

Examining our burdens to live with blessing



MAR. 26: *Sunday* BURDENED BY CYNICISM

“Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.” (Ephesians 4:29)

A man I know, once vibrant and talented, now lives in a family member’s spare bedroom, drinking beer and playing video games all day. His story is tragic. A series of misfortunes knocked him off his trajectory to success and turned him bitterly cynical. Everything and everyone was to blame for his misfortune. No one could stand being around him. He lost job after job and the woman he’d hoped to marry. His cynicism drove everyone away.

Cynicism can be triggered when we are hurt or angered. It’s a defensive posture we take to protect ourselves emotionally — nothing I do will make a difference, so why try? Cynicism can also keep us from dealing with negative emotions in a healthy way, allowing them to fester, grow and distort our view of ourselves, others and the world.

Paul’s letter to the Ephesians reminds us of our call to build each other up, to speak words of grace, compassion and love. This Lent, let us free ourselves from the threat of cynicism by allowing ourselves the grace to examine our emotions in a healthy, up-building manner.

EXAMEN:

Listen to the cynical messages you have heard or told yourself — angry messages of blame and mistrust. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Recall a time you expected the worst, a situation you were sure wouldn’t end well. Sit with the painful emotions of doubt, suspicion and mistrust as they arise. Picture these emotions moving through and then out of your body like cloud vapors. Imagine the clouds breaking into tiny bits, angry molecules that catch on the wind and float away. Rest in the release of these emotions. Allow yourself to feel this unburdening.

PRAY:

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MAR. 27: *Monday* **BURDENED BY ADDICTION**

“God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” (2 Timothy 1:7)

When we hear the word “addiction,” alcohol and drugs come quickly to mind. But any substance, pleasure or means of escape can become an addiction. An addiction is a dependency. The persistent and intense urge to engage in a behavior or consume a substance that causes us immediate or long-term harm. Some substances, such as nicotine, caffeine, cocaine, alcohol and opioids, are designed to get us hooked. But we can also become addicted to sugar, sex, prescription drugs, gambling, even our phones — substances or behaviors that, when abused or used disproportionately, can have severe and harmful consequences.

The God who created us and loves us desires our health and well-being. God also created us with the power to grow in self-discipline. But to break the hold of addiction, we must examine ourselves and our behaviors honestly and seek resources of support and help. We cannot pray our addictions away. But our faith can inspire the humility and honesty required to get the help we need. God does not desire our suffering. We are God’s beloved. God desires our liberation from that which seeks to control and harm us.

 **EXAMEN:**

Consider your cravings. What substance has more control over you than you would like or feels unhealthy? Are there actions you feel compelled to do? Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise as you consider this craving.

 **IMAGINE:**

Imagine access to your drug or addiction has been taken away. What does your dependency feel like? Notice your thoughts, emotions, physical sensations that arise. Attend to these feelings honestly. Don’t seek escape. Embrace these feelings knowing God is with you, encouraging your honest examination. Breathe. Release yourself from the practice. Rest. Reflect on what you learned.

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MAR. 28: *Tuesday* **BURDENED BY DESPAIR**

“And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” (Isaiah 35:10)

The weight of our world’s news burdens us with despair over the violence of war, rising hate crimes, devastating natural disasters and entrenched political divides. In the introduction to his edited collection *Joy: 100 Poems*, Christian Wiman writes that “joy is the only inoculation against the despair to which any sane person is prone, the only antidote to the nihilism that wafts through our intellectual atmosphere like sarin gas.” Despair is a constant. Joy must be sought.

I’ve often counseled people who are going through difficult times to intentionally seek joy. Observe the majesty of a sunset. Listen to giggling children. Receive a friend’s hug. Offer a random act of kindness. Seek joy, I’ve advised, not to demean or downplay their anguish, but to help them find their way through it. Moments of joy can serve as stepping-stones through the desert of despair.

Isaiah 35:10 describes the Israelites’ return after exile, through the wilderness to the promised land. Unlike their exodus journey, this pilgrimage is marked with rejoicing. The trials of God’s people are not over. The enemies that surround them are real and powerful. But the message of seeking joy during suffering is meaningful no matter where we are on our journey.



EXAMEN:

Sit with your despair. In what ways do you feel powerless? Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.



IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself walking through a desert of despair. Your journey is long, you are suffering from heat and thirst, the sand burning beneath your feet. Then, imagine desert crocuses blossoming, waters and streams beginning to flow, ready to quench your thirst and the land’s. The burning sands are cooled, leading you to break into a song, or shouts of joy, praising God.



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MAR. 29: *Wednesday* **BURDENED BY JUDGMENT**

“Blessed be the Lord, for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me when I was beset as a city under siege.” (Psalm 31:21)

There is a difference between pursuing opportunities for self-growth and subjecting yourself to judgmental self-punishment. I recently watched a video of myself preaching, only to diminish myself with harsh critique. Why did I leave my reading glasses on top of my head? Why can't I stop repeating “Um” and “Like” and making that weird clicking noise with my tongue? After watching this video, my inner critic jumped to exaggerated judgments. You are a terrible preacher, it said. People may have told you they liked what you said, but they were just being polite.

Small, yet relentless, messages of self-judgment are powerful in tearing us down. These messages do not speak truth, though. They exaggerate the worst. And they run counter to the messages God sends us. The psalmist relies on God's steadfast love to bolster him under siege. The way we judge ourselves, exaggerating our faults and failures, can burden us as if we were a city besieged by enemies. In these moments, remember that God created you and loves you. You are God's beloved. You are worthy of love. Fill your head and heart with these messages of steadfast love to free you from the burden of judgment.



EXAMEN:

Recall a recent failure or mistake you made. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise. Notice your body's response.



IMAGINE:

Imagine God's love above you like the sun. Can you feel its warmth? Visualize God's love moving through you, consuming and casting out failure, mistakes and self-judgment. Allow God's love the space to be free-flowing and steadfast.



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MAR. 30: *Thursday* BURDENED BY STUFF

Jesus said to his disciples, “Take nothing for the journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money — not even an extra tunic.” (Luke 9:3)

When I travel, I don’t pack light. I get a free checked bag with my rewards membership, so I take advantage of the space, packing everything I might need and then some. On my last trip, I even packed my heated blanket, which I love to write under every morning. Did I need the blanket? No. Did I love having my blanket with me? Yes.

Things can bring us comfort and joy. But there comes a point when our stuff burdens and restricts us from living the full and faithful life to which Christ calls. Possessions can become idolatrous — our attachment to them greater than our attachment to God. Our homes, luggage and lives can get so filled with stuff (hello, hoarder!) that we become imprisoned — trapped by the responsibility to care for our stuff, as opposed to caring for others or ourselves.

Marie Kondo, the Home Edit, tiny homes and the minimalist lifestyle are fascinating in their growing popularity. We know the accumulation of more and more stuff isn’t good for us. We know we can’t take it all with us. Spend some time this Lent considering what you need and what you can let go. Free yourself for the journey.

EXAMEN:

Imagine yourself in a room filled with all your possessions. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise. Notice your body’s response.

IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself packing for a trip. You are allowed only one small bag. What will you put in the bag? What are your essentials? How does it feel to travel with such a light load?

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MAR. 31: *Friday* **BURDENED BY DOUBT**

“Immediately the father of the child cried out, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’”
(Mark 9:24)

Doubt often surfaces when bad things happen to good people. Why, God? we cry, when suffering doesn’t make sense, and calamity doesn’t line up with the God we know and love. Why must the people of Ukraine suffer? Why did that hurricane choose that community to destroy? Why do so many people have to die from COVID-19? Where are you, God, in the midst of all this suffering?

Every faith journey is plagued by doubt. Without doubt, it isn’t much of a journey. Challenge breeds growth. Questioning leads to discoveries. At times, God feels distant and vague. Other times, God’s presence is obvious — thick and intimate, dispelling all our doubts. Is this some sort of divine trickery? What is real? What is true?

In her poem, “The World I Live In,” Mary Oliver writes about how she refuses to live in “the orderly house of reasons and proofs.” The world in which she lives and believes is “wider than that. And anyway,” she concludes, “what’s wrong with Maybe?”

“Maybe” leaves the door of our house open to all that is possible with God. “Maybe” acknowledges our doubt, without losing our faith.



EXAMEN:

Recall a moment or a question of doubt in your journey of faith. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise. Notice your body’s response.



IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself knocking on a closed door. You are seeking the person and the knowledge held in that house. The door opens a crack and gives you a glimpse at the beauty, meaning and purpose that lies inside. Absorb all that this glimpse has to offer. Allow this glimpse to fuel your faith.



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APR. 1: *Saturday* BURDENED BY RESPONSIBILITIES

“And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done.” (Genesis 2:2)

When I start to feel burdened or overwhelmed by my responsibilities, I listen to podcasts and read the books of organizational and productivity gurus. I adopt their techniques such as time-blocking and the pomodoro method. I preserve my “golden hours” – the time of my day when I am most alert and focused – for my most difficult work. But no matter how organized I get, I can’t do it all. And I shouldn’t expect this of myself.

Genesis 2:2 is a good reminder for over-achievers, Type-A personalities or anyone who feels like they just can’t keep up. God worked hard for six days, then rested on the seventh. The commandment to observe sabbath is a lesson in self-care and humility. We need rest. Everyone does. Even God rested. And, if we stop, the world will carry on. The sky will not fall. Our consumeristic culture values productivity above even our health and well-being. But we can resist this idolatry – worship of work – by hitting the “pause” button on our lives, taking a day, or a week, off. Resting is a means to assess who we are in relationship to our work, our lives and our God.



EXAMEN:

Consider your schedule for this week. Is there a day you can set aside for rest and renewal? What would happen on such a day? What would it feel like? Notice thoughts and feelings that arise as you consider this invitation to rest.



IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself on sabbath as the world moves on without your work and productivity. What does it feel like to rest as the world continues to turn. What thoughts, fears or stresses arise as you witness what is accomplished without your effort? Where is God, and what is God doing as you rest?



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