



# St. Paul's Church

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## Mending

*A soldier asked Abba Mius if God accepted repentance. After the old man had taught him many things he said, "Tell me my dear friend, if your cloak is torn, do you throw it away?" He replied, "No I mend it and use it again." The old man said to him, "If you are so careful about your cloak, will not God be equally careful of his creatures?"*

### Sayings of the Desert Mothers and Fathers

ed. Benedicta Ward

If you are like me, many of us feel torn these days. We feel torn by the effects of the pandemic, torn by the realizations that the BLM movement and others have brought to us and simply exhausted by a world and lives that feel out-of-control. Although we feel the fraying of our lives every day, it extends to what we are able to do in our worship/prayer life. This week, the lead article in the newsletter from the Episcopal News Service was entitled, "Episcopalians prepare for second COVID-19-restricted Lent with mix of fatigue and perseverance," and chronicled how one cleric in this diocese was initiating a Lent-Holy Week regimen of self-imposed ashes on Ash Wednesday, drive-by palm distribution on Palm Sunday, a Maundy Thursday service on Zoom coinciding with family dinners, online Stations of the Cross for Good Friday and an outdoor Easter Vigil." We will do some similar things,

but the amount of work and ingenuity necessary to make things feel "normal" seems breathtaking. All of us are feeling torn, so much so that what we saw as "normal" a year ago is not very helpful these days.

In my view, it is most important to remember that, in a time when are still looking for new ways to do familiar things (I will not offer a talk about new wine into old wineskins), we need to know that God is initiating this mending work with us. I know people who become hyper-vigilant about their spiritual lives during Lent; while attention is necessary, I am encouraging people to not feel as though Lent represents another series of burdens added to the impossible load we are already carrying. Repentance simply means to change our minds; part of what we need to modify in our thinking is that we must earn something in our

relationship with God. If we have planned a regimen for ourselves for Lent, let it be something that is not burdensome. If it includes giving our attention to the underserved in our neighborhoods, let it be "turning our gaze in the right direction," as Simone Weil would say. If prayer needs our attention, let it be something attainable. There is nothing we can do to make God love us more or less, I was told recently, and I believe it. We can trust God to be careful with us, even as God mends us.

The desert mothers and fathers wanted to work out the love of God and neighbor and realized that it was not the work of a single act or a season but a lifetime. We are in this for the long term. All we need to do is trust that loves us enough to do the necessary work. It simply needs a change of mind about who is directing this work and we can rely on God to do the rest.

# Praying through Lent

For many of us, Lent will be a reminder of how important it will be to pray our way through the coming forty days, for our families, for loved ones who we have cared about and whose health is fragile, but mostly for ourselves and the ongoing conversations we have with God. Because this is our second time through Lent in this crisis, I thought I would mention some ways in which we can deepen our relationship with God through several prayer practices, hoping that one will be a good fit.

## **Lectio Divina** (Divine Reading)

As one of the most ancient ways of praying scripture, it is a good way to let God's voice filter into our lives. The steps are simple:

**1 Read** (Lectio): Find a passage in scripture that speaks to you. The psalms are especially fruitful: Psalm 63 begins, "O God, you are my God; eagerly I seek you\* my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you, as in a barren and dry land where there is no water." We read it very slowly, until we reach a phrase that touches our heart.

**2 Meditate** (Meditatio): We repeat internally the phrase that touches us several times: "You are my God...you are my God..." until the phrase becomes a part of us. This exercise will take some time. Gradually, we will feel a prayer form within us.

**3 Pray** (Oratio): Our prayer can take many forms, but one might be, "Lord, help me to understand that you are the only thing I worship—not the job, not the things I accumulate around me, but you alone." Remember this is internal work and does not need to be said aloud.

**4 Contemplate** (Contemplatio): When we are through repeating our prayer several times, we simply rest, as one of the fathers said, in that place where there are no words. We remain in the presence of God, contemplating the time we have been in god's company and giving thanks.

## **Centering Prayer**

This prayer form, also very ancient, is helpful because it involves no words except the "holy word" we find for ourselves. It focuses on the work of listening, which especially helpful in a tradition where we love to fill the air with our polished, beautiful words.

Sit quietly on the ground or in a chair (with both feet flat on the ground), close your eyes and let your thoughts go by. Eventually a word will come to you—one without emotional associations—that will help anchor your thoughts. Internally repeat that word until the stream of thought slows. If you find a conscious thought rising within you, say your word as a reminder that you are focusing on the silence, not words. Eventually you will come to a stretch of time where there are no thoughts. This is a prayer form that takes some practice, but is wonderful for those who want to adopt it as a discipline.

These suggestions are called prayer practices because they take work, but they are worth the time. If you want other suggestions, please contact me—I would be happy to talk with you about prayer in this unique season.

Fr. Mark

# Paschal Sacrifice

“What are you giving up this year for Lent?” is the question I often hear these days. When I was growing up, the simplest solution was sweets. For those of us with a constant craving for sugar, it represented the closest thing to real sacrifice most of us could manage. I toy with the idea in my adulthood but have since determined that taking on an extra spiritual discipline has always been more meaningful, if only because it forces me to be intentional about my relationship to God. Being mindful of the conversations I have with God, means, for me, becoming a better listener. I try to cultivate practices that involve silence, so I am less inclined to fill the air with my own words and more inclined to attend to God who, famously, speaks in a still, small voice.

I suspect that for many of us, being asked what we have given up would include nearly everything on which we had depended to make our lives manageable; the entire year has felt like Lent. While we have had the important (and unrequested) gift of journeying through the pandemic with those whom we



love most deeply, many of us have not been that fortunate: I cannot, for example, imagine what it has been like for those of us who live alone. We have had computer gatherings for worship, computer book discussions, computer family visits, but no one would call them substitutes for real human company. We are made for each other; It is not good for us to be alone.

Still, this time of year I am haunted by St. Augustine’s address to God at the beginning of his *Confessions*, that “You stir mankind to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds rest in you.” If you are like me, restlessness has been the hallmark of our days and it is because we feel so deeply the absence of those things that we use to distract us from what we believe is mundane in our lives. The irony is that what we call “mundane” simply means that which points us to the earth from

which we came. We don’t like to be reminded of the words that we usually hear on Ash Wednesday, when the ashes are imposed on our foreheads: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” We need to be reminded, however, that we have our lives only for a brief time and that the constant reminder in our lives is to rest in the presence of God.

So my prayer discipline this year will involve more silence and more intentionality about keeping silence. Even as we are compelled by what we know about the suffering around us to proclaim the injustices endured by our sisters and brothers of color, even as we know and mourn the damage inflicted on us by short-sighted treatment of the pandemic, it makes our silence before God that much more crucial. Even if it is for a few minutes each day, I encourage you to offer your silence and your presence to God. It is nothing you can order online, nothing you can download. It is unavailable on Netflix. It is, however, the best gift you can give to yourself and the people closest to you. We are made for it, after all.

Fr. Mark

## From "Good News in the Garden State": February 5, 2021

### ST. PAUL'S COMMUNITY CLINIC OPENS IN CAMDEN



St. Paul's Church in North Camden has started an exciting new program to serve the local community, a clinic for the homeless population in North Camden with basic medical care, screenings for high blood pressure and diabetes, and to refer patients to Cooper Medical Center for conditions beyond the scope of the nursing students who

currently staff the facility.

January 24 was the opening of the St. Paul's Community Clinic at St. Paul's Church in Camden. A joint project of the Rutgers Camden School of Nursing and the church, St. Paul's Community Clinic opened Jan. 24, with office hours planned every Sunday from 7:30–11:30 a.m.

The clinic was made possible by a grant from the [Becoming Beloved Community program](#) of the Episcopal Church. These grants were developed to aid parishes in projects where it was clear that people of color were suffering disproportionately during the pandemic. Nursing students currently staff the facility from 7:30-11:30 on Sunday mornings, with plans to graduate students in the nurse practitioner program. Classes taught by the students will also be available on a variety of health issues.

The Rev. Mark Smith, rector of St. Paul's, said, "While St. Paul's has continued its food program throughout the pandemic, feeding 200 people for breakfast and supper on Sundays, our hope is that the

medical clinic will address the immediate needs of our guests in a more comprehensive way. We also hope, after the worst of the pandemic is over, that the clinic will remain a place where the underserved can find care on an ongoing basis in the coming years."

### Confirmation Class Beginning

If you have not been confirmed in the Episcopal Church and would like to be, please contact Fr. Mark. Our weekly online classes will begin on Tuesday, February 23. It's a wonderful chance to explore our faith in greater depth and prepare for other opportunities in the church.

### Diocesan Convention

Our convention takes place on March 6. Please pray for Marisa Henry, Linda Ferrante and Debbie Martin, who will be representing our parish!