



Nine Days of Grace: Novena 2018

Today's readings tell a familiar story. It is the story behind the season of Lent. It is the story of our salvation. This story is one of the continuing unfaithfulness of the people and of God's unceasing faithfulness to these very unfaithful people.

The first reading states that the people added infidelity to infidelity. They forgot what was important, they forgot to honor the Sabbath, they forgot God's love and faithfulness, they forgot they were God's people.

God's response to their unfaithfulness was compassion and mercy. "Early and often," as we hear in the first reading, God sought to rescue them. In the letter to the Ephesians, we hear of God who is rich in mercy, God who reaches out to save them in Jesus.

This is our story also. Early and often God continues to act in our lives to bring us back from our infidelities, from our lack of faithfulness. This is something that we cannot accomplish on our own. Only by God's grace and mercy are we restored, again and again, to a life of faithfulness.

It is not merely our story in general. It is our story in the specifics of our lives. Each of us can tell stories of our moments of unfaithfulness and of God's rescue.

In my own life, this pattern of unfaithfulness and God's mercy has been lived many times over the years. One story always stands out in my memory, and has continued to shape and guide me over the years.

It was in our first year of marriage. My husband and I had met when I was a junior in college and he a senior. I knew from the beginning, even from our first meeting in the library, that God had brought us together. Though I did not know enough at that time to undertake a formal discernment process, I knew that God meant us to be together. We married three years later, after our first year in graduate school.

My second year in graduate school brought what I titled at the time, "The Winter of My Discontent." I suddenly had forgotten God's call that brought us together, the very call that I was so sure of from the beginning. I was overwhelmed by a seemingly unresolvable dilemma: how can I spend my life not being able to share what is most important in my life—my love for God—with the person I love the most—my husband? My husband grew up Catholic, went to a Jesuit high school, was a good and faithful person, believed in God and trusted God's love, but did not share the intensity of my passion for God, my great love for God. For months, I agonized over this problem.

How quickly I had forgotten who I was, all that God had done for me, and how God had brought us together.



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One rainy spring day, I came out of the campus chapel after mass. The rain had stopped and the sun was breaking through the clouds and glistening on the drops of water clinging to the branches soon to bloom. The sky was just as I imagine the day of resurrection—sun breaking through clouds, the breakthrough from darkness to light, from death to life. I heard the words within me: “My grace is enough for you.”

That was the end of “The Winter of My Discontent.” Suddenly I had been brought from darkness to light, from death to new life. I broke out into smiles and song. I was suddenly freed of what had bound me.

There was no answer, no resolution to my dilemma, only the promise of God’s grace to see me through. And that has been enough—in that moment, in many other situations over the many years since that time, continuing to now.

But, of course, that is not the end of the story for the people of Israel or for us. The story is the pattern of their lives and also of ours. And God’s response, early and often, is the pattern of God’s action in their lives and ours. God is always faithful.

The problem is that we forget—we forget God’s love and mercy. Though I knew the gift of God bringing me and my husband together, when my dilemma arose, I forgot—I forgot who I was called to be, I forgot how God had brought us together, I forgot God’s faithfulness.

As did the people of Israel, as we all do...

In the first reading the people are taken into exile for seventy years of Sabbaths—to make up for the **lost sabbaths**—the years of forgetfulness.

This is significant—the Sabbath is for remembering—remembering all that God has done on behalf of the people. Remembering all that God has done for us. That Sabbath rest and remembering comes for us every Sunday, every time we gather to celebrate Eucharist in these nine days of grace, every time we find time in our day to rest in God’s love.

Those moments help us to remember God’s faithfulness, to remember all that God has done for us—to remember each day and to remember over a lifetime.

In today’s gospel we are reminded just how much God loves us:
For God so loved the world that God gave us Jesus, the beloved Son.

Just as the serpent was lifted up in the desert to heal and give life to those bitten by the poisonous serpents and bitten by their grumbling against God and lack of faith,



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so Jesus was lifted up on the cross to save us from our lack of faith, from our forgetfulness, and to give us the gift of eternal life—the gift of God’s unending presence now and forever and not merely at the end of our lives.

But we are also reminded how slow we can be to believe and live this truth.

And this is the verdict—then, in Jesus’ own day, and now in our day: that the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light.

And not just other people—at times, we prefer darkness to light.

We are called to come into the light, to live by the light of Christ who is the light for the world, to choose the light. There is so much darkness in our world now as in every age, so much to bring us to despair, so much to make us forget the light.

Perhaps Nicodemus is our guide: He comes first to Jesus by night, not wanting to come fully into the light, not wanting to commit himself to Jesus who is the light. Little by little he chooses the light over the darkness. In today’s reading, he engages with Jesus, but then seems to fade away. Later, he defends Jesus in an argument among the Pharisees—though without committing himself as a disciple. Finally he makes clear that commitment by publicly preparing Jesus’ body for burial.

It takes us a lifetime to come fully and forever into the light—and a lifetime for us to be light for others. We forget, and “early and often” God rescues us and brings us to light and life.

May we turn to the light and away from the darkness, may we remember all that God has done and continues to do. May we see, even in darkness, the light of God breaking through and bringing new life and hope. May we choose to live in the light of Christ, rather than turning back to the darkness that threatens to overwhelm us.

We come now to the table—to receive again the gift of God’s son given for us that we may have life. Receiving his life poured out for us and in the power of the Spirit, we are made holy, brought from darkness to light. This gift of light is entrusted to us for others. We are sent, as we are at the end of every Eucharist, to become the bearers of God’s light and love in our world today and every day.

Victoria Ries
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