

Gathered Together



Catholic

**A Lenten Journey of
Love and Belonging**

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Lent 2025

Gathered Together: A Lenten Journey of Love and Belonging

Lent is a season of transformation, calling us to grow closer to God through prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. But this journey is not just about personal renewal—it's also a time to extend Christ's love to others, especially those who feel lost or lonely. As we draw nearer to God, we are invited to unite as one body in Christ, reaching out to those who need hope, connection, and belonging.

Ash Wednesday

March 5, 2025

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Theme for the week: Humility is Just the Beginning.

Reflection for Ash Wednesday

Jesus' words for us on Ash Wednesday are just as potent today as they were for his listeners in his own time. As Christians, we often feel the temptation to seek recognition for our holy acts—making large donations, ensuring others notice our piety, or striving for admiration in our sacrifices. But he says three times in today's readings, "They have received their reward."

Our Lord knows human nature. If human approval were enough to satisfy us, we could simply accept it and move on. But it isn't. This outward expression and desire for attention is hollow and fleeting. What we really need is a loving, intimate, and personal relationship with our Father, who "sees in secret" and repays us in ways that attention from others simply can't.

This humility and sincerity in our spiritual practices can transform us. Freed from the need for recognition, we become more attuned to the needs of others. May our personal sacrifices this Lent extend beyond ourselves, bringing light and love to the lonely and forgotten in our midst.

Daily Challenges

3/5/25—Choose a person or group of people who are lonely or forgotten, and commit to praying for them throughout Lent. *Don't forget: today is a day of fasting (one full meal and two small meals that don't equal one meal) and abstinence (no meat).*

3/6/25—Pray that one person who doubts the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist would come a little closer to believing.

3/7/25—Send a text or an email to say "I'm thinking of you today" to someone who might feel forgotten. *Don't forget: today is a day to abstain from meat!*

3/8/25—Prepare for the First Sunday of Lent by reading the Gospel, Luke 4:1-13.

First Sunday of Lent

March 9, 2025

Luke 4:1-13

Theme for the week: Seeing Beyond Ourselves

Reflection for the First Sunday of Lent

In today's Gospel, we hear the familiar story of the Temptation of Jesus. Notice when the devil came to test Jesus: after 40 days of solitude and fasting in the desert, when he was physically weak and hungry. Get him while he's weak, or so the devil thought. Armed with the Word of God, Jesus was ready to face these temptations. After all, he himself is the Word made flesh.

It can be tempting to think of this episode as a "feats of strength" test: Jesus vs. Satan in the ultimate matchup. But rather than being determined to win this battle for pride, he vanquishes his enemy and then returns to Galilee to begin his ministry.

He does it for us.

What does this moment teach us about our own trials? When we face temptations or challenges, we often tend to turn inward, letting those "tests" consume us entirely. But what if we looked to Jesus as our model in those moments? He faced temptation not for his own sake but for ours, showing us how to resist and move forward. Could we follow his example—claim the victory that is already ours through him—and return to serving others with renewed strength?

Daily Challenges

3/9/25—If you are dealing with a personal struggle, decide to put it on hold just for today and pray: Jesus, I trust in you.

3/10/25—Turn off your phone for one hour (or more!) and contemplate Christ's solitude in the desert.

3/11/25—Check in on someone who lives alone.

3/12/25—Smile at a stranger today (even if it feels uncomfortable).

3/13/25—Spend time in Eucharistic Adoration (or virtual Adoration). Even 15 minutes will be a blessing.

3/14/25—Offer a prayer for the Church and the unity of believers. *Don't forget: today is a day to abstain from meat!*

3/15/25—Prepare for the Second Sunday of Lent by reading the Gospel, Luke 9:28b-36.

Second Sunday of Lent

March 16, 2025

Luke 9:28b-36

Theme for the week: Listening that Leads to Action

Reflection for the Second Sunday of Lent

In today's Gospel, Jesus taps Peter, James, and John to come up the mountain with him to pray. This wasn't that unusual since Jesus often spent nights in prayer. It was not to be like any other lengthy prayer session with their Lord, however. This time, they would be shown—and told—exactly who Jesus was. In Luke's Gospel, the three sleepy apostles miss the whole conversation between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, and when they did wake up, they must have been quite overwhelmed by the scene. And why not? They saw Jesus in his transformed glory and recognized the two men with him. After the disoriented suggestion to build some tents and stay, a voice told them, "This is my chosen Son; listen to him." And then they were alone with Jesus. Followed by stunned silence.

Had they not been truly listening to Jesus? Were they searching their hearts to understand why they needed this somewhat frightening encounter to remind them to listen to him? After all, they had been following him, they had been chosen, and they were close.

It is possible that the disciples engaged in selective perception—hearing only what they wanted to hear. Some may have only listened to Jesus's encouraging and uplifting words and ignored the difficult parts. Others may have understood his words and actions as a promise to become the long-anticipated Messiah who would lead a political and military uprising to liberate them from oppressive Roman rule.

Today's reading challenges us to reflect on our own listening. Are we, like the apostles, engaging in selective hearing? Do we struggle to fully embrace the truth that before the glory of resurrection comes the reality of passion and suffering? The Transfiguration is a gift—a moment of clarity and strength—to prepare us for what lies ahead. It fills us with awe and reverence so that, like Peter, James, and John, we can descend the mountain and re-enter a world marked by suffering and loneliness, ready to introduce others to Jesus.

The apostles' experience reminds us that true listening compels us to act. Who might we invite to journey down the mountain with us, sharing the light of Christ in a world longing for hope and belonging?

Daily Challenges

3/16/25—Reread the Gospel account of the Transfiguration (Luke 9:28b-36). Write down one way you feel God is calling you to act in your community.

3/17/25—Take time to fully listen to someone today without interrupting or thinking about your response. Focus on understanding their heart and needs.

3/18/25—Spend five minutes in quiet prayer, asking God to help you truly listen to His voice and be open to His call.

3/19/25—Find one small way to serve someone today—hold a door, lend a hand, or do an unnoticed chore—with the mindset of reflecting Jesus's love.

3/20/25—Identify someone who may be struggling or feeling lonely and send them a kind message, note, or call to remind them they are seen and loved.

3/21/24—Make an intentional effort to invite someone to join you in an activity—coffee, a walk, or Mass—building connection and belonging in their life. *Don't forget: today is a day to abstain from meat.*

3/22/25—Prepare for the Third Sunday of Lent by reading the Gospel, Luke 13:1-9

Third Sunday of Lent

March 23, 2025

Luke 13:1-9

Theme for the week: Tending the Garden

Reflection for the Third Sunday of Lent

Today's Gospel reading is the scriptural equivalent of the old image of the man on the sidewalk wearing a sandwich board that reads: The End is Near.

While the sidewalk evangelist may have gotten more laughs than converts, Jesus' words emphasize the urgency of repentance in a way that is tough to ignore. In the first part of the reading, Jesus responds to a "news report" about Galileans killed by Pilate, presumably as they offered ritual sacrifices, and another story about people crushed by a falling tower. He reframes both tragedies—not as divine punishment but as stark reminders of life's fragility. None of us know how much time we have, so Jesus challenges his listeners to examine their spiritual state now rather than assuming there's always time to make things right with God.

Jesus then reinforces this call to repentance with a vivid parable about an orchard owner, a gardener, and a barren fig tree. The orchard owner wants to cut the tree down, but the gardener pleads for one more year to tend and nurture it. As with all of Jesus' parables, there are layers of meaning to consider. The fig tree can represent us individually—our spiritual lives may have become stagnant, bearing little or no fruit. But it can also symbolize those who are distant from God: people who are struggling, lost, or alone.

Here's the challenge: As Christians, we're not only called to ensure our own trees bear fruit but also to take on the role of the gardener. We are invited to intercede, nurture, and tend the barren trees, offering time, patience, prayer, and love to help others grow. In doing so, we become participants in the mercy and grace of God.

This Lent, how can we embrace the gardener's mission? Who in our lives might need our care, encouragement, or prayer to bear the fruit they are capable of? Let us ask God for the courage and wisdom to meet this challenge, sharing His mercy with a world that is so often fragile and in need of hope.

Daily Challenges

3/16/25—Today, reflect on your own "fruitfulness." Where might you need God's grace to grow?

3/17/25—Spend some time in prayer for the "lonely trees" – strangers or friends who are far away from God.

3/18/25—Pray the Divine Mercy chaplet at 3 pm.

3/19/25—Text a friend and ask for their prayer intentions. Let them know it can be as specific or vague as they like, whatever they are most comfortable with. Then, offer an Our Father or a Hail Mary for their intentions.

3/20/25—Spend an hour helping someone who needs it, whether it's running errands for them, watering plants, or just listening.

3/21/25—Share a recipe for your favorite meatless dish with a Catholic friend and remind them: *today is a day to abstain from meat!*

3/22/25—Prepare for the Fourth Sunday of Lent by reading the Gospel, Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 30, 2025

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Theme for the week: A Father's Welcome

Reflection for the Fourth Sunday of Lent

Today's Gospel kicks off with a familiar jab at Jesus: He welcomes sinners and eats with them. What they called "sinners" in Jesus' time were not people who had minor slip-ups but those who had seriously broken the laws of God. Tax collectors were considered extortioners—really unsavory characters. Their outrage that Jesus would associate with these types of people prompted him to tell the parable of the prodigal son.

The prodigal son story is really a story about a father and his two sons and his crazy, wild, passionate, fatherly love for both of them (not just the squanderer).

The younger son demands his share. The father agrees and seems pretty unemotional about it. The son just wanted out. So he left. And we know the rest. The kid spends all his money, a famine hits, and he takes miserably to work doing the unthinkable for a Jew: tending to unclean swine. When he was beyond miserable and sinking fast, he came to his senses and decided to go beg for a job from his dad.

While the younger son drafted and rehearsed the speech he planned to give to his father and walked home barefooted, we learn that the father was far from unemotional. When he saw him from a distance, he ran out to meet him. To us, this doesn't seem unusual, "he ran to his son," but well-off men of the time did NOT run. It would be considered silly and undignified to run. But he didn't care. What was in his heart went to his feet, and he ran.

Now, the older son. The stalwart son. The obedient son. He wasn't watching for his brother's return; he was busy working in the field as was expected of him. When he saw the rowdy crowd gathering for the celebration, instead of being overjoyed that his brother was home, he got mad and sulked. The father loved his oldest son enough to leave the party and beg him to have compassion for his little brother. The father was loving and kind to his eldest, who was being, for all intents and purposes, a petulant jerk.

The story's message for Jesus' critics is the same now as it was then. God loves the prodigals, the sinners, and the tax collectors. God also loves the older sons, the devout Pharisees, and the scribes. When today's "prodigals" turn to the Father, he runs out to meet them, and the celebration begins. The Father also tenderly invites the older sons of today to the feast.

This parable reminds us that the Father longs to draw us close, whether we are lost in the messiness of our own mistakes or distant because of pride and resentment. As we reflect on this story, we're also challenged to extend that same love and welcome to others who are searching for belonging—especially those who feel lost, excluded, or alone. Can we run to meet them as the Father meets us?

Daily Challenges

3/30/25—Today is Laetare Sunday! Laetare means "rejoice!" In the midst of your Lent sacrifices, fasts, and penances, it is a day to remember that the Easter celebration is coming. Take a moment—by yourself or with your family—and think about 5 (or more!) things that bring you joy, and thank God for them.

3/31/25—Read and pray with Psalm 51 in light of the story of the prodigal son. Then, in your own words, pour your heart out to the Father, thanking him for his mercy and forgiveness.

4/1/25—Reflect on a time when you felt resentful or distant from others. Today, focus on extending compassion to those who seem judgmental or unapproachable.

4/2/25—Share a "Lent update" with a friend or on social media. What is God showing you?

4/3/25—Take some time today to reflect on a relationship in your life that needs healing. Ask God to soften your heart in this area.

4/4/25—Pray a "Hail Mary" after your dinner prayer for a special family intention. *Don't forget: today is a day to abstain from meat.*

4/5/25—Prepare for the Fifth Sunday of Lent by reading the Gospel, John 8:1-11

Fifth Sunday of Lent

April 6, 2025

John 8:1-11

Theme for the week: Mercy in Action

Reflection for the Fifth Sunday of Lent

In another episode of "Gotcha, Jesus," the scribes and Pharisees try to catch Jesus saying or doing something that would give them grounds to bring him up on charges. In this unsavory scene, they put an adulterous woman in the middle of a large group of people and ask Jesus what should be done with her.

What were they hoping to charge Jesus with in this case? There were a couple of possible scenarios. If he says she should be stoned, they can turn him over to the Romans, who forbid Jews to execute anyone (see chapter 18, verse 31). If he says the woman should not be stoned to death, they can charge him with not obeying the Law of Moses. They thought they had him this time.

Instead of answering their question, Jesus "bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger." What was he writing? In George Martin's book *Bringing the Gospel of John to Life*, he explains: "In reality, what he wrote is not important; if it were, the Gospel author would have presented it. The likeliest suggestion is that Jesus is simply turning away from those trying to trap him and doodling on the pavement, pointedly ignoring them."

Ignoring them just made them continue to pester him until he turned it back to them, saying, "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And just like that, the tables were turned. If they insisted on stoning her, they would have to face the Romans; if they did not, they would be breaking the Law of Moses themselves. He won this round, and they left.

Jesus masterfully handled the manipulative scribes and Pharisees. But even more importantly, he handles the woman with tender mercy, offering her not just forgiveness but an invitation to transformation and belonging. In a world that often shuns the lonely and broken, Jesus welcomes the outcast and offers the possibility of new life.

This encounter invites us to reflect on how we welcome others, particularly those who are broken, lost, or lonely. In our communities, are we quick to condemn, or do we offer mercy, space, and encouragement for transformation? Our loving Lord knows our sins, too, and is always ready to offer us the same mercy. Meeting him has a tendency to change lives—and in doing so, we are called to help change the lives of those around us.

Daily Challenges

4/6/25—Pray for those who feel rejected or abandoned in society—whether due to their circumstances, actions, or status. Ask God to help you become an instrument of mercy in their lives.

4/7/25—Pray with Psalm 126 from Sunday's liturgy. Think about or write down three "great things" God has done in your life.

4/8/25—Reflect on a time when you've been harsh in your judgment of others. Write down what you could have done differently to show mercy instead and how you might approach similar situations with compassion going forward.

4/9/25—If you haven't received the Sacrament of Reconciliation during Lent yet, this might be the perfect week to do it. Look up confession schedules on your parish website

4/10/25—Choose a moment today to put someone else's needs or desires before your own.

4/11/24—Make one extra sacrifice today (e.g., no cream in your coffee or a few hours off social media). *Don't forget: today is a day to abstain from meat.*

4/12/25—Prepare for Palm Sunday by reading the Gospel, Luke 22:14-23:56

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion

April 13, 2025

At the Procession with Palms—Luke 19:28-40

At the Mass—Luke 22:14–23:56

Theme for the week: The Journey to Redemption

Reflection for Palm Sunday

On Palm Sunday, we are faced with a striking paradox. At the Procession with Palms, we join the crowds in hailing Jesus as a powerful leader, shouting, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" Pharisees in the crowd want to silence the disciples, but Jesus tells them, "I tell you, if they keep silent, the stones will cry out!" It is a scene of joy, triumph, and anticipation.

Yet the tone shifts dramatically when we move into the Gospel at the Mass. We are now witnesses to Jesus' betrayal, suffering, and crucifixion. The same crowd that celebrated his arrival now calls for his death. The king who was hailed with acclamation is now mocked, rejected, and condemned to die on a cross.

This week, we walk with Jesus through the betrayals, sorrow, and surrender, fully aware of how the journey will end—with His ultimate victory over sin and death. As we reflect on His sacrificial love and perfect obedience to the Father, we are also reminded of our own need for redemption and the burdens of sin we carry. Jesus bore the weight of humanity's sin on the road to Calvary, embracing the suffering and isolation of the cross to reconcile us to God. In doing so, He shows us how to accompany those who feel lost or abandoned with the same mercy He offers us.

During Holy Week, let us respond to the invitation to receive His grace and share it, proclaiming the Good News that Easter's triumph brings hope and healing to a world longing for salvation.

Daily Challenges

4/13/25—Reflect on moments when your faith has wavered. Pray for courage to remain faithful even in times of difficulty or doubt.

4/14/25—Jesus was accompanied by crowds but stood alone in his Passion. Offer silent companionship to someone who is struggling.

4/15/25—Jesus foretells his betrayal but continues to show compassion. Today, perform an anonymous act of kindness for someone in need.

4/16/25—Reflect on Judas' betrayal and Christ's mercy. Consider how you respond to hurt and disappointment. Pray for the grace to forgive someone who has hurt you.

4/17/25—Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, calling us to humble service. Today, do a simple, humble task for someone without seeking recognition.

4/18/25 Good Friday of the Lord's Passion—Jesus carried his cross and suffered for the sins of the world. Fast from a personal comfort and offer it as a prayer for the lost and lonely. *Don't forget: today is a day of fasting (one full meal and two small meals that don't equal one meal) and abstinence (no meat).*

4/19/25 Holy Saturday—Spend 10 minutes in silent prayer in quiet preparation for the resurrection. Then, prepare for Easter by reading the Gospel, John 20:1-9

The Resurrection of the Lord

April 20, 2025

John 20:1-9

Theme for the week: Living in the Light of the Resurrection

Reflection for Easter

"They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they put him."

Imagine Mary of Magdala's shivers of fright and panic when she ran to report what she had seen to Peter and the beloved disciple. Despite anything she heard or thought, or even hoped, her first instinct when seeing the grave's stone rolled aside would be to think that the tomb had been raided and that Jesus' body would have been taken. It was a terrifying thought.

Peter and John didn't question or hesitate; they just ran. What they found was not consistent with a grave robbery. Robbers would not have unwrapped a body, yet the burial cloths were in the tomb. The cloth that covered Jesus' head was rolled up separately, again, not something robbers or looters would have done.

"Then the other disciple also went in, the one who had arrived at the tomb first, and he saw and believed."

What he saw didn't make sense—a grave with no corpse and burial cloths left behind. But he believed. In that moment, John put the pieces together and believed that Jesus was alive. The Gospel tells us they didn't fully understand yet, but that would come. What they saw that morning was at least the first proof that their beloved Lord had done what he said he would do.

The empty tomb challenges us to believe in the extraordinary and trust God's love's power to transform our lives. Like the disciples, we may encounter moments of confusion and doubt, but the resurrection assures us that God's plan is greater than our understanding. As we contemplate the empty tomb, may we open our hearts to the profound mystery of Easter—the hope that springs from Christ's triumph over death and the promise of eternal life for all who believe.

In this season of new life, may we also be inspired to accompany the lost, the lonely, and those in need of the hope that only Christ can give. Just as the disciples were transformed by encountering the risen Christ, may we be the presence of Christ to others, walking with them through their doubts and fears and leading them to the promise of new life in Him.

Daily Challenges

4/20/25—Embrace joy. Let the day be filled with celebration. With your children or grandchildren, say a prayer of blessing over Easter eggs!

Blessing of Easter Eggs

We beseech Thee, O Lord, to bestow Thy benign blessing upon these eggs, to make them a wholesome food for Thy faithful, who gratefully partake of them in honor of the Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

4/21/25—It's Easter all week, so don't succumb to the Monday blues! Instead, take a moment to send a joyful text or a message on social media to someone who might be feeling lonely or isolated.

4/22/25—Learn about and pray the Via Lucis (Way of Light)--recounting the fourteen steps of Christ's life on earth after the Resurrection.

4/23/25—We didn't hear the "Alleluia" during Lent, but now it is back for Easter! Make "Alleluia" your phone screen saver, and display it in your home or office.

4/24/25—Surprise someone with kindness; leave a little note or a treat for someone who might not often feel appreciated (think: mail carriers, baristas, service people).

4/25/25—Invite someone to Mass. It's likely your parish was full of people on Easter Sunday, but will they feel welcome to come back without a personal invitation? Make a point to reach out to someone and invite them to attend this Sunday (Divine Mercy Sunday).

4/26/25—Prepare for Divine Mercy Sunday by reading the Gospel, John 20:19-31.