

Day 7



My father's broken heart informed his entire life. Living in such close proximity to this man, whom I both loved and feared, his brokenheartedness spurred me on a journey to find greater wellness than I experienced in my relationship to Daddy.

My father's heart was broken when my twelve-year-old brother died from the lack of prompt and adequate medical care to deal with appendicitis. Proper care was unavailable for my brother because he was a poor black child in rural Arkansas. When my brother was taken to the local hospital in the town eighteen miles away from our home, he was turned away. The doctors instead insisted we take my brother to the charity hospital in another town, seventy miles away. We didn't have a car and by the time my father arranged to have my brother transported, it was too late. My brother had died.

For any parent, the sense of brokenness and immobilization brought on by the loss of a child—and a loss that could have been prevented—would be almost insurmountable.

My father's grief over the death of his son proved especially difficult for him—a poor, illiterate sharecropper. But I learned valuable lessons from this tragedy that have sustained my lifetime pilgrimage of seeking wellness.

In this season of reflection, we are presented a perfect time to think about the role of brokenheartedness in our lives. Where have the broken places led to opportunities for healing? How have those broken places helped and hindered as we faced limitations—our own and those imposed by others? Can new life grow in the cracks created by brokenness?

Holy God, though brokenness can lead to new strength, save me from trials that are immobilizing. May the trials that come be accompanied by enough grace to create the energy that I need to stand with courage and steadfastness. Amen.



Day 12



I still remember the groaning, but it didn't begin that way.

The whole trouble started a couple of days earlier, with a red patch of skin about the size of a dollar coin on my bicep.

Now, my whole right arm was hot, angry, about twice its size, and filled with infection. I was lying on my back on one of those moveable tabletops connected to the hospital's MRI machine.

I was half aware, the fever having a strong grip on my body as well as my mind, but I knew the diagnosis couldn't be good. Chief surgeons aren't supposed to be in radiology labs this late at night. I heard strange voices talking about amputation, about cutting until they found clean tissue with no infection.

They can't be talking about me, I thought. I'm a priest. I can't lose my arm. How can I give the blessing at the end of the Eucharist without my right arm?

Then silence.

I was back in the intensive care unit. *Is that my wife standing next to me? Who is that with her? It's the deacon from church. Are they reading Compline?*

“We have sinned against you, through our own fault, in thought, and word, and deed.” Weakly, I join in saying the prayers. I've never known it so difficult to think or speak.

What is going on with me? I don't have the energy to continue speaking the prayer. I'm too tired. I am afraid. I've never felt like this. Did I just groan? I must have. My wife is holding my hand and looking down at me.

Darkness.

How long have I been asleep? Is that a bell ringing?

In my mind, the words form. They are not as muddled by the fever and the pain:

The Angel of the Lord brought tidings to Mary. And she conceived by the Holy Spirit.

I might be too weak to pray out loud, but I know the Angelus, and I can still pray it in my thoughts. *Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.*

The Israelites know something about crying out to God. They groan under each pharaoh until God sends Moses to deliver them and lead them on a great pilgrimage out of Egypt and into the Promised Land.

Mary knows what it means to cry out to God in despair. She groans as her son dies on the tree. She holds his lifeless body in her arms after he has been beaten and tortured. Her pilgrimage is one of a mother's love, her hopes and dreams poured out for her child.

Even Jesus knows what it means to cry out. He groans with the weight of the world's sins, which we seem eager to pile on him day after day. His pilgrimage is one of incarnation, of movement through his life—and of gathering a community who will face rejection for following him and suffer for proclaiming his good news. Yet the pilgrim road Jesus walks—and that we walk as his disciples—always leads to resurrection.

The motif of life as pilgrimage is firmly rooted in the lives of the saints and can easily be seen in the life of Jesus and his movement through the Judean countryside and his ultimate destination—Jerusalem. Jesus bids all his followers to take this journey with him; he sets his face toward Jerusalem and extends his life to us with the gentle words: *Come and see.*

But are we brave enough to journey with him?

One thing about pilgrimage I am most grateful for is that it is rarely, if ever, done alone. That night in the hospital, I was not alone. My wife was with me—holding my hand in comfort, determined to find a way through suffering into healing and wholeness. The deacon was there, carrying the prayers of the entire parish, joining them with her own. Jesus was there with me that night, just as he is when anyone suffers, bringing healing and hope. Mary was there with me, too. As I prayed

the Angelus in the ICU, I saw Mary standing before me. I promised her that if I recovered, I would seek her out and give thanks for her assistance in Jesus' healing of my body.

The next morning, the doctors were more optimistic than they had been the night before. The antibiotics finally seemed to be working. It looked as if I would not lose my arm to the infection, after all. Another day, and the infection started to recede. My fever broke on the fourth day. All in all, I was in the hospital for twelve days (four in intensive care). I went home and spent another fourteen days on intravenous antibiotics.

The doctors never discovered what caused the infection; they had started me on an antibiotic cocktail before they could even culture it. But I knew Jesus had healed me, and I had his mother to thank.

At the end of the Angelus is the prayer for Annunciation. In this prayer, we see the familiar pilgrim pattern—the movement that begins with the life of Jesus and takes us through his death, passion, and resurrection. The prayer assumes that we are making this pilgrimage with Jesus. Honestly, I can't think of a better pattern for a life of faith than one spent in pilgrimage.

We are on a journey, with Jesus and the saints as our guides. The pilgrim road, like the journey of Lent, leads to resurrection and the measureless depth of Easter joy.

Day 26



When I was approached to write for this Lenten devotional, I hesitated. I told the editor that I didn't feel very connected to Christianity these days. It seems to me that the religion named after Jesus has become more exclusive than inclusive. It feels like it's become more about prosperity and "what's in it for me" than brokenness and welcoming the stranger, feeding and clothing the poor, and visiting those in prison. Further, the church seems to be consciously (or subconsciously) tolerating a governmental system that leads the world in incarcerating its citizens. This, the editor said, was exactly why I needed to write. So I accepted the invitation.

I don't identify with mega-churches, prosperity theology, or a way of life that is more about what I get when I die than how I behave when I'm alive and how I treat those around me—especially those with less or those who don't look like me or believe like me.

I seek the sacred word of God—in the Bible, the Koran, the Torah, written on parchment paper, drawn in the sand, or heard in the wind through the trees, uttered by a robed official

of the church, a sweat lodge leader, an imam, or a bedraggled patient at the psychiatric hospital where I work. Writer Anne Lamott says simply, “We can assume we have created God in our own image when it turns out that he hates the same people we do.” I would add to that: “I can assume I have created God in my own image when I think I understand God.”

Today’s scripture from Ezra is about rebuilding the house of the Lord. The dictionary says rebuild means to build something again after it has been damaged or destroyed, and the authors of the Old Testament have a pretty concise idea about what this rebuilt structure should look like. I am not an authority on anything, certainly not rebuilding a temple. I do, however, have a little experience with rebuilding a broken human, along with an alternative understanding of the God who makes this possible.

What I know has little to do with wealth or material possessions but has much to do with vulnerability and accepting one’s brokenness. My education into rebuilding a broken human has more to do with muddy feet than golden carpet, with stumbling, not surefootedness, with need rather than entitlement, with being left off the invitation list (and being let in anyway) instead of being on the VIP list to begin with. What I have learned is that rebuilding a temple in our hearts has more to do with bad coffee, hand-me down clothes, and honest souls in musty church basements than prime rib dinners at five-star restaurants where lobbyists and politicians make million-dollar deals to benefit the already-wealthy at the expense of those crushed by poverty. Rebuilding the temple

in our hearts has more to do with social workers who toil on the brink of that same poverty than administrators looking to retire early with a full portfolio of stock options.

Ezra's lesson talks about the stockpile of wealth being a tower of material proof that God is good—and we are thankful. It also implies that wealth is a measure of favor and, therefore poverty must be anything but God-like.

The tower I see looks a lot more like a soup kitchen than a palace; it looks a lot more like crumpled sheets on a lopsided cot in a homeless shelter than starched sheets in a king-size suite in a luxury hotel. My tower looks more like a young forest of trees planted by people who will never see them reach maturity than a city block cleared for another million-dollar church where all the pretty people go to be told God wants them to have lots of money and fancy cars.

This week, we are not talking about a physical journey. This week will be about being still, about the journey within, about looking at ourselves in the mirror and seeing the image of God. I will share stories that illustrate God's promise that just because something looks this way today doesn't mean that the promise will always look that way. I want to talk about the difference between bad days when it feels like no one appreciates me and everything goes wrong, and good days when I am tearfully aware of how fortunate I am to be alive—and how this difference is simply my attitude and perspective. We will also talk about how it is not a coincidence that dog is God spelled backward.

Monday of Holy Week



As summer wore on, many of the water sources we relied upon were drying up. Hiking fifteen to twenty miles a day, our bodies were burning through water faster than we could find it along the trail. On a blazing hot day in Massachusetts, we simply could not go any farther. Our canteens had only a tiny bit of warm water held in reserve, and our throats were dry. Our bodies were craving water.

In desperation, we got off the trail on a back road. There were no houses in sight, but after rounding two bends in the road, we saw a house with a water spigot by the garage door. Water! We quickened our pace.

Our sense of decorum kicked in as we neared the house. Politely, we went to the door and knocked, almost hoping no one would be home so that we could quickly get to the hose and drink our fill. A woman answered, looking a little puzzled to find two sweaty, smelly backpackers on her doorstep. Her husband joined her at the door as we explained our parched predicament. They escorted us into their kitchen—where

they plied us with cold lemonade from the refrigerator and, quite unbelievably, warm cookies. We found ourselves in a most luxurious oasis. Before we left, the lady and her husband topped off our canteens with fresh water and added ice cubes to keep the water cold.

Thirteen years after we stumbled to their door, I phoned the woman that other hikers have come to know as the “Cookie Lady.” She and her husband never forgot the couple who came to their doorstep in need of water. She told me, “You enjoyed the cookies so much that I try to keep fresh cookies around for other hikers.” This couple was changed by our encounter with them, and they never took the comforts of their home for granted. By the time I phoned years later to say thank you, we too had been transformed by their hospitality.

Source of life, your Son Jesus offered the Samaritan woman the living water that becomes a spring of water gushing up to eternal life: Grant us the grace to proclaim the Good News in deed as well as word so that others may find that same life-giving water, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



Good Friday



The pregnancy was planned. We wanted to begin our new life as parents. And for five and a half months, we nurtured that dream even as all was clearly not right with the pregnancy. Victoria's doctor wanted to know exactly where the baby had been conceived. He had hiked the Appalachian Trail in sections, and he had done a little math and had guesses of his own. He seemed oddly disappointed when we said we were sure it was at the campground near Abol Bridge in Maine.

Years later, this doctor would get back in touch with us to let us know about some research he had read. While Victoria was in great shape by some measures, we had also spent six months starved for calories and eating a rather limited diet high in carbohydrates and too limited in proteins and essential vitamins to support a healthy pregnancy. The baby died having never been born; surgery was required, as was dealing with the pain of what was not to be.

Many years later, we would come to see how this loss marked our lives when our daughter—born two years later—spoke

of her older brother who died unborn. She had heard us say that we never did come up with a possible girl's name. Our daughter felt the loss of her brother William through our grief.

The AT gave us a new life, even as we mourned the death of a baby who was not to be. We left newspaper work to forge our own path. Paid for by demanding and unsatisfying work in publications, we funded the writing of a first book and then began freelance writing and photography. We discovered a lasting purpose through relationship with Jesus.

Frank went on to finish seminary, and Victoria became a Franciscan tertiary, keeping a rule of life with others in the Third Order Saint Francis founded while living in the world. Together—with our daughter—we planted a new church in Georgia.

The redemption we found was not the life we hoped for when we ended the trail. What we found was so much more than we could have asked for or imagined.

Eternal God, you come to us not only in our hopes, but also in our suffering: Grant us the courage to seek you in joy and to bear the sorrows of others, strengthened by our Savior Jesus Christ who entered not into glory before he was faithful unto death on the cross; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.
Amen.