

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

God Makes All Things New

Mary Lenaburg

Hi everyone. My name is Mary Lenaburg, and I'm so glad you could join me today. This talk is called "God Makes All Things New", and we're going to... I'm going to share a few stories about the goodness of our Lord in my life, and we're going to have a little bit about confession and some other things. So, first, we're going to ask our Lady into our time together, and we're going to begin with a Hail Mary. So, if you would please join me in praying I would be so honored.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among 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. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Okay. So, Lent. Lent! Not every Catholic's favorite season. Lent is always challenging for me, which is good – we all need to be challenged, especially in a spiritual way to kind of build up our spiritual muscles with the Lord and enter into a deeper relationship with Him, so I guess I'll just take the challenge. But Lent is a season of penance. It's a time to take a good look at ourselves and our relationship with Christ and do a little sort of soul renovation, shall we say. Today, I want to talk to you about God's redeeming love. I want to share with you how God redeems our sin and makes all things new.

So in scripture, in Romans 8:28, it says "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good and for those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."

So, what does that mean? As my son would say, "what?" "He can't be talking about me in this passage. I mean, I've committed so many sins in my lifetime. Yes, I've gone to confession, but, I mean, I've got this, you know, U-Haul of sin hanging out behind me. So He can't be saying to me that He's going to make all that I've done He's going to bring out good in it, can He?" Well, how is it possible

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for God to take the good, the bad, the really ugly of my life and make it all work to His glory?

Well, we all have a past. No one gets out of childhood, and especially young adulthood or college, unscathed. Pardon me. I'm fighting a cold, so bear with me. I think back to high school, and I just have to shake my head. I mean, seriously, don't we all have to shake our heads about how we all made it through so much foolishness for me, and so much strife for my parents? Then I realized that those were simple sins.

I look to the mistakes that I made in my young married life, and the sins kind of got more... got bigger, more serious. Huge life-changing moments where truly the grace of God... I would say that truly by the grace of God my marriage survived, and it remained intact, and God came riding through that time on a mercy train, as my husband would say. "Come riding through on the mercy train."

When I was younger, I was terrified of confession. I was embarrassed about what I had done, there was no way I was going to voluntarily go and tell a priest what I had done. Are you kidding me? No way. I praised the living God that my parents didn't subscribe to such views, and at least once a month while I was growing up my mom brought all 8 of us kids – I was one of 8, so I have 6 brothers and a sister – and she brought all of us to confession at our local parish.

I would sit in the line, sweat dripping down my back. My hands were shaking just imagining the hellfire and damnation that was going to come when I read my laundry list of horribleness for the pastor. I mean, horribleness. Like how many times I lied, taken the Lord's name in vain, you know, placing other things before God, honoring my mother and my father. Ooh.

At the root of that fear was my own pride. I didn't want to look bad. Do any of us want to look bad? I was a people-pleaser of the first order. I just wanted everyone to like me and not think badly of me. This included my parish priest. I would go into the confessional, kneel down, and begin revealing my heart. Not once was I yelled at as a child in the confessional, thank you Jesus. Not once.

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There were a few times in young adulthood where the priest was very stern with me, but by then I was on the shame train, and I knew that I deserved whatever was coming at me. Then I understood what shame meant. And so when the priest would be a little bit more stern or forceful in his counsel, I deserved that.

You see, I spent much of my young adult life hiding in shame. Shame for the sins of my past, for the mistakes I was making at the time, and in all the ways that I had offended God. I held on to the sins of my past like a baseball bat, and whenever I messed up, made a bad choice and sinned again, I used that bat of self-judgment to beat myself up, saying things like “Of course you screwed up. You’ve screwed up your whole life sister. You know, what’s different about now? You haven’t learned your lesson, have you? Why would God forgive you again, and again, and again, especially on certain habitual sins? I mean, seriously?” That’s what I would do.

I’d allow the devil to whisper into my ear and tell me that I was not worth forgiving. That even if the priest said the words “Given by God, your sins are forgiven. Go now in peace”, I very rarely felt peace. I was unwilling to forgive myself, even though God had forgiven me and forgotten my sin the second mercy rained down upon me. The second those words of absolution came. Done. It was gone. He’s forgotten it. Me? I just put it in my U-Haul. Carried it around.

You see, my sins weren’t small. They were big, ugly, mortal sins. Sins that could permanently damage my soul to the point where redemption wasn’t possible, or at least so I thought. Yet another lie the devil whispered into my heart, and one that I held on for many, many years. I had sex before marriage; I got pregnant outside of marriage. Even though that pregnancy ended in a miscarriage, the guilt of my sin weighed on me for years. I got my tubes tied, playing God with my fertility. I participated in pornography with my spouse. I mean, these are not little things. These are big sins. These are all mortal sins, and some of them I did more than once, and for years at a time.

Then there was the lying, and the gossiping, and the shoplifting in middle school. There were Sundays I didn’t go to mass out of defiance. I mean, I share these with you knowing now that I am forgiven, fully embracing that. But also, you know, not to create a scandal situation, but to let you know that I have been there. That I have been in that pit of despair. I don’t want you to feel alone if you happen to feel that way too. I don’t want you to be watching this video, pardon me, going “Wow. I’m

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even more horrible than she is.” No you’re not. No you’re not. Because God loves you too. And we’re going to walk our way through it.

I share this with you because I want you to know that if that’s where you are right now, you don’t have to stay where you are. I want you to know that there’s hope, and there’s love, and there’s mercy, and there’s grace for you and for me.

So what changed for me? How did I make my way out of that pit and into the beautiful sunshine of grace? First of all, God is merciful, and He is a faithful God. He will never abandon us. He proved this to me multiple times. But I want to share with you one particular Saturday afternoon during confession. It was a big one for me. I was confessing the fact that I had gotten my tubes tied. I was married, and my husband and I were not practicing our faith as well as we have come to, and we had made this decision with our fertility. I denied God and His will with my fertility. It took 10 years for me to confess this sin. I thought for sure the priest would show me the door and ask me never to return. After all, I proclaim to be a Catholic. How could I do such a thing and expect to remain a Catholic? God knew what I needed that day. He had been waiting for me to come to Him with a humble and contrite heart.

In Psalm 139, God says... Or David says to our Lord, the psalmist David “You have probed me. You know me. You know when I sit, when I stand, You know my thoughts. You know everything about me. And yet I still try to hide from You, but You still see me, and You still love me. You formed me and my inmost being. You knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise You because I am wonderfully made. My very self You know. My bones are not hidden from You. When I was being made in secret, fashioned in the depths of the earth, You saw me unformed, and in Your book You wrote it all down.”

God wrote it all down. He knew how awesome I was, and how awesome you are. I mean, how beautiful is that? God knows me intimately better than I know myself. He placed Father W., the priest Father W is what we’ll call him, in that confessional that Saturday afternoon. And through him, He gave me the words of grace and healing that my soul desperately needed to hear to be restored, in order to be restored with the Lord. He was gentle, and kind, and strong, and affirming. He was everything I needed in that confession. That day, my relationship with the

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Lord was fully restored, and the benefits of that confession and that experience are still being felt in my life some 20 years later.

Shame, disgrace, humiliation, unforgiveness, these are tools of the deceiver. Satan wants us to stay focused on these things so that we don't seek forgiveness and mercy from the Lord. Satan wants us to remain in a state of confusion about who we are in God. The more we give into these untruths, pardon me, the quicker we lose hope of the forgiveness that is waiting for us. When we humbly prostrate ourselves before the Lord and ask for His mercy and His forgiveness for whatever we have done wrong, it is given in that most awesome sacrament of confession.

Pope St. John Paul II says, "Confession is an act of honesty and courage. An act of entrusting ourselves beyond sin to the mercy of a loving and a forgiving God."

An act of honesty and courage. Yeah, it sure is. I am not... but I'm not going to leave it there, just as that. I'm going to share with you how God not only forgave my sin, but He redeemed it and made it work for His glory. So yes, in that act of honesty and courage of going and confessing that sin, that particular sin, God then took that sin and created good from that sin, and I'm going to share with you how that happened.

As I said, my husband and I, we made our mistakes in our marriage. We sinned as individuals and as a couple. Sometime after that particular confession, our pastor approached my husband and I about being marriage mentors in our parish. He needed married couples who were willing to meet with engaged couples once a month for six months and assist in that couple's preparation for marriage. And then they would meet with the priest as well. But Father wanted them to have a couple who had been married for some time to share their wisdom and encourage them.

Yeah, the part I laughed at. He wanted us to share our wisdom and encourage them. I mean, Jerry and I just laughed. We're like "Marriage mentors? Do you know us? You've got to be kidding. I mean, you know what we've done. We've been in counsel with you. What? Look at all of that. I mean, you can't be serious that you're asking us to, like, be an example for others." Well, Father insisted that that was the very reason why he wanted us to do that. He needed couples who had fallen, and by the grace of God and the mercy of forgiveness in the sacrament of

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confession, they had gotten back up and kept trying, staying faithful to their vows, and to God, and to the church. Real couples.

So, we continued laughing and kind of scoffing, and Father went on in this conversation, and he said not only did he want us to be a marriage mentor, but he wanted us to learn NFP, Natural Family Planning, so that we could teach it. Well, that's when we knew he was crazy. NFP? I had my tubes tied. We never practiced NFP. I mean, how are we supposed to stand up in front of all of these young couples and tell them what we could not do ourselves? How are we supposed to encourage them to follow what we ourselves could not follow? They'd laugh us right out of the joint. I mean, seriously, think about that. We had zero street cred. Like none.

So, instead of saying "No" to Father right away, my husband so wisely said to me "Mary, we should pray about this." And I was very confident in that fact that that prayer would reveal that we should do absolutely none of this. So, in my arrogance I said "Sure, no problem. Let's pray about it." So I said "Whatever you're comfortable doing", this is what I told my spouse, "Whatever you want to do honey, we're going to do, alright." Jerry was a convert to the faith, so he wasn't always comfortable stepping out in these situations. So I pretty much knew that I was good to go. There would be no NFP training for me. You know where this is going, right? Okay.

Well, lesson learned. My husband took it to prayer, I took it to prayer, and God, in His infinite wisdom and humor, placed upon my husband's heart that we should do this. Like we should do all of it. We should be marriage mentors, we should go and learn about NFP and *Theology of the Body*. So, he agreed to do it all. That included attending the *Theology of the Body* seminar with Christopher West in Pennsylvania.

That week was a life-changer for us, and I look back and I see how merciful and beautiful and faithful our Lord was to us as a couple. Going through Pope St. John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* changed our perspectives on our own bodies, on life-giving love, on creating a family for God. It was an intense week filled with mass, adoration, study, lots and lots of study, and confession. More than once in the same week.

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This one particular confession lasted more than an hour. I poured out my past, even repeating sins that had already been forgiven, because I still felt such a powerful pull to lay it all out before the Lord, holding nothing back. I cried, I turned my soul inside and out, and what God did with that was amazing. He forgave all of it. And I walked away with such a sense of peace in my heart.

I had never felt such peace and grace before after confession. Not once. And I was in my thirties at this point. I knew I was remade in that confessional, rewired for God. I felt physically lighter since I had let go of the U-Haul that I'd been carrying around. I let that baby go, and I let go of the regret, and I surrendered my pride and opened up my heart to God, and He poured His love, and mercy, and grace in, filling me to overflowing.

It says in Psalm 103 verse 8-13 “Merciful and gracious is the Lord. Slow to anger, abounding in mercy. He will not always accuse, and nurses no lasting anger. He has not dealt with us as our sins merit. He has not dealt with us as our sins merit. Not requited us as our wrongs deserved. For as the heavens tower over the earth, so His mercy towers over those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our sins from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him. For He knows how we are formed, remembers that we are dust. As for man, his days are like the grass; his blossoms like a flower in the field. A wind sweeps over it and it is gone, its place knows it no more. But the Lord’s mercy is from an age to age towards those who fear Him. His salvation is for the children of those who keep His covenant and remember to carry out His precepts.”

That’s a rather long scripture, but I’m going to repeat 2 sentences. “He has not dealt with us as our sins merit, nor requited us as our wrongs deserved.” “For as the heavens tower over the earth, so His mercy towers over those who fear Him.”

Slow to anger. I mean, come on, seriously ya’ll. Slow to anger. I’m not slow to anger, but God is. Abounding in mercy. “As a father has compassion to his children, so the Lord has compassion to us.” I praise Him. I praise Him for restoring my soul that day in confession. But he didn’t stop there. I praised Him for restoring my husband’s soul in his own confession.

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My husband received as much, if not more mercy, more healing, more grace, more forgiveness that day, and it allowed a restoration of our marriage and our marriage bed to take place. We renewed our vows on the back porch of that retreat house, and haven't looked back since. Not only did we go on to learn NFP, but we went on to teach hundreds of students over the course of the next few years, before our daughter's health declined and we couldn't teach anymore.

We've mentored dozens of couples in their preparation for marriage. We started every NFP class and every marriage mentoring session with our story. We were honest and told the couples that when you remove God from your marriage, from your bedroom, there is someone waiting in the wings ready and willing to come in and wreak havoc. We shared how God had called us to Him, and how He restored our commitment to each other and to Him. God took our past and He remade it in His image and likeness.

This ability to share our story changed hearts. God makes all things new. He took away the fear and the shame, and He used our story as individuals and as a couple to work towards His purpose, towards His glory. Allow Him to do the same for you. Allow Him to restore you this Lent. Allow God to work through all of those old hurts and regrets.

Come to Him with a humble and contrite heart in confession, and let Him love you my friends. Just let Him love you. Don't be afraid. Set aside that pride. Set aside what Satan is whispering into your ear and go into confession to receive that grace, and that mercy, and that love. Open the door. He is waiting for the invitation. He will never... God will never force Himself on you. He will wait patiently until you are ready to walk with Him.

So this is my prayer for you this Lent my friends, as I have shared this story of these 2 moments of forgiveness. Go to God. Take the time and go to confession. Bring your shame and sin before the Lord, and allow God to forgive you. And then sit back and watch how He redeems it. Watch how He rewrites the story of that sin. Because He will. He did it in my marriage, He did it in my life, He continues to do it, and I have no doubt that He will do it for you as well. In His time, and for His glory, I promise you.

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Confession, it's a beautiful sacrament. It's one of the things that many churches around the United States, they double, triple, quadruple their confession times during Lent for this very reason. We are an Easter people. Sin has no stake in our hearts anymore, because our Lord hung on the cross for us. As God's mercy is from east to west, look at our Lord's hands on the crucifix. From the east to west, He loved us that much. He offered His life for us and for our sin.

So don't let that go unanswered. Step it up. Get yourself to confession. If you're a homebound person who doesn't drive, can't get to church, see if a neighbor can take you, a friend can take you. Or if you're in a place in life where you literally cannot leave the house – you're ill, old, frail – call your parish. I know in our parish, our priest goes out all the time to hear confessions. Don't let circumstance stop you from taking advantage of this wonderful, wonderful healing sacrament.

That is my prayer for you this Lent. Allow Him to make all things new. No matter what it is you're holding on to, from whenever it happened, bring it before the Lord. Allow His blood to wash over you, His mercy and His grace to fill you. Allow Him to forgive you, and then let it go, and watch as He makes it over in His image and His love. That's my encouragement for you this Lent. Get thee to confession my friends. Amen. And amen. So, we're going to end with prayer the prayer that Jesus taught us.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name; Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen. Father, Son, the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Have a wonderful, happy, and holy Lent, and get to confession. Let God remake you.