond?

What if today instead of spending on ourselves, we used that time, that money, and that self-fulfillment to serve and fill others? Who can you serve today?

Together let us fast from spending on that which we don't need – be honest with what those things are – and, instead using that energy to invest into someone outside our immediate circle: prepare a meal for someone, pray with someone, or spend time serving in some other way.

Dear God, thank you for always being right beside us, listening and loving. We desire intimacy and honesty with you. We pray for the courage to surrender to you our pride, titles, and false selves. God challenge us, and teach us to serve like Jesus. We surrender to you our apathy and complacency. Give us the courage to replace them with generosity and action. We love you. Amen.

Suggested Fast: Spending money
Prayer form: Giving, serving, foot washing

thirty-seven

READING: PSALM 31

Have you ever noticed a child scurry behind their mom or dad's legs when they are scared, worried, or just feeling a bit shy? It's remarkable how the safety of a parent's presence can bring such an amazing source of protection for a small child.

My daughter often cries out for me in the nighttime, afraid of a bad dream, or zombies, or simply, the dark. When I hear her, I go running because I want so badly for her to feel safe, protected, and loved.

In Psalm 31, David runs to God, the Father, for protection. He finds the legs of the Father to hide behind. He knows the safety of this rock and fortress. In his fear and his pain, David knows that his Father will rescue him, he will provide safety for him, and in him, he will be secure.

- What do you run to when you are afraid?
- Where do you go when you need protection?
- Is God, the Father, the first destination that you seek?
- What are you running from? What (who) are you running to?

David prays, "I entrust my spirit into your hand. Rescue me, Lord, for you are a faithful God." Today, let us pray that our spirits would be in God's hand. Let us choose to run first to him for protection. Today and always.

Suggested Fast: Spending money

Prayer form: Giving, serving, foot washing

thirty-eight

READING: PSALM 31

In my third year of university, I was in a pretty rough spot. My boyfriend of three years had just broken up with me and, at the same time, my best friend got engaged. I started to experience panic attacks and fell behind in school-work, which made the panic attacks worse, and I fell even further behind. It was kind of the perfect storm. Most of us can probably think of a time when it just felt like it couldn't get any worse. *When was the last time you felt this way?*

David sure has been there. In this psalm, he's in a pretty low place. He is crying out to God in pain and in grief. He says, "...Sin has depleted [his] strength." Everyone has abandoned him. He's withering away. It's almost Job-like in his descriptions. But amidst the grief, and pain, and lament, David expresses his faith in God. He says, "...I am trusting you, O Lord...my future is in your hands."

David knew the only place he could go to for rescue was to God's feet; so he writes of his pain, and grief, and trust in God. And then David does something that honestly blows my mind. When I remember my state-of-mind when I was in my "perfect storm" I can't imagine having done what David does next, but at the same time, I think, that is exactly what I needed to do.

He praises God. From a broken heart and a contrite spirit, David praises God. I need to learn from David here. When I am in grief, in pain, or even just in a place of discomfort, I cannot let any of this stop me from giving praise to God.

- What's your default setting when you're in a bad place?
- When was the last time you praised God?

Today, take time for praise as you go about your giving, serving, or foot-washing prayer form. Be aware that no matter what storms surround you, praising God will change the landscape.

Suggested Fast: Spending money

Prayer form: Giving, serving, foot washing

thirty-nine

READING: PSALM 31

My brother has been suffering for over a year with some significant health issues. They have caused him to feel incredibly depressed and without hope for his physical body. But in the interwoven way that God has created us, the physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of us are all connected. And I just think: *he is suffering so deeply.*

We have prayed consistently for him and with him. And, the hardest part has been to hear him question where God is in all of this. Why hasn't God eliminated this suffering? And, I know that theologically speaking, I have an answer for this, but in the moment, even that answer doesn't seem to suffice.

In the midst of this time, I picked up Psalm 31. One phrase leapt off the page at me: "...you care about the anguish of my soul" (v 7). And I know that it is just a small sentence fragment in this psalm, but the truth of these words is substantial. He does care about the anguish of our souls. He also doesn't want to see us suffer. He is the perfect parent that watches his kids and wants, so badly, to see them happy, healthy, and whole. The psalmist reminded me of a powerful truth: God cares for us so deeply, and he is with us in our suffering. Because of Christ, God knows the suffering we endure, and he has compassion on us. He cares about the anguish of our souls. And there is something so comforting about that.

As we near the end of this Lenten season, let's remember that our God does, in fact, care for the anguish of our souls because in the suffering of the cross he, too, has anguished.

Thank you, God, for loving us so much that you sent your Son to experience life as we experience it. To live, love, serve, and even suffer horrifically. Thank you that you care for the anguish of our souls. Thank you for your unfailing love and compassion. Amen.

Suggested Fast: Spending money
Prayer form: Giving, serving, foot washing

forty

READING: PSALM 118:1-29

Almost every day, I hear stories of people who are hurting: a lost job, a broken marriage, persecution overseas, the suffering of people in Syria, Sudan, Somalia, and other places of the world in turmoil. And there is very little I can do to make it better.

That's the danger of Psalm 118. We could read it and think: if people would only "give thanks to God because he is good" (v 1), or "take refuge in him" (v 8), then "the Lord (will) help" (v 13). And it's just not a true proposition. For all my thinking, praying, and pondering I can't give a good answer to why I was born into comparable privilege and so many of my brothers and sisters struggle with hunger, thirst, or the ability to worship freely.

Despite this reality, Psalm 118 is this wonderful call to worship God regardless of our circumstances. In verses 5-7 the psalmist describes being in anguish, crying to God in his anguish, and trusting in God's provision. These are the prayers of a man in trouble who communes with his God.

At the end of this psalm, the story is written. Whatever circumstances led this writer to reach out to God, the psalmist sees victory: fears have been relieved and the nations that surrounded have been cut off. Credit is instantly given to the Lord: "This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it" (v 24).

In our success, it is easy to forget that our circumstances could have been very different. There may have been a certain amount of hard work, good choices, and strong education, but, the reality is, people around the world have made the exact same decisions and live in a very different reality. So in the midst of every circumstance, can we, together with our Christian sisters and brothers, boldly proclaim, "*Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.*"

Suggested fast: Spending money
Prayer form: Communion

Acknowledgements:

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