

LEANING IN, LETTING GO

A Lenten Devotional

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Dear readers,

I want to invite you on a journey that just might change your life. This is a journey with Christ through the cross to resurrection. For some of you, this is a familiar pathway. For others, this will be a new start. But no matter how many times you've been here, there are a few things we must let go along the way.

Throughout life, we've collected quite a bit of stuff we don't need. We have picked up bitterness from disappointment and a bit of anxiety from our need to control. We have packed some anger from unmet expectations and brought along some fear from the past. Yet this Lenten journey will not be as effective if we cannot leave those behind.

Leaning in to God and letting go of these unnecessary burdens go hand in hand. This series of short devotionals written just for you will help with the process of leaning in and letting go. The scripture texts are drawn from the Revised Common Lectionary Daily Readings, Year C and are listed in the New Revised Standard Version. In order to make the most of the next seven weeks, it would be good to establish a rhythm of daily silence, reading, prayer, and meditation that suits your lifestyle.

Please be prepared; leaning in can be a scary thing. You may notice things about God, and about yourself, that you did not notice before. We may take a few paces on the journey and find that the first glimpse of stress tempts us to pick up all that we put down. But the calling of Christ during this Lenten season is to lean into the fullness of God and let go of anything that hinders your progress.

For the next 48 days, we are taking a journey that will lead us to experience Christ like never before. We will lean in to see his sufferings and experience God's grace. We will lean in to witness Jesus' passion and make room for divine healing. When we lean in, we let go. And who knows? We just might see a better version of ourselves emerge on the other side.

So, start unpacking and let's get ready to go. Your life-changing journey awaits.

Your fellow traveler in Christ,
Nicole Massie Martin

ASH WEDNESDAY

Starting with “Why?”

Read Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.” (6:1)

“I can’t have dessert; I’m fasting.” My friend was so pleased with her denial that I almost felt a tinge of guilt as I gobbled my chocolate cake. I was proud that she decided to make a commitment to God and happy for her discipline, especially around cake.

As we left our time together that day, I couldn’t stop thinking about her comment and how it made me feel. I was both happy and ashamed, inspired and embarrassed, all at the same time. Should I have been fasting too?

Public displays of righteousness often seem to have this effect. They make the “righteous” feel good while simultaneously making the “unrighteous” feel bad. However, Jesus was not interested in public works. He told his disciples that those people get on earth exactly what they want: to be seen by people on earth. But he wanted them to strive for something more than temporary satisfaction. Jesus wanted them to have a relationship with God in which their *doing* came as a result of their *being*. He was less concerned about *what* they were doing and more concerned about *why*.

As we enter this season of Lent, Jesus reminds us that he is more concerned about *why* we lean in than he is about *what* we let go. We are invited to fast, serve, and pray not because we’ll be recognized by people, but because of our love for God. When God is our audience, no one else has to know.

So whether we choose to eat cake or deny it, whether celebrating in silence or with a loud song, God is most concerned with our motivation, not our activation. When we have the right motives, the simple act of leaning in will be all the reward we need.

Lord, help us to let go of outward piety and lean into your unfailing love. Let your presence be our pursuit and your pleasure our only reward.

FIRST THURSDAY

Expect the Unexpected

Read Exodus 5:10–23

Then Moses turned again to the Lord and said, “O LORD, why have you mistreated this people? Why did you ever send me? Since I first came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has mistreated this people, and you have done nothing at all to deliver your people.” (5:22–23)

It was supposed to be different. When Moses agreed to follow God, things were supposed to get better. The lives of the Israelites should have gotten better. Moses and his family should have been better off. Saying “yes” to God was supposed to lead to increase, not decrease. But instead of getting better, things began to get worse.

God met with Moses and promised to deliver the Israelites. God promised they would be free to worship and no longer bound to the Egyptians. But Pharaoh denied the request for worship and decided to make their lives worse. Demanding more bricks with less straw, the promise of freedom instantly turned into the reinforcement of slavery. Is this what God had in mind all along?

Life with God is filled with promises and expectations. However, God’s promises are not always fulfilled when or how we expect. We can be so focused on an expected result of a promise that we lose sight of the source of the promise. In our anguish, we want God to move quickly, wasting no time to do what God promised to do. Yet even in desperate times, we are called to reset our expectations of God. This becomes a sacred opportunity to take the focus off of what God does and refocus on who God is.

What expectations must you surrender today? How can you redirect your attention from what God does to who God is? When you lean in, you might be surprised how God allows you to let go. While your assignment or suffering may not immediately change, God can strengthen you to let go of the resentment associated with your pain. Leaning in helps us to discover that our trouble does not trouble God one bit.

God, reset my expectations. Shift my gaze from your hands to your heart and carry me through all my troubles. Thank you for teaching me how to wait on you.

FIRST FRIDAY

Accepting the Flight

Read Psalm 91

Because you have made the LORD your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent. (91:9–10)

We are living in the midst of a refugee crisis. Around the world, thousands of men, women, and children are fleeing their homes to save their lives. Their flight is not about luxury, but safety. Driven to desperation, these families will do anything and go almost anywhere to keep themselves alive.

The pursuit of life in a new land is not a naïve one. Those who are forced to leave understand that there are no guarantees on the other side. Yet the intensity of suffering that would come with staying leaves them little choice. They either stay with the guarantee of trouble, or go with the possibility of peace.

Although we may not be personally familiar with this experience, our faith compels us to understand this complex reality. To say that God is our refuge implies that we are refugees in some way. Without minimizing the trauma of this flight, it can be said that we all have things, places, and even people from which we have to flee in order to save our lives. In these times, the truth of God-as-refuge comes alive.

God is our dwelling, and in God's presence we experience protection from danger. This does not mean that we are exempt from trouble. On the contrary, many would argue that being a believer invites tremendous amounts of suffering and trouble. Yet when faced with the guarantee of trouble outside of God's presence, or the assurance of peace within God's presence, we would rather find refuge in the Lord, even if it costs us our lives.

From what or whom must you flee in order to experience the safety of God's presence today? God yearns to be our refuge, and all are welcomed in.

Lord, we pray for your covering and protection for refugees around the world. May our solidarity with them remind us of our status in this world until you come for us again.

FIRST SATURDAY

Seek and Find

Read John 12:28–36

“While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.” After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them. (12:36)

My girls love playing hide-and-seek. But at ages three and five, they’re not very good at it. They try to hide behind a door, but their clothes tend to peek out. They may crouch behind the sofa when we’re coming into the living room, but their giggles always give them away. With them, it’s not so much “hide and seek” as it is “seek and find.” They enjoy the game simply because they love being found.

It could be argued that Jesus enjoyed playing “seek and find” as well. Even when his hiding places were good, Jesus proved consistently that he loved being found by those who sought him. In this text, Jesus gladly revealed himself as the Son of Man, despite the fact that people didn’t fully understand what that meant. It’s as if Jesus was hiding right in front of them. But he didn’t remain hidden. He wanted to be found *in them*. Jesus was inviting his disciples to a game of “seek and find” that would end with the light being found in them.

While we may outgrow the game, we never outgrow the practice of searching for God. At times, our search may be obstructed by darkness. Suffering and sorrow, pain and disbelief can all tamp down the light, threatening to snuff it out completely. Thank God for the Son of man, whose light outshines the darkness.

Today, we lean into this divine light with great anticipation. We let go of our need to hide, and lean into the joy of being found by Christ. By rekindling our awe of God’s Holy Light and reclaiming our belief in Jesus as the Light, we will burn again with passion for the One who seeks and finds us all.

Lord, we earnestly seek you in the darkness. Help us to find you as the light so that we may find life as children of that light. We cannot shine without you.

FIRST SUNDAY

Closer Than Close

Read Romans 10:5–13

...*“The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart”* ... (10:8)

Before there was travel-sized, there was Jesus. Able to fit in your mouth and your heart, Jesus proves his ability to go with us everywhere at all times, in the form of God’s Word, through the power of the Holy Spirit. John says that Jesus was the Word who was in the beginning with God and was God, becoming flesh and dwelling among us (John 1:1,14). In this miraculous way, Jesus, through the Spirit, makes God and God’s Word portable, residing in and around us through confession and belief.

But why don’t we feel this closeness all the time? What is it about God’s Word that makes Jesus feel so distant at times, so far removed from where we are? Perhaps we fall into the traps suggested by the apostle Paul in the preceding verses from chapter 10 of his letter to the early Christians in Rome. Just before verse eight, Paul cautions believers against trying to ascend to the heavens to bring Christ down, or descend to the depths to bring Christ up (6–7).

When faced with the contemporary issues of the world, we may wrongly assume that God’s Word is irrelevant. When we need guidance or direction, we might be tempted to think God’s Word is too complicated to understand. Instead, Paul suggests that the Lord is neither out of reach nor out of touch. The Word is neither too sacred nor too material, but alive and closer than we think. In an effort to draw us into an intimate relationship, God came close and dares to live in the messiness of our lives.

The portability of the Gospel reminds us of the intentions of God’s heart. Jesus demonstrates that God never intended to be far away; God always intended to be close. When we remove the barriers that keep us from the Word, we are free to worship and love God through regular engagement with scripture. Perhaps then we’ll recognize that what we need most is not beyond us, but right here within.

Lord, we need to feel you close. Teach us to engage with your Word so that we can feel the beat of your heart.

FIRST MONDAY

Choose Mercy

Read 1 Chronicles 21:1–17

Then David said to Gad, “I am in great distress; let me fall into the hand of the LORD, for his mercy is very great; but let me not fall into human hands.” (21:13)

“You can take back the rock, but it takes time to fix the window.” These were the words of comfort my dad offered me after a terrible fight with my younger sister. I wasn’t good at fighting with my hands, so I had learned how to fight with my words. I knew her soft spots and used my words to pierce in a way that could hurt more than a punch. I apologized, but she was still hurt. I was forgiven of the sin but still had to deal with the consequence.

We are forgiven of our sins by confession through Jesus Christ. In an instant, God’s grace allows us to take back the rock. But sooner or later, we still have to deal with the broken window. David was no exception. Even as a man after God’s own heart, King David sinned with an unsanctioned census. When he recognized what he had done, he prayed for forgiveness and took back the rock. But just like us, David still had to deal with the consequences.

Given the choice between God and man, the king chose the punishment that came from God’s hand. While he could not avoid the consequence of his sin, he chose to lean on the mercy of God, even with the guarantee of suffering. In many ways, the choice to suffer in the hands of God was a foreshadowing of the price Jesus paid for all of us on the cross. Taking on the punishment for our sins, Jesus took back our rocks and mended the window of our relationship with God.

What rocks have you thrown and what windows have been broken? You are invited to bring your mistakes to God, knowing that there is nothing too big or too small for God to restore.

Gracious God, have mercy upon us. Forgive us of our sins and cleanse our unrighteousness. Thank you for restoring our lives and for making us whole in you.

FIRST TUESDAY

From Innocent Lips

Read Psalm 17

Hear a just cause, O LORD; attend to my cry; give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit. From you let my vindication come; let your eyes see the right. (17:1–2)

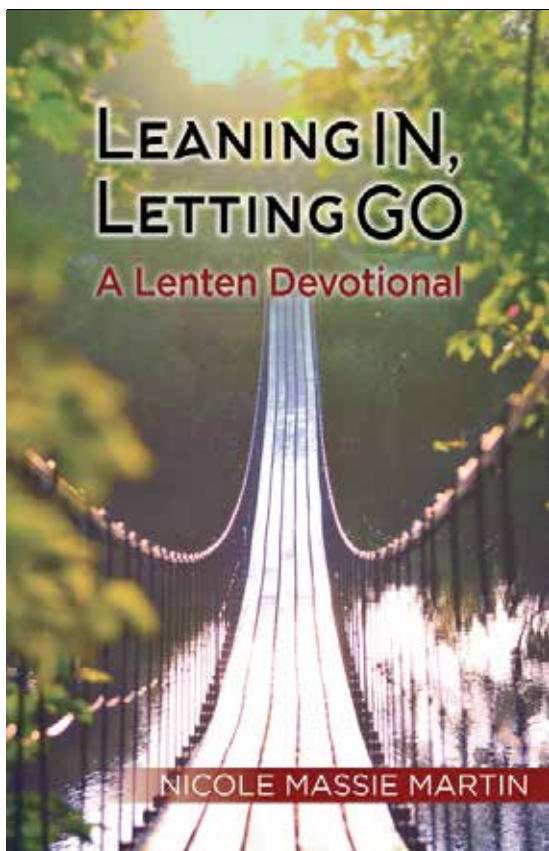
God does not deny the call of the righteous. By virtue of God's goodness and as indicated by God's compassion, our Maker does not turn from the cries of the innocent. As echoed by the psalmist, we believe that God listens to the cries of the guiltless and vindicates the lives of those falsely accused. Yet this truth brings both comfort and conviction: comfort in knowing that God will bring justice for those in need, conviction in the fact that none of us are completely free from deceit.

Our humanity makes us vulnerable to sin. We were born in it and cannot find our way out alone. Sin traps us in a mirror maze where every turn takes us to another angle of ourselves, teasing us with a way out only to confront us with another view of our pain. In struggle, we cry out to God. In pain and torment, we pray for relief, knowing deep down that we are not worthy to receive the mercy and grace of a Holy God.

Who shall save us from our sin? Who will hear us when we cry out from lips tainted with deceit and hearts cloaked with shame? Jesus, our righteous Savior, will hear! He is the only truly innocent One, able to deliver us from ourselves and defend us against the attacks of our enemies.

Our confidence in the midst of crises comes from having Jesus as our covering. Our strength in struggle stems from having a relationship with the Righteous One. Although few, if any, can pray the prayer of this psalm, Jesus opens the door for all to pray through him for vindication and relief. Wrapped in the sacrifice of the Son, we have the assurance that God hears our prayer and is able to respond.

God, we confess that we do not always pray with clean lips. Purify our hearts and grant us the assurance of your protection and grace.

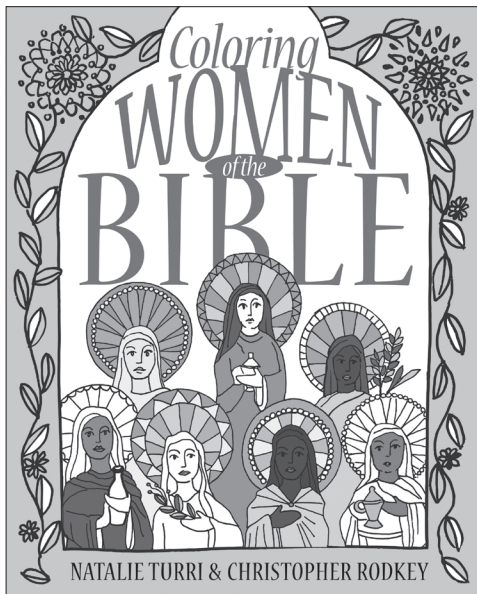


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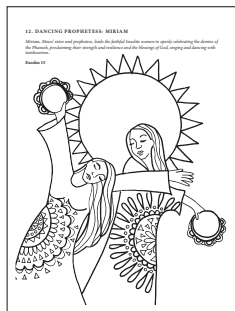
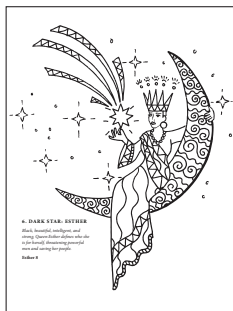


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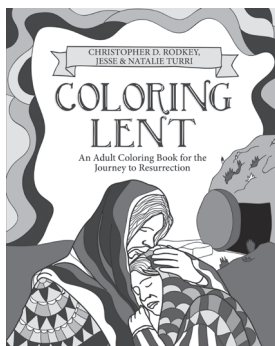


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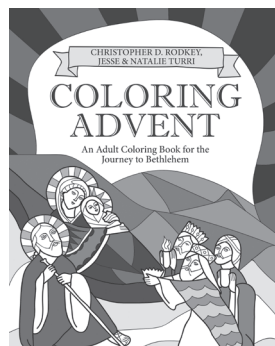
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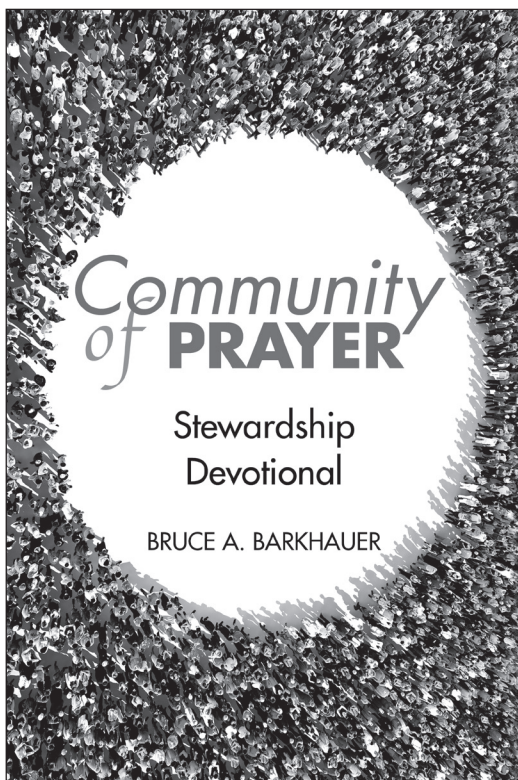


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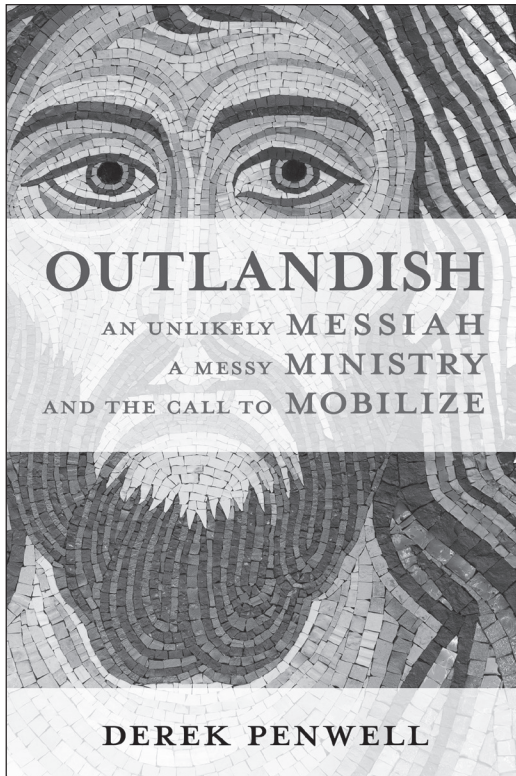
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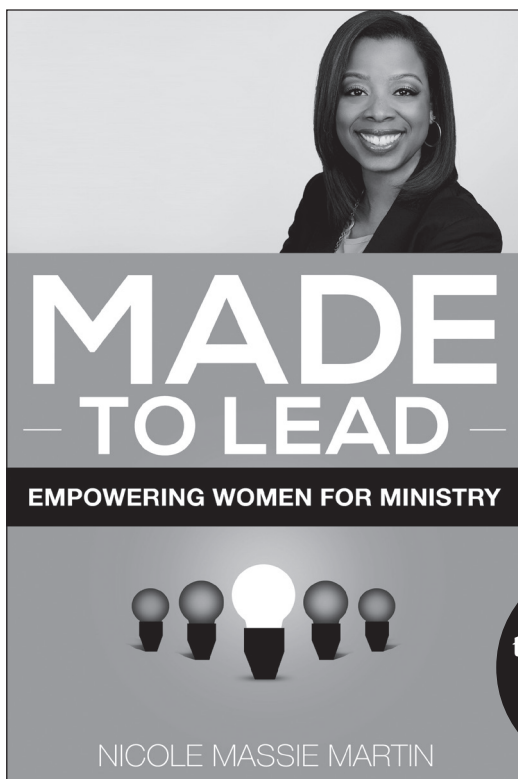
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