

Walking with Jesus this Lent: A Gospel Journey, Year B Facilitator Background

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Engage

Consider the following words as seven steps for a Lenten walk with Jesus: humble, deserted, connected, zealous, healing, dying, and victorious. Make a note in each of the footprints below to indicate your initial thoughts and/or feelings about each word as a step on your own Lenten walk with Jesus.



Reflect

How would you apply each of the Lenten steps above to Jesus?

Who comes to mind as you ponder each of the words that represent the seven steps?

Carry with you these reflections as you read through the seven steps outlined below. Revisit them as part of your own meditation on each step. Make adjustments to them as you gain new insights during your reading.

Explore

Spiritual writers often discuss Lent as a journey with Easter as the destination. Spiritual practices such as Stations of the Cross are also journey-oriented. This essay proposes a Gospel journey through Lent which can be divided into seven meaningful steps that disciples are called to walk with Jesus.

The first step of the journey is Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday is followed by five additional steps called the Sundays of Lent. The seventh step is Palm Sunday. Each step has a distinctive character, but they are all woven together by the thread of the Lenten theme of transformation. This essay will focus on the Year B Gospel readings from Ash Wednesday through the procession of palms on Palm Sunday.

All disciples are welcomed to begin wherever they are on Ash Wednesday. The journey does not begin with judgment; rather, it begins with your life exactly as it is at this moment. We are all sinners in need of Gospel transformation. It doesn't matter what kind of sinner you are; it only matters that you are willing to move from where you are to a place that is closer to God. Then we are called to walk through the seven steps and be transformed into something new by Palm Sunday.

This extended Lenten retreat is a prelude to the central truth of Christianity: the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus celebrated in the Triduum that immediately follows Lent. The walk with Jesus during Lent sets us up to celebrate our transformation as we sing glory to God for the paradigmatic transformation that happened to Jesus on the first Easter Sunday.

Step 1: Ash Wednesday – The Humble Step

The reading for Ash Wednesday is Mt 6:1-6, 16-18.

Every Ash Wednesday is a call to joyful, not gloomy, repentance. It's a call to become more authentic and less showy. It is a step into humility. The Gospel reading reminds us not to parade our faith practices in front of others in order to be noticed. The Lenten journey is not characterized by a proud and triumphant march. It is more like the earthy, deliberate, bare-footed steps of a gardener careful not to trample the tender plants emerging from the soil. Gardeners who bring focus to the plants rather than to themselves reap rich harvests. "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven." (Matthew 6:1)

We are also taught to be generous, primarily because it is our call and our identity. There is nothing superhuman about generosity. It is simply who we are. Being generous makes us more human... more down-to-earth... more humble. Generous giving is not a

way to measure social status; rather, it is a way to participate in the life of God who is generous beyond measure. (James 1:5)

Wealthy individuals or families who make large donations to organizations or even charitable causes are often rewarded with great social recognition. While it is possible to do this with integrity, there are clear warnings from Jesus to be vigilant about the desire for social praise. “So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (Matthew 6:2-4)

Even prayer is not good or helpful when our hearts are in the wrong place. “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (Matthew 6:5-6)

Jesus speaks often about rewards in the Ash Wednesday Gospel. Rewards are important and a necessary part of life. Human beings are wired to respond to rewards. This in itself is a humble recognition. We are more like our brothers and sisters in the animal kingdom who respond instinctively to positive reinforcement than we care to admit. To acknowledge our primal need for rewards is both honest and humble. The important question for Jesus seems to revolve around the kinds of rewards a person seeks. The Ash Wednesday Gospel suggests that the prideful person seeks the reward of recognition. The humble person seeks the reward of joy.

Humility and joy are partners. They work together to build an authentic Christian expression of faith. “My spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.” (Luke 1:47-48) Jesus instructs us to walk with humility and rewards us with joy, empowering us to avoid a “dismal” look, even as we humble ourselves with fasting and the other disciplines of Lent.

Step 2: First Sunday of Lent – The Deserted Step

The reading for the first Sunday of Lent is Mark 1:12-15.

Jesus is driven by the Spirit to a deserted place at the beginning of Lent. “And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.” (Mark 1:12-13) He will again be deserted at the end of Lent but it will be a different kind of desertion. This early desert experience is willful, purposeful and designed to build

his spiritual strength. The desertion at the end of Lent when his friends flee from his side is not something he would have chosen. It was an experience of isolation that was thrust upon him as a result of weakness and sin on the part of his disciples.

Being alone and being lonely are very different experiences. One can be empowering while the other is physically and spiritually draining. The deserted step on this first Sunday of Lent is a necessary time of soul searching. It is the time, hopefully daily even if only for a few minutes, when we make sense of our busy-ness and our many interactions with others. The deserted step is a step of integration and empowerment. We reflect upon our lives in solitude to put the pieces together with the silent guidance of the Holy Spirit. We are then empowered to move back into the hustle and bustle of daily life with a new perspective and a refreshed spirit.

If we nurture a place in our spirit for solitude, then we have an ever-present retreat place where we can go to gather our thoughts and feelings at any given moment. For example, someone does something or says something that triggers anger in me. If I have no experience of the desert, no place for solitude, then my only option is to remain engaged in the encounter with my anger as the context. I will fight! But if I can retreat from the encounter, even for a moment, and let the energy of the anger drive me into the desert, then I can return to the encounter when I am ready with a more deliberate response, one that I won't regret.

Step 3: Second Sunday of Lent – The Connected Step

The reading for the second Sunday of Lent is Mark 9:2-10.

This step reminds us that we never need to feel lonely even if we are alone. The Communion of Saints is perhaps the most consoling tenet of Catholic faith. Christians are a deeply connected people. We are a unified body in Christ. We are in communion with those who are living and with those who are dead. We commune with divinity in the Eucharistic celebration. We draw our deepest strength from our connectedness. Our most important teaching is to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. It is a teaching about staying connected.

The Gospel turning point for Mark is the highly connected experience of the transfiguration. Jesus, at this point in Mark's Gospel, begins to move more deliberately toward the cross empowered by intimate communion with his closest friends (Peter, James and John), two key Old Testament figures (Moses & Elijah) and his heavenly father:

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on

earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" (Mark 9:2-7)

Johns Hopkins University professor John Pilch interprets this passage as evidence that Jesus had "alternate reality" experiences. Alternate reality experiences are spiritual experiences that connect a person to another level of consciousness without becoming disconnected from daily human consciousness. One could say that it is a super-connected experience. Pilch cites anthropologists who document that 90 percent of human societies report alternate reality experiences regularly that are not induced with drugs or alcohol. Those who don't experience them or acknowledge them would seem to be the ones who need to explain themselves as they are clearly in the minority, the exceptions to the rule. Western cultures, marked by hyper-rationalism, individualism and alienation, find this level of super connection to be foreign; some even dismiss it as lunacy. We have trained ourselves to block the experience. At the same time, westerners seem to grasp at alternate reality through pervasive drug and alcohol use and other ecstatic recreational pursuits, perhaps as a compensation for a lack of deep, personal connection. It is a challenging Lenten step for most of us, but because super connection is so universal and so biblical it is difficult for people of faith to ignore.

Christianity is about loving relationships above all else. Love is the reason we have faith in the first place. Love is the gateway that can connect us to this world and the next in the same moment. Lent is a journey that leads us to each other and to God in a cosmic embrace.

Step 4: Third Sunday of Lent – The Zealous Step

The reading for the third Sunday of Lent is John 2:13-25.

The third Sunday of Lent features Jesus cleansing the temple of corrupt money changers. His disciples witness this dramatic event and the author records that they are reminded of one particular line from the Old Testament, "Zeal for your house will consume me." (Psalm 69:9) Many writers focus on anger when they reflect upon this story from John's gospel, but the witnesses did not see anger; they saw zeal. Zeal is passionate ardor that has a purpose. It seeks to accomplish an objective. It is not anger that so often results in blind, crazed, meaningless behavior.

In this story, Jesus is passionate about the integrity of worship and about justice. Religion, in Jesus' day, had become corrupt and the poor were paying the price. (That scenario, of course, has been repeated over and over throughout the centuries even to

the present day.) Pilgrims arriving at the temple to make an offering to God were being ripped off by clever temple money changers. The money changers were necessary because money with the image of the emperor on it was not appropriate for an offering to God. The money changers had to exchange Roman coins for temple coins. It was a perfect opportunity to take advantage of poor, uneducated pilgrims.

Jesus acts with integrity and with a sense of purpose when he drives out the money changers. He is doing in a dramatic way what everyone knows in their hearts needs to be done. He is fearlessly bringing to light what was hidden in darkness. In the process, he is speaking up for those who are powerless. This zealous step of Jesus reminds us that we are challenged in our lives to take zealous steps on behalf of the poor and vulnerable members of our society. We are also challenged to take zealous steps to challenge our own faith communities so that our worship is offered in integrity and inspires acts of kindness and justice.

Step 5: Fourth Sunday of Lent – The Healing Step

The reading for the fourth Sunday of Lent is John 3:14-21.

Reconciliation and healing are faith goals. Salvation is what we are shooting for and by salvation we mean the salvation of all of creation and everything and everyone in it. Jesus saves us from sin. Jesus saves us from death. Jesus saves us from illness. Jesus saves us from poverty. Jesus saves us from hatred. Jesus saves us from selfishness. Jesus saves us from alienation. Jesus wants to save every bit of us and every one of us with the healing salve of reconciliation. Salvation puts back together what has been driven apart by sin.

“And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (John 3:14-17)

These verses draw an unmistakable line from healing to salvation. All who looked upon the serpent that Moses lifted up were healed in body (see Numbers 21:7-9). All who look upon the Son who is lifted up are healed in spirit. Faith brings healing of body and soul together. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to heal the physical and spiritual wounds of others and to actively participate in and celebrate our own healing.

Step 6: Fifth Sunday of Lent – The Dying Step

The reading for the fifth Sunday of Lent is John 12:20-33.

Death is a necessary step to new life. Christians are called to lose their lives in order to save them. This is as true in the spiritual life as it is in physical life. Human development is an appropriate example. Our infancy has to die in order for our childhood to be born. Our childhood has to die in order for our adolescent life to be born. Our adolescence has to die in order for our adulthood to be born. We can die and rise in myriad ways and on a daily basis. “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (John 12:24)

Death is not an ending; death is a passage into greater abundance. The Lenten journey calls us to think about what is dying in our lives right now. How are we going to accept this death? How will we grow through it? What is the promise of abundance if we die faithfully? There is no need to fear death for we do it all the time. It is as ordinary as the passing seconds of time. Clinging to passing seconds is futile. Letting time pass and embracing the coming moments opens us to new life... to resurrection.

Step 7: Palm Sunday – The Victory Step

The reading for the procession of palms on Palm Sunday is Mark 11:1-10.

The victory step of Palm Sunday is not a full victory in the same way that Easter resurrection is a full victory. We are still in the season of Lent and we are still on the journey, but victory is our sure hope and so we celebrate it, even if imperfectly.

Palms are a symbol of victory. On Palm Sunday, Jesus is welcomed into Jerusalem as a conquering king, but again this victory is marred by deep misunderstanding. Jesus did not come to win so that there would be losers over whom the victors can gloat. The ones who are celebrating the wrong kind of victory on Palm Sunday will be terribly disappointed when Jesus doesn't overpower Rome.

Another more subtle and more permanent victory is suggested by Jesus' war horse... it's not a horse at all; rather, it is a colt with no wartime experience. It has never been ridden before. In fact, the clear reference is to Zechariah 9:9 that suggests this colt is actually a young donkey and the king who rides it is called “humble”, the perfect Lenten bookend to the humble step of Ash Wednesday! This is hardly the entrance procession of a king intending to conquer with violence!

Disciples of Jesus at the close of Lent are challenged to rethink their notions of victory. What does winning mean to you? How can you win in a way that doesn't produce

losers? Your victory step should not be a crushing experience for anyone because the kingdom that Jesus ushers in is one of loving relationships. In this kingdom, we all win!

Conclusion

Journey analogies abound in Christian spiritual literature. Journeys remind us that there is meaning in human experiences even without completion, even though completion is the goal. Journeys are more fruitful when we take time to be conscious of the lessons we can learn along the way. Lent, due to its preparatory character, is an especially appropriate time to reflect upon life and the Christian way as a journey, a spiritual walk with Jesus.

Apply

Before facilitating a session on the Lenten journey with Jesus, it will be important for you to carefully consider how each step is operative in your own spiritual journey.

Step 1

- What does humility mean to you?
- How do you nurture yourself as a “down to earth” person?

Step 2

- What role does solitude play in your life?
- How does solitude strengthen your primary relationships?

Step 3

- With whom are you most deeply and intimately connected?
- What do you do on a daily basis to maintain a high level of connection with this person?
- How will you help others appreciate the possibility of super connection as it is discussed above?

Step 4

- What is your passion in life?
- How do you overcome obstacles when you are zealously pursuing a goal without resorting to angry outbursts?

Step 5

- When have you been healed? In body? In spirit?
- How have you participated in the healing of others?

Step 6

- In what way are you called to “die” in the near future?
- What will you need to let go of?
- What blessing awaits you if you “die” faithfully?

Step 7

- What experiences have you had of winning without requiring others to lose?
- How do you celebrate the victories of others?

Sources

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