

INWARD WORK FOR OUTWARD LIVING

2023

Lent Devotions

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SAMPLE



THE PRESBYTERIAN OUTLOOK

Introduction

*May God bless you
and keep you on your
Lenten journey.*

Meditation, contemplation, centering prayer or examen can all feel like a waste of time — especially when our to-do lists are long and productivity is king.

But we shouldn't devalue the beneficial interior work these spiritual practices promote. Lent presents us with an opportunity to slow and listen for the still small voice of God.

At the college where I served as chaplain, I learned students were interested in mindfulness. Although I'd only dabbled with mindfulness meditation, as I have with many spiritual practices, there was no one else to help me meet this student need. So I decided to give it a try, starting a meditation group on Friday afternoons.

At first it was slow going. Few students came and I didn't really know what I was doing. Sitting together in silent meditation was more awkward than helpful. Growing frustrated, I told myself I needed to do better by my students. So I dug in and dedicated myself to the group. I read some books, reviewed online resources and began meditating every morning on my own.

As I practiced meditating, I began to learn about myself. Sitting in silence, focused on my breath, I could note my stressors: where I held them tightly in my body and, eventually, what triggered them. I discovered I could free myself from some of the tension of stress through breathing exercises. I grew to love praying without words, centering an image of God in my mind, visualizing myself soaking in the warmth of God's love like sunbeams breaking through the clouds of a brilliantly blue sky.

The most fascinating part of my personal practice was how it transformed the Friday afternoon group. More and more students were drawn to sit with me for prayer and meditation. There was a clear connection between my interior spiritual work and the way my students were attracted to what I offered. The more internal, spiritual work I did, the more I grew in awareness about who I am and who God is with me, the better I lived outwardly in mission and ministry.

In his book, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, Richard J. Foster writes that the Latin examen refers to a weight on a balance scale, conveying the idea of an accurate assessment of a situation. This accurate assessment is the heart of Ignatius of Loyola's five-step daily prayer of examen one practices to honestly reflect on your day before God.

These daily Lent devotions will combine the practices of examen – honest assessment and reflection – with meditation, visualization and short prayers. The prayers can be used as mantras or breath prayers: breathe in praying the first phrase, breathe out praying the last. Through this interior work, I pray you also notice the benefits in your outward life — how you carry yourself, how you interact with others, how you can remain soft and still in a chaotic and hard world.



WEEK ONE

Examining our fear to live with faith



Sunday FEAR OF THE FUTURE

"For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." (Jeremiah 29:11)

God knows. God plans. God desires a future for us free from harm. Yet, still we fear what might come and what we can't control. What tragedy will strike tomorrow? What awfulness lies ahead for those I love? The world is full of despair. Surely we can't steer ourselves clear. Surely God can't protect us from every harm.

Our faith calls us to trust God today, not fear for tomorrow. In this moment there is reason to rejoice. The sky is a radiant blue, filled with a bright hopeful sun. Flower bulbs wait eagerly beneath the earth preparing to break through the soil to delight us and the pollinating butterflies with colorful blooms.

Our lungs expand and contract with each blessed breath. Our hearts beat a steady rhythm in our chests. In this moment we are free to love and be loved.

Do not allow fear to taint this present moment, diverting our attention from that which is good and beautiful and worth cherishing. Trust what God desires for the future so we can live fully and faithfully in the present.

EXAMEN:

Sit with your fear of the future. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine God speaking to you as a prophet, telling you about your future free from harm, a future full of hope. Picture this future. Allow yourself to feel the hope God promises.

PRAY:

Free me from fear, O God, so I can live with faith. Amen.



Monday FEAR OF LOSS

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." (Psalm 23:1)

What are you afraid to lose?

Your job? Your comfort? Your reputation? Your lifestyle? Your friends or family members? Your marriage? Your money? Your health?

Do we fear loss more when we have much to lose?

The psalmist trusts God will provide for his needs, like the shepherd provides for his sheep. Needs are, of course, different from wants. We may want a juicy hamburger, but we need whatever will satiate our hunger and nourish our body.

God has provided for our needs through God's good creation. There are enough food, water and sheltering resources for everyone to have enough. But greed and fear of loss drive many to hoard more than their share.

Loss is inevitable in life. We cycle through endings and beginnings, death and resurrection. But we do not journey through these seasons or cycles alone; we do not grieve our losses without our shepherd's love and support. Our fear of loss need not keep us from claiming all that God offers to move forward in faith — or loosening our grip to share our abundance.

WEEK ONE

Examining our fear to live with faith

EXAMEN:

Sit with your fear of loss. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine God sitting next to you as a shepherd. Notice how your shepherd has provided all you need. Allow yourself to feel satisfied and safe. Allow yourself to let go of your fear of loss.

PRAY:

Free me from fear, O God, so I can live with faith. Amen.



Tuesday FEAR OF DEATH

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor power, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8: 38-39)

This scripture is often read at gravesides and funeral services because it's such a comfort to those grieving. Although we are separated by death from our loved one, it's comforting to hear and know they are not separated from God. We need this comfort.

Death, as the ultimate ending, is also the ultimate unknown. Images of pearly gates, streets paved with gold and angels singing while strumming harps proliferate our conception of the next life. But no one comes back to report. Is death painful? Will we miss our loved ones and our lives? Will we carry the love we knew in this life into the next? No matter how the specifics shake out, God's promises remain sure and steady. We do not face death alone. Nothing will separate us from God's love. We can let go of this life with faith that God will never let us go.

EXAMEN:

Sit with your fear of death. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself passing into the next life. Visualize strolling along a forest trail that connects this life to the next. How is God present with you on this journey? Is God your companion along the trail? Or the sun peeking between the leaves of the forest's canopy? Or the solid earth beneath your feet? Or the fragrance of wildflowers up ahead?

PRAY:

Free me from fear, O God, so I can live with faith.



Wednesday FEAR FOR OTHERS

"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts our fear." (1 John 4:18a)

I fear for others more than for myself. I fear for my husband's safety when he travels. I fear for my children as I send them off to school, picturing the latest lockdown drill becoming a necessary reality. I fear for my parents as a hurricane barrels towards Florida. Fear rises also for innocent lives in peril. As Russian bombs fall on Ukraine, I fear for this struggling country's people. How much more can they withstand? As Kim Jong-Un tests another nuclear warhead, I fear for those who must live with him and near him. As the young women of Iran flood the streets in protest, I fear the Islamic Republic's response.

Examining our fear to live with faith

Fear is easy to come by these days. 1 John suggests love as the balm. Love has the power to cast out fear, according to the author of this epistle. When I travel, I feel my husband's love traveling with me as I text him updates: "On the plane." "Landed in Houston." "At my hotel." His love and desire for my safety follows me. Can I trust the same when he travels? Instead of picturing accidents and danger, can I picture him surrounded in love?

Earlier in 1 John 4 we read "God is love." When we send our love to others, we send them God. When I intentionally pause in the morning before school to look into my kids' eyes and say, "I love you" I may still worry, but I will have sent them with all the assurances love and God provide.

EXAMEN:

Sit with your fear for others. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine God's love above you like the sun. Can you feel its warmth? Visualize God's love moving through you, consuming and casting out your fear.

PRAY:

Free me from fear, O God, so I can live with faith.

Thursday FEAR OF OTHERS

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." (Hebrews 13:2)

In the Bible, angels appear to deliver divine messages or serve as God's representatives. They announce and proclaim good news of great joy while also terrifying the hardest shepherds, used to protecting their flock from wild animals prowling at night. (Luke 2:9)

Our first response to someone we don't know or don't understand is often fear. Unhelpful stereotypes and myths fan the flames of prejudice to consume our bodies, psyches and our social structures. We have inherited many of these prejudices — taught to us by our White supremacist culture. A White woman goes rigid and tense as a Black man walks by, embodying her fear of him as angry and dangerous. A Latina woman is devalued and held back at work because her supervisor fears she is less dependable and less professional than her White peers. A bearded and turbaned Sikh man is stopped and searched because airport security fears he is a terrorist.

Our fear of others keeps us from entertaining angels, messengers of God who might not look or act like us, but have divine gifts. Releasing the weight and tension of fear allows us to cross boundaries of difference, challenge prejudice and deconstruct biases. It will take a lifetime of intentional and honest interior work to free ourselves from the barriers of fear. But it is worth it to receive the good news God's angels offer from their new, diverse perspectives.

EXAMEN:

Sit with your fear of others. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Call someone you fear to mind. Imagine this person surrounded by the light of God's angels. Imagine the person is speaking to you, bringing you a divine message. What do you hear?

PRAY:

Free me from fear, O God, so I can live with faith.

WEEK ONE

Examining our fear to live with faith



Friday FEAR OF FAILURE

"Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand." (Isaiah 41:10)

Failure is a universal experience. I fail my spouse or my children when I get tired and speak too sharply. I fail myself when I don't live by my values, when I respond to ugly with ugly or fail to love my neighbor who is in need. I fail my God when I excuse myself from the discomfort of Christ's call, or when I tell God "I can't" when I haven't even tried.

What would you try if you knew you couldn't fail? What boundary would you cross? What wall would you attempt to break down? What star would you reach for if your fear of failure weren't inhibiting you? How would you define those successes? Take some time to answer these questions. Make a long list.

Fear of failure constricts our lives and keeps us small. We learn and grow from the stumbles we make along the way. When we push past our fear of failure, oftentimes we realize the tragedy isn't in failing, but in never trying.

EXAMEN:

Sit with your fear of failure. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine you are climbing a huge mountain — it's so tall you can't see the top. People are streaming down the mountain who did not make it to the top. They tell you not to try the climb. It's impossible. You will certainly fail. But God is with you, strengthening you, helping you, holding your hand. Will you go with God?

PRAY:

Free me from fear, O God, so I can live with faith. Amen.



Saturday FEAR OF GOD

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." (Proverbs 1:7a)

This week's devotions wouldn't be complete without contemplating our fear of God. The Hebrew word *yirah* can be translated as fear, but also awe, respect or reverence. *Yirah* is a worshipful posture before God. To fear God means we understand who God is and who we are in relationship to God. To know we are not the Divine — a tragic misjudgment humans often make.

As we hear stories about soldiers raping and pillaging innocents and torturing prisoners of war, about nations proliferating nuclear weapons, about extremists and racists elected to powerful political positions, about the lack of will to protect our degrading environment, a little more fear of the Lord would serve us well.

The more humans contemplate our humble position before God, the better. We need reminders that the world does not center around us and our immediate needs. We are one small part of God's great and glorious creation.

Such a posture, such fear of God, can also be incredibly comforting. To know we are not in control, to believe our benevolent Creator desires a future for us free of harm, can bring us great peace. To understand our place before God and to assume a posture of reverence, respect and fear, is, according to Proverbs, the beginning of all knowledge. We would be wise to pray to be filled by this fear, not freed.

WEEK ONE

Examining our fear to live with faith

EXAMEN:

Sit with your fear of God. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine you have been granted an audience with God, like Job. What does it feel like to be in God's presence? Who are you in relationship to God? How can you worship God in this moment?

PRAY:

Fill me with fear of you, O God, so I can live with faith.

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