

LENTEN LONGINGS

LET YOURSELF BE ...

YEAR A
REFLECTIONS ON THE SUNDAY READINGS

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INTRODUCTION

The *Lenten Longings* series is based on the three-year cycle of the Lectionary. Each book contains six sessions corresponding to the six weeks of Lent and presents themes drawn from the year's Lenten readings.

***Let Yourself Be*—Year A:** Encourages participants to embrace the teaching of Christ that authentic loving involves self-surrender.

***For the Life of the World*—Year B:** Participants are called to commit to works of justice and to the ongoing conversion of hearts.

***Seeing with God's Eyes*—Year C:** An invitation to see ourselves, one another, and our world with the eyes of God.

These Lenten reflections are intended to empower Christian communities “to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). They seek to call forth and strengthen communal commitments to the work of justice and to the ongoing conversion of hearts. Only such a response can genuinely embody the gospel imperative. The capacity to live such radical, communal lives is not something we can give ourselves. It comes to us as gift. Our own attitudes may prove our biggest stumbling block. The heart of the Lenten mystery and its deepest lessons are about surrender. To such a life, we must give ourselves over. We must let ourselves be ultimately transformed by the One in whom “we live and move and have our being” (Acts of the Apostles 17:38).

For this reason, these reflections on the Sunday readings of Lent invite us to “let ourselves be ...” so that together and alone we may be moved during this holy season by the Loving Presence who longs for us more than we long for life itself. To this God of our longing, we entrust ourselves throughout this paschal journey, asking only that—little by little or in one great flaming of our hearts—we may let ourselves be set ablaze.

**Author**

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LET YOURSELF BE LED

Suggested Environment

Bible, candle, and a small table on which a Bible may be enthroned.

Lenten Longing 1

Leader asks a participant to recite the aim for the session:

That our prayer and sharing may lead us to greater self-understanding and to reverence anew God's way of leading us to our deepest peace and truest potential through life's rhythm of joy and struggle.

Invitation to Pray

Leader: Let us put ourselves in the presence of God.

The group gives itself over to several moments of deepening silence as each member pays attention to her or his breathing and slowly prays for stillness.

Leader: This time of communal prayer seeks to encourage the awareness that, because of our baptism, God is in us and we are in God. Our greatest longing is to see and taste, feel and savor this truth. We are God's dwelling place in the Spirit. Our prayer begins as we let ourselves be held in God's embrace.



Song suggestion: "Change Our Hearts"

Scripture Readings for the First Sunday of Lent

Review the readings and proclaim the Gospel.

Genesis 2:7-9, 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11



Silent reflection

What word, phrase, or image from the Scripture reading touches your heart or speaks to your life?

Invitation to Share

The leader invites those who so wish to echo a key word or phrase that touched them from the Scripture passage.

Prayer

Leader: Let us pray the following together:

**Tender God of the garden and the desert,
you give life graciously as overflowing gift.
You pour out your lavish grace on us
even when we see and feel you not.
Give us the courage
to let ourselves be led by you
to those places and persons
where you wait to meet us.
Open our hearts and our lives
to your quiet and unsettling stirrings.
Come to us in both the ache and the awe
of our human journeys.
In the company of one another,
deepen our faith to see
that in each discovery of another,
we discover you, and each time we recognize you, our Father,
we come to know a little more of our true selves.
We place ourselves in one another's keeping
and together praise you, through, with,
and in the Spirit of Jesus, now and forever. Amen.**

Reflection 1

Off into the Desert

All my life, I have tried too hard. Mostly, it was for good things. I wanted to do well in school, to please my parents, to help out at home with younger brothers



and sisters, to be popular with friends and liked by teachers. My adult years altered circumstances and the cast of characters, but little else changed. I gave myself over to becoming a good religious and a good teacher with the same drive that by now was deeply rooted in my psyche.

And generally, if the votes could be tallied, the overwhelming results would prove that my efforts paid off. I did a good job. I am probably what people would call a “high achiever.” How important, then, for me to learn ever so slowly that all this effort does not create holiness.

Sometime in the third century, as the Church was becoming more firmly established in the Greco-Roman world, a movement began in which certain Christians removed themselves from the

ecclesial setting of the urban centers that was adapting itself to the culture of its day and went off into the desert. There, they sought to discover anew the power and presence of God in solitude and silence, in the Scriptures and their personal lives, in the sharing of the sacramental bread in communion with one another.

On being asked how one might learn to live a holy life in the desert, a monk would quickly respond, “Go to your cell, and your cell will teach you all that you need to know.” Among the many remarkable lessons that these desert dwellers of the third through seventh centuries learned was an incredible spirit of humility and hospitality. These virtues, rooted in the experience of *penthos* or compunction, epitomized for them the very heart of gospel living.

The Desert Fathers and Mothers described *penthos* as “the puncturing or piercing of the heart” by means of which the God-seeker begins to see the depths of his or her own frailty, deluded sense of self-sufficiency, and utter dependence on God for everything. The shock of this awakening often resulted in the gift of tears, which early Christian writers described as a “second baptism.” The experience took place as the spiritual seeker allowed herself or himself to be stripped, in the barren desert surroundings, of the many false pretenses, material acquisitions, marks of status and reputation with which human persons cover over their need for others and God. When these were dropped, the self was encountered anew with all the ache and awe that accompany such discovery. This new self-understanding opened up spaces for welcoming others, weak and needy

“This is indeed the time for fruitful sadness, for us to grieve over the condition of our mortality, over temptations sweeping over us, sins creeping up on us, greed of all sorts lining up against us, lusts always quarreling and agitating against good thoughts; these are the things we should be sad about.”

St. Augustine,
Sermon 254, 4



like the Desert Fathers and Mothers themselves, into the company of pilgrims seeking the God who comes to draw us all into the “many dwelling places” (John 14:2) of God’s own house.

Perhaps the days of the Desert Fathers and Mothers resemble our own times far more than we have yet explored. Like us, they were living at a time when the Christian life was becoming culturally influenced by the social standards of the empire. The demands of acting justly, loving tenderly, and walking humbly (see Micah 6:8) were good for liturgical reading, but not always heeded as a prophetic voice addressed to communities living in the here and now. Many people of that time, like many of us today, had forgotten that the Greek word *paroikoi*, from which our word “parish” comes, means “resident aliens,” those called to live by standards different from those prescribed by the dominant culture. Lent serves to remind us who we are.

Invitation to Share

- When in your own life have you felt a sense of trying too hard, even in the pursuit of “good”? Of what have you been invited to let go? What grace do you hear in “having nothing to prove”?
- What are the challenges to living a Christian life in today’s culture?
- Where have you experienced the “desert” in your life? What has it taught you about yourself, others, God?

Reflection 2

To Act Justly

Immediately after Jesus’ baptism, he was led by the Spirit into the desert. How consoling and baffling to consider that the same Spirit that had flooded Jesus with such an overpowering awareness of his own belovedness was now at work again, leading him to self-confrontation in ever deeper ways. A wise saying suggests that no one arrives at the promised land without some sojourn in the desert. And so it seems. People of faith around the world speak of the desert as a metaphor for times of spiritual purification and soul searching. Mark, Matthew, and Luke portray this event in Jesus’ life just before he undertakes his active ministry of teaching, healing, and proclaiming the Good News of God’s unconditional love.

Self-knowledge, described as the opening of their eyes (see Genesis 3:7), occurs also in the Genesis account of Adam and Eve, who, after eating the forbidden fruit, realize that they are naked. Rather than claim their nakedness and utter dependence on God, they choose to hide it, a choice all too often



repeated by us, their descendants. The choices placed before Jesus in the events described in Matthew's Gospel offer him repeated opportunities to see himself as powerful, independent, and in control. But Jesus wrestles with these voices and images in the light of his understanding that he does not belong to himself; his very identity has been given him as gift. He is God's own beloved Son in whom God takes delight. Only in and through this relationship does his life or accomplishments have meaning or value. God alone is the giver of life; only God is worthy of adoration.

Paul's Letter to the Romans highlights his convictions about the gift we have been given. In Jesus Christ, overflowing grace and justice will live and reign. Through Jesus, the promise has been given that "many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:19). The mysterious ways in which God works to bring each of us to act justly are essential components of our prayer, reflection, and sharing throughout this Lenten season. In and through the unique circumstances and character of our personal, family, and communal lives, we are invited "to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with [our] God" (Micah 6:8). Our core Lenten longing, "to let ourselves be led," is to give ourselves over to this awe-inspiring process.

"Adam was banished from the earthly Paradise, a symbol of communion with God. Now, in order to return to this communion and thus to true life, to eternal life, it is necessary to cross the desert, the trial of faith not alone, but with Jesus! He has preceded us, as always, and has already won the battle against the spirit of evil. This is the meaning of Lent, the liturgical Season that every year invites us to renew our decision to follow Christ on the path of humility, in order to take part in his victory over sin and death."

**Pope Benedict XVI, Ash Wednesday homily,
February 17, 2010**

Invitation to Share

- How have you experienced yourself as "God's beloved child"? Why is this realization essential to a life of self-giving?
- Where and when have you met persons who seem to stand before others "naked, empty-handed, and unashamed"? What qualities do you admire most in persons who allow themselves to be vulnerable and receptive to the gifts of others?
- How can those who are poor give you an awareness of your own neediness as well as theirs? Has this grace happened in my life? When and how? What action will you take this week to reach out to those who are poor?



Invitation to Act

Jesus emphasized the connection between faith and action, between what we believe and what we do. In that spirit, decide on an individual or group action that flows from what you have shared in this session. If you decide to act on your own, share your decision with the group. If you decide on a group action, determine among you if individual members will take responsibility for various aspects of the action.

You are likely to benefit most from taking an action that arises from your own response to the session. However, you can consider one of the following suggestions or use these ideas to help develop one of your own:

- This week, keep a daily journal of your awareness of God's presence in the ordinary events and moments of your day. Try to designate a simple daily happening, like your morning shower, as a time to pause and be mindful of God who makes such simple gifts available to you.
- Make a decision to visit the sick or imprisoned, to prepare a meal for someone who lives alone, or to serve meals in a soup kitchen as a way to adore the God who waits to be revealed in those who are poor and forgotten.
- Recommend to someone on your parish liturgy preparation team that some time for contemplative quiet be provided within your liturgical celebrations during the weeks of Lent.

Invitation to Pray

Listen again to the song, "Change Our Hearts."

Give God thanks (aloud or silently) for desires stirred, insights gleaned, directions clarified, decisions reached, and for the gift of one another's openness and sensitivity. Pray together the Our Father and conclude with the following prayer:

God of our desert journeys, you know our needs and our hearts.

You fashioned us in secret and love us intimately.

**We ask your blessing on our goings
and our comings in the week ahead.**

**May your Spirit sustain us,
your Word impel us,
and your desire for us
incite us to do good
and to choose life for the sake
of the world you so love.**

Bless us in Jesus' name. Amen.



RESOURCES FROM RENEW INTERNATIONAL

PrayerTime Cycle: Faith-Sharing Reflections on the Sunday Gospels

This faith-sharing resource responds to the U.S. Bishops' suggestion that "every parish meeting can begin with the reading of the upcoming Sunday's Gospel, followed by a time of reflection and faith sharing."



With each Sunday's Gospel as a focus, *PrayerTime* proposes meaningful reflections, focused faith-sharing questions, related questions for consideration, and prayers as a source of spiritual nourish and inspiration.

Use *PrayerTime* any time of year, when the small community needs. It is also ideal for beginning meetings of the pastoral council, staff, and other parish groups. The themes can also be read personally as a way to prepare for Sunday Mass.

Advent Awakenings

Advent is a time of spiritual anticipation amidst the often distracting preparations for Christmas. Stay focused on the significance of this season with *Advent Awakenings*.

The *Advent Awakening* series is based on the three-year cycle of the *Lectionary*. Each book contains four sessions corresponding with the four Sundays of Advent and presents themes from the Sunday gospel readings, plus enriching family devotions.



ALSO AN

BOOK



Appropriate for seasonal groups, small Christian communities, and individual reflection and prayer.



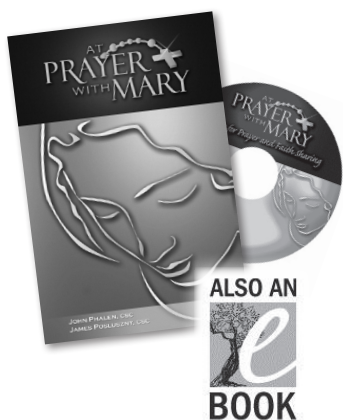
Also available as an eBook!

A 15-song CD is available and contains the songs suggested for use during the prayerful reflections of each faith-sharing session for years A, B, and C

At Prayer with Mary

At Prayer with Mary offers seven sessions on the life and mystery of Mary that will deepen your appreciation of and devotion to our Blessed Mother

Mary and enrich your prayer experiences. Over the centuries, Mary's example has inspired Christians to imitate her by saying "yes" to God's call in their own lives. Her faithfulness, as it is portrayed in the Gospel narratives, is a model of the prayerful kind of life Jesus calls us to. Scripture, Catholic teaching, personal testimonies, and Marian prayer—including the rosary—provide a renewed appreciation of Mary's place in today's world, where she, as always, points the way to Christ.



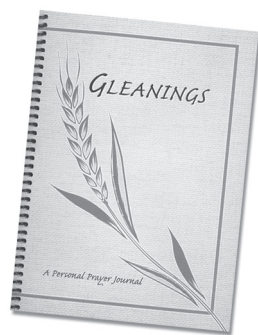
Also available as an eBook!

This 14-song CD is also available and contains the songs suggested for use during the moments of prayer.

GLEANINGS: A Personal Prayer Journal

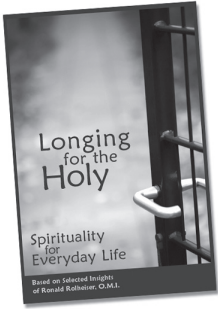
Many participants in small communities tell us how much they are helped in both their shared discussion and their personal reflection by the technique known as journaling: keeping a notebook for the expression of thoughts and ideas.

Gleanings is a valuable tool for both avid and occasional journal writers. Each page spread is decorated with a spiritual quotation or musing that can inspire prayerful reflection on your relationship with God. The comfortably-sized format makes it an excellent companion for your personal faith journey, helping tap into the richness of God's wisdom within you. It is also a thoughtful gift for friends or family.





LONGING FOR THE HOLY: Spirituality for Everyday Life



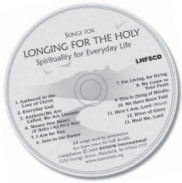
Based on selected insights of Ronald Rolheiser, OMI

Experience how the gentle spiritual guidance and practical wisdom of best-selling Catholic author Fr. Ronald Rolheiser, OMI can enliven everyday life. Suitable for small-community faith sharing or individual reflection, *Longing for the Holy* covers different dimensions of contemporary spiritual life for those who want to enrich their sense of the presence of God and develop a

deeper spirituality.

The Participant's Book contains twelve sessions with prayers, reflections, sharing questions, and stories from saints and contemporary people of faith.

This resource is also available as a **four CD-set audio edition**, which has both narrated text and songs for all twelve sessions.



The songs suggested for the moments of prayer in the faith-sharing sessions are offered on the **13-song music CD**.

Scenes from a Parish

Special Edition DVD and Film Faith-Sharing Guides In English and Spanish

Get a rare glimpse into one parish's real-world experience as it struggles to reconcile ideals of faith with the realities of today's changing and diverse culture.

View, reflect upon, and share faith with this special edition film and Faith-Sharing Guide and its important themes of welcoming the stranger, offering compassion, and feeding the hungry.



Ideal for parish-wide, small-group, and personal viewing and reflection.

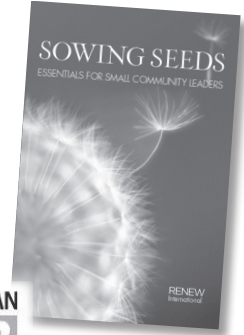


SOWING SEEDS

Essentials for Small-Community Leaders

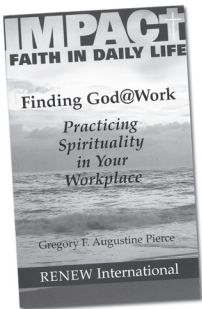
This book offers a comprehensive collection of pastoral insights and practical suggestions to help small-community leaders guide their groups in a way that nourishes spiritual growth. Culled from RENEW International's three decades of experience in pioneering and promoting small Christian communities, this book overflows with simple but effective ideas and strategies that will enhance the way these groups reflect on and respond to the Gospel.

Also available as an eBook!



ALSO AN

 BOOK

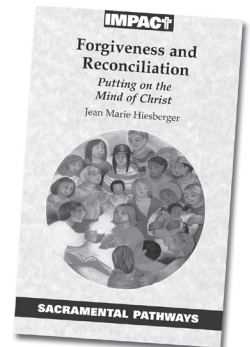


Finding God@Work

Six faith-sharing sessions guide us on a quest: can God be found at work? If so, how? Examine your lived experience of work—both positively and negatively—from a spiritual vantage point, considering relevant passages from Scripture, and principles of Catholic social teaching.

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

The insightful wisdom and many inspiring stories of forgiveness and reconciliation offer a profound understanding of people's desire to be forgiven and the steps to take to live reconciled lives. Reflect on the healing power of God and the richness of the sacrament of reconciliation to discover again how to live in the freedom of God.



For more information or to order these and other fine resources from RENEW International, please visit our secure online bookstore at www.renewintl.org/store or use our toll free order line: 1-888-433-3221.



Did you know...?

RENEW International is a not-for-profit Catholic ministry organization that has touched the lives of 25 million people in the United States, Canada, and 22 other countries.

From the inner city and rural areas to remote parts of the developing world, RENEW International's priority is to serve all parishes who desire to renew their faith and build the Church, regardless of their economic situation.

Throughout RENEW's dynamic history, individuals have generously reached out to support our mission.

Please join us by making a donation to RENEW International at www.renewintl.org/donate

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WorldRENEW, our free e-newsletter, covers interesting topics on today's spiritual life with behind-the-scenes stories and special features on RENEW International's work with parishes and small communities around the world.

To read more and explore how you can be an integral part of the RENEW International family, please visit www.renewintl.org/subscribe

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