

## DAY 1 • DEVOTION

**READ JOEL 2:1-2, 12-17.**

*Blow a trumpet in Zion; sound an alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming; it is near, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains a great and powerful people; their like has never been before, nor will be again after them through the years of all generations....*

*"Yet even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD your God? Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Consecrate the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her chamber. Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep and say, "Spare your people, O LORD, and make not your heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'"*

Ash Wednesday is the gathering of the church in response to God's call to return to the path from which we stray whenever we lose focus on Christ. Together, we acknowledge our own preoccupation with ourselves, and we agree to follow Jesus again. It is a very personal decision but carried out in the context of community, alongside our brothers and sisters in our shared faith. The prophet Joel called his own people to repentance. The church is encouraged to re-read his words every year at the beginning of the season of Lent.

When God wanted to communicate with his ancient people, he often selected a prophet to deliver the message. It may sound prestigious, but being a prophet was not an easy job. God's message was not given to the prophet verbally. Rather than a written document or dictation to be written verbatim, God gave visions. They "saw" the events taking place in their minds, and their instructions were to write down what they had seen, and then pass it on to the people. I imagine the prophet Joel closing his eyes to see, like a movie screen in his mind, visions of God's judgment. Even skimming

through Joel's first chapter can make you sense the terror he must have felt. Imagine the compassion with which he chose his words and the courage it took to deliver this message. Along with the details of destruction, however, Joel also got a glimpse of God's grace and his desire to be connected with his people. "Yet even now," the Lord says, "return to me with all your heart—with fasting, weeping and mourning. Tear your hearts, not just your garments." The season of Lent is a time of scheduled penitence. Here is an opportunity to examine our motivations, our decisions. Our God has always been more interested in authentic inner change than outer shows of repentance. God's Lenten invitation to us is that of the prodigal's father, "Come home."

# **DAY 2 • LECTIO DIVINA**

## **JOEL 2:1-2, 12-17**

### **PREPARE**

Be seated in a comfortable place. It can be helpful to designate a spot for your times with the Lord. The rhythm of it conditions your heart, mind, and body that this is a sacred time and place. Take a couple of deep breaths. Ask the Lord to guide your thoughts.

### **READ (LECTIO)**

Read through Joel 2:1-2, 12-17. Read slowly to yourself, or aloud. "Listen" for a thought, phrase, or word that catches your attention. Take your time.

### **REFLECT (MEDITATIO)**

Read the passage again, finding that phrase or word. The Prophets brought a message of judgment/correction and hope. Think about, "why this particular phrase or word?" What does it engender in you? An awareness of something to be addressed in your life? Perhaps a sense of urgency of a spiritual nature, or a ray of hope in the midst of a challenging situation?

### **RESPOND (ORATIO)**

Read this passage again and have a conversation with the Lord about what you're pondering. Let it be as if you are sharing a cup of coffee or tea with him at the beginning or end of the day. Tell him what is in your mind or on your heart. Let this be a different kind of prayer.

### **REST (CONTEMPLATIO)**

Read the passage a final time. Relax in the presence of the one who loves you most. Listen for his response to you, or just enjoy being with him.

### **RESOLVE**

Decide to live in the light of your conversation with the Lord. Plan an action for the day, or set a reminder to come back to your thoughts and return to God, "for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love!"

# **DAY 3 • IMAGINATIVE PRAYER**

## **MATTHEW 6:1-6,16-21**

Our imagination is a gift from God to help us create and also communicate. When you're talking with someone, and he brings up a trip to the park, your mind searches for memories of a trip to the park, and you use your imagination to connect you to their story. In the same way, we can use our imagination to flesh out certain details in Scripture. Imaginative prayer is a way of deeply entering God's Word that helps us begin great conversations with the Lord and impresses the passage on our minds and in our hearts.

### **PREPARE**

Be seated in your comfortable place. Take a couple of deep breaths. Ask the Lord to guide and guard your thoughts. When we use our imaginations, we stay within the boundaries of Scripture. The setting for today's reading is found in Matthew 5:1-2. We're not given a lot of detail, but draw on your imagination. A mountainside, Jesus sits to teach the crowd. Is it grassy there or rocky? Do you have a blanket? How close to Jesus are you? What other sounds do you hear? What scents are in the air? Is the sun on your face?

### **READ MATTHEW 6:1-6, 16-21.**

Watch Jesus as he teaches. Listen to how he speaks the words you're reading. Does he turn your way? Do you see welcome in his eyes? Which of his words tug at you? Is there a phrase he seems to speak directly to you? What if he pauses and comes to you, what might you say? Stay in this moment as long as you wish.

### **PRAY**

Finish your time with a prayer of thanksgiving for your time spent with the Lord. Let the memory you have made stay with you throughout the day. You might want to journal the things you noticed, the details, and the emotions and insights you experienced.

# **DAY 4 • BIBLE STUDY**

## **2 CORINTHIANS 5:16-6:10**

Our third reading each week is from the Epistles. For this exercise, we will follow a simple method for Bible study known as the inductive method. We encourage you to use colored pencils or pens to mark your observations. About half of the New Testament is made up of epistles, or letters, communicating practical truths and addressing challenges that faced the early church. Keep in mind that they were written to a particular group, and we only get a glimpse of part of the communication. This letter was written by Paul to the church in Corinth.

### **PREPARATION**

Be seated in your comfortable place. Take a couple of deep breaths. Ask the Lord to guide your thoughts.

### **OBSERVATION**

Read 2 Corinthians 5:16-6:10 closely a couple of times. Ask questions. What seem to be the key words? Are any words repeated? Is there a principle or idea the author is trying to communicate? Does he give examples to illustrate? Is there a list of any sort? Is there a cause and effect statement?

### **INTERPRETATION**

Reflect on your observations. Consider looking up the key words or repeated words using the Blue Letter Bible app or online dictionary. Is the main idea you observed to be imitated or something to be avoided? Is the list a challenge or an inspiration? What about the cause and effect idea: because we are a "new creation" ... what? Once you have done your work, and explored your observations, feel free to go to a commentary.

### **APPLICATION**

Respond. Take your observations and interpretations and make an application for the day or for the week. Here are some questions you can ask: Do I in some way need to be reconciled to God or to another person in my life? What specific action can I take? How do I present (commend) myself to others in patience or kindness? As a new creation, is there something to release or something to embrace? Choose one that speaks to you and that you are able to actually do. Set for yourself a "do by" date. End your time of study with a prayer of thanksgiving for the renewal of your mind and an invitation to obedience!

## DAY 5 • VISIO DIVINA



“KEEPING WATCH” BY SKIP MCKINSTRY

### **TURN ASIDE**

When he noticed the bush that burned but was not consumed, Moses turned aside to see this amazing sight. Take a moment. Relax. Let your eyes turn to the image.

### **THIS BREATH PRAYER IS A GOOD WAY TO BEGIN:**

- [On the inhale] Immanuel
- [On the exhale] God with me
- [On the inhale] Open my heart
- [On the exhale] That I may truly see.

### **SURRENDER**

C.S. Lewis, in *An Experiment in Criticism*, said, “The first demand any work of art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way. There is no good asking first whether the work before you deserves such a surrender, for until you have surrendered you cannot possibly find out.”

Just as you would with another person—even one you might disagree with—withhold judgment. Take the time to get to know the work.

## **READ**

Take a moment to read the associated Scriptures. With the image in your mind let the words of Scripture begin to highlight aspects of the image or initial thoughts you had about it.

*"Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come." (Joel 2:1-2)*

## **ENGAGE**

Let the image spark your imagination. Ask the Lord what he might want to say to you through this image. What jumps out to you? What pulls you in; what repels you? What surprises you? How does this connect to the Scripture? Reflect on what you see and what you feel. You may want to journal your thoughts. Look again, even more deeply and ask the Lord if you missed anything.

## **REMEMBER**

Ask the Lord to bring the image to mind at other times. In that way the art, and the thoughts it brought to your mind, can become an "Ebenezer," a reminder of an encounter with the God who is The Artist and who speaks to us in a myriad of ways.

