



## GSR in the Classroom: LENT

# LESSON – A SEASON OF RENEWAL, RECOVERY, DISCOVERY

### BEFORE YOU READ:

Take a moment to reflect on the photo of the spring flowers bursting through the snow. Alone or with a partner, discuss:

- What harsh spiritual or emotional conditions might be weighing on you in these early days of Lent?
- What growth do you hope will emerge in your faith through your Lenten practices?

### Keep in mind while you read:

As the article calls you to a deeper commitment to prayer, fasting and giving, pause to consider your current practices and how they can be made more meaningful.



(PIXABAY/EFRAIMSTOCHTER)

## A SEASON OF RENEWAL, RECOVERY, DISCOVERY

BY COLLEEN [GIBSON](#)

[March 1, 2019](#)

February snow has not kept the signs of spring from coming. The daffodils are slowly pushing up through the hard ground outside my windows, glimmers of green despite cold winds and streaks of snow. It's hard to believe it's time for flowers. Ash Wednesday is around the corner, and the dreariness of winter still seems to be holding court.

Seeming streams of scandal both in the church and the world desensitize our spirits. Like a long winter, days like these create grounds for despair and fodder for desolation. It

would seem that the deep purple tones of the Lenten season, with its themes of repentance, **abstinence** and humility, would be the last thing we need right now. It would be easier to skim the surface or avoid it all together. So, why go deeper?

We go deeper because we must. This season is as much about repentance as it is about renewal. In fact, maybe Lent is more about light than darkness, about lightening our load and reprioritizing our lives. Lent is about being real. And perhaps, that is exactly where we need to be.

The seasons are changing; the days are getting longer. Light is returning. And in the midst of painful revelations in the church and ongoing scandal in the world, Lent invites us into a time of discovery and recovery. This is a time for renewal of faith.

These forty days of wandering, of being proved, of finding strength, and of bolstering faith are exactly what we need right now. From ashes and fasting to **almsgiving** and prayer, the spiritual deepening and awareness offered by the Lenten season invite us to a place of renewal, a place that, if we are honest, it wouldn't hurt to spend some time in, individually and collectively these days.

*You are Dust.*

The words we hear as we begin the season of Lent might easily be taken as a signal of the bleak landscape that awaits us: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

We are dust. We were born and we will die. The life we live in between these two moments is God's gift to us. Recognizing our humble beginnings and our mortality is part of embracing the Lenten call to renewal.

When we remember that we are beloved creations of God, we can embrace ourselves, others and all of creation with the wonder that befits such divine design. The same dust we are made of makes up the ones we look down upon, those we judge, and those who frustrate us, as well as those who bring us joy. We are united in our creation. Seeing the world this way, how could we ever tolerate or turn a blind eye to injustice? You are dust and I am dust and we are dust together.

From such dust comes new life. Like fields that lie fallow, the dust of our being is never wasted. The seeds

## VOCABULARY

**abstinence:** not doing or having something that is wanted or enjoyable

**almsgiving:** giving money or food to help people in need

**incarnate:** to be brought to life (literally, to become flesh)

**inextricably:** impossible to separate or untangle

of faith are planted in the dust of our humanity. Lent invites us to acknowledge our humanity, where we've fallen short and how reliant we are on God. When we can do this, faith has space to grow and blossom. By honestly embracing our humanity and using the days of Lent to recommit to following Christ, we are renewed, becoming ever more mindful of how God is working in our lives and calling us to repent and live lives that reflect a belief in the Good News.

Full engagement in the renewal Lent calls forth is about examining and recommitting to the practices that ground our faith and remind us who we are and who we're called to be. Traditionally, this has led people to focus on prayer, fasting and almsgiving in an intentional way during Lent. Most often this entails giving something up or taking on a practice in each realm. This year, though, I wonder if we might not be better served by considering how these practices can not only focus us but can transform us if we lean into the truth that underpins our practice.

Our prayer, for instance, is an opportunity to grow closer to God; we might choose to prayerfully consider our shortcomings, to look at our role in racial inequality, or to share with God the wounds of our hearts. Wherever our prayer leads us and whatever we reflect on, we must remember the essential aim of our prayer: our relationship with God **incarnate** in Jesus Christ.

This is the God we journey with this season, the one who suffers with us, and ultimately, the one who we long to know (and who longs to know us) more deeply as we travel the way towards the cross.

In the words of St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson in [Creation and the Cross](#):

“To those who believe, the call from the depths of their relationship with God is to bend every effort to stand with God in solidarity with those who suffer; to right wrongs, counter injustice, relieve the pain, and create situations where life can flourish.”

Indeed, it is our practice and our deepening relationship with God, especially during Lent, that directs us to such renewal in our lives and for the life of the world.

Bending our every effort, through practices such as fasting, we recognize our dependence on God. By going without, we discover the truth of where/who our strength comes from. We also come to stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters who have no choice but to live simply. Our fasting is voluntary, theirs is not. By recognizing that, we are renewed in our sense of mission to be one with all people and to work so all are provided for.

This renewed sense of unity and call to action is reflected in the giving called forth in us during Lent. We give freely and fully, modeling our sharing and sacrifice on Jesus' own. Doing this intentionally during Lent bolsters our relationship with God and neighbor far beyond this one season.

In giving with intention, we renew and revitalize our call to compassion. Our giving may include material goods, but to deepen our sense of renewal this season it might serve us well to give of time and presence — to hear someone else's hurt, to relate deeply with another's confusion, or to provide loving presence that moves our giving beyond charity to true relationship.

When we're able to do this, Johnson points out, “Then a resurrecting word can gain a foothold in this fractured world.”

The active choice to seek renewal in Lent is a choice to embrace the Good News of Christ and all that comes with it. As theologian David Tracy writes, “Cross and resurrection live together or not at all.” The connection between these two is part of our journey to renewal in Lent. We know that the Lenten journey will lead us to the cross, and we are so compelled by the God who calls us to stand for the Good News that we can't avoid it. But the journey doesn't end at the cross. We

must never forget that the cross is **inextricably** linked with the resurrection. This is the promise of faith, the promise of new life in and with God. On dark days, this is a good reminder.

The work of renewal is deeply personal and profoundly prophetic. New life is brimming, but we must create conditions for it to spring forth. That process looks a lot like dying — to self, to shortcomings, to misguided intentions and to sinful institutional action.

By renewing our commitment to Christ this Lenten season, we offer ourselves to the mercy of the journey. By refining our actions and active love, we can be transformed. This is a season of renewal. We must trust God and be engaged. These next forty days offer us a beginning to that process. May we take advantage of this time and know that, sure as the flowers will bloom, God will work with us and through us to bring forth renewed life.



*Colleen Gibson is a Sister of St. Joseph of Philadelphia. Author of the blog [Wandering in Wonder](#), she currently serves as coordinator of services at the SSJ Neighborhood Center in Camden, New Jersey.*

## AFTER YOU READ:

Think back for a moment at some people or groups mentioned in the article who can help deepen our Lenten experience:

- Those who struggle due to racial inequality and other forms of injustice.
- Those who eat less not by choice, but simply because they have less food.
- Those who are hurting, confused or lonely and need the gift of our presence.

Try to identify and reach out to one particular person or group in your community who would benefit from your deeper prayer, fasting or giving this Lent.

**SCRIPTURE SPOTLIGHT:** The Gospel for the second Sunday of Lent presents the Transfiguration of Jesus.

*“Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother,  
and led them up a high mountain by themselves.  
And he was transfigured before them;  
his face shone like the sun  
and his clothes became white as light.  
And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them,  
conversing with him.  
Then Peter said to Jesus in reply,  
‘Lord, it is good that we are here.  
If you wish, I will make three tents here,  
one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’  
While he was still speaking, behold,  
a bright cloud cast a shadow over them,  
then from the cloud came a voice that said,  
‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased;  
listen to him.’  
When the disciples heard this, they fell prostrate  
and were very much afraid.*

*But Jesus came and touched them, saying,  
‘Rise, and do not be afraid.’  
And when the disciples raised their eyes,  
they saw no one else but Jesus alone.  
As they were coming down from the mountain,  
Jesus charged them,  
‘Do not tell the vision to anyone  
until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.’”*

[Matthew 17: 1-9](#)



Alone or with a partner, consider the following insights and questions:

- Peter, James and John react with fear and confusion to Jesus' transfiguration. How does he quiet their fear? How does Jesus quiet your fears?
- Sister Colleen Gibson writes, "Lent invites us to acknowledge our humanity, where we've fallen short and how reliant we are on God." Where have you fallen short? How do you rely on God when you fall short?
- Name a shortcoming that you would like to change (transform) during Lent?

## THE CHURCH'S CALL

Pope Francis reflects on the Transfiguration with pilgrims gathered in St. Peter's Square.

*"The mountain in the Bible represents a place close to God and an intimate encounter with Him, a place of prayer where one stands in the presence of the Lord.... We, the disciples of Jesus, are called to be people who listen to his voice and take his words seriously. To listen to Jesus, we must be close to him, to follow him..."*

*We all need to go apart, to ascend the mountain in a space of silence, to find ourselves and better perceive the voice of the Lord. This we do in prayer. But we cannot stay there! Encounter with God in prayer inspires us anew to 'descend the mountain' and return to the plain where we meet many brothers weighed down by fatigue, sickness, injustice, ignorance, poverty both material and spiritual."*

[Pope Francis, March 16, 2014](#)

Reflection Questions:

- How does Pope Francis' invitation to climb the mountain and stand in God's presence resonate with you? If you felt God call you to serve the least among us, what might you do to respond?
- Who in your community is weighed down by fatigue, sickness, injustice, ignorance or poverty? How might you be a sign of God's love to them?

## SYNERGY WITH SISTERS

Sister Colleen Gibson tries to live the words she shares by working "so all are provided for" at the SSJ Neighborhood Center in Camden, New Jersey. The center's ministries include English as a Second Language classes, a food pantry and a community garden.

This Lent, explore services in your area that support people who are marginalized by their need for food, language skills and other necessities. Can you give of your time and presence by being a mentor, providing child care or helping sort and distribute donated items? Check with your teacher or pastor to see how you and your class can make a difference.



## ACT

1. With Sister Colleen Gibson, let us rediscover our shared sense of mission to be one with all people and to work so all are provided for. End your day with this video: [The Art of Examen: Mission](#).
2. Help lessen the suffering of families who lack resources in your faith community. Think about your spending habits. How much do you spend a week on junk food, coffee, clothes, mobile apps or movies? Consider “fasting” from some of all of these. Share what you might have spent on these with your parish outreach program.
3. Carry on Jesus’ mission. Consider starting a social justice club in your school. Invite classmates who are regularly overlooked to be part of the group. Ask your religion teacher to support your efforts. Search for movies and books that address justice issues and sponsor a movie night or book discussion.

## PRAY

Lord, guide us on our journey of mercy.  
Guide us when life appears too busy and chaotic.  
Guide us when we face defeat and discouragement.  
Guide us when our minds become flooded with self-doubt.  
Guide us when we have lost our way.  
Guide us when we fail to be your presence and compassion in a fractured world.  
Guide us when we ignore the suffering of the poor and the outcasts.  
Guide us when we choose violence over diplomacy.  
Guide us when the streams of scandals in our churches and world shake our faith.  
Guide us when we become fearful of our leaders’ political actions.  
Guide us to be merciful toward others.  
Lord, work with us and through us to bring forth renewed life.  
Amen.

