



LENT

Places we go

INTRODUCTION

To go on a journey...

Life is not hurrying
on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you

- *The Bright Field*, RS Thomas

Welcome!

How do you feel on the eve of Lent?

Maybe it's the first time you are embarking on this journey, and you're both excited and unsure of what lies ahead. Maybe you are tackling it for the umpteenth time, and you're wondering what the journey has in store for you this time. As with many journeys, Lent often arrives unexpectedly and at an inconvenient time. You're probably already very busy with all the new year's activities, expectations and obligations.

So why go on this journey then?

Precisely because so often I sleepwalk through life. The noise around me – and in me – makes me deaf to the voice of God, of my heart, and of others. Lent wakes me up. Lent invites me to face that which I'd rather avoid – my mortality, my brokenness, my sadness and disappointments. For 40 days I go on a journey dedicated to isolation, prayer and fasting. The number 40 appears often in the Bible – especially where it offers patterns and archetypes of the very journey I am also on. In this way, the Israelites leave Egypt, the place of comfort and slavery, to travel through the desert for 40 years, searching for the freedom of the promised land. On the way, they discover God's closeness and provision in a new way. Just after his baptism, where Jesus hears the word of grace that he is God's beloved, he goes into the desert for 40 days, and is tempted to build His worth and identity on something else.

The first few days of this journey are a time of preparation. Each day contains a piece of Scripture, a guide, an exercise and a grace – a short prayer which I can pray continuously throughout the day.

May this Lent journey be a confirmation of how God is always with me, give me the courage to go to places I would rather avoid, and let me experience his provision once more.



"For dust you are, and to dust you will return."

Genesis 3:19

Today, in churches across the world, the sign of the cross is made with ashes on the foreheads of many Christians. Our journey as human beings starts with dust. The creation story tells us how God takes dust, forms a human being, breathes air into his lungs, and how he then becomes a living soul.

How is it for me to hear, "You are dust?"

One reaction is to say with a sigh, "Yes, I know. So don't expect too much from me. I had dreams, once, but they all came to dust. I've made too many mistakes, hurt too many people. There is no hope."

Another way is to answer with determination, "Yes, I know, but I'll show you. I'll make something of myself, gather many possessions, be someone who others talk about."

Both reactions speak to a conception that to be dust is not good.

And yet, when God made man, He said it was very good.

God knows how we are formed, remembers that we are dust.
(Ps. 103:14)

And then the words, "to dust you will return".
So often I live unaware of my mortality. A poet writes, "Everyone wants to go to heaven, but just not now."

Today's ashes and words remind me that I have limits, that my life will end at some point.

EXERCISE

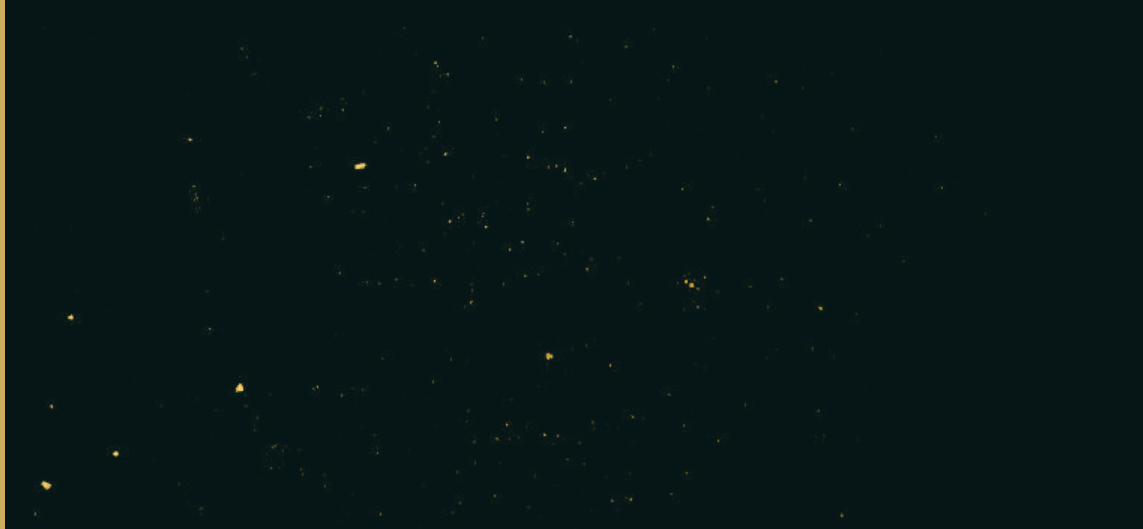
Find a church near you that has a service today where you can receive the signs of the ashes.

Alternatively, take a dried palm frond or any other ash, mix it with oil and draw a cross on the foreheads of yourself and your loved ones.

During your time of prayer, become aware of where your life story started, before your birth. Talk to God about the things you become aware of.

Grace

Lord, give me the grace to accept that I am dust.



Here's what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace.

Math. 6 (Msg)

Are there special places where you feel closer to God?
Where you want to pray more, become aware of God in a different way?
Where you feel you should take off your shoes?

For a lot of people that place is in nature. For me, it is by the ocean. There is something about the greatness, the water coming in and out, the crash of the waves that calls me to reflect, leaves me in awe - that makes me want to pray. I also feel like this in places that are dedicated to prayer, like cathedrals, churches, and places of retreat. The fact that people have been going there for such a long time to pray, inspires me to pray as well.

Of course we can pray anywhere. God doesn't live in man-made temples.

Jesus' presence fills every part of the universe.
We can find him in our car, at work, in the kitchen.

But at the same time, certain places can help us to pray. It is true that God is present everywhere. The problem is that I am not always present where I am.

I get distracted easily, with so many things requiring my attention. Jacob's words may as well have been mine: "Surely the Lord was in this place, and I was not aware of it." (Gen. 28:16)

Of all the things the disciples could have asked Jesus to teach them, their only request was this: Lord, teach us to pray. He gives them the words of the Our Father, but not before giving them the guidelines which are our Scripture for today.

EXERCISE

In this time of preparation, you are invited to think about the place where you will pray during Lent. It could be good for you to find a specific place to pray for these 40 days of Lent. Arrange the space so that you want to pray there.

Your house may have a separate room you can use for this. But maybe there is a chair that you want to put aside, with a piece of art or a candle.

That could also be a visual cue – something that reminds you and calls you to pray each time you see it.

Take some time to prepare a space for prayer during Lent. Also decide on a time and a length of time which will suit you most days.

Grace

Lord, give me the grace to be aware of your presence.

“Exercise daily in God — no spiritual flabbiness, please! Workouts in the gymnasium are useful, but a disciplined life in God is far more so, making you fit both today and forever. You can count on this. Take it to heart.”

1 Timothy 4:6-10 (MSG)

Our experience of the Lent journey can deepen when we intentionally make adjustments for this period of time. We choose a specific time every day to pray, we arrange a space for prayer. Another practice for Lent is to fast from something, give up something which sometimes provides a little comfort. Dallas Willard says, “We fast so we can feast on Jesus.” The other side of the coin is that we also take up something with the extra capacity which fasting provides, something that can feed your soul. People sometimes give up things like chocolate, coffee, wine, social media or a TV series, and replace it with activities like reading spiritual books, having conversations with others, or performing acts of service. Every time you become aware of that which you have given up, it’s an opportunity to turn to God. The “desert” becomes a place of encountering God.

What is it that you will give up and take up?

I recently saw a friend posting on social media about the travel journals she gives her kids when they travel. She invites them, at the end of every day, to write down what was good, what they learned, what upset them.

Months later they can share the stories of their journey with each other.

It can be helpful to keep such a travel journal at the end of each day. Ask God to help you remember what is important, and in your imagination, walk through your day with Jesus. Pay attention to everything that happened in your heart, that which you were thankful for, that which gave you life, and that which was difficult.

Let your day run through your imagination like a film. Pay attention to what happened in your heart today; identify the one thing that gave you life, and the one thing which was difficult for you.

It's important to make all these adjustments with a lot of patience and grace for yourself. Decide on manageable times you can spend on prayer. If you miss it, just start again. Our intention is to journey with Jesus, a journey on which we're always beginners.

Grace

God, give me the grace to keep my eyes on You.



Your life is a journey you must travel with a deep consciousness of God.

1 Pet 1:18 (Msg)

When you go on a journey, sometimes you have to stop before you can go further. You make sure the luggage on the roof is still secure and that the tires are still inflated. You use the navigation app to check if you're still on the correct route.

At the end of each week in Lent, you are invited to do a revision prayer – this means to look again at that which stood out to you, which you want to think about or pray about some more. To do a revision prayer doesn't mean that you did it "wrong" the first time. Rather, it's about fixing God's means of mercy, the "manna and quail", in your heart with gratitude.

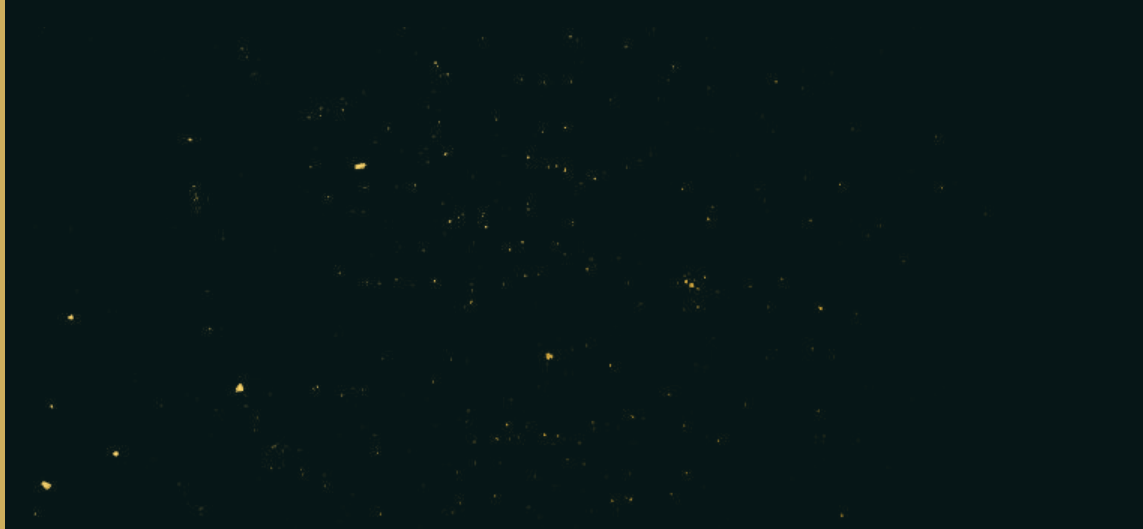
EXERCISE

Choose one of the days of the week and reflect on your experience of this day. You can also think back over your entire week and stand still at some moments where you experienced things that stand out and stay with you.

Maybe you also want to look at some of your journal entries again. Talk to God about it.

Grace

Lord, give me the grace to see you in my life.





WEEK 1

When I compare



WHO AM I?

Who am I? They often tell me
I stepped out from my cell's confinement
calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
like a Squire from his country house.

Who am I? They often tell me
I used to speak to my warders
freely and friendly and clearly,
as though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me
I bore the days of misfortune
equably, smilingly, proudly,
like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I know of myself?
Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
struggling for breath, as tough hands were compressing
my throat,
yearning for colors, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
thirsting for words of kindness, for neighbourliness,
tossing in expectation of great events,
powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
faint, and ready to say farewell to it all.



WHO AM I? *continued...*

Who am I? This or the Other?

Am I one person to-day and to-morrow another?

**Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
and before myself a contemptible weebegone weakling?
Or is something within me still in me like a beaten army,
fleeing in disorder from a victory already achieved?**

**Who am I? they mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine!**

- *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Translated by J.B. Leishman)



Num. 13: 30,31,33, 14: 1-3

Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, “We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.”

But the men who had gone up with him said, “We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are.” We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.” That night all the members of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, “If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this wilderness! Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn’t it be better for us to go back to Egypt?”

That means we will not compare ourselves with each other as if one of us were better and another worse. We have far more interesting things to do with our lives. Each of us is an original.

Galatians 5:26 (MSG)

In the wilderness, that which is in us often comes to the fore. We might be shocked at what comes out and feel that that's not really who we are. At least not who we want to be. The dynamic of comparison of comes into play.

To compare is to try to fit in and stand out, all at the same time. It's being like everybody, only better. We see how this happens to the Israelites. There is upward (with those who are "better" than us) and downward (with those who are "worse" than us) comparisons that happen.

It can lead to admiration and respect, but more often it leads to envy, jealousy, murmuring and happiness about others' misfortune. To compare has a big effect on our emotions, which in turn affects our relationships and self-image.

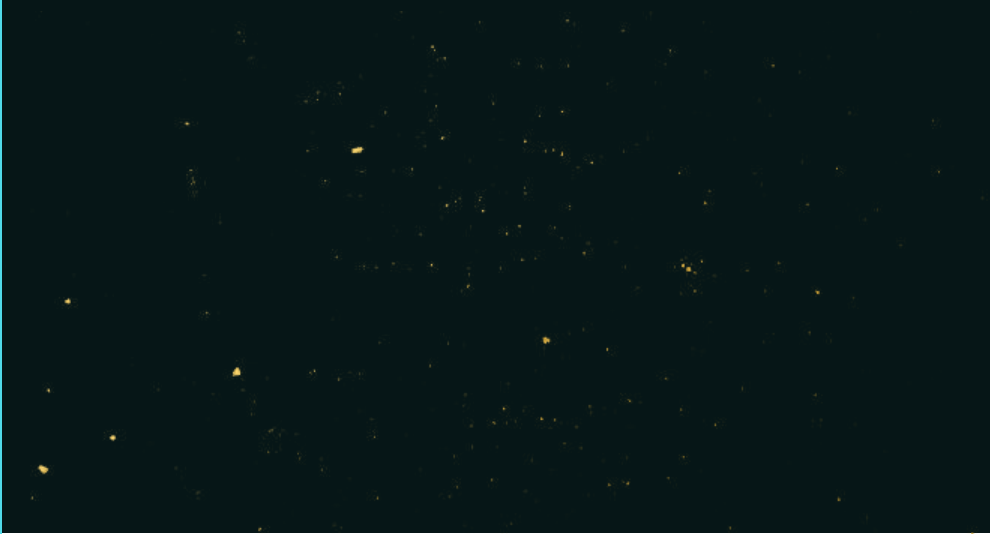
EXERCISE

Become aware of the comparisons you make in your life.

Ask Him to lead you to a new life of freedom.

Grace

Lord, I ask for the grace of a life free from comparison.



Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.

Ephesians 4:31

Jealousy is to be afraid of losing a relationship or a part of a relationship which means a lot to me. Envy is to want something that someone else has.

Jealousy says, you threaten my life by trying to take away someone I love's attention, love and care. Jealous thoughts can leave you with emotions of anger, sadness and fear.

Envy says, I want what you have, and I don't want you to have it. I even want you to come to a fall and suffer loss. These thoughts can leave me with a deep dissatisfaction, resentment and bitterness.

We can make jokes about envy and jealousy, and even pay someone a compliment by saying, "I'm so jealous of you!" We can fall for the advertisements that are geared towards making us dissatisfied and envious, but we'll be left with the effect of envy and jealousy.

The law warns us not to be jealous and envious (Ex 20:17). This instruction is repeated in the New Testament (Ef 4:31). In the history of the church, it has always been a big thing and was counted as one of the deadly sins.

Before we can beat evil with good, we need to admit to and accept envy and jealousy in our lives. 'You can't heal a wound by saying it's not there' (Jer. 6:14 LB).

Do I have a fear that something of great worth is going to be taken away from me by someone? Do I really want something that someone else has? Do I want them to lose it? What kind of conversation should I have with that person?

Can I confess my envy and jealousy to God and start moving with Him towards thinking differently about life, being transformed, being set free from envy and jealousy?

How can I focus on the good that I have and not just on that which I don't have?

How can I confess my envy and jealousy to become happy with what I have now?

How can I focus on the good that I have?

Grace

Lord, I ask for the grace of a life free from comparison.

Do everything without complaining and arguing...

Phil. 2:14

A natural reaction when things don't work out like I want them to, is to complain (murmur). It's sometimes seen as a noble characteristic and is associated with concern, to be informed, and to be courageous by doing something about it now – by talking about it. It is contagious, as we see in the story we are journeying with at present (Num. 13:32, 14:2).

By complaining we say... I deserve something different (everything I have is not thanks so grace), I know better (there is no sense to what is happening), I am a victim (look how I am being treated), I can't do anything and no-one will help me (my locus of control is outside of myself). Paul's instruction to the Philippians (2:14) is to do everything without complaining and arguing. Even the slaves are encouraged to let go of murmuring. This doesn't mean that we should just accept everything and are left to our own devices. On the contrary – there is One who knows better. There is One who is with me and supports me in everything, and gives me the strength to handle everything that I may be faced with.

Do I sometimes complain to gain the sympathy of others?
It's important to me that others will see me as.....

What do I need to let go of my murmuring?

Grace

Lord, I ask for the grace of a life free of comparison.

...be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep...

Rom 15:15

Schadenfreude is a German word which has crept into the English language – maybe because the word describes a certain emotion so accurately and in such a nuanced way. Schadenfreude is an aggregation of two German words: Schaden, meaning damage / loss, and Freuden, meaning joy. It therefore literally means experiencing joy (pleasure) when someone else experiences pain through loss. There is something cruel and vindictive about it. Just think, if I'm jealous of you, in other words if I want something you have and I want you to lose it, then I'm happy if you lose it, even if I can't have it.

It's so different to Jesus, who had deep empathy with everyone suffering loss. Even his enemies. This is why Paul says that a more appropriate reaction would be to weep with those who weep and be happy with those who are happy (Rom 12:15).

Through schadenfreude we go against the deepest nature of our humanity, which can lead to feelings of guilt and shame. Schadenfreude is rife in our culture. We see it in politics, sports, and the films that we watch. It's something I notice in myself, too. When a black politician said that Covid was a white man's disease, and proceeded to be infected with Covid himself, I was so happy.

At first, I rationalised my schadenfreude by saying that he was endangering a lot of lives by talking the way he did. But in the end, I just couldn't feel good about the reaction, and the guilt and shame took over.

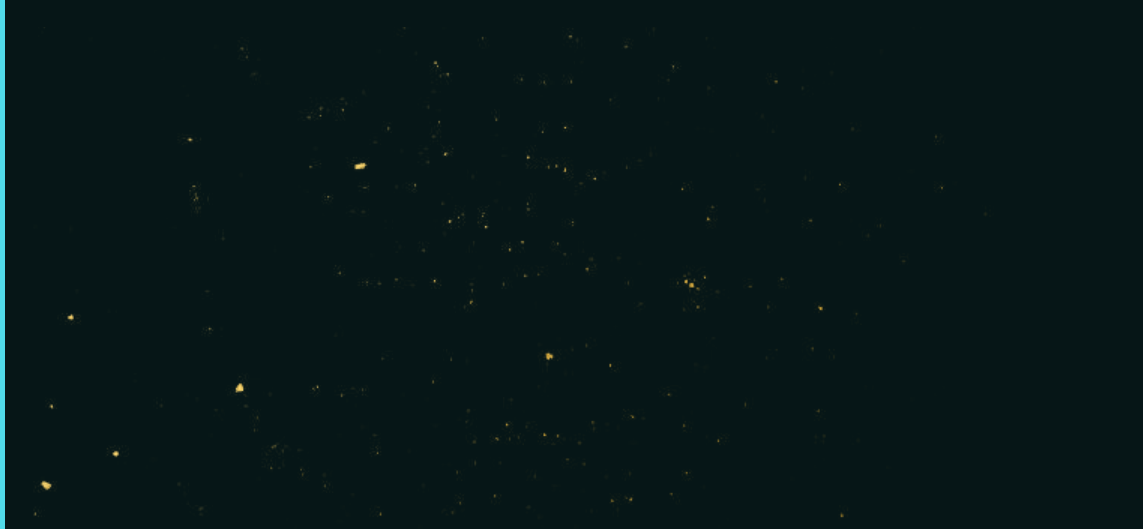
It's easy to be taken up with collective schadenfreude and, along with the group I belong to, be happy about others suffering, but that doesn't change the fact that it doesn't promote true connection with myself, the group, or the suffering party.

The question is if I want to be someone who is glad when others suffer loss, become ill and die, whoever they are?

Who do I really want to be like?

Grace

Lord, I ask for the grace of a life free from comparison.



“Bless those who persecute you. Don’t curse them; pray that God will bless them. Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep. Never pay back evil with more evil. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable.”

Rom. 12:14,15,17

Another word which the Germans use is freudenfreude. It literally means joy-joy. It is the opposite of schadenfreude, and it means that I’m happy about the success of others. If I experience success, there is a need to share it with others and my expectation is that people with whom I share my success will be happy with me. If there is a negative reaction of competition for example, it is disappointing and the connection between me and the other party is damaged. That’s not what good friends do.

A good friend cries with you if you cry and is happy with you when you are happy. Paul’s invitation is bless, do not curse, do not repay evil with more evil (Rom 12:14,15,17). More freudenfreude and less schadenfreude.

Practically speaking, it means that if something shares something with me about which they are excited, I express interest by asking them to share even more of the experience. I receive it and am happy with them by telling them so. If someone is happy with me about something good that has happened to me, I thank them.

At school, our rugby coach taught us to always say thank you to the team if you score a try, and always go to the person who scored the try to congratulate him. I’m not always going to score the try, but I am always going to be happy with others when a try is scored. It promotes connection and feels so good!

You can now take a few moments and think of people in your life in whose happiness you can share. You can share their happiness intentionally by listening to their story of success and to tell them that you are happy with them. You can share something you are grateful for with someone close to you and thank them that they listened and shared in your joy.

Grace

Lord, I ask for the grace of a life without comparison.

And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.

Phil. 4:8

According to research, it doesn't look like we can get away from the tendency to compare ourselves to others. It looks like it is something that happens to us, rather than a choice that we make. What we do know is that we have a choice concerning what we will do once we realise that we are busy comparing. In other words, we can choose to not give in to the temptation. The more we accept our own brokenness, accept the diversity of gifts and the inequality in life as a given, the more we can move to a place of admiration and respect.

I can admire or respect someone if their abilities or achievements or character inspires me. Instead of competing and putting myself at the centre of everything, I choose connection and put someone else at the centre. It can contribute to us wanting to improve ourselves. We do it with our sports heroes. We don't become jealous or envious of them, but we admire them. We don't want to take their place, or even become like them. We just want to become a better version of ourselves.

Admiration and respect can also be called worship. It's what happens to us when we see and realise who He is. We feel small, humble, and drawn to coming closer and making a connection. To be disrespectful means to not have the expected reaction of respect towards the important, weighty, and holy in life. We sometimes laugh at silly, disrespectful humour, but we can never feel good about it.

The invitation for the day is to look at three people close to you with eyes of admiration and respect. What is there about them that is true, lovely, noble and pure? Familiarity kills everything in and around you. Look at those people you know until they become unfamiliar.

Thank Him for that which He has given them and tell them what you admire about them.

Grace

Lord, I ask for the grace of a life free from comparison.

EXERCISE

Choose one of the days of the week and reflect on your experience of this day.

You can also think back over your entire week and stand still at some moments where you experienced things that stand out and stay with you.

Maybe you also want to look at some of your journal entries again. Talk to God about it.





WEEK 2

Places I go when I suffer loss



“Mourn, my people, mourn.

Let your pain rise up in your heart and burst forth in you with sobs and cries.

Mourn for the silence that exists between you and your spouse.

Mourn for the way you were robbed of your innocence.

Mourn for the absence of a soft embrace, an intimate friendship, a life-giving sexuality.

Mourn for the abuse of your body, your mind, your heart.

Mourn for the bitterness of your children, the indifference of your friends, your colleagues’ hardness of heart.

Mourn for those whose hunger for love brought them AIDs, whose desire for freedom brought them to refugee camps, whose hunger for justice brought them to prisons. Cry for the millions who die from lack of food, lack of care, lack of love...

Don’t think of this as normal, something to be taken for granted, something to accept... Think of it as the dark force of Evil that has penetrated every human heart, every family, every community, every nation, and keeps you imprisoned.”

Cry for freedom, for salvation, for redemption.

Cry loudly and deeply,

and trust that your tears will make your eyes see that the Kingdom is close at hand, yes, at your fingertips!”

Henri Nouwen: New Oxford Review, June 1992).

When the LORD brought back his exiles to Jerusalem, it was like a dream! We were filled with laughter, and we sang for joy. And the other nations said, “What amazing things the LORD has done for them.” Yes, the LORD has done amazing things for us! What joy! Restore our fortunes, LORD, as streams renew the desert. Those who plant in tears will harvest with shouts of joy. They weep as they go to plant their seed, but they sing as they return with the harvest.

Psalms 126

In the wilderness I am confronted with dimensions of life I cannot escape. Suffering is one of these dimensions. How I deal with it is a determining factor of my life.

When I look at the life of Jesus, I see how He prepares me for life. In Him I find a prototype for living. If I want to understand something, I look at him. I see that He has also suffered. Not only physically, but also emotionally. He didn't just lose his freedom. He also had to give up his dream: “Not my will, but Yours” (paraphrase Luke 22:42)

During his most difficult time, the disciples weren't there for him. Through his life I see how suffering is a signpost to God. Through his life I see how I can be comforted by the Holy Spirit. Through His life I see - *joy comes in the morning.*

Grace

Lord, I ask for the grace of tears, to mourn my losses.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.

Revelations 21:1-2.4

Why suffering? It's a mystery.

I grew up with the idea that I wouldn't have to suffer, because Jesus suffered for me. But in my discipleship, I have come to realise that suffering is part of life.

There will be losses and that goes along with great sadness. Sadness is part of being human. I like the Sanskrit word "ta-tata" – the suchness of life. The nature of life is that everything passes. Everything changes. If you look at a 700-year old tree, it will still be changing. Life is short.

Jesus says: "It's like a cloud." James, his brother, says: "Look at the grass. It's just a season, then it's gone." John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, the one probably live closes to Jesus, says: "This world is fading away."

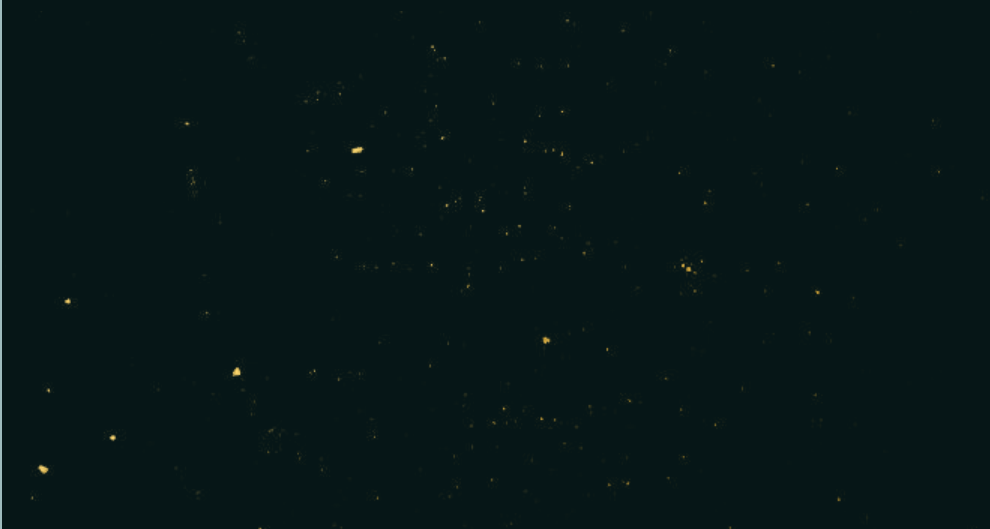
It's a great truth of life and it's something you not only have to know. It's something you have to accept.

Your sadness, pain, the purgatory you are in, will pass. It, too, will pass, and you will see the new Jerusalem.

How do you think about loss? How do you deal with it?

Grace

Lord, I ask for the grace of tears, to mourn my losses.



Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Matth 5:4

The path of sadness is an emotion I can't control. It's a feeling that comes over me and I can try to regulate it up to a point, but it often catches me off guard. That's when I'm faced with the choice – am I going to allow it by thinking about it and feeling it; or am I going to cut myself off? Am I going to resist it? It's an incredibly important moment.

My culture – and often, my theology – tells me that I have to resist it in that moment and let it go. I grew up with the idea, "Always rejoice in the Lord." And when I encounter something like that, I have to resist it. Be positive. Read encouraging scriptures.

I remember the first funeral I ever attended as a child. A family member had died. I remember how I experienced the sadness of those around me, and then started crying myself. Looking back, I don't know if I cried about the family member, or if I cried because everyone else was crying. Maybe a mixture of both.

Immediately, I cut myself off from it, and I heard a lady behind me whisper: "There now, it will all be better. Everything is going to be okay."

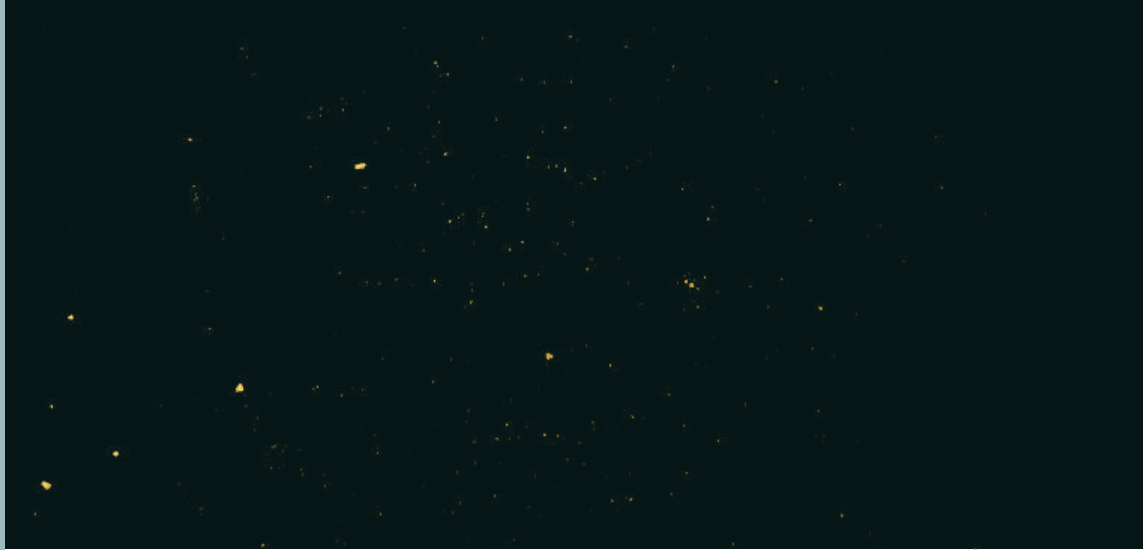
There's a saying in therapeutic circles: "Everything that you resist, will persist."

When I hide the sadness – when I don't work with it – it builds up and consumes me.

What do you do with sadness in your life? What prevents you from embracing it and feeling it?

Grace

Lord, I ask for the grace of tears, to mourn my losses.



Mary was standing outside the tomb crying, and as she wept, she stooped and looked in. She saw two white-robed angels, one sitting at the head and the other at the foot of the place where the body of Jesus had been lying. "Dear woman, why are you crying?" the angels asked her. "Because they have taken away my Lord," she replied, "and I don't know where they have put him." She turned to leave and saw someone standing there. It was Jesus, but she didn't recognize him. "Dear woman, why are you crying?" Jesus asked her. "Who are you looking for?" She thought he was the gardener. "Sir," she said, "if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him." "Mary!" Jesus said. She turned to him and cried out, "Rabboni!" (which is Hebrew for "Teacher"). "Don't cling to me," Jesus said, "for I haven't yet ascended to the Father. But go find my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene found the disciples and told them, "I have seen the Lord!" Then she gave them his message.

John 20:11-18

I find it interesting that Maria is asked twice: "Why are you crying?" The first time by the two angels in the grave, and the second time by Jesus himself. It's like she needs to process how she feels and why she feels that way more than once.

One of the greatest researches in the field of loss and grief says that we used to think we went through phases when grieving. But he says all research today indicates that that's not the case, that everyone deals with grief in a unique way.

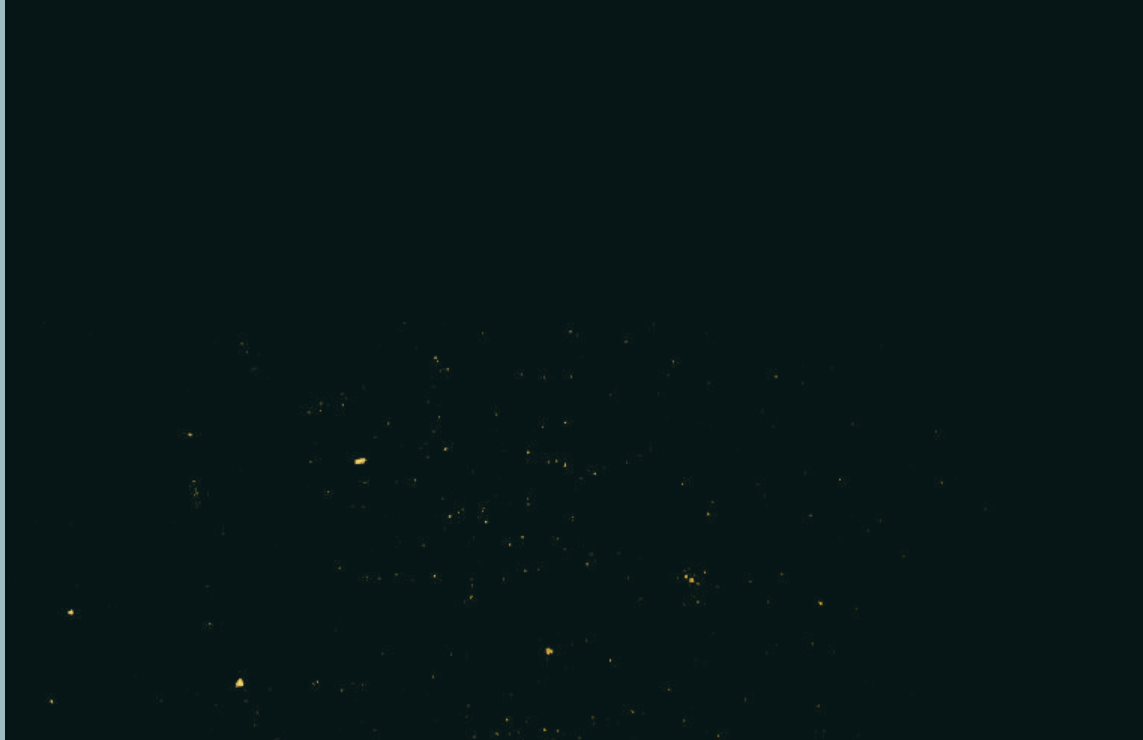
He says, however, that there is one thing that everyone has in common: we need a witness for our grief and pain. I have to talk about it. Someone must listen. Someone has to see it and know about it.

It's not easy to verbalise our sadness and pain. Jesus says if I do it I will be comforted. I don't have to be scared of going there. God is with me. Jesus says the Comforter will come to me in the darkest of night. In the dark night of the soul, God does His greatest work in me. I don't only find Him in the victory. I don't only find Him when things are wonderful. In fact, I find Him there when I am grieving.

With whom can I share my pain?
Who can I be there for, listen to, embrace?

Grace

Lord, I ask for the grace of tears, to mourn my losses.



...so you will not grieve like people who have no hope.

1 Thes. 4:13b

When Paul talks about loss and tears in Thessalonians, he invites me not to cry like someone without hope. Believers cry differently!

The tears I cry becomes the medicine the Spirit uses to heal and repair. Within that vulnerability I find that I am not alone. That He is there, in the deepest darkness.

I can meet losses full on knowing that there is a God. He is good. He knows tears. He is with me, and He strengthens me. Just like he was ultimately handed over and lost His freedom, health, reputation, and life, it wasn't the end of Him.

That is also the pattern according to which He works with me. I can rest assured that the new life is better than the old life I had. It might not look like it right away, but in time I will see it.

Share your despondency over your loss with Him and ask Him for trust in the way that He works within you.

Grace

Lord, I ask for the grace of tears, to mourn my losses

“Don’t cling to me,” Jesus said, “for I haven’t yet ascended to the Father. But go find my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

John 20:17

What can I let go of? To cling prevents me from starting the grieving process, but it also prevents me from moving so that the sadness can go through me. For example, I can cling to anger through blame. I can feel it’s someone or something’s fault, and that I want revenge. I can start blaming myself – “If only I didn’t do that.”

These can be ways of avoiding sadness. They’re things I have to let go so that I can grieve. Jesus asks Mary in John 20 to not cling to him. She has to let Him go. The Jesus she used to know. She has to let go of her idea of Jesus.

This invitation is open to all of us as followers of Jesus.

What is it you need to let go of in order to grieve?

Grace

Lord, I ask the for the grace of tears, to mourn my losses.

EXERCISE

Choose one of the days of the week and reflect on your experience of this day.

You can also think back over your entire week and stand still at some moments where you experienced things that stand out and stay with you.

Maybe you also want to look at some of your journal entries again.

Talk to God about it.





WEEK 3

*When I'm looking for connection...
(to belong)*



THE MASS

What I say I don't feel
What I feel I don't show
What I show isn't real
What is real, Lord-I don't know
No, no, no-I don't know.

I don't know why everyt ime
I find a new love I wind up destroying it
I don't know why I'm
So freaky-minded, keep on kind of enjoying
it-

Why I drift off to sleep
With pledges of deep resolve again,
Then along comes the day
And suddenly they dissolve again-
I don't know...

What I need I don't have
What I have I don't own
What I own I don't want
What I want, Lord, I don't know.

- Extract from The Mass, *by Leonard Bernstein*

So Moses went out to meet his father-in-law. He bowed low and kissed him. They asked about each other's welfare and then went into Moses' tent. Moses told his father-in-law everything the LORD had done to Pharaoh and Egypt on behalf of Israel. He also told about all the hardships they had experienced along the way and how the LORD had rescued his people from all their troubles. Jethro was delighted when he heard about all the good things the LORD had done for Israel as he rescued them from the hand of the Egyptians. When Moses' father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he asked, "What are you really accomplishing here? Why are you trying to do all this alone while everyone stands around you from morning till evening?" Moses replied, "Because the people come to me to get a ruling from God. When a dispute arises, they come to me, and I am the one who settles the case between the quarrelling parties. I inform the people of God's decrees and give them his instructions." "This is not good!" Moses' father-in-law exclaimed. "You're going to wear yourself out—and the people, too. This job is too heavy a burden for you to handle all by yourself. Now listen to me, and let me give you a word of advice, and may God be with you. You should continue to be the people's representative before God, bringing their disputes to him."

Exodus 18:7-9. 14-19

The wilderness is a place where we are threatened and run into trouble. T

o survive, we then often look to others. It is not only for physical reasons that we look to others, but also for emotions, social and spiritual reasons.

Even though we can physically survive independently, it is not possible to survive emotionally, socially, and spiritually on our own.

From an evolutionary standpoint, connection was about physical survival, but today it's more about meaning in life.

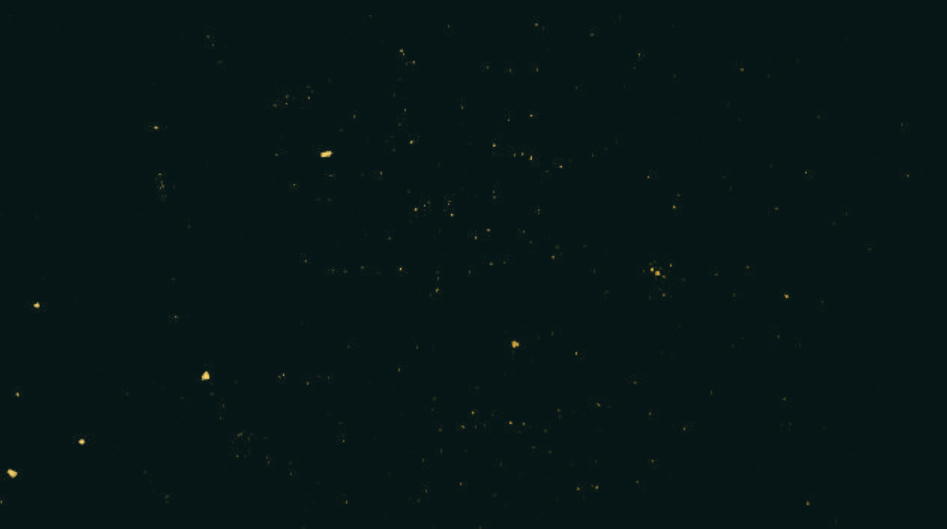
In Exodus 18 we find a story in which we can see ourselves with all the relationships we live in. We are introduced to the dynamic nature of connection and the dialogue a relationship can establish and maintain.

The space between you and someone or something else isn't static but keeps changing. We are able to establish good, life-giving relationships. I am not a victim if I am living in a relationship which brings only pain. I have a choice.

We are invited to grow in the art of connection and dialogue to live in life- giving relationships.

Grace

Lord, I ask for the grace of connection and dialogue in my relationships.



Then the Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him.”

Genesis 2:18

We are made for connection. That is what the book of the beginning of all things (Genesis) teaches us. When the Creator looked at creation, everything was good, except the fact that man was alone (Gen. 2:18).

Connection is to make contact and create a space where there is a feeling that you are seen, heard, felt, and accepted by another party. According to research in various fields of humanities, connection is integral to our neurobiology.

That is why we experience pain through disconnection, which can lead to isolation, loneliness, powerlessness, addiction and even depression. People with strong connections, according to research, are happier, healthier, and better able to cope with the stresses of life.

Connection enables dialogue. Connection and dialogue establish relationship.

There are four relationships in which we live, according to Martin Buber. The I-Thou, I-You, I-It and I-I relationships. This means there are four very important connections in our lives.

You are now invited to become aware of these four connections.

Think separately for a moment about each of these connections – with God / your loved ones / your world.

How would you describe the connection?

How do you feel about the connection?

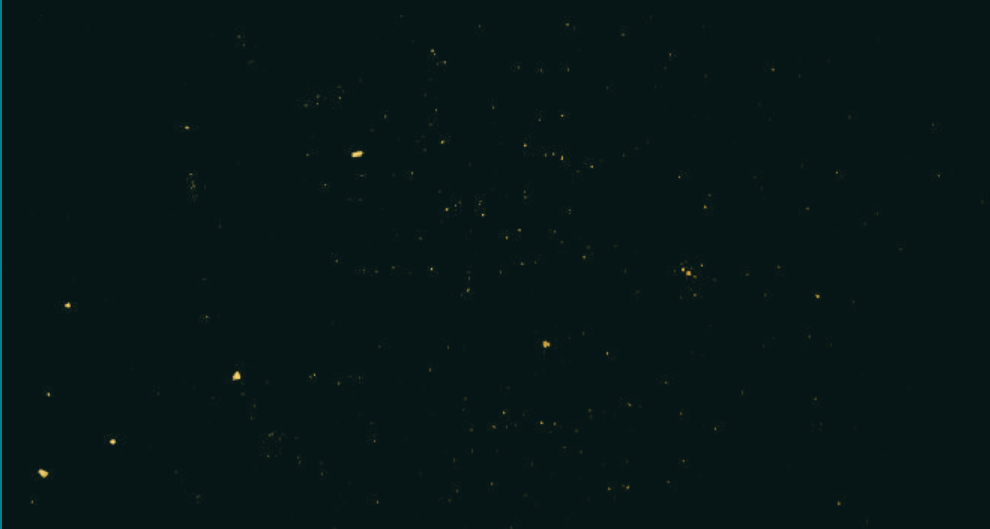
What would you compare the connection with?

How would you express the connection physically? (Watch yourself in the mirror, see what you look like when you express it).

What are you invited to through this exercise?

Grace

Lord, I ask for the grace of connection and dialogue in my relationships.



Jesus replied, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all you soul, and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: Love your neighbor as yourself."

Matth 22:37-39

One of the things we notice from the story of the encounter between Moses and his father-in-law is that Moses loses contact with himself. He is overworked and had sent his wife and children to his father-in-law so that he could manage all his work.

When his father-in-law decides to take his daughter back and sees how exhausted Moses is, he asks him why he does it to himself. Moses has placed the locus of control outside of himself and blamed the people. (Ex. 18:16).

I wonder if he gained insight when he heard himself: "The people come to me to get a ruling from God." (Ex 18:15). There is an ego need for acknowledgement and acceptance which drives him to say yes and prevents him from setting good boundaries by saying no.

Even though his workload causes fatigue and pain, he gains something that he needs emotionally – acknowledgement from people.

Through this meeting he gained insight and his life changed. His life with his family changed.

Through this story it looks as though...
Our connection with ourselves is related to our connection with others. We experience pain when our connections are damaged.

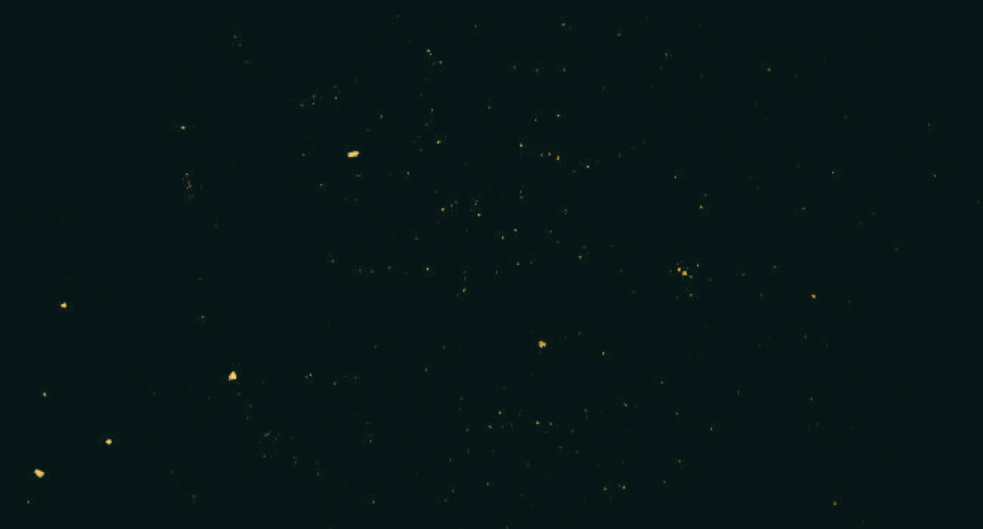
You are now invited to think about a time when you experienced deep connection – an encounter where you felt seen, heard, felt and accepted.

Think about the person, the place, and how you experienced it. How you felt, what you sensed and what happened to you.

Thank Him for the experience and share your story with someone close to you.

Grace

Lord, I ask for the grace of connection and dialogue in my relationships.



Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, heard about everything God had done for Moses and his people, the Israelites. He heard especially about how the Lord had rescued them from Egypt. Earlier, Moses had sent his wife, Zipporah, and his two sons back to Jethro, who had taken them in. Moses told his father-in-law everything the Lord had done to Pharaoh and Egypt on behalf of Israel. He also told about all the hardships they had experienced along the way and how the Lord had rescued his people from all their troubles. When Moses' father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he asked, "What are you really accomplishing here? Why are you trying to do all this alone while everyone stands around you from morning till evening?" Moses listened to his father-in-law's advice and followed his suggestions.

Exodus 18:1-28:14,24

To make a connection – to make contact and create a space where there is acknowledgement and acceptance, doesn't just happen.

Here are a few things you can do to make a connection possible:

Interest – Jethro wasn't taken up in his own world, and when he heard the news of Moses, he decided to go and make contact (Ex. 18:1). Moses was open to it and received his father-in-law's advice, even though his father-in-law didn't share the same faith and did not have such a big congregation as him either (18:24)

Courage – Jethro displayed courage by asking personal questions of Moses (18:14). Moses displayed courage by receiving Jethro and listening to him (18:24).

Vulnerability – Moses and Jethro were both vulnerable in sharing what they felt (15:15,16).

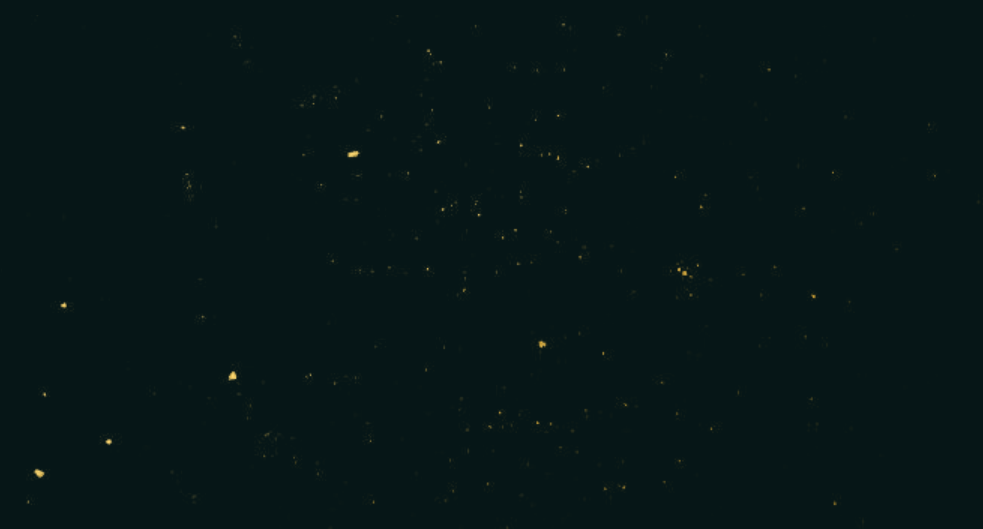
Humility – Moses especially was humble by listening to his father-in-law, who had less experience than him in the things he was handling.

You are now invited to think about a time when you experienced deep connection. Take note of the friends of connection and see if you acknowledged them during the encounter.

Do you acknowledge the characteristics of Jesus? Which other friends are important to you? How do you befriend the friends of connection?

Grace

Lord, I ask for the grace of connection and dialogue in my relationships.



Therefore, accept each other just as Christ has accepted you...

Romans 15:7

For connection to happen, I must make contact and establish a space where both I and the other party feel seen, heard, felt and accepted. This means that I...

...must be present. Being present means in the first place that I am not busy with other things in my head. I give you all my attention. I am conscious of my own presence. I am aware of my emotions (fear, anger, etc.), my desires (e.g. what I want from you) and my own body (fatigue) or any other sensation. It's a wide and open consciousness. I don't think about everything, because then I'm no longer present for you.

- **...see you and listen to you.** I don't interrupt you and I don't hijack your story by saying, 'exactly the same thing happened to me' or 'something much worse happened to me'. Eye contact and appropriate touch improves the connection. To really see and hear is rare. It takes practice and time. If you have experienced it, you will remember it, recognise it. John the apostle was 90 when he wrote about the first time Jesus saw him and spoke to him (John 1:40). He remembers the place and that it was four o'clock in the afternoon. He was only 16 at the time.

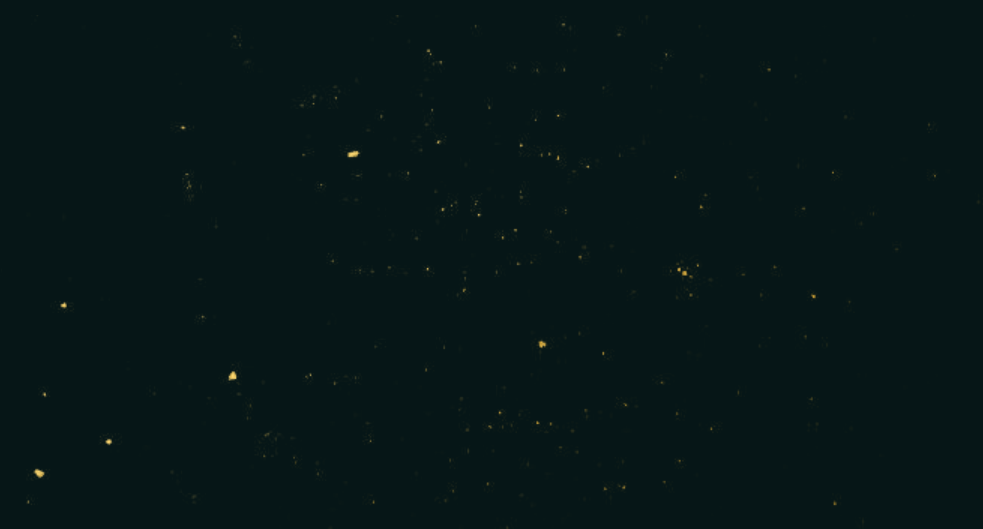
...accept you. I am not there to save you, to change you or to fix you. It can be one of the most difficult tasks to accept someone who is not like you. Ask anyone who is married and went through that phase of being in love, where the ego boundaries disappeared, and the couple felt like they were one and love each other unconditionally. Paul gives the instruction... Accept each other... as Christ has accepted you (Rom 15:7).

You are invited to think about a deep connection you experienced and note how these skills were present.

Which skills would you like to use to strengthen connections, and what would you have to do to achieve this?

Grace

Lord, I ask for the grace of connection and dialogue in my relationships.



**Don't let evil conquer you,
but conquer evil by doing good**

Romans 12:21

A close enemy is opposition, impediment or threats which isn't as easily recognisable as a distant enemy. Modesty, for example, is a close enemy of humility. The distant enemy of humility would be the opposite, namely pride.

At first glance the close enemy is close to the desired quality. The truth is that the close enemy is still an enemy. Even though the enemies can look similar, and it feels like connection is promoted, it actually destroys relationships and leaves us alone and full of pain. We can often feel that there is something wrong with us, that we are being manipulated, or just that something is wrong, but I can't put my finger on it.

Here are a few close enemies of connection:

Interest is replaced with curiosity and fault finding, rather than reconciliation and appreciation.

Courage is replaced with silence and an inability to show pain or fear, often due to a fear of rejection. We wear the mask and pretend that everything is fine.

Vulnerability is replaced with a performance that would be acceptable to the other person (performing vulnerability). It is to copy words and emotions that we think is suitable rather than talking from the heart.

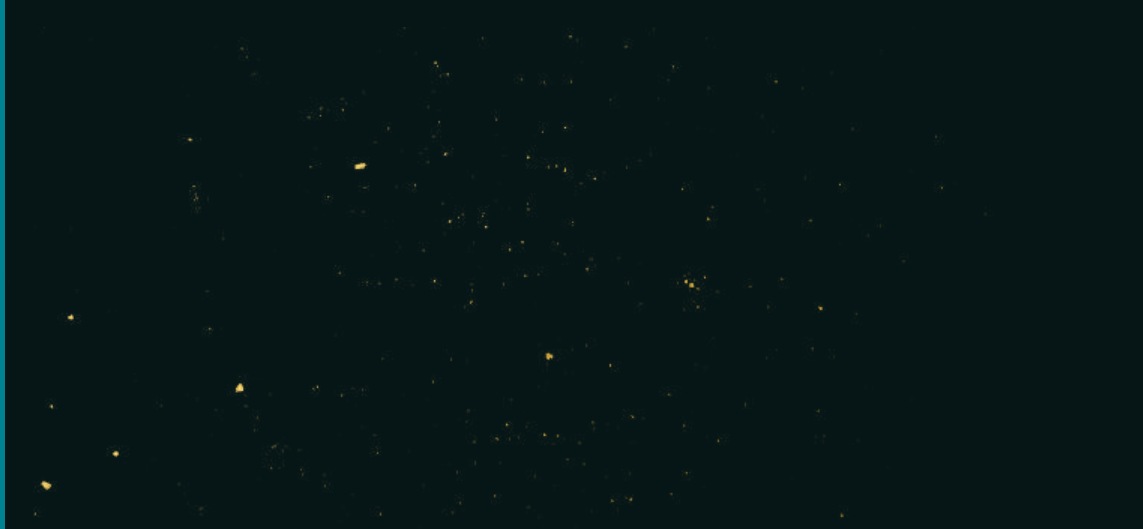
Humility is replaced with modesty. Modesty has more to do with a bad self-image and fear. I want to present something that will impress, while it's not really how I feel.

You are invited to ask God for the gift of discernment in your relationships. Start with yourself and look at the close enemies which could (to an extent, sometimes?) be living with you.

What can you do with these enemies?

Grace

Lord, I ask for the grace of connection and dialogue in my relationships.



EXERCISE

Choose one of the days of the week and reflect on your experience of this day.

You can also think back over your entire week and stand still at some moments where you experienced things that stand out and stay with you.

Maybe you also want to look at some of your journal entries again.

Talk to God about it.





WEEK 4

When I feel I'm not good enough



YOU SAY

**I keep fighting voices in my mind that say I'm not good enough
Every single lie that tells me I will never measure up**

**Am I more than just the sum of every high and every low
Remind me once again just who I am because I need to know
Ooh-oh**

**You say I am loved when I can't feel a thing
You say I am strong when I think I am weak
And you say I am held when I am falling short
And when I don't belong, oh You say I am Yours
And I believe
Oh, I believe
What You say of me
I believe**

**The only thing that matters now is everything You think of me
In You I find my worth, in You I find my identity
Ooh-oh**

**You say I am loved when I can't feel a thing
You say I am strong when I think I am weak
And you say I am held when I am falling short
When I don't belong, oh You say I am Yours
And I believe
Oh, I believe
What You say of me
Oh, I believe**



YOU SAY *continued...*

Taking all I have, and now I'm laying it at Your feet
You have every failure, God, You have every victory
Ooh-oh

You say I am loved when I can't feel a thing
You say I am strong when I think I am weak
You say I am held when I am falling short
When I don't belong, oh You say I am Yours
And I believe
Oh, I believe
What You say of me
I believe

Oh, I believe
Yes, I believe
What You say of me
I believe

- You Say, *by Lauren Daigle*

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Ephesians 2:4-10

Many of us, people of faith, struggle to believe that we are good enough. I struggle to believe that I am worthy and lovable. I struggle even more to believe that God can love me as I am. I am always tempted to believe that there are things I need to do or accomplish to be worthy of love – especially God’s love.

Sometimes I confuse behaviour with my inherent worthiness – I think I don’t measure up because of how I have behaved and therefore I’m not good enough. Sometimes I confuse accomplishments – or the accolades of others – with worthiness and therefore think I’m not good enough.

Sometimes I internalise negative messages from others and so believe I’m not good enough. Other times my negative thought patterns convince me that I’m not good enough. In challenging times, I can so quickly begin to think – and believe – that I am not enough.

How we think about ourselves impacts our ability to become the best version of ourselves.

Saint Irenaeus, a Christian theologian from the second century, wrote: “The glory of God is man fully alive.” When we do not believe we are good enough, we struggle to be “fully alive”. Irenaeus believes that each one of us has dignity and is good enough because that is what God wills.

In Lent, we discover how God desires each of us to have life and have it to the full – Jesus tells us, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10).

Lent reminds us that we are always good enough despite our human weaknesses and sin. But, unfortunately, thinking the opposite, which we tend to do, is far from the truth.

This week you are invited to step back and notice how the message “I am not good enough” has impacted your relationship with yourself, others, and God. We want to see ourselves as God sees us.

During the week ahead, write down some of the best qualities and gifts you believe you have. Frequently look at the list. Then, in prayer, name the qualities and gifts you have written to God. Finally, intentionally give thanks to God for the work of art that you are.

Grace

I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness. (Jeremiah 31:3)

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

(Ephesians 2:10)

The great spiritual writer of the last century, Henri Nouwen, tells us that the fundamental truth of who we are – whether we feel it or not – is that long before we are born and long after we die, we are God's beloved. He echoes St. Paul, who tells us that "God prepared in advance" – God knew us long before we were known by others or ourselves.

Sometimes I think I am not good enough because I have not experienced or felt it. I feel that I am yet to be noticed or acknowledged. Maybe I carry, in my subconscious, a message from my experience that plays over and over "I am not good enough". The root of this message could be from a failure, because of something I was told and hold onto or because I am ashamed of the sinful tendencies I see in myself.

Yet, as Nouwen tells us, I am beloved long before my parents, siblings, teachers, society, or faith community says anything to me or about me. I am special because I belong to God from all eternity. St. Paul says, "God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus".

That is the good news and truth Lent teaches us: we are good enough because we are the beloved of God, who has made us right and good in Christ.

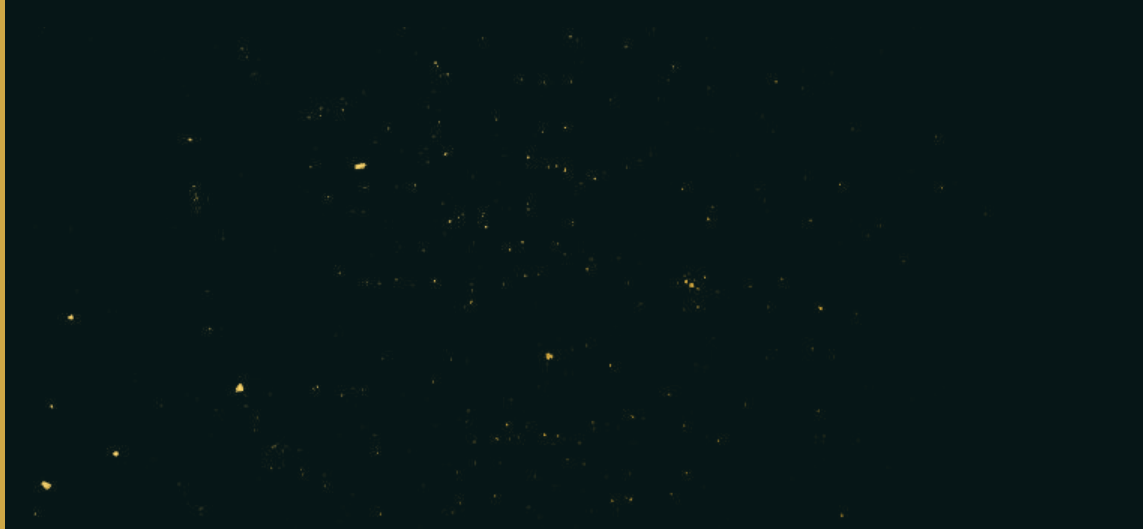
EXERCISE

Take a moment today to recall a time or a moment when you knew that you were loved and cherished – maybe by a family member, a partner or a friend.

Can you allow yourself to, in those moments, see how God was claiming you as the beloved?

Grace

I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness. (Jeremiah 31:3)



For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Ephesians 2:10

"Perfectionism at its core isn't about high standards. It's about fear. Fear of failure. Fear of looking stupid, fear of making a mistake, fear of being judged, criticised, and ridiculed. It's the fear that one simple fact might be true: You're not good enough" – Marie Forelo

It might be helpful to revisit and reflect upon our understanding – or definition – of what "perfection" or "good enough" means. So often, our self-deprecating positions or beliefs are rooted in how we understand or define things.

When I think I am not good enough, I might fall into the trap of moving in the opposite direction, overextending myself, and seeking all the time to be perfect. I can be swamped trying to be who I am not, because I think that if I could be like this or that or like someone different, I would be good enough.

This can be exhausting and will drain energy. I will find that the more I strive to be who I am not, the more restless, alienated and dissatisfied I feel. This can lead to spiritual fatigue, and my efforts seem fruitless.

St. Paul tells us that we have been made alive in Christ despite our transgressions because of God's great love and mercy for us. Therefore, we do not have to be who we are not because wherever we lack, the Lord provides in great love and mercy.

EXERCISE

Lent invites us to recognise that each of us is continually moulded in the hands of God; each of us is “God’s handiwork”. Lent urges us to claim our value, God’s unique fingerprint on each of us.

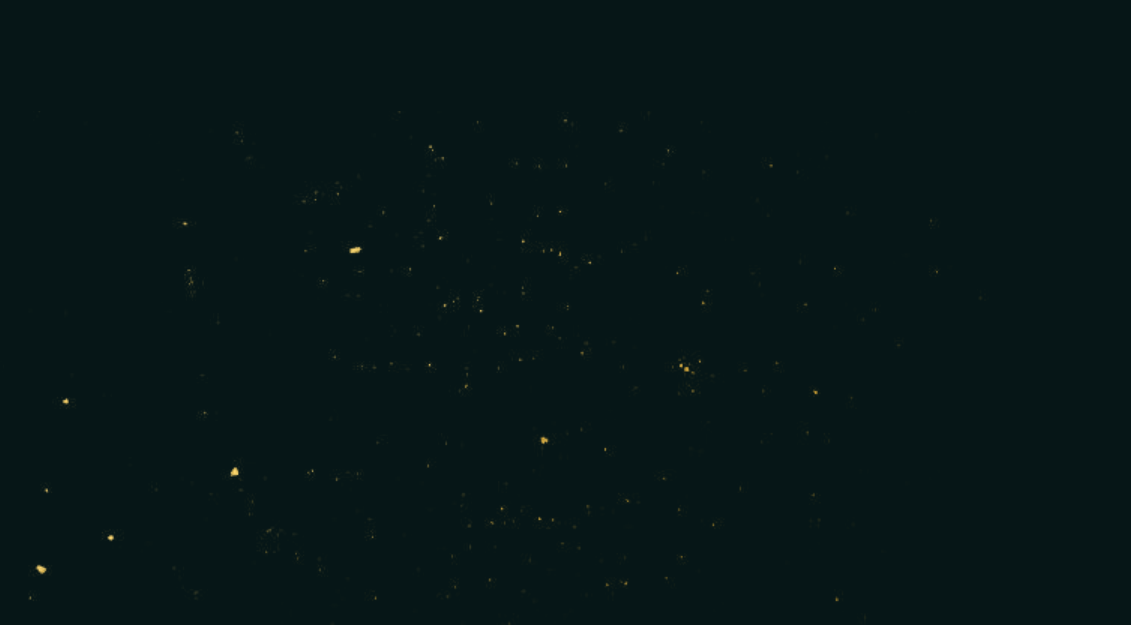
I do not have to be who I am not because God, in Jesus, has made me right and saved me as I am.

What does “good enough” mean to you? Are you tiring yourself by trying to be someone that you are not?

Spend time today talking to God and giving God thanks for who you are and how God has moulded you.

Grace

I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness. (Jeremiah 31:3)



For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Ephesians 2:10

"O God, help me to believe that truth about myself no matter how beautiful it is!" wrote the spiritual guide and author Macrina Wiederkehr.

One of the hardest things for any of us to believe is the beautiful truth about ourselves. We readily embrace the negative messages about ourselves but find it challenging to embrace the beauty.

We are, as St. Paul says, "rich" because of God's kindness to us in Christ. Each of us is crafted, with skill and purpose, by God for God's purpose. We do not need to be like anyone else or do what anyone else does because each of us has a unique role. After all, we are "God's handiwork".

The comparisons I make between me and others are unhelpful. I might think someone is good enough, and they disagree. I may think I am not good enough, and someone else may put me on a pedestal!

In this season of Lent, we are invited to intentionally become aware of the truth of our beauty. We are urged to let go of unhelpful definitions and comparisons. Instead, we are invited to welcome God's grace, which makes us good enough and offers us life in abundance.

EXERCISE

I have never forgotten watching a new parent hold their small child in their arms. The face of the parent glowing in awe as they look with loved-filled eyes and a deep, joyful smile at their child in their arms. This is a powerful picture of how God sees us.

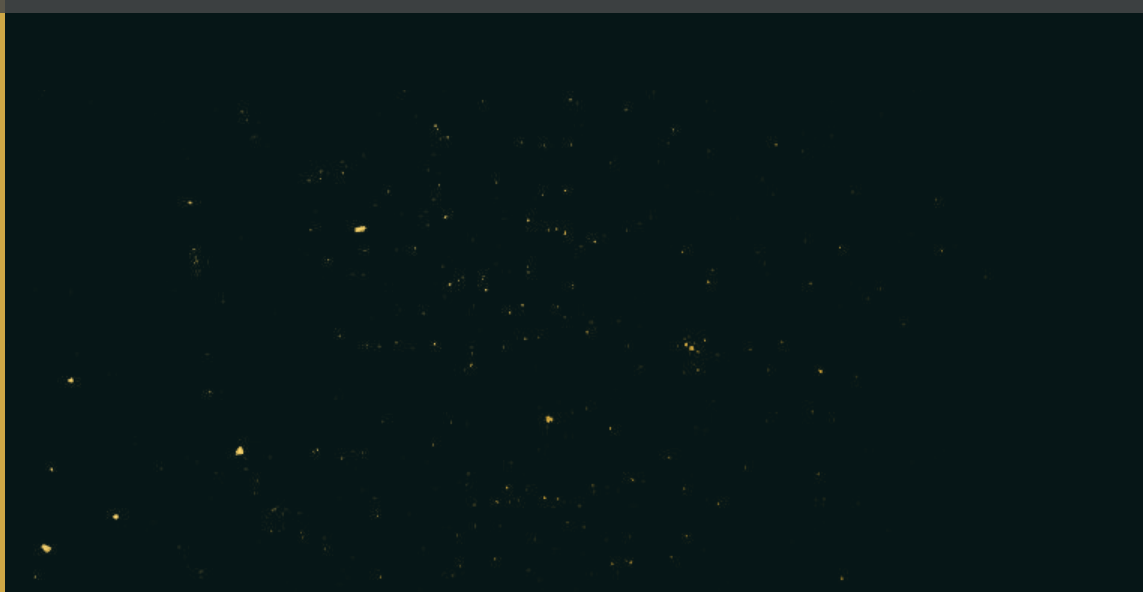
We are looked upon with the same intimacy and embraced in the arms of loving care as a parent does their child. The child is more than good enough – and so are we in God's arms!

Spend time today imagining you are held in God's arms as a parent holds a child. Notice the awe and affirming smile on God's face as you look into God's eyes.

Can you see God's love-filled eyes? Take note of what your heart feels. What does this do to you emotionally? Speak to God about it.

Grace

I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness. (Jeremiah 31:3)



For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Ephesians 2:10

"Finally, I am coming to the conclusion that my highest ambition is to be what I already am. That I will never fulfil my obligation to surpass myself unless I first accept myself, and if I accept myself fully in the right way, I will already have surpassed myself." – Thomas Merton

We often try to hide, neglect, or reject the parts of ourselves we consider unacceptable. As a result, we might spend a lot of energy trying to change ourselves in vain.

Although it may seem counterintuitive, self-acceptance will lead me to transformation. It does not mean that I ignore my weaknesses and sin. Instead, it means that I become more aware of who I am and accept myself as I am. St. Paul reminds us that God's grace saves us as we are – strengths and weaknesses, gifts and sins. The Lord makes us worthy, and if God accepts us as we are, we should accept ourselves. God works with what we are and not what we are trying to be.

Paradoxically, I become much more in touch with the fact that I am God's handiwork when I accept myself as I am now.

Self-acceptance means recognising that my value goes beyond my attributes and actions. It goes beyond what I think. When I dare to accept myself, I become more authentic and discover what I truly desire. My desires shift and change all the time. However, my deepest desire to be accepted, valued and loved, do not change.

EXERCISE

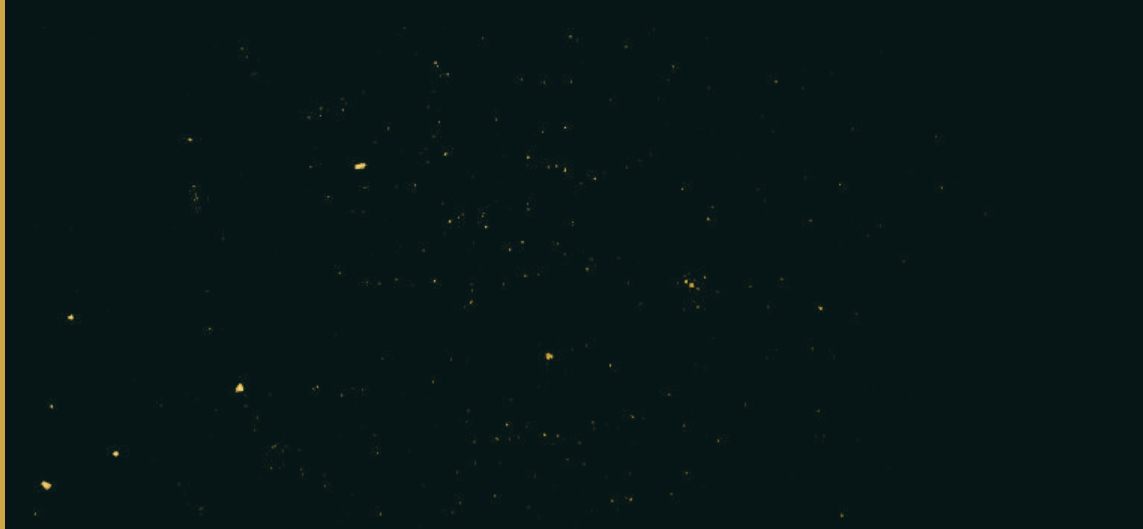
The way I seek their fulfilment, however, will change. I will not be pursuing who I am not, but accepting who I am and relying more intentionally on God.

What part of yourself do you tend to hide, neglect, or reject?
What part of yourself do you consider to be unacceptable?
Speak to the Lord about this. If you have a spiritual companion, consider sharing your reflections with them.

Accepting ourselves and learning that we are good enough as we are, is a journey that we walk together with God and others.

Grace

I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness. (Jeremiah 31:3)



For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Ephesians 2:10

Constantly trying to make ourselves good enough can lead to a kind of narcissism in which we rarely find the time and space to be in touch with the deeper movements inside and around us. We will only discover our inherent goodness and dignity, the fact that we are God's handiwork when we make time and space to notice what is moving beyond the surface.

A friend recently described the anxiety they experience when there is no power, and it is dark. I asked what the catalyst for the anxiety was. After a brief reflection, they responded by saying that they felt insecure in the dark because they did not know what was happening around them.

This is a metaphor for our spiritual lives too. When we are unaware of what is happening around us and within us, we can quickly feel insecure within ourselves and about ourselves. If we do not give ourselves the time and space to get in touch with the deeper movements within, we can easily retreat into feeling that we are not good enough and don't have anything to offer. We lose touch with the deepest part of ourselves and live insecurely on the surface. Like the ends of a rope, our inner lives become frayed, and we lose touch with our inherent dignity and goodness made in the image of God.

Lent is a God-given opportunity to reclaim our worth by being in touch with the deepest part of ourselves. Lent invites us to rediscover what we may have allowed to slip away in the busyness of life. We will discover that we are always good enough if we respond to this invitation.

EXERCISE

In the seemingly endless chaos and confusion, competitiveness and rush, we are anchored within ourselves, and the insecurity around us does not second-guess our inherent goodness.

On the contrary, we can hold onto the fact that we are good enough because we are secure in God.

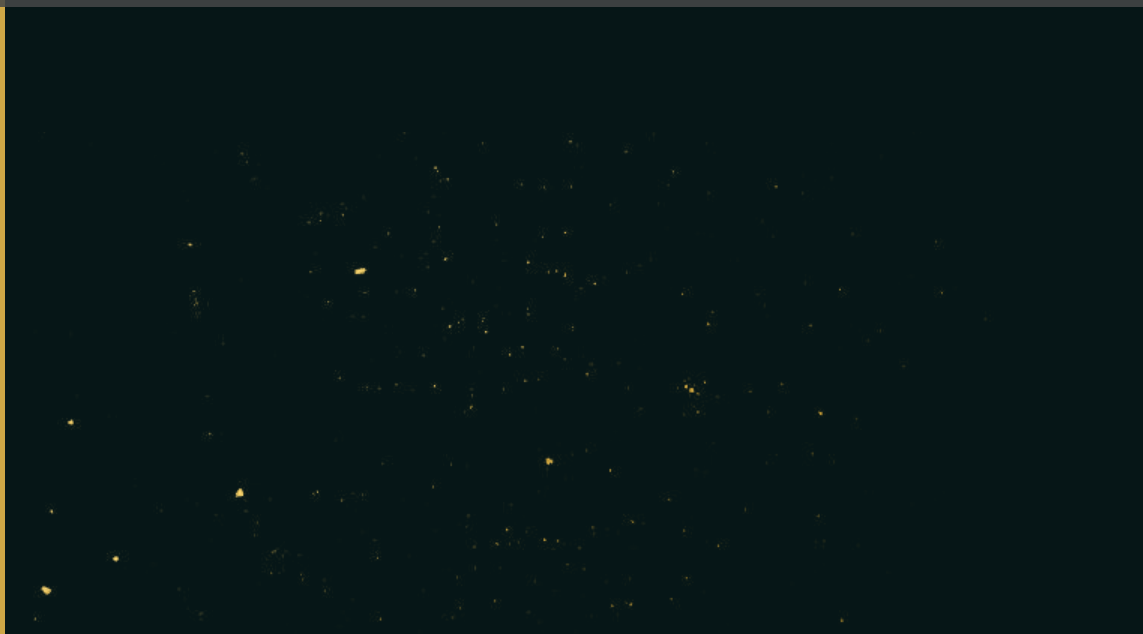
How aware are you of the deeper movements within you and around you? Are there parts of your life that have become frayed? Can you name them?

Take time and space today to reconnect with your deeper self.

Speak to God about what is in your heart now.

Grace

I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness. (Jeremiah 31:3)



SATURDAY - *Revise*

1. Ask the Lord to remind you of the week's experiences. Trust in what you experienced.
2. Reread the week's text. Take time to look at your notes.
3. Where did I experience God's presence?
4. Where did I experience my goodness?
5. Speak to God, as one friend does to another, about your experience.



WEEK 5

When my plans don't work out...
(regretment)



WILD GEESE

You do not have to be good.

You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.

Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

- Mary Oliver

“So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. “But his father said to the servants, ‘Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. “Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, and he asked one of the servants what was going on. ‘Your brother is back,’ he was told, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.’ The older brother was angry and wouldn’t go in. His father came out and begged him, but he replied, ‘All these years I’ve slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!’ His father said to him, ‘Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!’”

Luke 15:20,22,25-32

When I come into the wilderness, I become aware of the biggest and cruellest reality of life: things don’t always go according to plan.

And the question is, what do I do with that? What do I do with this pain? What do I do with these things that have happened to me, with the bitterness, with the anger, with the disappointment, with the resentment I am living with?

I become angry. I sit with high levels of aggression. I constantly expect a saviour, someone who will come to do justice by me.

And at the end of the day I, just like the oldest son in the parable of the prodigal son, am caught up in bitterness: "I worked so hard and look what happened to me. Life is unfair. My dreams and the things I was looking forward to, never came to pass. I don't deserve what has happened to me."

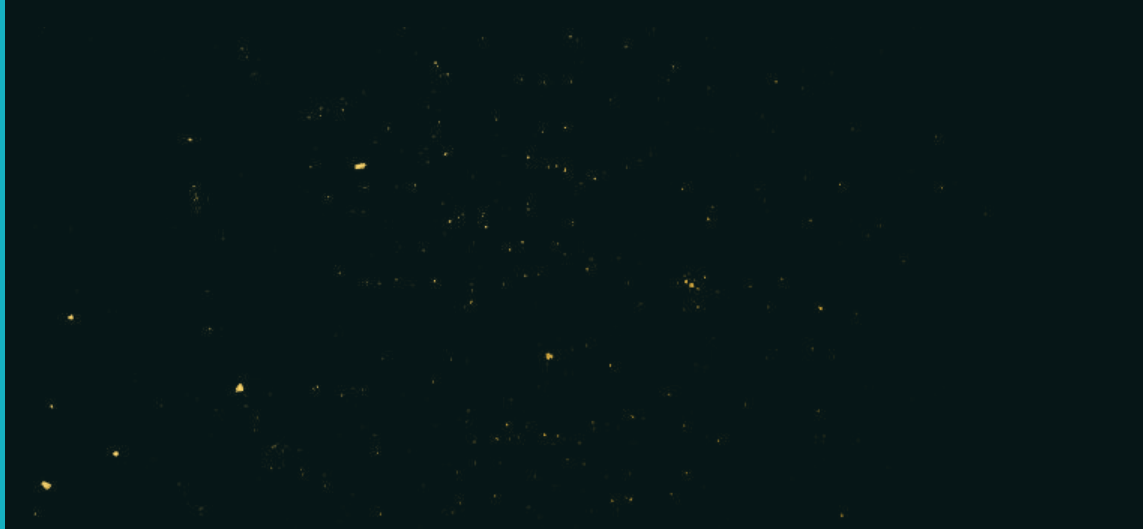
I get caught up. I can't move on. I can't carry on.

The invitation is to accept, so that there can be a resurrection.

New life has to come into being, and that goes along with pain.

Grace

Lord, give me the grace of freedom from resentment.



Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I wasn't even aware of it!"

Genesis 28:16

In Jacob's story, he works his whole life to get his father's blessing. Finally, he dupes his father to get what he wants, and the effect of that is tragic. His brother wants to kill him. He has to flee. He has to flee for his life. He lives with shame. He lives with guilt. He lives with resentment. He lives in fear.

I can just imagine what thoughts would be going through his head: "Why is this happening to me? What did I do? I'm just trying my best. I mean, there was a prophetic word that the elder would serve the younger, even before I was born. And what should I do? How should I go about gaining a better life, to be able to function in this family, to have a future? Nothing ever works out for me."

In that situation, in that place, God comes to him. God speaks to him. He affirms the promise he made to his grandfather, Abraham, and He says to him: "What's more, I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go. One day I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have finished giving you everything I have promised you."

When I think my life is over, is when God invites me to a bigger story. I can only see a part of the story.

He is busy with something more.

Think about a time when you were dealing with resentment about a decision you had made.

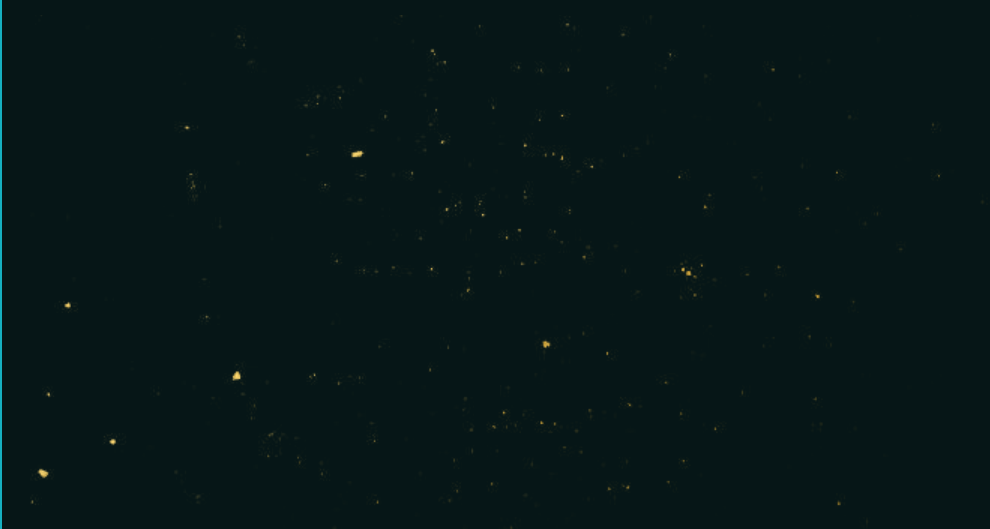
What was the effect of that decision on your life?

In which ways did things turn around?

Talk to God about it.

Grace

Lord, give me the grace of freedom from resentment.



**Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.**

Matt 5:7 (AQN)

It's not only love that makes the world go round. Resentment is also prominent. In so many ways, the world is drowning in resentment. Everywhere I look, it seems that there's someone who is bitter over something.

What is resentment? Why is this feeling so common in our lives? How do we move past it?

Soren Kierkegaard once defined resentment in this way: Resentment happens when we move from mercy to bitterness.

Mercy is to stay in relationship, to refuse to repay evil with evil, and then gradually let go of the bitterness and resentment, to forgive. And as I carry on with the journey, so do I move into a life of joy! Of freedom and happiness, because I am sharing in God's life now!

To whom can you show mercy?
How can you share the mercy that you receive from God? God has forgiven the unforgivable in you. Can you not share this?

Grace

Lord, give me the grace of freedom from resentment.

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

Ephesians 4:22-24

Rachel Murray Martin wrote these wise words: “Sometimes you have to let go of the picture of what you thought life would be like and learn to find joy in the story you are actually living.”

To make peace with how life is – and to let go of the idea of how my life was supposed to be – is a long and arduous process, but incredibly freeing.

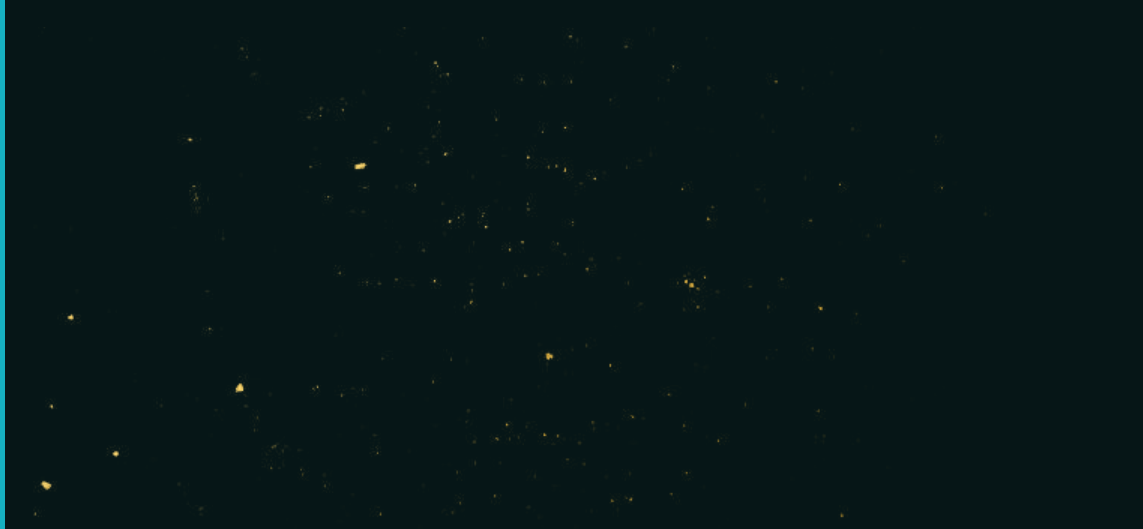
God would like to see a deep peace in each of our lives. I am invited to live with a “holy detachment” – the ability to let people and things in my life go in a holy way, to let life run its course, to not live with unhealthy patterns in my life.

I suspect that freedom from resentment grows in my heart when I start to identify the unhealthy processes in my life, break them, and let them go. Then I can grow in a life of responsibility and forgiveness and freedom.

Of which unhealthy patterns in your life are you becoming aware?
What are you clinging to?

Grace

Lord, give me the grace of freedom from resentment.



On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

John 20:19,22-23

I grow in freedom from resentment when I grow in peace. In his book, *The Holy Longing*, Ronald Rolheiser speaks about how we can make peace with life:

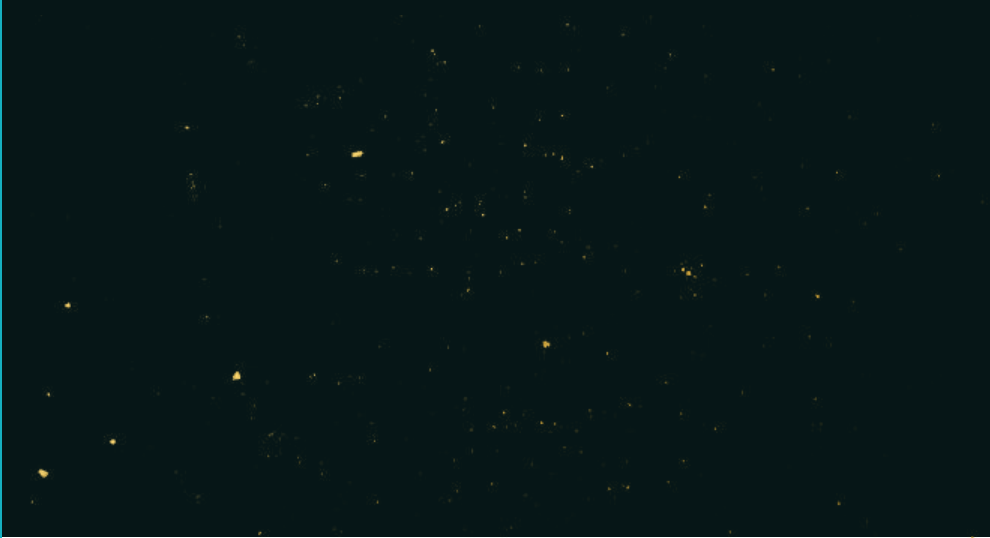
- Give your will and dreams and hope over to God.
- Name the things in your life that have come to an end.
- Wait in silence and expectation for God to do something new while you are grieving your loss.
- Notice the birth of a new life.
- Let go of what you have lost.
- Allow yourself to be blessed by the gifts of the past and adapt to the new reality.
- Receive the Spirit of God for the life you are living now: "Accept the Spirit for the life that you are, in fact, living."

When I go through this cycle,

I can be open to receive God's spirit for the life that I am, in fact, living, not for the life I thought I wanted to live, or that I would have lived had my circumstances been different.

Grace

Lord, give me the grace of freedom from resentment.



Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Ephesians 4: 31-32

Practice forgiveness. I specifically say practice forgiveness, because it doesn't come naturally. Forgiveness is not our first reaction.

Forgiveness is one of the things that Jesus talks about the most, probably because Jesus knows that if we don't forgive each other, it is impossible for us to live a life where we're free and where we can experience something of life in abundance. That's why, whether we like it or not, forgiveness is one of the litmus tests for being a child of God.

Richard Rohr talks about the centrality of forgiveness in our relationship with God, and says: "We have been weak in teaching the absolute centrality of forgiveness to understanding the gospel. It is not that you might need to do this, it is in this experience of forgiveness that you refind your life in a different place."

To be a follower of Jesus and walk around with a heart full of resentment is a *contradixio exterminus*. It isn't possible. And it's when I'm faced with this brokenness in my life that I realise we are broken people, and that's exactly why we need to forgive each other.

How is it going with your practice of forgiveness?

In what ways are you being held captive by resentment as a result of unforgiveness?



Grace

Lord, give me the grace of freedom from resentment.



EXERCISE

Choose one of the days of the week and reflect on your experience of this day.

You can also think back over your entire week and stand still at some moments where you experienced things that stand out and stay with you.

Maybe you also want to look at some of your journal entries again.

Talk to God about it.



