

Connection to the Cross

A Lenten Journey

The Evangelical Catholic

Michael A. Havercamp &
Mary Grace Simon

Connections Series

Connection to the Cross: A Lenten Journey

702 S. HIGH POINT ROAD, MADISON WI 53719
608.821.3163 WWW.EVENGELICALCATHOLIC.ORG
EC@EVENGELICALCATHOLIC.ORG
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INTRODUCTION

*"Yet even now, says the Lord,
return to me with your whole heart,
with fasting, and weeping, and mourning;*

*Rend your hearts,
not your garments,
and return to the Lord, your God.
For gracious and merciful is he,
slow to anger,
rich in kindness,
and relenting in punishment.*

Joel 2:12-13

The moment has come! The time is *now*. There is no sense in waiting, no benefit in delaying, no use in putting it off. Regardless of the mistakes of our past, despite the desperation of our current circumstance, the hour has come. Our spirits may feel distant from God and our hearts hardened, yet “even now” the Lord our God calls each one of us.

In moments of quiet reflection you know that all is not well within. You wonder why your heart is not at rest. You realize that the promises of the world do not satisfy the deeper hunger you have rumbling in your core. For you too, the time has come. “Even now” the Lord is calling you.

God’s call is straightforward and simple: “Return to me with your whole heart.” He wants you back. He yearns for you as a father for a lost child. He waits for you like a watchman longing for the dawn of light. He is asking you to stop what you are doing and take the time to reexamine your life. “Why am I striving so hard? What am I searching for? How can I find true life, purpose and fulfillment?”

Through the prophet Joel the Lord addresses those questions and leads us toward the true object of our longing. God calls us to none other than himself. He is our answer. He is the beginning and the end, the font and foundation, the only One who can satisfy the deepest longing of the human heart. The time is now. “Return to the Lord.”

Joel 2:13

*“Return to the Lord,
your God.
For gracious
and merciful is he.”*

The prophet Joel received and shared a beautiful foretaste of the singular event from which our entire lives as Christians are born – the full glory of God coming to us in the person of Jesus Christ. The passionate exhortation of the prophet is later reiter-

“return to me with your whole heart”

ated and given grandeur in Mark’s account at the dawning of Jesus’ earthly ministry: “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mk 1:15).

Many biblical scholars assert that the whole gospel, the entire message of God manifest in the coming of Jesus the Christ, is expressed

in this single passage of sacred Scripture.

In this solitary verse is contained the quintessential core of Christianity and the key to understanding our lives in light of Jesus, the Incarnate Word.

“This is the time of fulfillment.

The kingdom of God is at hand.

Repent, and believe in the gospel.”

Mark 1:15

After his baptism and temptation in the desert and before calling his disciples to carry out the ongoing mission of the Father, Jesus proclaimed those commanding words, “This is the time. . . The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.”

Much could be said of this single verse but several points are particularly important. Ancient voices had, through the centuries, heralded the future coming of the Messiah, the chosen one who would liberate the children of Israel from their enemies and bring judgment to their oppressors. These prophets trumpeted the Lord’s promises to comfort his people, deliver them from their sins and beckon them into everlasting life.

What is particularly significant about Jesus’ words at the beginning of Mark is that the future tense of the prophets’ messages has been converted into the present tense. It is no longer a matter of waiting. Jesus tells us to wait no more. “This is the time of fulfillment,” he said. “The kingdom of God is at hand.”

This, of course, is an astounding statement. In a way never before encountered, in a completely new and unprecedented fashion, the kingdom of God had broken into the physical world. In the very person of Jesus of Nazareth the fullness of God became present, tangible, and accessible to the human family who was created to receive and celebrate this glorious gift. We have no reason to wait, no excuse to delay, for the time is now: the Lord our God is here.

The wonder of Emmanuel, “God-with-us,” is illustrated throughout the entire life of Jesus. It was proclaimed by the angel Gabriel to Mary, the Virgin Mother of God in the Annunciation – “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!” (Lk 1:28). It shines forth in the splendor of the Incarnation as God came into the world in human form to reveal the love of the Father

– “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (Jn 1:5).

It washes through the scene at the river Jordan when Jesus was baptized by John and the Father

said, “This is my beloved Son” (Mt 3:17). It was heralded in the reading from the scroll in the synagogue, following the words of the prophet Isaiah - “Today this scripture is fulfilled” (Lk 4:21).

Even in the most unlikely places and most painful circumstances, Jesus proclaims these same words to us. Though he suffered an agonizing death on the cross, not even that could separate him from the world he came to save. As he hung on the cross, even in his final moments, he said to the thief, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” (Jn 19:30). Over and over again, throughout the life of Jesus, we hear the same message – God is truly with us; the kingdom of God is at hand.

*“The same Spirit who brings sin to light
is also the Consoler
who gives the human heart grace
for repentance and conversion.”*

CCC 1433

"return to me with your whole heart"

The power and splendor of this realization is breath-taking. As this truth dawns on the human consciousness we are overwhelmed by the grace of a God who appears in our midst. We are besieged by the compassion of a God who chooses to embrace us in all of our weakness, sickness, depravity and sin. We are humbled by the mercy of a God who would take that sin upon himself for our salvation.

If this is true, if the Lord has come, if the kingdom of God is at hand, then there is only one natural response – “Repent and believe in the gospel.” If we are standing in the presence of God, the One who breathed life into our lungs and holds the promise of our future, then it is only natural that we turn away from our fallenness and embrace the source of our healing and redemption. Acknowledging our condition

*"There are two conversions
in the Church:
the water of Baptism and
the tears of repentance."*

-St. Ambrose

in the light of God's love and forgiveness we can begin once again the perennial journey that leads to wholeness, holiness and peace.

This is the reason that the Sacrament of Reconciliation is especially emphasized

during this holy season. Through the sacrament we truly do turn away from our fallenness and embrace our healing and redemption. Our confession brings us face to face with our brokenness and sin. Yet the priest's absolution brings us face to face with the forgiveness and mercy of Jesus. As we hear the priest speak, Christ himself forgives and blesses us. Our sanctifying grace—"the indwelling of the Holy Spirit"—is restored or increased, bringing about that inner transformation which flows to outward charity. Such reconciling and renewing encounters with the risen Lord capture the essence of the Lenten journey.

In fact all of the Church's energies are focused on bringing about and experiencing this forgiveness and conversion of heart. The daily read-

ings offered at Mass all converge to proclaim a common message of conversion. The traditional Lenten practices that Christians are exhorted to take up—fasting, prayer, and almsgiving—are all meant to be expressions of and means to conversion of heart. The communal fasts of Ash Wednesday and Good Friday draw the Church together as one in a sign of repentance and conversion to God. Through the Church’s guidance and wisdom, we, the Church, rend our hearts and return to the Lord.

The time is now. There is nothing to fear. Often we have the erroneous impression that God wants to punish and belittle us for our tendency to wander from him. Sometimes we think of God as a heavenly scorekeeper, tallying our mistakes and weighing them against our merits. We might get the impression that Lent is a time for us to be chastised, or at least suffer in our guilt. Yet the message is clear. The Lord our God is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger and rich in kindness” (Jl 2:13).

We are not simply to give up chocolate or caffeine. We are not merely to perform outward signs and ritual actions. We are called to manifest outwardly what is being transformed inwardly. The Lord’s words through the prophet Joel say “rend our hearts, not our garments.”



This is a call to seek God in truth and “return to the Lord with our whole heart.” What the Lord desires is a genuine recommitment of the heart. Without a sincere turn of the will, outward formalities are fruitless. There is only one suitable response to the inbreaking reality of the kingdom of God, only one option for us as we’re confronted by the living presence of Christ in our midst - a sincere change of heart. This means an interior turn to the Lord and

“return to me with your whole heart”

an openness to him and his power in the sacraments and prayer, to radically transform us into the disciples he has called us be. That is what Lent is all about. Symbolized in baptism and in the annual recommitment of our baptismal vows, Lent is a time when we can die to the tyranny of self and all that checks our progress on the spiritual journey, all that undermines and inhibits full communion with our loving Father. It is a time when we can reclaim the grace of our baptism and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit at confirmation. It is a time when we can “return to the Lord with your whole heart” (Jl 2:12), a time when we own up to our weaknesses, our failures, our sins and express our sorrow for the way that we’ve wounded ourselves and others. In the unmerited love of the Father comes a newness of life, an elevation of spirit, a transformation of heart that reflects the all-encompassing invitation to experience the mystery of God.

“This is the time of fulfillment,” Jesus said. “The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mk 1:15). Through this Lenten series we invite you to journey together, as one body of Christ, and respond to the grace-filled invitation of God in this season. This lectionary-based Lenten study draws from the Church’s liturgical readings (Cycle A) to sow the seeds of conversion. Our shared reflection on these inspired words can be expressed and celebrated with renewed energy at Sunday Masses throughout Lent.

We pray with the Church that the liturgy of the Word might penetrate your heart in a new way this year, bearing fruit that will endure forever in the kingdom of God. The time is now. Return to the Lord with all your heart and experience the joy of rebirth in Christ.





Father,

I abandon myself into Your hands,

Do with me what You will.

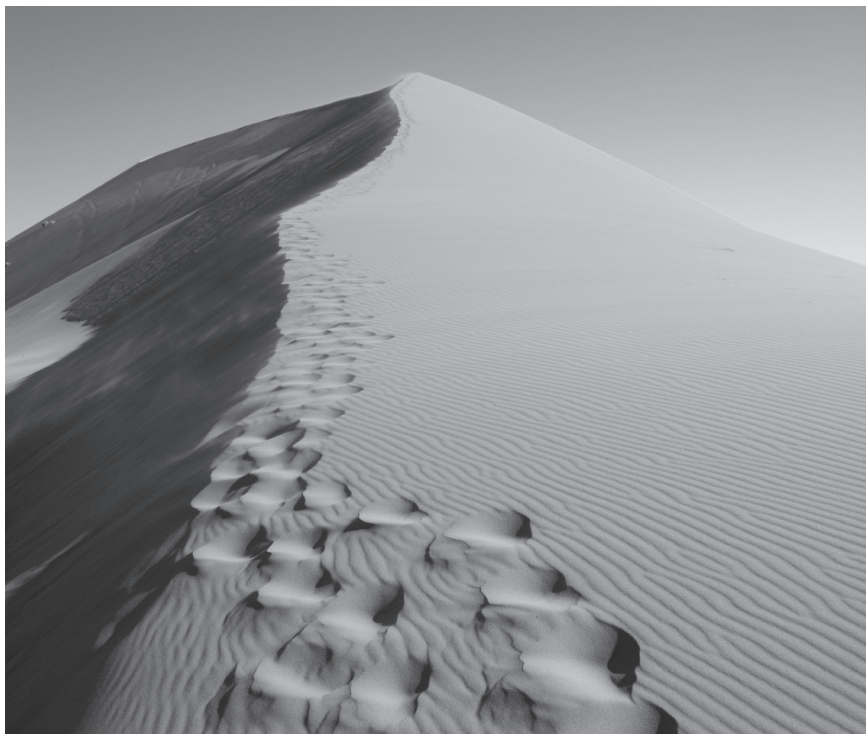
For whatever You may do, I thank you.

I am ready for all,

I accept all,

Let only Your will be done in me.

*Charles de Foucauld,
Little Brother of Jesus (1858-1916)*



STEPPING INTO THE DESERT

1st SUNDAY OF LENT

*"Then Jesus was led by the Spirit
into the desert"*

Matthew 4:1

Opening Prayer



All-powerful God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
by water and the Holy Spirit
you freed us from sin
and gave us new life.

During this holy season of Lent,
send your Holy Spirit once again
to guide us through the desolation of the desert,
fortify us against the evil one,
and renew us in the living waters of your Son.

Give us a courageous and resolute spirit,
a spirit of sobriety and humility,
that we might have eyes to see
the darkness that still remains in us
and the painful reality of our sin.

Wash us clean again O Spirit,
And fill us with wonder and awe in your presence.

We ask this
through Christ
our Lord.

Amen.

"In tribulation
immediately draw near to God
in confidence, and you will receive strength,
enlightenment, and instruction."

-St. John of the Cross

Sharing Our Experience



- 1) **Have you ever made a trip into the desert? Describe your experience. What was it like? How was it different? How did such a landscape make you feel?**
- 2) **What did you do to prepare for such a trip?**
- 3) **How are you preparing for the season of Lent?**

Please invite a participant to read the following aloud.

The late priest and spiritual theologian Henri Nouwen likened the season of Lent to the ongoing struggle between winter and spring. It is a time where cold and heat, darkness and light are locked in a battle for primacy. It is a time when the desolation of winter is challenged and confronted by the dawning life of spring.

The word “Lent” is derived from the Germanic root that means “Spring.” Recalling Jesus’ 40 days in the desert where he was tempted by the devil, Lent is a time when we confront the gloomy shadows in our lives and stretch ourselves toward the light of God. It is a time to face the darkness, not simply the darkness of the world, but more specifically the darkness from within.

Fasting, heightened prayer and almsgiving are traditional practices for the season of Lent. Many of us choose to give up a particular food that may have become an indulgence – soda, chocolate, or those late-night bowls of ice cream. Without giving it much thought or prayer, we take this as a convenient occasion to begin shedding those extra pounds that have gathered over the holidays!

But the liturgical season of Lent marks something much more serious. Lent is the time when we acknowledge and identify the barrenness of our sin, expose the temptations of the devil, and expel our demons in the light of Christ.

Reading:

“O Lord, how often have I lived through these weeks of Lent without paying much attention to penance, fasting, and prayer? How often have I missed the spiritual fruits of this season without even be-

Genesis 3:7

“Then the eyes of both of them were opened, And they realized that they were naked.”

ing aware of it? But how can I ever really celebrate Easter without observing Lent? How can I rejoice fully in your resurrection when I have avoided participating in your death?

Yes, Lord, I have to die – with you, through you, and in you – and thus become ready to recognize you when you appear to me in your resurrection. There is so much in me that needs to die: false attachments, greed and anger, impatience and stinginess. O Lord, I am self-centered, concerned about myself, my career, my future, my name and fame. Often I even feel that I use you for my own advantage. How preposterous, how sacrilegious, how sad! But yes, Lord, I know it is true. . . I see clearly now how little I have died with you, really gone your way and been faithful to it. O Lord, make this Lenten season different from the other ones. Let me find you again. Amen.”

-Henri Nouwen, A Cry for Mercy

4) What struck you from this passage? Do you resonate with any of Nouwen's sentiments?

Take a minute of silence to privately reflect on the ways you need to die to self, sin, and false attachments. Ask God to reveal to you the ways you continue to be shackled by sin and darkness. Write them in the space provided.

Scripture and Tradition



Please invite a participant to read the following.

In the first two weeks of the Lenten liturgy, the Church gives us a snapshot of the entire pageant of redemptive history: from Creation to the Fall, through the struggle and toil of human life, to a sweet foretaste of the glorious life that awaits the lives of the faithful. This Sunday's first reading from Genesis brings us back to our humble beginnings as God "blew into [Adam's] nostrils the breath of life" (Gn 2:7) and planted he and Eve in the Garden of bounty and blessings.

*"So if anyone does not feed upon
God's Word,
that one will not live."*

-St. Jerome

Even here, at the very beginning, we see that our freedom leaves us susceptible to the temptations of the serpent. The presence of evil is real, alluring us toward doubt,

deception, pride, and ultimate despair. It helps us to realize, like Paul in the second reading from Romans, that all of us have been taken in by the devil's cunning ways. "All have sinned" (Ro 5:12) and fallen short of the glory God has planned for us.

Yet hope is not lost. Though sin and death have come through deception and disobedience, grace and life have come in the person of Jesus Christ. No matter how grave the sin, how serious the error, the abundance of God's grace is always greater. Even in the face of sin and trial, victory is secure when we walk in the grace of God.

Gospel Reading: Matthew 4:1-11

Please invite a participant to read the following passage aloud.

¹Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was hungry. ³The tempter approached and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become loaves of bread." ⁴He said in reply, "It is written: 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.'" ⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city, and made him stand on the parapet of the temple, ⁶and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you and 'with their hands they will support you, lest you dash your foot against a stone.'" ⁷Jesus answered him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.'" ⁸Then the devil took him up to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in their magnificence, ⁹and he said to him, "All these I shall give to you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me." ¹⁰At this, Jesus said to him, "Get away, Satan! It is written: 'The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve.'" ¹¹Then the devil left him and, behold, angels came and ministered to him.

1) What caught your attention in this passage?

2) According to verse 1, why did Jesus go to the desert?

3) Why would God (through the Holy Spirit) direct Jesus

to a place where he would be tempted by the devil? Do you

John 1:14

"And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us."

"Stepping into the Desert"

think God sends us to those desert places? Explain.

- 4) Recall the three temptations of the devil and reflect on their meaning. How do they apply to our lives today?
- 5) How does Jesus respond to the temptations of the devil?
- 6) To the first temptation Jesus responded, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God." What do you think he means by that?
- 7) In a similar way, how might you use the Scriptures to expose and overcome temptation?
- 8) After resisting the devil three times, what happens? What does that tell us about the journey of Lent?

"We must overcome the devil not by miracles but by forbearance and long-suffering. We should do nothing at all for display and vainglory."

-St. Chrysostom

Connection to the Cross This Week



Lent is a time when we can take an honest assessment of our lives as Catholic Christians. Lent offers us the chance to examine our lives in the light of Christ and see where he wants us to grow, how he wants us to change, and what parts of our lives need pruning. The question is not, “What shall I do to improve myself?” but rather “God, how do you want to further refine me into your image?”

Our Lenten practices, therefore, should not be engaged on a whim or even according to our individual preferences. Only God knows the true condition of our hearts. Only God knows what must be overcome in us. And ultimately, it is only God, and not our good efforts, which can triumph in the end. Let us spend time in prayer, asking God to make us aware of the sin in our lives and direct us toward those sacrifices which truly lead us back to him.

“To those who have been far away from the Sacrament of Reconciliation and forgiving love I make this appeal: come back to this source of grace; Do not be afraid! Christ himself is waiting for you. He will heal you, and you will be at peace with God!”

-Pope John Paul II

“Stepping into the Desert”

- Before doing anything else, commit some time to pray to the Father, asking him to guide you in your Lenten journey. Ask the Spirit to illuminate your unique path through the desert. Ask Our Blessed Mother Mary for her unique intercession with her son, that you may be given the courage to see your sins clearly and to help you achieve victory over them. Do not commit to a Lenten sacrifice without first asking God what part of our lives is most in need of divine intercession and healing. A brief examination of conscience is provided here to help you discern and pray how God is leading you

1) What is my attitude to the Sacrament of Reconciliation?

Do I sincerely want to be set free from sin and to enter into a deeper friendship with God? Or do I look on it as an obligation and burden?

2.) Have I participated in any grave sins since my last confession? Have I abandoned God, committed adultery, stolen, lied, or coveted the possessions or relationships with others? Have I gone against my conscience for any reason (fear, convenience, selfishness)?

3) The Lord says, “You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart.” Is my heart set on God so that I really

love him above all things? Or am I more concerned about the things of the world (money, popularity, power, or other people)?

“Jesus’ call to conversion and penance, like that of the prophets before him, does not aim first at outward works, ‘sack-cloth and ashes,’ fasting and mortification, but at the conversion of the heart.”

CCC, 1430

- 4) Have I taken the Lord's name in vain or neglected to keep Sunday as a holy day?
- 5) The Lord says, "Love one another as I have loved you." Do I have a genuine love for others, or do I use them for my own ends? Have I been proud or boastful, thinking myself better and despising others as less important?
- 6) Have I injured others by deceit, anger, insults, judgment, harboring hatred or violating a secret? Have I done damage to another's reputation, honor, possessions or body?
- 7) Have I provided genuine and patient love for my family, my neighbor, my co-worker, my enemy?
- 8) Have I made the best use of my time, my talents and my strengths to make the world more like God would have it or do I use these gifts to better my own position? Have I been lazy or given over to too much leisure? Does my life reflect the worthy mission to which I have been called in Christ?
- 9) Have I dishonored my body by fornication, impurity, unworthy conversation, lustful thoughts, evil desires or actions? Have I given in to sensuality? Have I indulged in reading, conversation, shows, and entertainment that offends Christian decency?

"It is in repenting our sins that we expressly repudiate evil and revert to God."

-Dietrich von Hildebrand

10) Have I cared for the less fortunate, the poor, the sick, the stranger, the elderly, the innocent, the defenseless? Have I shown disrespect or prejudice to people of different race, cultural and ethnic background, social and economic status?

Scripture for meditation:

- Psalm 51
- Romans 7:15-25
- Deuteronomy 7:25 – 8:5
- James 4:1-10
- 1 John 1:5-10
- John 20:19-23 As Christ “breathed” his Holy Spirit into the apostles granting them God’s unique power to forgive

sins (Mk 2: 5-12), he sends them and their successors, the bishops with their priests, to be His own ambassadors of this powerful gift of the

*“So submit yourselves to God.
Resist the devil
and he will flee from you.
Draw near to God,
and he will draw near to you.”*

James 4:7-8

Holy Spirit to the world. In the sacrament of reconciliation it is Christ himself who absolves us from our sins and grants us the transforming grace to live and grow in deeper conformance with his law of love.

Closing Prayer



Lord of infinite compassion and steadfast love,
we stand before you in humility and trust.
Look with compassion on us
as we acknowledge our sinfulness.
Stretch out your hand
to save us and raise us up in your goodness.

Do not allow the power of darkness
to triumph over us,
but keep us free from sin
as members of Christ's body,
and sheep of your own flock.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ,
your Son,
who lives and reigns
with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.