

in the
SHADOW
of the
CROSS

Creative
Communications
Sample

DEVOTIONS FOR LENT

Chad Bird

ASH WEDNESDAY

The Smiling Wink in the Ashes

To grant to those who mourn in Zion—to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning. ISAIAH 61:3

ASHES ARE THE LAST CHAPTER IN THE STORY OF WOOD. What once was a tree, bold and upright, has now been burned. Its grandeur diminished to a palmful of dust. Ashes are the story of how big things become little. Great things become small.

But ashes are, for us, only the next-to-last chapter. Death will kneel before resurrection. Our dust and ashes will, by the word of Christ, become glorious, resurrected bodies. There's a smiling wink of Easter in that palmful of dust.

**Jesus, shine on the ashes of our guilt,
the light of your resurrecting love. Amen.**

THURSDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

Sundials of Guilt

*He will bring forth your righteousness as the light,
and your justice as the noonday. PSALM 37:6*

LONG BEFORE DIGITAL CLOCKS AND CELLPHONES, SOME PEOPLE TOLD TIME BY A SUNDIAL. You counted the hours by the position of the shadow cast upon the dial.

We still do this, but in a different way. The shadows of certain things we've done, or left undone, are cast upon the dial of our lives. The shadows mark the day, the hour, we failed in ways big and small. The shades of guilt mark the progress—or regress—of our time here on earth. These shadows, more than anything, hold us back. Handcuff us to a shaded past darkened by guilt.

Jesus takes a hammer to our sundials of guilt. He smashes our captivity to sin by the crushing blow of his cross. And on us he casts the light of his forgiving love.

**Jesus, brilliance of the Father, dispel from our hearts
the shades of guilt. Amen.**

FRIDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

The Weight of Shadows

*But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven,
but beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"* LUKE 18:13

THERE IS NO SCALE FOR WEIGHING SHADOWS. Their size cannot be measured by pounds or ounces. But we all know how heavy they can be. Thus it was with the tax collector, who wouldn't even lift up his eyes to heaven. He faced down, pulled there by the greedy darkness of his guilt. And so it is with us. Standing before God, we cannot look up to his face. The heft of our sin is too heavy.

So Jesus puts his hand under our chins and lifts up our heads. He looks us square in the face. And his face radiates the light of love. A light that steals away the weight of guilt, leaving in its place mercy that lifts our hearts to heaven.

**"Lift up the light of your face upon us,
O Lord!" (Psalm 4:6). Amen.**

SATURDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

False Guilt

For your name's sake, O Lord, pardon my guilt, for it is great. PSALM 25:11

AS IF IT WEREN'T ENOUGH THAT WE BEAR THE BURDEN OF TRUE GUILT, WE ALSO WRESTLE WITH FALSE GUILT. Something bad happens to our child or spouse, and we feel responsible for it. We did nothing wrong but the wrong does its damage to us. We're fraught with "What ifs." It's not enough to reason with ourselves that false guilt is indeed false. We can't explain our way into

peace of heart. For real guilt, as well as imagined guilt, we need the truth of a loving and forgiving Father.

In Christ, we have that Father. True guilt and false guilt die and are buried in the bloody soil beneath the cross of Jesus. All shadows of wrongs, all dark burdens of conscience, are stripped away in that sacrifice. False guilt gives way to true peace in that Savior who gives his all, that we might have all in him.

**Jesus, true God of grace, lift from our hearts
the burden of true and false guilt. Amen.**

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Shame Clothing

*He has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has
covered me with the robe of righteousness. ISAIAH 61:10*

WHAT IF A PASTOR ASKED PEOPLE TO WEAR SOMETHING TO CHURCH THAT REPRESENTS HOW THEY ACTUALLY SEE THEMSELVES? One woman might wear a T-shirt with “Human Garbage” printed on it, for after multiple failed marriages and struggles with alcoholism, that’s how she sees herself. An older man might wear an orange jumpsuit, for although he’s been a law-abiding citizen for years, he can’t dissociate his self-image from the felony on his record. What would you wear?

If guilt is “I did this bad thing,” then shame is, “I *am* this bad thing.” We feel shame over who we are. It’s a deep, crippling assessment of our inherent worthlessness.

But God sees and makes us otherwise. In Christ, we are as he is. Not only does he take away our guilt, he soaks in our shame as well. We are not garbage, felons or worthless. In Jesus, we are perfect, beautiful, clean and holy. The Father un-shames us and re-creates us as his children in Christ, clothing us with his righteousness.

**Jesus, wrap around us the spotless garments
of your shameless love. Amen.**

MONDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

God's Twisted Kiss

[His father] ran and embraced him and kissed him. LUKE 15:20

IN *MORTAL LESSONS*, SURGEON RICHARD SELZER TELLS OF A YOUNG WOMAN WHO HAD A TUMOR IN HER CHEEK. To remove it, he had to sever a tiny nerve that left her mouth slightly twisted. She asks, “Will my mouth always be like this?” “Yes,” he replies. But her husband says, “I like it. It is kind of cute.” And he bends down and twists his lips to match the twist of her own. This husband shows her, Selzer writes, “that their kiss still works.”

All of us are twisted on the inside. Our hearts are like the metal of a demolished building, bent and wrenched. Razor-sharp shame severs our hopes and dreams. And we wonder how anyone could accept and love us if they know just how messed up we are.

Jesus comes into our twisted lives, that are contorted with shame, and bends down to kiss us. He becomes what we are that we might become what he is. He becomes our shame that we might become his perfection. And in his kiss of love, we learn what divine compassion really is.

**Jesus, embrace us with your love,
kiss us with your healing peace. Amen.**

TUESDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

Outside the Camp

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. EPHESIANS 2:13

AT SOME POINT IN OUR LIVES, WE'RE “ON THE OUTSIDE, LOOKING IN.” We've been left out, overlooked, or—worst of all—purposefully excluded. Shunned. Banned. Shamed. We've been categorized as an outsider, unfit or unworthy to rub shoulders with everyone else.

In the Old Testament, this happened to those afflicted with skin diseases.

Until they were healed and cleansed, they had to roam “outside the camp.” They were ritually unclean. In the worst cases, they had to cry out, “Unclean! Unclean!” if anyone approached them. They existed in the shadowlands.

One of the most amazing acts of Jesus is that he touches lepers. He goes outside the camp, to the excluded, the unclean, and lays on them a healing hand and a healing word. He embraces the shunned, un-shames the shamed, loves the unloved. His dirty, bloody cross cleanses everyone of every uncleanness. He brings us from outside the camp into the kingdom of his Father, whose light of grace rescues us from the shadowlands.

**Lord God, dispel from our hearts every
dark shame and bring us home to you. Amen.**

WEDNESDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

Shaming the Wise and Strong

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. 1 CORINTHIANS 1:27

THREE OF THE QUALITIES WE ADMIRE MOST ARE STRENGTH, WISDOM AND BEAUTY. The wise of the world are magnets for students. People flock around the strong for protection. And, in our Instagram society, those who are beautiful gain millions of followers.

But God turns these qualities inside out. He camouflages his strength in a man weakened by whips and nails. He conceals his wisdom in one laughed and scoffed at as foolish and crazy. He appears as one with “no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him” (Isaiah 53:2). God hides himself beneath his opposite.

He does this for us. In Jesus, we who have acted foolishly find true wisdom. We who are weak in ourselves receive divine strength. We who are deformed by sin are made splendid in his ugly cross of beautiful love.

**Lord Jesus, make us wise and strong and lovely
in you and you alone. Amen.**

THURSDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

God's Happiest Moment

[Jesus,] for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. HEBREWS 12:2

WHEN WE HAVE AN IMPORTANT TASK TO ACCOMPLISH, BUT FACE DARK OPPOSITION, WE MAY MARCH FORWARD FOR SEVERAL REASONS. Maybe we have no other choice. Maybe we just aren't quitters. Or maybe we're just too mulish to back down.

When hell itself stared Jesus in the face, when all the dark powers of evil enveloped him, when he became sin itself on that Roman cross, he didn't stop his mission. Why? He endured the cross not out of duty, out of stubbornness or out of a stoic resolution to complete his mission. He did it because of joy.

His joy is your salvation. The shame of the cross was but a drop in the bucket compared to the ocean of joy that comes from saving us. So he despised the shame, laughed in its face, because he knew that it was all for us. Nothing has made God happier, in all eternity, than making us his children.

**Jesus, our Savior, fill us with the joyous
light of your salvation. Amen.**

FRIDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

How Can Anyone Love Me?

Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. ISAIAH 9:2

SOMEONE STANDS IN A DIMLY LIT DOORWAY. We see them. Then they take a step back. Then another. Then still another step. Each backwards movement takes them farther into the lightless room, until finally darkness fully envelops them and they are hidden from our eyes.

This is how shame works. It sucks us backwards, inch by inch, into darkness. A night with no dawn. We lose all sense of direction. We lose all dignity. Worst of all, we lose all hope that anyone will love and accept us.

That is shame's lie. God shatters that falsehood with the light of his welcoming grace. "I love you," he says. "Before you were born, from all eternity, I love you. You are not your shame; you are my child. My heart defines you." In Jesus we move forward into the rays of hope once more. Into a life, begun at the cross, where we are safe, uplifted and accepted as the apple of the Father's eye.

**Father, carry us from the darkness of shame
into the light of your hope. Amen.**

SATURDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

Shameless Faith

*To you they cried and were rescued; in you they trusted
and were not put to shame. PSALM 22:5*

WE OPERATE WITH A SIMPLE PRINCIPLE IN HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS: "FOOL ME ONCE, SHAME ON YOU. FOOL ME TWICE, SHAME ON ME." Say we go out on a limb for someone, loan them money or vouch for their good character. If they fail us, if they abuse our trust, we're supposed to learn our lesson. Never trust them again. If we do, as the saying goes, "shame on me." We should've learned our lesson the first time around.

Built into human trust is risk. The risk of disappointment. The risk of deceit. The risk of being shamed by their failure to live up to their promise.

Not so with Jesus. As surely as dawn follows darkness, as surely as resurrection follows crucifixion, as surely as there's a sun where there's a shadow, so sure is his truth and faithfulness. In him we trust and are not put to shame. The wounds on his body, tokens of love, are the signs of his fidelity to us.

**Lord Jesus, to you we cry. Hear and
answer, save and rescue us. Amen.**

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

Why Did You Doubt?

O you of little faith, why did you doubt? MATTHEW 14:31

WHEN WE SAY, “TAKE A LEAP OF FAITH,” WE USUALLY IMPLY THAT THE LEAP IS THE HARDEST PART. Step out on faith and everything afterward will be easier. But I’m not so sure.

Peter took a leap of faith—or at least a step. On the dark sea, when he saw Jesus walking atop the waters, this disciple got out of the boat and came toward his Lord. But as he saw the wind howling and waves churning, he cried out, “Lord, save me!”

Our own leaps of faith may be hard, but so is the journey. Waves of fear roll over us. Winds of anxiety buffet us. We sink in fear into the dark waters of doubt.

But Jesus grabs our hands, as he did Peter’s. His rebuke is firm but gentle. “Why did you doubt?” he asks. “I am with you. I am your faithful, loving Savior. Storms will never sever you from me.” The light of Jesus’ love, and the grip of his nail-scarred hands, will buoy us up when we sink in the darkness of doubt.

O Lord Jesus, hold us tight, and increase our faith. Amen.

MONDAY, THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT

The Civil War Within

And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. MATTHEW 28:17

SIX WORDS SUM UP THE CIVIL WAR THAT RAGES INSIDE US EVERY DAY: “THEY WORSHIPED HIM, BUT SOME DOUBTED.” Each of us individually is like that group of disciples. We believe but we don’t believe; we follow Jesus but go our own way; we worship but we doubt. We stand in the light of God but wrestle against the darkness within.

This happened to the disciples when the resurrected Jesus stood before them, when it should have been “easy” to believe. But even then some doubted.



In the **SHADOW** *of the* **CROSS**

Lent is a season of shadows. Throughout this holy season we wrestle with the very real shadows of death, doubt, fear, sadness, guilt and shame. But in these powerful daily devotions for Lent, Chad Bird helps us to discover anew the definitive truth that Christ through his cross lifts us out of those shadows into his glorious light of hope, freedom, joy, forgiveness and new life.

This book, along with many other *Creative Communications for the Parish* products, is available on [amazon](#)kindle and [nook](#).

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