

*Henri J.M. Nouwen*

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# Christ Our Hope

*Daily Lenten Devotions*

## Ash Wednesday Believing in God's Mercy



*Have mercy on me, O God . . . Psalm 51:1*

God's mercy is greater than our sins. There is an awareness of sin that does not lead to God but to self-preoccupation. Our temptation is to be so impressed by our sins and failings and so overwhelmed by our lack of generosity that we get stuck in a paralyzing guilt. It is the guilt that says: "I am too sinful to deserve God's mercy." It is the guilt that leads to introspection instead of directing our eyes to God. It is the guilt that has become an idol and therefore a form of pride. Lent is the time to break down this idol and to direct our attention to our loving Lord. The question is: "Are we like Judas, who was so overcome by his sin that he could not believe in God's mercy any longer and hanged himself, or are we like Peter who returned to his Lord with repentance and cried bitterly for his sins?" The season of Lent, during which winter and spring struggle with each other for dominance, helps us in a special way to cry out for God's mercy.

*Lord, cleanse me of my hard-heartedness. Help me embrace your infinite mercy and love in my life.*

## Thursday After Ash Wednesday Saying "Yes" to Life



*Choose life so that you and your descendants may live . . .*

Deuteronomy 30:19

Life is always small. It is always vulnerable. It never shouts or screams. It always needs protection and guidance. Saying "yes" to it means being willing to look at the small life that seeks to be born in your heart, in your body, in your mind, among people. Death is always glamorous. Death shines; it is always big and noisy. Death goes bang, bang! Because life is very small, you can never see it happening. Have you ever seen a tree actually grow? Can you see a child grow? Growth is too gentle, too tender. Life is basically hidden. It is small and begs for constant care and

protection. If you are committed to always saying “yes” to life, you are going to have to become a person who chooses it when it is hidden.

*In the depth of my soul, dear God, allow me to find your hidden life there. Allow me to say “yes” to this life.*

## Friday After Ash Wednesday Reach Out and Save Me



*For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.* Psalm 51:3

O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me as a sinner . . . It seems as if I am standing on one side of a huge canyon and see how I should grow toward you, live in your presence and serve you, but cannot reach the other side of the canyon where you are. I can speak and write, preach and argue about the beauty and goodness of life I see on the other side, but how, O Lord, can I get there? Sometimes I even have the painful feeling that the clearer the vision, the more aware I am of the depth of the canyon.

Am I doomed to die on the wrong side of the abyss? Am I destined to excite others to reach the Promised Land while remaining unable to enter there myself? Sometimes I feel imprisoned by my own insights and “spiritual competence.” You alone, Lord, can reach out to me and save me.

*Dear Jesus, I want to cross that abyss to reach the Promised Land to be with you. Please hear my cry for help.*

## Saturday After Ash Wednesday The Paradox of Hospitality



*If you offer your food to the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be like the noonday.* Isaiah 58:10

Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space

where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines. It is not to lead our neighbor into a corner where there are no alternatives left, but to open a wide spectrum of options for choice and commitment. It is not an educated intimidation with good books, good stories and good works, but the liberation of fearful hearts so that words can find roots and bear ample fruit. It is not a method of making our God and our way into the criteria of happiness, but the opening of an opportunity to others to find their God and their way. The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create emptiness, not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free; free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations.

*Dear Lord, give me the understanding to offer true hospitality to stranger and friend alike.*

## Sunday, First Week of Lent Searching for God



*Make me to know your ways, O LORD;  
teach me your paths. Psalm 25:4*

Being the Beloved is the origin and fulfillment of the life of the Spirit. I say this because, as soon as we catch a glimpse of this truth, we are put on a journey in search of the fullness of that truth . . . I know that the fact that I am always searching for God, always struggling to discover the fullness of Love, always yearning for the complete truth, tells me that I have already been given a taste of God, of Love and of Truth. I can only look for something that I have, to some degree, already found. How can I search for beauty and truth unless that beauty and truth are already known to me in the depth of my heart? . . . We were innocent before we started feeling guilty; we were in the light before we entered into the darkness; we were at home before we started to search for a home.

*Dear God, be with us on that journey as we search for your truth, for your love.*

Monday, First Week of Lent  
Living Our Christian Calling



*Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. Matthew 25:40*

We have to be a sign, a witness. I can have wonderful ideas, but finally people are going to look at how I'm living. Each individual Christian and each community of Christians has a unique call. Everybody can't do everything.

You get out and do what the gospel is saying. Jean Vanier is a prophet for me. He did something that I could relate to—working with mentally handicapped people. There are some people who go to prison, who develop a whole nonviolent strategy around that. There are people who live very simple lives of prayer. Some live in monasteries, some as hermits, some in families. There are doctors and lawyers who live as witnesses. There are people who use their wealth to bring about things that otherwise wouldn't be possible. We have to get in touch with what is our unique vocation, to be a sign of hope in the world.

*Loving God, create in me the path I need to follow to be a witness of your love in the world.*

Tuesday, First Week of Lent  
Listening Amid the Din



*When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears,  
and rescues them from all their troubles. Psalm 34:17*

Prayer is the discipline of listening to that voice of love. Jesus spent many nights in prayer listening to the voice that had spoken to him at the Jordan River. We too must pray. Without prayer, we become deaf to the voice of love and become confused by the many competing voices asking for our attention. How difficult this is! When we sit down for half an hour—without talking to someone, listening to music, watching television or reading a book—and try to become very still, we often find ourselves so

overwhelmed by our noisy inner voices that we can hardly wait to get busy and distracted again. Our inner life often looks like a banana tree full of jumping monkeys! But when we decide not to run away and stay focused, these monkeys may gradually go away because of lack of attention, and the soft gentle voice calling us the beloved may gradually make itself heard.

*Sweep away all distractions, dear Jesus. Clear my mind of noise and let your comforting voice enter that solitude.*

Wednesday, First Week of Lent  
What Is Really Real?



*Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit. Psalm 51:12*

The great challenge of faith is to be surprised by joy. I remember sitting at a dinner table with friends discussing the economic depression of the country. We kept throwing out statistics that made us increasingly convinced that things could only get worse. Then, suddenly, the four-year-old son of one of my friends opened the door, ran to his father and said, “Look, Daddy! Look! I found a little kitten in the yard . . . Look! . . . Isn’t she cute?” While showing the kitten to his father, the little boy stroked the kitten with his hands and held it against his face. All at once everything changed. The little boy and his kitten became the center of attention. There were smiles, strokes and many tender words. We were surprised by joy!

God became a little child in the midst of a violent world. Are we surprised by joy or do we keep saying: “How nice and sweet, but the reality is different.” What if the child reveals to us what is really real?

*Dear God, like an innocent child, let me once again feel your joyful presence.*