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# PART 1

## AN INVITATION



# WELCOME



*A dead thing can go with the stream,  
but only a living thing can go against it.*

G. K. CHESTERTON<sup>1</sup>

Lent is strange because Easter is strange. If you've been raised in a tradition in which Easter is routinely recognized, you might have forgotten its peculiarity, but consider: We celebrate freedom from the sting of eternal death because thousands of years ago a humble Jewish man claimed to be the Son of God, then died and rose again. We celebrate with our families and friends, go to church and proclaim, "He is risen indeed!" and sing songs about the gladness of Jesus's resurrection. In many traditions, new followers are baptized, welcomed into the fold, and then catechized in their newfound faith. From the earliest days of the first-century Church, Christ's followers have recognized the sacramental nature of the eucharist by giving thanks with bread and wine.

Secular traditions such as the Easter Bunny and colored hidden eggs are strange enough on their own, being devoid of serious connection to what we're actually celebrating. The true historic feast day of Easter alone, without the basket of pastel eggs, is a genuine paschal mystery to our twenty-first century culture, who may look at our claim of a resurrected Savior of the world with skepticism. In terms of the liturgical calendar: Tie in the idea that Eastertide traditionally lasts a full *50 days* and the 46 days

*before* that constitute a season of penance called Lent, and we have ourselves a downright bizarre spiritual and communal heritage. Even those of us who do claim faith in the paschal mystery might scratch our heads at why the ancient Church declared the months before Easter a fasting season, why the months afterward are a feasting season, and why millions of Christians still observe it today.

In light of all this, why bother observing Lent? After all, it's not in the Bible and Jesus never told us to do it. This was my posture for most of my adult life.

I was raised by loving parents who made sure we attended our evangelical, non-denominational Protestant church almost weekly. The two biggest holidays of the year at church were—you guessed it—Christmas and Easter, with the latter, in my young mind, significantly less important than its companion. Every Easter was a magnificent production with music (sometimes orchestral) and an evangelization-focused sermon, pastel outfits aplenty, and crowds of extra visitors. But in all my years, I never recall recognizing Lent. *Lent* was a foreign word reserved for the loftier Christians, our Lutheran, Episcopal, and Catholic counterparts.

Not until I began dipping my toes into a more liturgical approach to the Christian life did I understand more about the purpose of Lent. And not until I began reading the words of ancient Christians themselves did I realize just how old a tradition it is.

Now Lent is something I genuinely look forward to in the dark final days of winter, a few weeks after we return the Christmas decor to the attic and just in time for my springtime eagerness. The eagerness is different from the anticipation of Christmas and our household celebrations of Advent; after all, the Lenten season is longer, darker, less culturally festive, and more penitent. But every year we recognize the ancient season, the more my modern-day sensibilities crave it. I feel the need for Lent in my bones. It may be an antiquated tradition, but our modern culture needs it now more than ever.





*To endure the cross is not a tragedy; it is the suffering  
which is the fruit of an exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ.*

*When it comes, it is not an accident, but a necessity.*

*DIETRICH BONHOEFFER<sup>9</sup>*





## ASH WEDNESDAY

“Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” These are the words said as ashes are either sprinkled on your head or smeared on your forehead in the shape of a cross. The ritual is strange. It’s uncomfortable. It’s blunt. And it’s supposed to be all these things.

Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent, a day set aside for many Christians to remember their mortality. We’re unsure of the day’s origin, yet we can read in the Old Testament when people connected penitence, fasting, and prayer with ashes. Today, ashes often come from the palm fronds burned after the prior year’s Palm Sunday service—the day when the congregation remembers Jesus’s entrance into Jerusalem and marks the start of Holy Week. We’ll be there this year, too, soon enough. Ashes are the stuff of earth, charred to oblivion, bitter, and largely useless—save for two things.

First, ashes remind us of our own dusty origin and ending. The Latin phrase *memento mori*—“remember you will die”—is an ancient reminder that applies to every living thing on earth and has not yet expired in verity. If what we see around us is all there is, *memento mori* is bleak at best, soul-crushing at worst. To believe that life as we know it ends when our earthly bodies expire is to reckon with the fact that at any moment, the purpose of our existence could extinguish faster than a thumb and forefinger to candlewick.

To believe that our skin and bones are arks of God’s covenant, however—that our bodies do nothing less than house the very divine-breathed souls that make up our personhood—is to believe life *must* matter. A reason bigger than ourselves must exist for breathing in and out, at this particular moment and in this particular place on earth.

When we choose to believe in a maker who has woven our tendons into legs and cartilage into nostrils, we're also choosing to believe that we don't determine our own value. We're not required to define our worth, our purpose for being, or even our humanity. We are, thankfully, allowed to simply trust that God has a reason for our existence. *Memento mori*, therefore, becomes a battle cry, a lullaby that lures us toward a good purpose for rising in the morning and resting in the evening. Our life is so very short, and we will die, but oh how purposeful and masterful it must be! It has to be. Why else are we here?

Second, ashes remind us of growth. A wise gardener collects the heap of ashes in her fireplace for her compost bin, adding nutrients for a more fruitful, nutritious harvest in the summer garden. Blackened cinder will decompose to make grasses greener, berries juicier, peppers spicier. The ashes smudged on our foreheads speak of our own future harvest, when we choose to abide in Christ like fruit on a well-pruned vine. God turns our compost heap into fertilizer to yield more than we could possibly imagine.

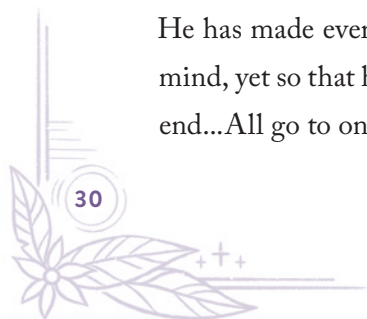
Remember you are dust; remember you will one day return to dust; and remember that in between, life's daily ashes become compost yielding rich fruit when we allow Christ to prune us. Trust in this hope.

**Read:** **Ecclesiastes 3:1-2, 4, 10-11, 20 RSV**

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;  
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
a time to mourn, and a time to dance

I have seen the business that God has given to the sons of men to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man's mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end...All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again.



**Ask:**

Because my life is so short, how will I trust in the hope of Christ today?

**Pray:**

“Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth: Grant that these ashes may be to us a sign of our mortality and penitence, that we may remember that it is only by your gracious gift that we are given everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.” —*The Book of Common Prayer*

**Listen:**

“Ash Wednesday’s Early Morn” by Liturgical Folk





# Day 2

## THURSDAY

It's long been said that among the cardinal sins, pride is the most deadly because it gives birth to all other vices. Pride is nothing more and nothing less than the desire to be more than we are, than who God created us to be. It tempts us to long for unearned praise as though it's the lifeline sustaining our daily actions, as though it's our reason for loving others and loving ourselves. Pride demands of us a sense of exceptionalism among our neighbors and friends. Pride makes us think of our gifts as something self-given. It asks us to forget who God is.

Saint Thomas Aquinas states in his *Summa Theologica* that “pride is the appetite for excellence in excess of right reason.”<sup>10</sup> The goal isn't to think ourselves unworthy or unlovable; it's to never forget that we are *made* and not our *maker*. Pride slips into the nooks and crannies of the soul when we have an inordinate desire for our own excellence. According to Saint Augustine, pride comes when our own excellence becomes an end in itself instead of a gift God can use as the hands and feet of Christ.<sup>11</sup> We succumb to pride when we believe our actions, ideas, and habits end with us.

God wants us to remember *whose* we are and *why* we are. We don't exist for ourselves and our glory. Pride insists we forget that life is gloriously about so much more than our own desires and preferences. The irony is that pride is so fatal to our being it demolishes our souls, lowering us far beneath anything God means for us, and the cost of pride is forgetting how fearfully and wonderfully made we already are. When we aim for an excess of excellence that's meant only for the creator of all things, and not for created beings like ourselves, we neglect the spread of goodness set out in abundance where we *can* feast as beloved children. Pride is always contrary to the love of God because

it demands we forget the order God has created—an order that places humanity in a mind-blowing partnership with the creator. God invites us to leave the bitterness of our own paltry, putrid portions made by selfish pride and collaborate with him in creating a delectable banquet of sweetness for his kingdom come. When we let go of our own self-focused agendas, we're free to feast.

**Read:**      **1 Corinthians 1:27-31 RSV**

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption; therefore, as it is written, “Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord.”

**Ask:**      How might God use my 40-day fast to make me aware of the pride in my life?

**Pray:**      “From the desire of being praised, Deliver me, Jesus.”  
—*from “A Christian Litany of Humility” by Rafael Cardinal Merry del Val*

**Listen:**      “Champion” by Alanna Boudreau (featuring Scott Mulvahill)



# Day 3

## FRIDAY

In these early days of Lent, our fasts often feel easy. We're still energized by our initial motivations for our offerings to God; the gentle reminders throughout our day still speak with tenderhearted voices. When the fasts do feel challenging, we still laugh easily and shake our heads at our weak hesitation to offer small sacrifices. Ash Wednesday's ashen mark remains on the forefront of our minds.

Oh, how these penitential acts pull back the curtain on our pride! We believe we have the moxie within us to offer what we love back to the One able to sustain us without it. Because we're aware of what we need to give, we walk through these early Lenten days in confidence, assuming *knowing* works in tandem with *doing*.

Ash Wednesday reminds us we aren't only souls or spirits—that our physical bodies matter because they're gifts from God. Jesus himself was God incarnate, who took on a physical human body with all its quirks and requirements. If we were merely brains being carted around in skulls atop bipedal bodies, simply *knowing* about sacrifice would suffice. Our pride tempts us to believe knowing is enough and that our actions don't matter.

Our physical bodies need sustenance: food, water, sleep, shelter. God saw fit to make us so that throughout the day we eat, drink, nap, and rest in order to be more fully human. In fact, he called the bodies he made us *very good*. These are the same bodies able to take action toward our chosen fasts, to fully submit to our doing them. If we have chosen to rise earlier to pray, our arms can push us off our mattresses when it's still dark and the pillows beckon us back. If we're pausing our entertainment streaming services, we can set down the remote and instead pick up a book or garden trowel. If we're

fasting from needless spending, we can close the tabs on our internet browser and fold the clean clothes we already have.

Pride tempts us into believing we only need to name a fast, to want it, to think about it, to do what we can and see what happens. True humility ties on the running shoes when everything in us screams *no*. Only when we remember our frailty do we see the blatant ridiculousness of our pride and the deep, deep need for our meager fast. May God use our desire for good to break the pride that permeates our hearts.

## **Read:** Ephesians 2:8-10 RSV

By grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

## **Ask:**

Why does God want to free me from the stronghold of pride?  
What benefit do I stand to gain?

## **Pray:**

“Let me have too deep a sense of humor to be proud. Let me know my absurdity before I act absurdly. Let me realize that when I am humble I am most human, most truthful, and most worthy of your serious consideration.” —*Daniel A. Lord, SJ*<sup>12</sup>

## **Listen:**

“Dust We Are and Shall Return” by The Brilliance





## SATURDAY

There are times when pride disguises itself as humility. It whispers the lie that a lack of courage is actually a lack of desiring personal attention. God often places us in situations where we would act in the good name of Christ to speak, to touch, to listen, or to move, but we tell ourselves that to do so would be prideful. We say it would probably be best if we walked on, confident that we're following the will of God.

At times Jesus purposely sought out anonymity, deliberately waiting for the moment when God saw fit to make his identity known. But when it was time, Jesus publicly acted in God's will to heal the suffering, feed the hungry, and call out corruption and wickedness. It wasn't his pride that healed the man who was lowered from the roof; it was mercy and compassion. Christ didn't shy away from his calling, and neither should we.

Pride is an excessive desire for our own excellence for reasons outside of our divinely appointed excellence: reasons like our race, gender, age, station in life, intelligence, nationality, economic security, and other human-oriented categories. But the opposite of pride is not to ignore these identifiers; it's to call out, in humility, when our neighbors are made to be inferior because of them. Humility is recognizing our equal dependence on God: a form of humbly loving others when we defend someone in need of our voice, our hands and feet, or our material goods. We follow Christ's model of humility when we give our extra coat to the person who has none, or when we lovingly correct our neighbor who shames the elderly man down the street.

Pride tells us that attending to the needs of others draws attention to ourselves. God doesn't want us to care if passersby notice our coin toss to the charity cup, but *neglecting*

the gifts we've been given and failing to give out of our abundance to help raise the station of our brothers and sisters is no act of humility.

In *The Divine Comedy*, the medieval poet Dante Alighieri defined pride as the love of one's own good perverted to a desire to deprive other people of theirs. The consequence of pride in Dante's *Inferno* is the very center of his hell, where sinners are frozen in ice. This ice keeps them in isolation, separate from all others—a chilling consequence to the alienating sin of pride.

We are made to live in community with one another, and to do so with flourishing requires humility. Humility is not becoming a doormat; it is freedom from self-focus, from caring too much what our fellow human beings think. Paired with magnanimity, humility lets us participate with God in the pursuit of kingdom come, here on earth for everyone. May God use our humility to serve others when we're called.

**Read:**

**Micah 6:6, 8 RSV**

With what shall I come before the LORD,  
and bow myself before God on high?  
He has showed you, O man, what is good;  
and what does the LORD require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?

**Ask:**

Who is an example, either from history or from my own life, of someone who has demonstrated freedom from self-occupation?



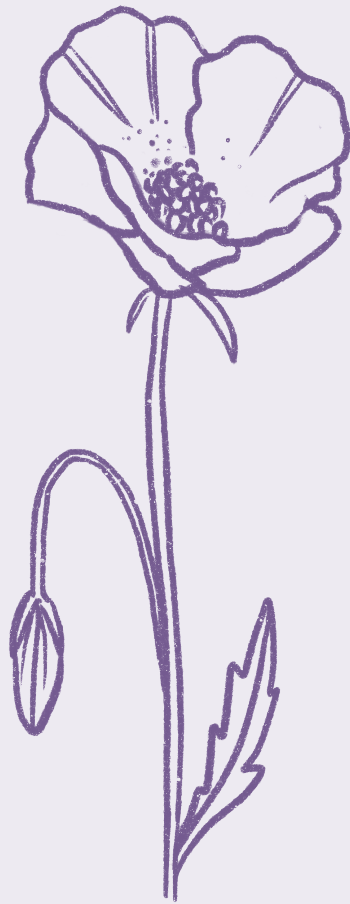
**Pray:**

In my campaign against pride, God, keep from me a false humility that both denies your good gifts and my advantages. Give me the eyes to see and courage to act as your faithful servant to further your kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

**Listen:**

“All the Poor and Powerless” by All Sons & Daughters





# Day 5

## SUNDAY

On Sundays during Lent, we take a small break from fasting to recognize a day of repose as a “mini-Easter,” remembering that Christ has already freed us from the crippling weight of sin. Rest in the goodness of Scripture, sacrament, and community, and delight in the beauty of steadfast provision: delicious food, a comfortable bed, and perhaps some laughter.

### Read:

### Psalm 73:23-26 ESV

I am continually with you;  
you hold my right hand.  
You guide me with your counsel,  
and afterward you will receive me to glory.  
Whom have I in heaven but you?  
And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.  
My flesh and my heart may fail,  
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

### Ask:

When has God given me opportunities this past week to practice ordinary, everyday humility?

### Pray:

You were before all things, you created all things, and only because of you all things are held together. God, free us from too

much inward focus on ourselves so that we look outward and rejoice in your creative hand under every nook and cranny. Amen.

**Listen:**

“All Ye Tenderhearted” by Daniel Martin Moore

**Reflect:**

*Still Life with a Skull and a Writing Quill* by Pieter Claesz (1628)

