



FAITH UNDER PRESSURE

2023 Lent Devotional



CENTRAL
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

For upcoming service information
visit www.centralpc.org



Lent Devotional 2023

For centuries, Lent has been a time when Christians have prepared themselves spiritually for Holy Week, when we remember the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. It has traditionally been a time of self-reflection, fasting, and repentance, and the 40 days of the season corresponds to the 40 days that Jesus was fasting in the wilderness, when he was tempted by Satan.

In our sermons and devotions during Lent, we will be exploring the ways Jesus was tested during his life and ministry. This will afford us a chance to not only reflect on the areas of temptation in our lives, but also how Jesus "has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin....[so that we may] approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." (*Hebrews 4:15-16*).

You can use this devotional on your own, with a mentor or friend, or in your small group. For each week, we have given you a short reading with reflection questions. There are also daily readings, including the sermon passage which is noted with an asterisk. We pray that this series helps you draw nearer to Jesus, our Redeemer and Friend.

WEEK 1 – February 26 – March 4

Relevance: Whose Needs?

Because my mother grew up in a very liturgical Episcopal church, she insisted that our family eat no meat on Fridays during Lent, and give up something for those forty days. My wife and I continued that practice in our family (and still do). Lent, after all, is a time of sacrifice and self discipline as we reflect on the sacrifice of Jesus for us, and the discipline He evidenced while He was tempted in the wilderness.

But I have often wondered: Does giving up chocolate or any treat we like (which aren't good for us anyway) actually connect us to the sacrifice of Jesus (especially since we are likely to go back to feasting on chocolate after Easter)? Perhaps we should use these forty days not to give up something, but to begin a new practice that expands our spiritual life.

What if we made a phone call every day during Lent to someone we know who is hurting? What if we prepared a meal for a young mother with a growing and busy family? What if we embrace a volunteer opportunity? What if we committed to witnessing to an unchurched neighbor, friend or colleague? In other words, what if we used these forty days to make the world around us a better place?

Of course, if it is really important for you to give up something, you could give up an hour of sleep in the morning to spend more time in prayer. Or you could give up time to read through a Christian classic like C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*. You might even turn off your electronic devices for an hour a day and meditate on God's grace and love.

I think you get the idea. Lent isn't forty days without chocolate. It is forty days of adopting a sacrificial lifestyle and disciplining ourselves to allow Jesus' example a greater place in our lives. Who knows? We just might maintain these practices after Easter as a transformed people.

John Shedwick – John is a retired PCUSA pastor. At Central, he co-leads a Men's Bible study, preaches, and, along with his wife Dottie, sings in the Chancel Choir (and acts as choir chaplain).

Reflection Questions

1. What is your history with Lent? How might that affect your practices this year?
2. Looking at the lists of possible practices John mentions, is there one you might adopt this year? Does another idea come to mind?
3. How might you be different at the end of these 40 days as a result of practicing Lent?

Daily Readings

SUNDAY:	*Luke 4:1-4
MONDAY:	Isaiah 58:1-7
TUESDAY:	Deuteronomy 8:1-3
WEDNESDAY:	Matthew 25:35-40
THURSDAY:	John 6:1-6
FRIDAY:	John 6:7-14
SATURDAY:	John 6:38-40

WEEK 2 – March 5 – 11

Power: Control

My husband has a nickname for me: 'Miss Risk-Averse.' I've always been a bit of a worrier, but this trait has grown more prominent in my adult life. We just returned from vacation in Hawaii, and when we started planning the trip I was equally excited to go and terrified that one of us would get caught in a riptide and drown. If things get bumpy when I'm traveling on a plane, then obviously we are about to nosedive and crash. I work in an intensive care unit and often see worst-case scenarios, so I tell myself that my tendency to worry about things comes from these experiences. However, I think that's only part of the true explanation. The other part arises from a desire to control things that are beyond my power.

Sometimes worrying can be productive. For a student, worrying about an upcoming presentation may spur them to practice and prepare accordingly. For a wilderness hiker, having a healthy level of awareness about a thunderstorm or river crossing conditions may help ensure that appropriate safety precautions are taken. However, while this innate tendency to 'worry' in order to mitigate risk can be helpful, it is all too easy to fall into a trap of excessive worrying about things that are out of our control. Sometimes, I think we even idolize worrying. We think if we worry just a little bit more, then we'll be able to have control over a situation that is out of our hands.

What stood out to me in this passage is how calmly Jesus ventured into the wilderness. There's no description of any supplies he brought with him, but I get the impression that he didn't spend hours worrying over every worst-case scenario that could happen in the wilderness. Even in the face of temptation and hunger, he remained calm and faithful. To me, this passage is an inspiration to remain steadfast in the face of the temptation to worry about things that are out of our control.

Sierra McNew – Sierra is a pharmacist and writer. At Central, she is a Student Ministry leader, and, with husband Nathan, participates in the Young Adult small group, and with the Worship Tech team.

Reflection Questions

1. When you reflect on the worries in your life, how many of them are healthy levels of awareness about things that are in your control and how many of them are out of your control?
2. Besides worrying, are there other unhealthy ways you try to take control?
3. Are there ways you can be handing these worries over to God?

Daily Readings

- SUNDAY:** *Luke 4:1-8
- MONDAY:** Philippians 2:3-8
- TUESDAY:** Deuteronomy 6:10-16
- WEDNESDAY:** John 10:14-18
- THURSDAY:** Matthew 6:24-34
- FRIDAY:** Luke 12:32-34
- SATURDAY:** 1 Peter 5:1-7

WEEK 3 – March 12 – 18

Attention

I felt unseen. Invisible. I left my meeting lost in those feelings. I've long since forgotten what the meeting was about, but I remember the feeling I had at the end. No one had paid any attention to me. A few moments later, I realized I had walked right past someone trying to get my attention--and had completely ignored them. This is a small example, but it's a good picture of what happens to me when I focus too much on being noticed. My perspective becomes skewed. I see myself as others do, not as God does; I see people for the attention they can give me.

In the story of Jesus' temptation (Luke 4), we hear that Jesus was tempted by Satan to throw himself off the temple wall. Here was an opportunity for Jesus to get attention. This was a temptation (among other things) to fix his gaze on what others thought of him instead of focusing on his Father and the mission for which he had come to earth. Jesus never sought attention for himself. In fact, he seemed to have the odd habit of leaving the area when he got too much attention. Mark 1:35 - 39 tells the story of one of the many times Jesus goes off by himself to pray. When he gets back, his disciples rush to inform him that everyone has been looking for him. I can hear their excitement at the building attention Jesus is getting. But Jesus replies, "Let's go somewhere else." He was focused on his mission, not on gathering attention.

That unshakable focus also left Jesus free to notice and give attention to those around him. Jesus saw the people no one else saw: the wounded, the unclean, the outcasts. Jesus knew he had the full attention of his Father, and that connection with God was all the attention he needed. He freely gave attention to others without feeling the need to seek out attention for himself. I long to see others as Jesus did. To do this, I need to know that I am noticed and deeply loved by God. With this love, I too can notice those around me.

As you do this week's daily readings, take time to notice who Jesus pays attention to.

Amy Pantzer – Amy is a homeschooling mother of four boys and wife of Pete Pantzer. At Central, Amy leads a co-ed, intergenerational small group, volunteers with Summer Bible Camp, and co-directs Soup & Group during Lent.

Reflection Questions

1. Take time today to dwell on the fact that you are noticed and given attention by a loving God. Can the fact that God sees you help you be less concerned about how others see you?
2. What things are vying for your attention today? (work crises, phone, social media, current events, a hobby,...)
3. To whom do you want to give more attention? (A family member, a friend, a neighbor, people around you who may be “unseen?”)

Daily Readings

SUNDAY:	*Luke 4:1-13
MONDAY:	Psalm 139
TUESDAY:	Mark 1:35-45
WEDNESDAY:	Mark 10:46-52
THURSDAY:	Luke 8:40-48
FRIDAY:	John 4:1-26
SATURDAY:	Luke 10:25-37

WEEK 4 – March 19 – 25

Comfort: Not Ease

I have learned, often the hard way, that I can discern God's plan for how to live my life by observing the culture around me and then doing the opposite! Advertising tries to sell us on the notion that we are entitled to convenience, enjoyment, happiness, pleasure, relaxation, and comfort. Social media promises us abundant friendships and the ease of maintaining those relationships. These messages often mislead us into thinking that we deserve an easy path in life. Jesus, however, teaches us that nothing could be further from the truth.

The disciples were dismayed when Jesus told them that He must suffer and die at the hands of His very own people. I imagine they didn't even listen to the words about being raised to life on the third day. The disciples didn't have an easy life, but they had seen and heard miraculous things and they were following a special man that was going to change the world. So, what was this suffer and die nonsense Jesus was talking about, they must have wondered. Peter pushed back, "Never Lord! This shall never happen to you." Jesus' rebuke was scathing and may have been the harshest words He had ever uttered, "Get behind me Satan!" Then He returned to teaching mode and told them that His way was the hard, but only, way to save their lives. He told them it would be costly. Then He showed them the path by going first. He overcame the temptation to take the easy way out. He could have avoided His execution by just saying NO to God in the garden.

Jesse Gardner – Jess is co-owner and CFO of Kelson Energy, husband to Carol – and a very proud dad and new grandfather (Ask him to show you pictures!). At Central, he serves as an Elder, where he helps direct Session and works with church staff.

Reflection Questions

1. Where are we tempted to say NO to God's calling? In leadership? In service? In giving? In changing our sinful ways?

2. How are we tempted to say NO? What does Satan whisper in our ear as he did with Peter? "Someone else will do it. You don't like that program anyway. You can't afford it. You've already done your part. It's time for someone else to step up. You are not gifted in that area. You don't have the time or energy."

3. How can looking to Jesus' example help you say yes?

Daily Readings

SUNDAY: *Matthew 16:21-26

MONDAY: Matthew 7:13-14

TUESDAY: Proverbs 14:12

WEDNESDAY: 1 Corinthians 10:13

THURSDAY: Deuteronomy 8:7-14

FRIDAY: John 14:1-7

SATURDAY: John 14:8-14

WEEK 5 – March 26 – April 1

Argument: Opposition

Earlier in the book of Matthew Jesus claims, “I did not come here to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17). In our passage Jesus shows us what the law is, and has always been, truly about: Love. The message of love, however, can easily get lost behind the debate between Jesus and the Pharisees. Modern readers often view this passage like a boxing match: Jesus vs. the Pharisees, where Jesus wins by delivering the knock-out blow - taking out the Pharisees with his radical interpretation of the law. I’ve always found this interpretation a bit troubling: Do we really worship a God who shames and humiliates? In this passage, does Jesus teach us to humiliate and “out-wit” those who disagree with us?

I think we need to start by addressing what Jesus is NOT doing:

- Jesus is NOT trying to shame the Pharisees
- Jesus is NOT trying to “win” or “beat” the Pharisees

It can be easy for us to forget that Jesus himself was a Jew. The Pharisees were not his enemies, but his people whom he loved as much as he loves you and me. He did not engage in dialogue with the Pharisees to shame them, but to teach them and guide them towards himself. When the Pharisees asked him, “which is the greatest commandment in the law?” Jesus replies by quoting Deuteronomy and Leviticus: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind (Deuteronomy 6:4) and love your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19:18).” Jesus quotes the Old Testament not to shame the Pharisees, but to show them that the true meaning and thrust of the law is love. While this may sound like a simplification of the law, Jesus highlights the high expectations of the law. How much easier is it to give up sweets for Lent, than it is to talk kindly with someone we disagree with politically? How much easier is it to go to church on Easter, than it is to help someone we just don’t like? Love is difficult; love is a choice that Jesus is calling us to make each and every day.

Morganne Ottobre – Morganne is a PhD Candidate in Hebrew Bible at Johns Hopkins and is married to Dillon Mundie, who serves with the Contemporary Worship Team. At Central, they are in a Young Marrieds small group. Morganne also serves as a teacher and member of Central’s Discipleship Team.

Reflection Questions

1. Where are you tempted to argue, when God may be calling you to love?
2. How is God inviting you to better love those you disagree with?
3. Is there a spiritual practice you could use to help in this (perhaps praying for them by name or memorizing 1 Corinthians 13:4-7)?

Daily Readings

SUNDAY: *Matthew 22:34-40

MONDAY: Deuteronomy 6:1-9

TUESDAY: Luke 6:6-11

WEDNESDAY: James 4:11-12

THURSDAY: James 1:1-6

FRIDAY: Psalm 1

SATURDAY: Luke 5:17-26

WEEK 6 – April 2 – 8

Applause

Robin and I applaud a lot for our grandkids. For example, we applaud when they go down the slide or blow out the candles on their birthday cake.

As we enter Matt. 21:1-11, people applaud Jesus as he rides into Jerusalem. Waving palm branches, they shout “Hosanna,” a Hebrew word meaning, “Save!” But the salvation these folks applaud is not what Jesus intends; they want salvation from Caesar. Jesus wants salvation from sin, in all its manifestations.

Too often, we applaud the things Jesus doesn’t want or prioritize - or - things that are good, but “safe,” not challenging our lives. A current method of applause is registering “likes” on social media. But many of the “likes” we issue are not for the soul and sacrifice of life but its expediency and commonality. During the recent Martin Luther King (MLK) holiday, social commentators noticed that we tended to “like” MLK quotes related to love and service but not MLK quotes linked to nonviolence and racism. But Jesus applauds both the comforting, and the challenging.

As we enter Holy Week, our call is to like what Jesus likes in fresh, stretching ways. Christ’s intent is not the dominant culture but the Reign of God. It was that “Kingdom of God” vision that Jesus rode into Jerusalem to advance—a dream, as He clarified to Pilate, that “is not of this world” (John 18:36 NIV). Vance Havner agrees; as a Christ-follower, “you are not a citizen of this world trying to get to heaven; you are a citizen of heaven, making your way through this world.”

A critical way to “make it” through this world as heavenly citizens is to like what Jesus likes and to applaud what He applauds. To “preach good news to the poor, to proclaim...recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed” (Luke 4:18 CEB). To “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them... teaching them to obey everything that [Jesus] commanded” (Matthew 28:19-20 CEB). Liking such things will probably not increase our status on Facebook, but it will surely delight the God, in Christ, who we ultimately worship and applaud.

Paul Munday – Paul is a pastor in the Church of the Brethren denomination. Since retiring from his congregation in Frederick, MD., Paul has served at the denominational level and remains a popular pastor, speaker, and author. He is husband to Robin, our Traditional Worship Director, and a proud father and grandfather. At Central, he serves on the preaching and teaching team.

Reflection Questions

This is the last week of Lent, so as you answer these questions, take some time to reflect back on what you wrote or practiced in the first five weeks of Lent.

1. What things do you find yourself applauding or liking? How do these line up with Jesus' priorities?
2. In what ways do you find yourself desiring applause, attention, control, or other of the temptations we've studied during Lent?
3. Is there something you have tried this season that is, in Paul's words, "fresh or stretching?" Will you continue this after Lent?

Daily Readings

SUNDAY: *Matthew 21:1-11

MONDAY: Luke 6:22-26

TUESDAY: Matthew 26:36-46

WEDNESDAY: Matthew 26:47-56

THURSDAY: Matthew 27:32-44

FRIDAY: Matthew 27:45-51

SATURDAY: Matthew 28:1-10

Soup & Group



**Wednesdays
during Lent.**

Connect over a simple meal &
meaningful conversation.

March 1 - 29

Register at www.centralpc.org

HOLY WEEK



MAUNDY THURSDAY

April 6 | 6:30 PM

A creative and reflective service to give space for us to think about Jesus' sacrifice and prepare us for Good Friday.



GOOD FRIDAY

April 7 | 5-8 PM

Come as you are able to this service designed to deepen our connection to Jesus and remind us of the meaning and power of his crucifixion.



EASTER SUNDAY

April 6

A joyous celebration of Jesus' resurrection and ultimate victory over death.

9:30 AM Contemporary
11:00 AM Traditional



CENTRAL
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

LEARN MORE
www.centralpc.org