

Adding In, Not Giving Up

BY ELIZABETH SANDS WISE

Many are familiar with “giving up” something for Lent.

We should ask a more pertinent question: “What are we *adding in* for Lent this year?” These books help us add practices of reading, cultivating humility, praying ancient texts, and digging into Scripture to encounter Christ anew.

Many Christians, even those from less liturgical traditions, are familiar with the notion of “giving up” something for Lent. Similar to the litany of New Year’s resolutions we hear recited every January – lose weight, exercise more, quit smoking – the Lenten “fast” lists often include avoiding chocolate, alcohol, cigarettes, or, for the overly zealous, all three. But we miss an opportunity during this penitential season if our Lenten practice only involves subtraction from our lives, only involves cutting out that which is bad for us. We should be asking one another come Ash Wednesday a more pertinent question: “What are you *adding in* for Lent this year?”

As the four books reviewed here demonstrate, observing Lent can take on a variety of forms – adding in practices that free us from false cares, setting time aside for reading, cultivating humility, praying through ancient texts alone or in a community, or digging into Scripture to encounter Christ anew. Lenten practices have the potential to add vitality to Christian living, deepening our awareness of Christ’s journey to the cross as we follow behind him on the path.

PRACTICING HUMILITY

Benedictine oblate Paula Huston knows well the importance of *practice* on the journey of faith. In *Simplifying the Soul: Lenten Practices to Renew Your Spirit* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2011, 192 pp., \$14.95), she helps readers explore how the busyness of everyday life stifles the spirit and hinders the humble heart.

Because “growth in humility...doesn’t come naturally” (p. xiii), simplifying the soul requires deliberate action. Lent offers us this opportunity,

and Huston outlines daily practices to guide readers along the Lenten path toward humility.

Each daily reading opens with a quotation, the vast majority from the desert Christians, and incorporates an essay-like meditation. Huston follows with an explanation of the day's assigned practice and closes with a brief Scripture passage.

As suggested in Huston's subtitle – "Lenten practices to renew your spirit" – the book focuses on nitty-gritty practices rather than Scripture, as some readers might expect. And while the practices certainly require prayerful contemplation if they are to be helpful in 'simplifying the soul' – and indeed, the paragraph explaining each practice usually includes instruction regarding reflection as well – this is not a devotional book, nor a Bible study. It is a guide to cultivating new practices.

Huston's emphasis is on doing the hard, often inconvenient, work of nurturing humility. The practices range from sleeping on the floor to praying the daily office, from forgiving an old hurt to cutting up a credit card, from walking to the grocery store to inviting a lonely person to tea. These practices have the potential to "twitch back the curtain on sin," Huston writes, and also "give us a way to counteract life-complicating temptations" (pp. xiv-xv). At the outset, Huston encourages readers to not enter this journey lightly but rather to begin the book committed to adopting each day's practice in a thoughtful and deliberate manner. *Simplifying the Soul* invites the reader on an intentional individual retreat – a time of discipline, reflection, action, and growth in humility.

Divided into chapters based on the weeks of Lent, *Simplifying the Soul* offers six readings each week, Monday through Saturday. Walking through Lent, readers spend each week "simplifying" a different aspect of their lives, symbolically working from the outer world to the inner life. In the days between Ash Wednesday and the first Sunday of Lent, for example, Huston's practices encourage readers to simplify their living space by cleaning out a junk drawer, scrubbing out a rarely cleaned spot, giving something away, and creating a special place of prayer. In later weeks, they will simplify the use of money, the care of the body, the mind, the schedule, and relationships. During Holy Week, leading up to the Easter Triduum, Huston guides readers to simplify their prayer lives.

Though Huston ends her final chapter on Holy Thursday, in her conclusion she offers readers ideas for further meditation heading into the Easter season: "Now that we have simplified our space, our marketplace interactions, the care of our bodies, our minds, our schedules, our relationships with other people, and our prayer lives, we must finally ask ourselves about the nature of our relationship with God" (p. 157). Huston briefly outlines ongoing practices to reflect on the image of God – practicing the presence of God, for example, or spending time in nature, reading poetry, listening to music, and seeking out a spiritual director.

SEEKING A GENTLER, LESS HEROIC LENT

In contrast to Huston's Lenten focus on "doing," Emilie Griffin invites readers to embrace a thoughtful and quieter Lent. In *Small Surrenders: A Lenten Journey* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2007, 249 pp., \$16.99), Griffin's Lent is a season of prayer and Scripture reading, a season of reflection. "In earlier centuries, many Christians took on severe penances and forms of self-denial," she notes; "Today's Lent is gentler and less heroic in style" (p. xii).

While Griffin's introduction, "A Word about Lent," helpfully welcomes newcomers into the journey of Lent by offering important background information about the season, it also encourages even the old-timers among us to turn, once again, to the wilderness. We turn, Griffin says, in order to open ourselves to repentance and transformation: "We spend an intentional time with Jesus, entering his wilderness, walking with him, and finally, sharing his Passion. Lent is a time when we deepen our faith in a journey not of grand gestures but of small surrenders" (p. vii). Indeed, the title of the collection, *Small Surrenders*, captures Griffin's recurring theme that Lent is an opportunity for us to "gently open ourselves up to the grace of God" (p. xii).

Though each day's devotional is not assigned a particular Scripture passage, Griffin urges readers to meditate on the daily liturgical passages appointed by the Revised Common Lectionary as part of their daily practice. (These readings are available at www.commontexts.org.) Griffin's four-to-five page reflections work through Scriptural themes as well as contemporary applications of Lenten ideas. When discussing the "small surrender" of practicing mercy during Lent, for example, Griffin begins her reflection with a quote by a Hurricane Katrina survivor. Griffin recounts being invited to participate in a prayer service for Gulf Coast residents and the way her own life was blessed as a result of her calling to practice mercy: "I went to comfort them; but they also comforted me. I shared with them what they already knew: what Jesus says about founding our house upon the power and grace of God" (p. 145).

Each of Griffin's essays begins with a short quotation, most from recent spiritual writers like Thomas Merton, Kathleen Norris, Brennan Manning, Henri Nouwen, and C. S. Lewis, or from voices of the Old and New Testaments such as Jeremiah, Joel, Isaiah, Matthew, Luke, John, and Paul. During the Second week of Lent, readers might be surprised to be welcomed into their Lenten devotion by J. D. Salinger writing about psychoanalysis. Griffin, however, creatively – and successfully – uses character sketches in Salinger's book *Franny and Zooey* "to provide insight into the path of surrender," which is a life of prayer. "The yearning to pray is human and fundamental. Prayer is the life's blood of our religion. It refreshes and sustains us" (p. 77).

Even when Griffin offers a technical explanation for a Lenten observance she is instructive in a devotional sense. For instance, the collection includes readings for Sundays throughout Lent, and on the fourth Sunday, Griffin explains the significance of Laetare Sunday. The Latin word "laetare"

means “to be happy” and on this particular day, liturgical vestments incorporate the color rose alongside the traditional penitential color purple. “Such intertwining of death and life, sorrow and rejoicing, is always part of the Christian message,” Griffin explains. “Ours is a religion of heartbreak and of celebration, a message of God’s deep love for his wounded world” (p. 123).

Small Surrenders is a lovely companion piece to the biblical and liturgical themes offered in the Revised Common Lectionary and common worship services during the Lenten season. The Ash Wednesday meditation opens with a Thomas Merton quote about how Christians are converted many times in our lives — “this endless series of large and small conversions, inner revolutions, leads to our transformation in Christ” (p. 3) — which allows Griffin to discuss the opportunity Lent affords for a starting anew, Christ’s temptation in the wilderness, and how the mini-wilderness we embark upon during Lent leads us to transformation. During Holy Week, Griffin travels through familiar territory but brings it to life in new and thoughtful ways: Jesus walking to Jerusalem and our own journey, the Transfiguration and our own imaginative faith, following Christ by picking up a cross and our friends who have died, the Last Supper and our inner transformation, Christ’s death and our need to forgive our enemies, and the resurrection on Easter morning and our own struggle to accept ourselves as new creations.

It is here on the last page that Griffin comes full circle: “However inadequate we may feel to this amazing destiny, it is ours; it is the promise that Jesus has made to us and lived out for us. Our task is to accept the grace, to make our small surrenders” (p. 231).

ENCOUNTERING JESUS TODAY

John Indermark’s *Gospelled Lives: Encounters with Jesus, A Lenten Study* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2008, 144 pp., \$15.00) thoughtfully incorporates Scripture and reflection as it challenges readers to “encounter Jesus today.” Each week’s readings are grouped around a Lenten-themed type of encounter with Christ from the Gospels, building on the week before. The first week’s theme, for example, is “Called,” the second follows with “Challenged,” the third “Rejected,” and so on. The final week of Lent, “Open-Ended,” offers to readers the opportunity to place themselves in the story.

The daily readings — five per week — begin with a Scripture reference of a particular encounter with Jesus from the Synoptic Gospels. Those who encounter Christ take center stage in the daily reflection. Some of these individuals are well-known names from Sunday school lessons, like Mary and Jesus’ family, John the Baptizer, Pilate, and Simon the Pharisee; others are the unnamed from the pages of Scripture: the woman with the hemorrhage, a leper, or a scribe.

Gospelled Lives is more directly based on Scripture than the other books reviewed here. In his introduction, former pastor Indermark encourages

readers to begin each day's devotional time by thoughtfully considering the Bible passage of each character's encounter with Jesus prior to reading Indermark's short sermon-like essays. The daily reflections, typically two to three pages in length, bring the Scripture passage to life in a thoughtful and accessible way, sometimes incorporating personal vignettes, popular culture references, or other Scripture passages.

Each reading concludes with a brief prayer followed by an "Encountering Jesus Today" section, a paragraph or two that serve as a prompt for further reflection and life application. For example, during week five, "Empowered," one daily reading highlights the story of "Mary Magdalene and 'Many Others'" from Luke 8:1-3. In his meditation, Indermark reflects on his own church experience and the role women played in ministry there as a way to consider the significance of women providing for Jesus and his disciples. Indermark's closing remarks lead readers to consider, "Who are the ones whose presence and ministry in your community goes neglected or unrecognized? Hold that individual or group in prayer. Commit to taking some personal action that will convey support and recognition of them and of their ministry" (p. 92).

This book would make wonderful study for a small group committed to deepening their faith through daily reflection. Indermark's in-depth leader's guide at the end of the book is sure to ease any lay leader's concerns about leading a group discussion based on *Gospeled Lives*. Despite the book's subtitle, "A Lenten Study," Indermark's six-week study could be used at any time of the Church Year, but especially during Ordinary Time when believers are called to live out their faith in Christ's resurrection. Lent, being six weeks long, is particularly conducive to a short-term study, but the challenge of *Gospeled Lives* – to encounter Christ – is a message believers need to hear year-round.

WELCOMING RIGOROUS SELF-EXAMINATION

Another Lenten devotional that need not be limited to use in the Lenten season is Frederica Mathewes-Green's *First Fruits of Prayer: A Forty-Day Journey through the Canon of St. Andrew* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006, 195 pp., \$14.95). Mathewes-Green adapts the nine-canticle prayer-infused hymn composed by St. Andrew, Bishop of Crete (d. 740), for a more individual, forty-day "journey" of repentance and reflection appropriate for Lent.

The Great Canon of St. Andrew is a lengthy prayer of "rigorous self-examination" (p. ix) firmly rooted in Scripture and church history. The Canon's underlying scaffolding is the nine great canticles or songs of Scripture, including the songs of Moses, Hannah, Habakkuk, and Jonah. The prayer is petitionary and responsive in its repentance-seeking; often "Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me" is the penitential refrain, though worshipers also find themselves reciting the Beatitudes and the Magnificat, among other familiar Scripture passages. Infusing the prayer with Bible passages,

especially well-known prayers and songs from Scripture, brings those passages to life and draws worshipers into a vibrant place of both personal and public confession.

Despite its intensely personal and reflective tone—St. Andrew may even have intended the prayer for his own private devotion—the Canon is widely used in Eastern Orthodox churches during Lent. Modern-day Orthodox worshippers gather as a congregation during the fifth week of Lent to journey through a multi-hour responsive prayer service of petition and repentance. (The Canon also appears in Orthodox worship during the first week of Lent, spread out over four days in smaller increments.)

In addition to a translation of the Canon itself, Mathewes-Green provides an introduction that briefly touches on the different way Orthodox Christians understand concepts such as *theosis*, sin, sickness, and the evil one, differences that are key in a spiritual meditation on the Canon. Additionally, Mathewes-Green anticipates the difficulty that Western Protestants might have with the occasional exhortations to heroes of the faith who are no longer living. “How can we, and why should we, talk to them if they’re dead?” (p. xxiv), she poses, and then addresses the concern satisfactorily: they are no longer dead in Christ, after all, and “we ask for their prayers, just as we ask for the prayers of a friend, a pastor, a prayer partner” (p. xxv). In a second introductory section on the historical background of the Canon, Mathewes-Green helps readers unfamiliar with the Canon to get their bearings before entering the prayer.

Dividing the nine-canticle Canon into forty daily readings, Mathewes-Green admits, occurs somewhat arbitrarily. Though each reading appears at first glance to be quite short, a mere two pages or less, readers expecting to speed through them should be forewarned. Taken slowly and prayerfully, St. Andrew’s eighth-century words come to life. The responsive construction of the prayer forces readers to be reflective, deliberate, and patient; reading the Canon becomes similar to the practice of *lectio divina*, or sacred reading, in which Scripture read repetitively becomes prayer.

Alongside the daily readings, Mathewes-Green has included a running commentary on facing pages. The section captioned “Explore” offers readers St. Andrew’s scriptural citations from the Septuagint for further study as well as commentary on the passages and notes for clarity. (When St. Andrew mentions “Holy Mother Mary” (p. 34), for example, Mathewes-Green points out that he is not referring to the Virgin Mary but St. Mary of Egypt, whose biography is read during the Orthodox Great Canon service and is included as an appendix here.) The “Consider” portion of the commentary allows readers, especially those new to the Canon, to think through the Canon as they digest it daily. Mathewes-Green asks early on, for example, “How do you feel about the companionship of St. Mary of Egypt, St. Andrew, and the Theotokos? Is their presence alongside us in prayer helpful, or intimidating, or frankly not believable?” (p. 14). Though not always posed as questions,

the “Consider” sections are helpful guides to reflection and prayer. In Canticle 7, Mathewes-Green compares modern responses to difficulty with that of the Israelites:

The Israelites always knew to turn to God in repentance when disaster struck.... Their response, as we see in the Song of Azariah, was to admit that their own sins provoked this chastisement. We react in the opposite way today. When misfortune strikes we think, ‘How dare God allow this to happen?’” (p. 120)

These reflections prompt readers to see their world differently as they digest the Canon prayerfully into their devotional lives.

“If you have wished you could pray like the Desert Fathers did, or read Scripture like the church fathers did, or know God like the early martyrs did,” Mathewes-Green entices readers, “the Great Canon can be a doorway. It can take you back in time to the early centuries of Christian worship, and open the way to a prayerfulness that is not bound by time at all” (p. x).

CONCLUSION

As these four books reveal, there is no single correct way to “do” Lent, but it certainly involves more than avoiding caffeinated beverages. Huston offers practices that become a physical manifestation of our clearing out space for Christ, Griffin challenges us to a thoughtful and reflective “less heroic” season, Indermark brings encounters with Christ on the pages of Scripture to life, and Mathewes-Green accompanies us on a slow prayerful journey of self-examination.

Lucky for us, Lent comes around every Spring. If we endeavored to accomplish all of this in one Lenten season, our bodies and souls would be worn out long before Good Friday! Such fatigue can prohibit us from opening our hearts to hear the call of the season—calling us into the wilderness, onto the path, out to the world. But surely, this Lent we can all hear the challenge of these four books to do a little *adding in*, not just *giving up*.



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