

Lent 2024, Week 4 Reflection

A SAVING LOVE, A SAVING PRESENCE

Welcome to the Fourth Week of the Lenten Audio Retreat, presented by Jesuit Connections, a program of the Office of Ignatian Spirituality. The Fourth Sunday in Lent is known as Laetare Sunday, which means we're halfway through our Lenten journey! Like Gaudete Sunday in Advent, Laetare Sunday invites us to take an intermission from our pilgrim somberness (Laetare is Latin for "Rejoice!") And so, as we begin our prayer, consider: How has joy manifested in your life recently? What has helped you "rejoice," even in the midst of difficult circumstances in your life and in our world? To what extent are you feeling far from or connected to God, your spiritual home, your beloved community, and yourself? Acknowledge the stirring of the Spirit as we dive into this week's theme: "A Saving Love, A Saving Presence." This reflection was written by Meg Anne Liebsch, an alum of the Contemplative Leaders in Action program in Washington, DC...

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If I'm being honest, this week's Gospel deeply challenges me. In fact, I often try to avoid it. But when I sat down to write this reflection, I remembered Ken, a man I interviewed in a Seattle prison last summer.

The recording of our interview opens with a crescendo of microphone popping nearly drowning out Ken's faint guitar strumming. Each of us is fiddling with our instruments—me to double, no, triple-check that the recorder is working, and Ken presumably to occupy himself while I soundcheck. When I'm satisfied, Ken plays in earnest, his tender voice floating across the empty visitor's room.

Morning light— filtered through the high, barred prison windows— dapples our faces. The ugly metal tables, the cinder block walls, the gray cement floor—for a moment they all feel beautiful. My heart aches.

Ken has been in what he calls "monastic timeout" for 14 years. Incarcerated at a prison 30 minutes east of Seattle, Ken is a longtime participant in the Jesuit Restorative Justice Initiative Northwest (JRJI NW), a spirituality program for people behind bars. I was visiting the prison with JRJI NW's executive director Jennifer Kelly to write a story about the program.

Of course, you can't casually visit a prison, so I had prepared for this day of reporting, submitting multiple rounds of paperwork, planning contingency after contingency. What I hadn't prepared for was how profoundly the experience would touch my spirit.

This Sunday's Gospel contains perhaps the most famous—and for many Christians most fundamental—Gospel verse. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16). Yet, I must confess, these words, this pivotal idea of sacrifice, has never resonated for me. Not for lack of trying, mind you.



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When my grandmother, a devout Catholic, died shortly after my 13th birthday, I threw myself into Catholicism, hoping to find her in it. I diligently read and highlighted my cheap copy of the New American Catholic Bible. I journaled out my nightly prayers. I walked to Sunday Mass, as if role-playing my grandmother who had walked to her parish's 8 a.m. Mass every day.

At some point, I realized that I wasn't *believing*—I was studying for a test. Neither Mass nor my rigorous Bible study made me feel closer to God or my grandmother. In fact, the more I read, the less I believed—especially John 3:16. How could a loving God send his Son to suffer? I was uncomfortable, too, with the concept of “saving.” What about my friends who weren't Christian: were they “condemned” as the Gospel of John suggests? Perhaps if I had had the tools of Ignatian spirituality in my teens, I might have realized that, while my grandmother found God in Mass and scripture, I could experience God in other ways. The heartache, the beauty I felt as Ken sang—for me that was God. A moment of pure humanity in a place as brutal as an American prison.

After Ken finished singing, we chatted. Like old friends reminiscing, Jennifer and Ken recounted how he first came to JRJI NW retreats. He had just been diagnosed with cancer and was staring down chemo treatment. He was terrified, but through the companionship of Jennifer and other retreatants, he realized, “If God's on my side, then I'm going to get through this.”

In talking to Jennifer and the men incarcerated at MCC, I began to understand John 3:16 in a new light. What animates their faith is not that God sent Jesus to suffer and die. It's that God sent Jesus to *live*. Like them, Jesus was incarcerated. He was betrayed. He loved. He hurt. Because God has lived all the joy and strife attached to the human experience, the men at MCC do not feel alone. God is not simply supporting them through their struggles; God is *with them*, behind bars.

In that witness is a love so profound, so transcendent that it can indeed save us, liberating our spirits from that which divides us—whether that's physical prison walls or spiritual loneliness. Such love connects us to something greater than ourselves, something sacred and eternal.

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Thank you for seeking “A Saving Love, A Saving Presence” with us. We hope you will join us to ponder next week's theme: “Broken Open to Transformation.”

Reflection questions:

- *In what moments have you felt God with you? In what moments have you felt God was absent?*
 - *Jesus understands us because he lived as a human being who struggled and was betrayed. How does this aspect of Jesus' life help you to prepare for Christ's death and resurrection this Lent?*
 - *As you reflect on this side of Jesus, what did you feel? What did you learn?*
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Opening & Closing Prayers

Waiting and Longing by Walter Bruggemann

God of the seasons,
God of the years,
God of the eons,
Alpha and Omega,
before us and after us.

You promise and we wait:
we wait with eager longing,
we wait amid doubt and anxiety,
we wait with patience thin
and then doubt,
and then we take life into our own hands.

We wait because you are the one and only
one.

We wait for your peace and your mercy,
for your justice and your good rule.

Give us your spirit that we may wait
obediently and with discernment,
caringly and without passivity,
trustingly and without cynicism
honestly and without utopianism,

Grant that our wait may be appropriate to
your coming
soon and very soon,
soon and not late,
late but not too late.

We wait while the whole the world groans in
eager longing.

*From Prayers for a Privileged People,
Walter Bruggemann*

Creature of God by Jessica Powers

That God stands tall, incomprehensible,
infinite and immutable and free,
I know. Yet more I marvel that God's call
trickles and thunders down through space to
me;

that from God's eternities God shouts
to me, one small inconsequence of day.
I kneel down in the vastness of God's love,
cover myself with creaturehood and pray.

God likes me covered with my creaturehood
and with my limits spread across God's face
God likes to see me lifting to his eyes
even the wretchedness that dropped his
grace.

I make no guess what greatness took me in.
I only know, and relish it as good,
that I am gathered more to God's embrace
the more I greet God in my creaturehood.