

Irrepressible

Find the resilience you need

A Personal Spiritual Practice Guide
for Lent and Holy Week



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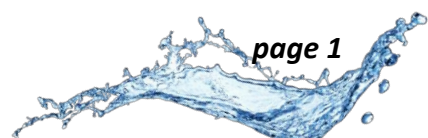
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A Personal Spiritual Practice Guide
for Lent and Holy Week

John van de Laar

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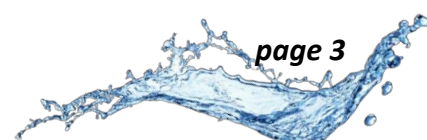
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Introduction

Have you ever started something enthusiastically, with great inspiration and strength, only to find that over time, you began to lose heart and struggled to keep going? Perhaps you've even started this year like that. You may have set intentions for the year and set up your systems and structures to bring them to fruition, only to hit obstacles and get derailed.

For many of us the pandemic has been one long, exhausting obstacle that has blocked us from fulfilling our hopes and dreams, kept us from connecting with others, and changed our lives for the worse. Even if we've managed to find joy and keep our lives on track, we may still be feeling depressed and depleted. Around the world the call is growing ever louder: we want things to go back to normal.

But what we knew as normal no longer exists and we can't yet see what the new normal will be like when it finally arrives. If we've learned anything from the last two years, it's that COVID-19 isn't going away anytime soon. We will be navigating this pandemic and its impact for years to come.

And that means that we desperately need a new and deeper capacity for resilience.

Irrepressible

It is with exactly this reality in mind that I am excited to share the new personal spiritual practice guide from Sacredise entitled **IRREPRESSIBLE—Find the resilience you need**. This guide for Lent and Holy Week explores ten qualities that can empower you to find the resilience you need. In addition, from Monday to Wednesday in Holy Week, **IRREPRESSIBLE** explores three of Isaiah's *Servant Songs* to find what resilience meant for the prophet and how it was manifest in the life of Jesus.

To get the most out of this guide, you will need to set aside at least ten to fifteen minutes every day. I recommend that you have a journal, or a dedicated document on your phone, tablet, or computer to record your thoughts, questions, and insights. You can also make notes of any specific practical things you want to do to increase resilience in your life.

If your church is using this journey in your Sunday worship, the content in each week is the same as that which is used to guide the sermon in church. The practices you find in this guide are based on this content and you are invited to return to it throughout the week. The practices themselves are tailored to help you to engage more deeply with the message of the week and are repeated throughout the week. Some of the practices remain the same or similar throughout the entire Lent and Holy Week journey for the same reason.

A Repeating Practice

Repetition often moves us past an initial, shallow engagement and removes any resistances we may have to more difficult or challenging insights. As we repeat a practice, so our defences begin to relax, and the Spirit is able to speak to us in ways that are not possible without the repeated practice. I encourage you not to skip over the repeating parts, but to engage in them with intention throughout the journey.

It is my hope and prayer is that **IRREPRESSIBLE** will not only be meaningful for you, but that it will be transforming. I believe that a mindful and intentional use of the Lent and Holy Week seasons can teach us and empower us to find a deeper and more robust resilience to help us navigate the tough times that come to every life. And that is what I hope this guide will do for you!

May God guide and bless you as you nurture your resilience through Lent and Holy Week.

John

Irrepressible Dust

Ash Wednesday

Reflecting on Scripture

SCRIPTURE READING

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

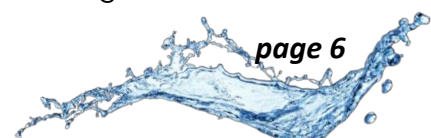
Today is Ash Wednesday. It is a significant day in the Liturgical Calendar, but I doubt it is one of the most popular celebrations in our faith. Even the word 'celebration' seems strangely incongruous when speaking of Ash Wednesday. Traditionally this day is seen to be about confessing sin, acknowledging our mortality, and repenting or changing our ways to be more faithful, obedient, and righteous. It begins the Lenten season, which extends the confession and repentance into a six-week process. Originally, Lent was a time of preparation for baptismal candidates in which they would learn what it means to follow Christ before making their public commitment at their baptism on Easter Sunday.

This is not a bad thing in itself. There is great value in setting aside extended times to reflect on what it means to embrace the way of Christ and live it out more wholeheartedly in our daily lives. But there is also a danger here—at least in how Lent has been observed in my experience of the Church. A faith that makes us feel bad about ourselves is neither healthy nor likely to lead to the kind of positive transformation we seek. But this can easily be the effect of our observance of this season. It is common to hear phrases from our Scriptures and liturgies that reinforce the message that we are worthless sinners who deserve nothing but condemnation:

*The worst of sinners
A worm, not a human
Not worthy to gather up the crumbs
Deny yourself
Think of others as better than yourselves
Dust you are and to dust you will return...*

There is value in humility, recognising our flaws and brokenness, and committing to becoming more whole and generous. But ironically, the worse we feel about ourselves the less capable we are of doing this important work. We spiral into a deeper brokenness where we feel worthless, incapacitated, and paralysed by our self-loathing and/or self-doubt.

I was raised on Christian teachings about humility, confession, sin, repentance, denying myself and putting others first. It is in my DNA to think of myself as broken, unworthy, and in need of improvement. And I have gained much that I am grateful for in these teachings. But they also did me great harm. In denying myself, I lost my sense of self and allowed myself to become little more than a function of the needs of those around me. In always putting others first, I became empty and lost my capacity for enjoyment and vibrant living. In constantly focussing on what was



wrong, inadequate, not-enough, or worthless about myself, I became incapable of seeing my giftedness, my value, my contribution, and my goodness. I allowed myself to be dismissed, humiliated, mistreated, and even abused because I felt that it was wrong to stand up for myself and I always worked hard to see things from the other person's perspective.

For most of my life, my faith had a very unhealthy impact on my sense of self. It took a long time, but eventually I realised that all this focus on how bad I was did not make me better. I was not more capable of serving others and I was not empowered to contribute more or to make more of a positive impact on my world. Rather, I found myself paralysed, withdrawn, and afraid to step out and show up, because I did not believe I had anything of value to give. I doubted my ideas and visions for doing ministry and I submitted myself to the agendas of my leaders, even when they were self-serving or hurtful to others. A faith that makes us feel less, bad, and unworthy is neither biblical nor spiritual.

But this is not all that Scripture tells us about ourselves. Jesus calls us friends. He claims that bringing abundant life is central to his mission. We are 'fearfully and wonderfully made' and God's good and loving thoughts about us 'cannot be numbered.' To love God and our neighbour we must also love ourselves. And we are not just dust. The molecules and atoms within us were born in the cosmos. It is a scientific fact that we are stardust!

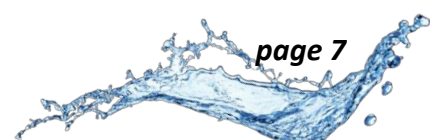
For Ash Wednesday—and Lent—to be only about how bad we are, to see repentance only as admitting our sin and committing to be better, is neither healthy nor helpful. And it will not bring about the wholeness, goodness, and willingness to serve and give to others that we seek. It is when we have a vision of our best selves and we feel that we are good and whole—and constantly moving toward greater goodness and wholeness—that we are most able to live full and connected lives.

It is only those who are insecure and who feel inadequate and unworthy that crave the approval of others. These are the play-actors (hypocrites) to whom Jesus refers in his Sermon on the Mount. It is those who know that they are irrepressible (star)dust that don't need applause. These are the ones who can do their own work of growth and their generous work of serving others in quiet, unassuming ways regardless of the recognition or applause of others. And this is where abundant life is found.

In this series we will be exploring all the wonderful, good, true, and beautiful God-given qualities within us that are irrepressible, that lift us above our worst, and that carry us through times of trauma like this pandemic. And we will be learning to embrace and celebrate that we are Irrepressible Dust—Cosmic, God-Imaged Stardust! I hope you'll come along for the ride!

Daily Spiritual Practice

Repeat this practice every day this week. The preparing, responding, and integrating elements remain the same every day. This repetition enables you to dwell in the practice more deeply through the week and it often opens you to new insights and experiences of God.



The listening part of your practice changes so that each day can focus on a different aspect of the reflection on Scripture. Feel free to use the questions provided to guide you or to follow your own process as you meditate with the reading and the thoughts presented here.

PREPARING

Spend a few moments in silence. Get comfortable and ground yourself in your body. Slow and deepen your breathing and focus on your breath entering and leaving your body. If any thoughts come up, notice them, and then let them go. If you need to make a note of anything so that you can return to it later, then do that.

When you're ready, shift your awareness to your emotions, motivations, and longings. The following questions may help you in your reflections:

- What in your life brings you security, comfort, and calm right now?
- What in your life brings you insecurity, discomfort, and restlessness?
- What qualities within you are your best allies? What do you draw on when you need strength, wisdom, and resilience?

When you feel ready, you may want to offer this, or some other prayer:

*You know, O God, the parts of my life for which I am most grateful,
and the qualities and relationships that sustain me.
You also know the parts of my life with which I struggle,
the hurts, uncertainties, and unpredictabilities that challenge me.
And so I pray that you will enable me to draw strength and wisdom
from the goodness in my life,
and that you will awaken within me the irrepressible qualities
that will empower me to thrive even in my most difficult times.
Amen.*

LISTENING

Insert the **Listening Exercises** for the relevant day at this point in your spiritual practice.

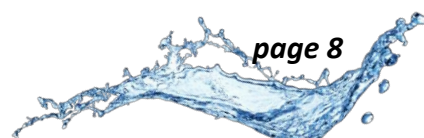
RESPONDING

When you feel ready, spend a few moments responding to your reflections of today. You may want to light a candle as symbol of embracing your God-imagined, stardust self and of your commitment to live more intentionally from your best self.

As you light your candle use the following phrase (or create your own) as an aid to your meditation:

May the light of God's image fill me and radiate from me into my world.

If you are attending an Ash Wednesday service, you will probably receive the ashes on your forehead as part of that gathering. If not, you may want to do this for yourself. You can prepare ashes by burning dry leaves and mixing them with a little olive oil (don't use water - it can create a caustic mix that will burn you). Then stand in front of a mirror and apply an ash cross to your own forehead. You may want to use the following words as you do:



You are dust and you will return to dust,
and you are stardust reflecting the image of God.
Embrace who you are
and live abundantly in Christ's power.
Amen.

INTEGRATING

As you end your spiritual practice you may want to consider one thing you can do this week that will connect you more deeply with your best, 'stardust' selves. Make a note of that thing and set aside some time in the day to do whatever it is. At the end of the day, journal the impact that doing your 'stardust-connecting' activity had on you and your day.

As you close your practice pray the following prayer:
May God's grace and love fill me with courage and confidence
to embrace my best self
and live fully, abundantly, and freely in Christ's life-giving way.
Amen.

Listening Exercises

DAY ONE (ASH WEDNESDAY)

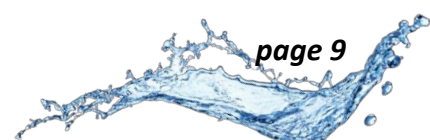
Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you attended an Ash Wednesday service. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- What does Ash Wednesday mean to you?
- To what extent has the language of sin, repentance, and unworthiness affected your self-esteem and your ability to value yourself and trust in your own goodness?
- What value do you find in examining yourself and identifying places where you are broken, struggling, or not living up to your best? How can you use this examination in a more intentional and life-giving way in order to embrace your capacity to overcome your worst?
- How can you balance being honest about the places within you where you need to grow and become more whole while also being honest about the places within you where you are already whole, strong, and good?

DAY TWO

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you attended an Ash Wednesday service. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- What comes to mind when you think of qualities like humility, goodness, contribution, and worth?



- Are there any ways that your faith leaves you feeling bad about yourself? Are there any ways that your faith empowers you to feel good about yourself?
- When you acknowledge and face the ways you may have hurt others or failed to live as your best self, what impact does it have on you? Do you ever feel paralysed by your mistakes, failures, and regrets for things of which you are not proud?
- What empowers you and enables you to overcome the times when you're tempted to paralysis?

DAY THREE

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you attended an Ash Wednesday service. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- What response do you have to the idea that Jesus calls you 'Friend'?
- How have you endeavoured to take hold of the abundant life that Jesus said he had come to bring us?
- What happens within your mind, heart, and body when you think of yourself as mortal 'dust'? And what happens when you realise that you are made up of immortal 'stardust'?

DAY FOUR

Return to the reflection at the start of this Chapter, or to any sermon notes you may have taken if you attended an Ash Wednesday service. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

- When have you fallen into the trap of being a 'play-actor' in your life and spirituality? How have you tried to put your righteousness on show so that others will think of you as good? In what ways are you affected or motivated by the applause or approval of others?
- What would it take for you to be more objective about yourself and more compassionate toward yourself? What would it mean to prioritise applauding and approving of yourself? How can you open yourself to more of a sense of God's love and approval of you?
- What would it mean to your life if you focussed on living authentically, kindly, and with a focus on your goodness and abilities and what brings you joy? How might you find more energy to love and serve others if you were to have a more positive, affirming, and encouraging relationship with yourself?
- What else would you need to do to live from the knowledge that you are God-beloved, God-imagined stardust?

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