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Guide To Lenten Reflections 2023

harcourt

Introduction

Once again we encounter in the church calendar the solemn season of Lent. Traditionally, Lent is a time for 'repentance' or 'metanoia', a change of mind and heart. The goal of this Guide is to help us gain self-awareness that leads to action, not guilt and shame that lead to paralysis.

Ideally, the Way of Jesus is an ascending spiral. We may ask ourselves similar questions each time Lent comes around, but our answers develop and change as we ascend closer to his example. We lament our failures and resolve to continue rejoicing along the Way.

A separate reflection is set out for each of the first five weeks of Lent, based on a gospel reading. A separate reflection, again based on a gospel reading, is set out for each day in Holy Week.

For each reflection, read the gospel story and accompanying commentary and then reflect on the questions provided. Make a few notes to yourself and pray.

There will be an opportunity to participate in an online group to share some of your reflections and to listen to other people's.

May you have a holy Lent,

Harcourt's Spiritual Life Committee

Connection instructions

This Guide is intended principally to support your personal reflections. However, for each of six Saturdays beginning with February 25th, you are invited to participate in an online sharing time from 9:30 to 10:30 AM via ZOOM, if you choose to do so.

To share some of your reflections and listen to others', click [here](#) between 9:15 and 9:30 on the Saturdays you are able. At 9:30 the meeting will be locked for security and no further access will be possible.

If you are using a printed copy of this document, go to this page in the electronic copy in the Faith and Spiritual Life section of the Harcourt website and click on the above link in the electronic copy.

The ZOOM Meeting ID is 814 2090 6065 and the Passcode is 938209.

Three initial steps

This Guide invites us to look outward at the suffering of the world, and then inward at ourselves. When we look outward we'll be asking ourselves questions about the systems that are producing unnecessary suffering. When we look inward we'll be asking ourselves questions about our complicity in these unjust, faulty systems.

Before embarking on the reflections, take some time to complete these three initial steps. You may find it helpful to return to them from time to time.

Step 1 - identify the systems that cause you concern

Identify some of the unjust, faulty systems that most concern you. A few examples are provided; they are complex and interrelated and you may want to add others:

- the climate crisis
- humanitarian consequences of this crisis including flood, drought, famine, refugees and migrants
- ecological consequences of the climate crisis, including acidification of the oceans, habitat loss and species extinction
- delays and deficiencies in our collective response to such consequences and to natural disasters such as earthquakes
- economic systems that distribute wealth unfairly, creating poverty, hunger and homelessness
- underfunding and failures of health care, education, nutrition and other social supports
- overconsumption of earth's resources

Step 2 - identify the kinds of actions that are within your power

None of us is able to correct such complex, massive systems alone, or even influence them very much. Nonetheless, each of us can work at the near edge, doing what we can where we are with what we have, and together we may make a difference. Examples of things that may be possible for you to do include:

- reconsidering the values shown by your behaviours in the context of the self-giving love revealed in Jesus's journey to the cross
- changing your personal patterns of consumption
- shrinking your personal carbon footprint
- becoming more active politically through writing letters, joining movements and giving financial support
- offering your time and financial support to charities and other organizations that help the victims of these systems.

Step 3 - remind yourself that all this is about your relationship with God

This Guide invites us to move toward actions in this world. Nonetheless, we need to remember that although our focus may be primarily on everyday earthly concerns, ultimately the way we live is about how we respond to and interact with Divine Love.

We may draw inspiration from these words found written on the wall of Mother Teresa's home for children in Calcutta:

People are often unreasonable, illogical and self centered;
Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives;
Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies;
Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you;
Be honest and frank anyway.

What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight;
Build anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous;
Be happy anyway.

The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow;
Do good anyway.

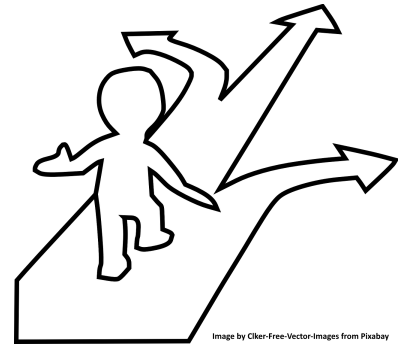
Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough;
Give the world the best you've got anyway.

You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and your God;
It was never between you and them anyway.

Lent 1, February 22-26 2023

THEME: Temptation

Read Matthew 4:1 to 11



Jesus resists the temptations of wealth, status and power, choosing instead to be fully exposed to the suffering that comes with being human. He continues to struggle with these temptations throughout his life, as we may infer from such stories as the changing of water to wine, the refusal to bring armies of angels to resist Pilate, and the refusal of wine-dipped hyssop to alleviate his thirst on the cross. But instead of giving in to temptation, Jesus's path turns to God.

When we consider the systems that cause unnecessary suffering in the world, we may be tempted to ignore the faults of systems from which we benefit personally. Even when we acknowledge those faults, we may be tempted to avoid responding to the information we have gained; it is more comfortable and convenient to carry on as usual. Our challenge is to follow the Way of self-giving love.

Questions for Personal Reflection

In what ways am I complicit in systems that cause unnecessary suffering?

In what ways am I tempted to 'carry on as usual'?

In what ways might I strengthen my resistance to such temptations?

Prayer

Jot down your thoughts. Lament your failings. Resolve to change.

To participate in the online sharing time see
the connection instructions on page 2.

Lent 2, February 27 - March 5 2023

THEME: Being born again

Read John 3:1 to 17



Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night, perhaps hoping not to be noticed. He is puzzled by what Jesus says about being born anew of water and the Spirit. Jesus points him toward becoming more aware of the movement of Spirit blowing where it will. Jesus also offers encouragement: I do not come to condemn the world, says Jesus, I come so that the world might be saved by following my example.

Today, some conservative Christians understand 'born again' as a state to be achieved by accepting doctrines such as the Bible being the inerrant word of God and the fixity of gender roles. Some even welcome the disasters wrought by unjust, faulty systems, hoping that their effects will hasten the end times described in the Book Of Revelation. We don't have to accept this understanding.

Instead we may understand 'being born again' as a continuing process. Again and again we recognize ourselves as held in Divine Love and yet also launched into the world with eyes of wonder, invited to make yet another fresh start. In this process we are challenged to be alert constantly for the Spirit's nudging and invited to respond by working for justice and caring for creation as we can.

Questions for Personal Reflection

In what ways am I holding myself back from being born again?

What are some past choices I'd like to reconsider as part of a fresh start?

What might be some first small steps?

Prayer

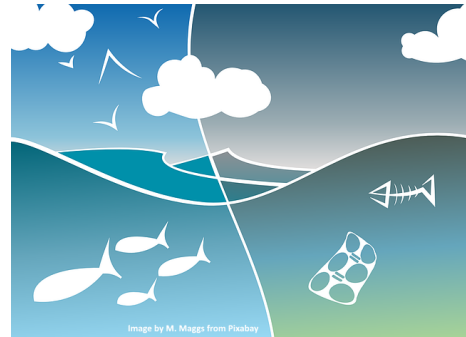
Jot down your thoughts. Lament your failings. Resolve to change.

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Lent 3, March 6-12, 2023

THEME: Living water

Read John 4:5-42



In this story we see Jesus breaking the conventions of his time by asking a woman - a woman who is not even a Jew - for a drink of water. His astonishing request develops into a deep and life-changing conversation for her, an unexpected interruption to her arduous work. Through her testimony, others come to believe in Jesus.

Jesus challenges the woman's lifestyle: 'you have had five husbands and the one you have now is not your husband'. He points her toward the path of worship in spirit and truth, the path to living water.

Today, we may infer from this story similar challenges to our lifestyle choices, to our complicity in unjust, faulty systems. Perhaps we too are being called to turn aside from the path we are on and to tread instead the path of worship in spirit and truth, where our actions help nourish ourselves and the whole of creation with living water.

Questions for Personal Reflection

What current lifestyle choices might I be called to turn away from?

Am I thirsting for living water?

In what ways might I through my actions worship God in spirit and truth?

Prayer

Jot down your thoughts. Lament your failings. Resolve to change.

To participate in the online sharing time see the connection instructions on page 2.

Lent 4, March 13-19, 2023

THEME: Seeing with fresh eyes

Read John 9:1-41



In this story, Jesus responds to the blind man's need for healing even though it is the sabbath. The healed man speaks plainly to the Pharisees of what he knows through the evidence of his own eyes and resists pressure to declare Jesus a sinner. In his closing words to the Pharisees, Jesus says that if they see the right path yet choose not to follow it, they are sinful.

Today, the evidence that major systems are unjust and faulty is not difficult to see. For example, the effects of climate crisis are reported in the mainstream media, as are the poverty, food insecurity and homelessness wrought by the crisis and economic systems. Yet some of us may close our eyes, perhaps paying attention instead to fake news in social media, the distractions of the entertainment industry or the numbing effects of food and drugs.

Questions for Personal Reflection

In what ways am I closing my eyes to the evidence?

Where might I find eye-opening healing?

In what ways might I be called to speak plainly what I know to be true?

Prayer

Jot down your thoughts. Lament your failings. Resolve to change.

To participate in the online sharing time see
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Lent 5, March 20-26 2023

THEME: Compassion in action



Read John 11:1-45

At the beginning of this story we find Jesus uncharacteristically still, not on the move from place to place. Perhaps he is wrestling with temptations again, gathering his energy and courage. But the situation of Lazarus and the entreaties of Mary and Martha, all three of them his friends, move him to travel to Bethany even though danger hovers close by in Jerusalem. Upon arrival, Jesus is moved to compassionate action by the tears of Mary and the Jews who accompany her.

Today we can be immobilized by our busyness, claiming that we have no time, or by our comforts, claiming that the risk of action is too great. Like Jesus, we wrestle repeatedly with our temptations to stay in our cocoon. Yet the suffering of the world arrives daily at our doorstep, with tears of loss on the face of human victims and the silent testimony of the rest of creation.

Questions for Personal Reflection

What might be immobilizing me?

In what ways might I allow myself to be moved to feel compassion?

How might I gather the courage to risk moving into action?

Prayer

Jot down your thoughts. Lament your failings. Resolve to change.

To participate in the online sharing time see
the connection instructions on page 2.

Lent 6, March 27 - April 2 2023

THEME: Standing up to empire



Read Matthew 21:1-11

Jesus's entry into Jerusalem is a parody of the entry that Caesar or Caesar's representative customarily makes. Caesar would ride a warhorse; Jesus rides a lactating donkey. Caesar's path would be lined by the local dignitaries and ranks of soldiers wearing armour and carrying weapons; Jesus's path is lined with ordinary people wearing coats and waving palm branches. Jesus's entry mocks Caesar's show of power.

Caesar represented the forces of empire that were oppressing the Jews. For example, Roman taxes were being levied, and the Lake of Galilee fishery was being changed from a common resource feeding the local people into a commercial fishery whose catches were salted and sent to feed Rome. People's livelihoods were being taken away, so Caesar personified the faulty, unjust systems of that time.

Today, poking fun at people who abuse power can be an effective way of communicating your disagreement, and sometimes of shaming them into mending their ways. But changing the behaviour of a few individuals, powerful though they may be, is seldom enough to change the underlying system from which they benefit. These systems are sustained by social values and attitudes and the mass behaviours they engender; changing the systems requires us to engage in advocacy and political activism, and to model in our own behaviour the change we hope to see in the world.

Personal Reflection

Thinking back to today's faulty unjust systems and the actions within your power:

In what ways can I take a stand to show my disagreement?

What kinds of actions do I feel called to take?

What are some first steps for me?

Prayer

Jot down your thoughts. Lament your failings. Resolve to change.

To participate in the online sharing time see
the connection instructions on page 2.

Holy Week, April 3-9 2023

Holy Week ends this Lenten season. Each day this week you are invited to read scripture about Jesus's journey to the cross and beyond, and to reflect on its significance for you.

Jesus was executed because he worked for and practised regularly the things that make for real social transformation and a common life based on justice and compassion. This transformed community he referred to as the Kingdom Of Heaven. He posed an unacceptable threat to Roman imperial culture based on status, power and wealth.

Today the dominant culture has been called romantic consumerism. "Romanticism tells us that in order to make the most of our human potential we must have as many different experiences as we can ... break free from our daily routine, leave behind our familiar setting, and go travelling in distant lands, where we can 'experience' the culture, the smells, the tastes and the norms of other people ... Consumerism tells us ... we must consume as many products and services as possible. If we feel that something is missing or not quite right, then we probably need to buy a product." (Sapiens, Yuval Noah Hariri, 2011, page 115.)

Christians are called to resist romantic consumerism, to 'live simply, that others may simply live,' as the Quakers put it. To be the Body Of Christ in the world means becoming part of an alternative community that seeks to follow Jesus's Way of self-giving love instead of the self-indulgence of the dominant culture. Day by day this week, try to be open to the whisperings of Spirit speaking through scripture, through other people and your own still small voice.

Monday April 3

Read John 12:1-11 and these comments:

- Mary's action is counter-cultural. It is an intimate act conducted in public; it flies in the face of the power-culture that reserves luxury goods for special people and special occasions.
- That money-culture has even influenced the values of Jesus's disciple, Judas.
- Mary is criticized for her action.
- Jesus voices support for Mary.
- Even Lazarus is threatened because of his inactive but central participation.

Enter the story, allow yourself to imagine, journal and close with prayer.

Tuesday April 4

Read John 12:20-36 and these comments:

- This story finds Jesus seemingly preoccupied with his coming death. He has retreated from the crowds that wish to meet him, and later he hides from the disciples as well.
- Jesus's words call his disciples to action: follow, serve.
- Jesus also calls the crowd, confused about what is happening, to action: walk while you have the light, believe, become.
- Jesus resists the temptation to ask for personal safety: his task is to be lifted up for all people.

Enter the story, allow yourself to imagine, journal and close with prayer.

Wednesday April 5

Read John 13:21-32 and these comments:

- This story finds Jesus troubled in spirit, perhaps anxious about what lay before him.
- Jesus instructs Judas, his betrayer, to 'do quickly what you are going to do.'
- Jesus then gives a shout of triumph; perhaps glorying in the courage that allowed him to be betrayed.

Enter the story, allow yourself to imagine, journal and close with prayer.

Thursday April 6

Read John 13:1-17, 31b-35 and these comments:

- This story describes Jesus loving the disciples to the end, not stopping.
- Jesus assumes the role of servant, washing feet.
- Anyone who wishes to be Jesus disciple must allow Jesus to act as servant.
- Disciples are to do for each other as Jesus has done for them.
- Jesus gives the new commandment of love.

Enter the story, allow yourself to imagine, journal and close with prayer.

Friday April 7

Read John 18:1 - 19:42 and these comments:

- Throughout this long account we see manifestations of the power of the dominant culture
 - soldiers, police, torches and weapons
 - people with authority - Annas, Caiaphas and Pilate
 - the threat of the emperor
 - the legal process
 - the intimidation of Peter
 - the mob frenzy of the crowd
- We also see Jesus's quiet persistence in resisting and speaking truth to power.

Enter the story, allow yourself to imagine, journal and close with prayer.

Saturday April 8

The gospels provide no account of this day. Spend some time imagining the disciples feeling lost, their hopes dashed, their future uncertain; and some time reflecting on ways in which you experience similar feelings today. You are invited to participate in the Easter Vigil on ZOOM, 3 - 4 o'clock this afternoon. For details on how to access the link, see the Harcourt website.

Sunday April 9 **Hallelujah, Christ is risen**

Read John 21:1-18 and celebrate the good news of the resurrection, and then pray.

Christ has no body now but ours. We are Christ's body. Let us behave as the body of Christ in the world.

Go and treat with compassion every person you encounter, including yourself.

Go and walk through this life, reaching out a helping hand where you can.

Go and bless this world with everything that you have, with everything you are.

Do not be afraid for you are loved with a love that will never let you go. Divine Love folds itself around you, holds you up and carries you forward.

Amen