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Experiencing God's Mercy, Part 1

Amanda Teixeira

Well, hello there. My name is Amanda Teixeira, and I am honored to be with you on your Lenten retreat. Today we're going to be talking about the mercy of God. But before we dive into all the good stuff, I wanted to briefly take a second just to introduce myself a little bit more in case we haven't had the pleasure of meeting in the past. Like I said, my name is Amanda Teixeira, and my husband, Jonathan, and I have 3 daughters: Josephine, Charlotte, and Eleanor. We also have a crazy Labrador Retriever named Wrigley, not pictured here, and we live in Omaha, Nebraska, which is a joy for me because I grew up in the area as well.

We served on staff with FOCUS, Fellowship of Catholic University Students, for almost 9 years before we resettled back in Nebraska, and now my husband and I run a business side-by-side called WalletWin, where we help people get out of debt, build wealth, and change the world through generosity. And I am super thrilled, like I said, to accompany you on your Lenten retreat, specifically as we dive into the topic of mercy today. And I have to admit that my husband laughed a little bit when I told him that I was going to be talking on the subject of mercy, because, if I'm going to be honest and transparent, I'm not always the best at showing him mercy. He's right, he is more of the Mr. Mercy in our relationship, and I tend to be a little bit more a lover of justice, and I really have to fight hard to understand God's mercy, to receive His mercy, and to extend that mercy to others.

So I just wanted to preface this entire set of talks that we're about to dive into, that I'm not somebody who has mastered this, I don't have it down pat, but I'm a fellow pilgrim on this journey to discovering God's merciful heart. And so I just wanted to put that out there in case anybody else watching this also finds themselves being drawn a little bit more to the justice side, and they want to grow in the mercy. You're not alone. And those of you who, maybe you are prone to a little bit more of the merciful heart and not so much the justice, that's great. There's definitely ways that you're going to expand that side of experiencing God's mercy and receiving it, so that you can radiate it out to others as well. So I'm excited to dive into this topic with you guys.

There's really no better time to dive into the topic of mercy than Lent, because we've got not only Lent that we're experiencing right now, but then we have Easter, and then we have Divine Mercy Sunday the week after Easter. So it's all set up in the liturgical calendar to just be immersed in mercy over the next several weeks, and so there's really no better time than right now, and it's a privilege to

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walk with you on your journey. Today's talks are going to be divided up into 3 different ones: We are going to discuss the mercy of God, experiencing that mercy, and last and certainly not least, becoming a channel of mercy to ourselves and to others. As we get ready to dive in, I'm just going to go ahead and open us up in a prayer, so please join me.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Heavenly Father, we come before You today just begging, asking for Your mercy to wash down upon us. Help us to receive that, help us to see Your heart laid out in scripture, in the lives of the saints, and in our own story, just of the mercy that You have poured out on us, and that You long to continue to pour out. Help us to receive You in every way that You wish to speak to us today, and give us the courage to respond to You with an open heart. We pray these things in Your name. Amen. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

As we transition into this first talk, I want to communicate that every person should know the story of God's mercy for His people, because it's the message He's been communicating since the beginning of time. Literally, from the beginning of time until now, God's plan has been unfolding. Now, you have to look at the main narrative that stays consistent from those early days until now, and I would argue, as many theologians have, that mercy is at the heart of that story. And today, we're going to highlight a few examples of God's mercy from the Old Testament, the New Testament, and in modern times, so that we could actually watch that story of mercy evolving.

Okay, so first up, let's talk about the Old Testament. Alright, you might have heard sometimes people talk about Old Testament versus New Testament God, and that Old Testament God isn't merciful. And you know what? That's just not true. They're the same God. And in Genesis 3:15, there's something called the Protoevangelium, or the first gospel. Genesis 3:15, God said ***I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; they will strike at your head while you strike at their heel.***

So this is right after - like, to give you some context around this right - right after Adam and Eve just sinned. The deal could have been off, right. I mean, they had a deal. They had a... God said don't eat of the tree, and they did. And God decided to step in and He made this promise and this prophecy really, and this line in Genesis 3:15 was God setting up a way to restore their relationship by prophesying the coming of Jesus. So right there, literally, not even skipping a beat, after they broke that covenant relationship with God, He already begins to display mercy to them.

Alright, another example in the Old Testament is from the destruction of Sodom in Genesis 18:20-33. Alright, bear with me, I'm going to read this quickly, but it's a

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goodie. Okay. *So the Lord said “The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin so great, that I must go down to see whether or not their actions are as bad as the cry against them that comes to Me. I mean to find out.” As the men turned and walked toward Sodom, Abraham remained standing before the Lord. Then Abraham drew near and said “Will You really sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there were 50 righteous people in the city. Would You really sweep away and not spare the place for the sake of the 50 righteous people within it? Far be it from me to do such a thing - to kill the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from You! Should not the judge of all the world do what is just?”*

The Lord replied “If I find 50 righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.” Abraham spoke up again. “See how I am presuming to speak to my Lord, though I’m only dust and ashes. What if there are 5 less than 50 righteous people? Would You destroy the whole city because of those 5?” “I will not destroy it,” He answered, “If I find 45 there.” But Abraham persisted, saying “What if only 40 are found there?” He replied “I will refrain from doing it for the sake of the 40.” Then he said “Do not let my Lord be angry if I go on. What if only 30 are found there?” He replied “I will refrain from doing it if I can find 30 there.” Abraham went on. “Since I have thus presumed to speak to my Lord, what if there are no more than 20?” “I will not destroy it,” He said, “For the sake of the 20.”

But he persisted. “Please do not let my Lord be angry for this one last time. What if 10 are found there?” “For the sake of the 10,” He replied, “I will not destroy it.” The Lord departed as soon as He finished speaking with Abraham, and Abraham returned home. Okay, again, that was long, but it was Genesis 18:20-33, and it’s really a beautiful story about Abraham and God kind of negotiating, literally, Abraham calling down God’s mercy on Sodom and Gomorrah. And you can see God’s own heart, right. This is a city committing great wickedness and not following His laws whatsoever, and He wants to extend mercy on behalf of His faithful. But at the end of the day we know how the story ends up - He cannot even find 10 righteous people there, and so judgment came down on the city of Sodom and Gomorra. But at the center of it really was God’s desire to extend mercy.

Okay, another example from the Old Testament is looking at Israel. God showed constant mercy to the Israelites. Oh my gosh, if you’ve ever watched even the movie *The Ten Commandments* with Charlton Heston, I mean, you almost get angry at how stubborn they can be. Really though, this is a story of our own selves, right. So He showed mercy to them when they broke free from Egypt, He showed mercy again after they decided in their freedom to create a golden calf and to worship that, that idol. He provided mercy again when they grumbled in the desert

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against God because they were, you know, they didn't have the same food and the quality of things that they had back in Egypt. And so He provided literally food and water out of thin air in the desert, He found a way. He showed mercy when He sent judges and, kings and, prophets to try and constantly guide them back to the Lord. It's just this on repeat cycle in the Old Testament, that He's constantly reaching out and trying to find ways to give mercy to His people and turn their hearts back to Him.

It is just continuously going on, and He extends that mercy, the Israelites receive it, they vow to never depart Him again, something always happens, and they end up forgetting His mercy and they wind up tangled in sin again, needing rescue. That's why this just is on wash, rinse, and repeat, right. But the theme here is that God is just ready to constantly display mercy. Or you can turn to the book of the Psalms. Psalms 136. Again, it's a little bit of a long one, but it's so good, and it really captures God's mercy.

So the Psalm says: Praise the Lord, for He is good. For His mercy endures forever. Praise the God of Gods. For His mercy endures forever. Praise the Lord of Lords. For His mercy endures forever. Who alone has done great wonders. For His mercy endures forever. Who skillfully made the heavens. For His mercy endures forever. Who spread the earth upon the waters. For His mercy endures forever. Who made the great lights. For His mercy endures forever. The sun to rule the day. His mercy endures forever. The moon and stars to rule the night. His mercy endures forever. Who struck down the firstborn of Egypt. For His mercy endures forever. And let Israel from their midst. For His mercy endures forever. With mighty hand and outstretched arm. For His mercy endures forever. Who split in two the Red Sea. For His mercy endures forever. And let Israel through its midst. For His mercy endures forever. That swept Pharaoh and his army into the Red Sea. For His mercy endures forever. Who led the people through the desert. For His mercy endures forever. Who struck down great kings. For His mercy endures forever. Slew powerful kings. For His mercy endures forever. Sihon king of Amorites. For His mercy endures forever. Og king of Bashan. For His mercy endures forever. And made their lands as a heritage. For His mercy endures forever. A heritage for Israel, His servant. For His mercy endures forever. The Lord remembered us our lowest state. For His mercy endures forever. Freed us from our foes. For His mercy endures forever. And gives bread to all flesh. For His mercy endures forever. Praise the God of heaven. For His mercy endures forever.

So we've just seen there, you know, the Psalms, the example of Israel and all of the stories surrounding God freeing His people. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Protoevangelium in Genesis 3:15. We see the entire Old Testament

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literally, the heartbeat of all of it is God's mercy. Alright, so let's next take our eyes and look at the New Testament and kind of see how this theme from the Old Testament just blends right in with the new. In Luke 15:3-7 it's the story of The Lost Sheep, and this is what it says: ***So to them He addressed this parable: "What man among you, having 100 sheep and losing one of them, would not leave the 99 in the desert and go after the lost one until he finds it? And when he does find it, he sets it on his shoulders with great joy, and upon his arrival home he calls together his friends and neighbors and says to them 'Rejoice with me, because I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous people who have no need of repentance.***

So really, I mean, gosh, if you look at this story, this parable from like a business perspective, I mean it doesn't make sense at all, right. It's very irresponsible. You'd never leave \$99, you know, to go after the \$1 blowing in the breeze. I mean, but spiritually speaking, this speaks volumes of God's heart and His mercy. He wants to extend mercy to the one who wanders, so He goes in search. He's eager to lavish mercy on repentant souls, opposed to the masses who have no need for His mercy.

Alright, another example is the Prodigal Son. Luke 15:10-22. Jesus tells this story: ***Then He said "A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of your estate that should come to me.' So the father divided the property between them. After a few days, the younger son collected his belongings and set off to a distant country, where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation. When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck the country and he found himself in dire need. So he hired himself out to a local citizen who sent him to his farm to attend the swine, and he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any."***

"Coming to his senses, he thought "How many of my father's hired workers have more than enough to eat? And here I am dying from hunger. I shall get up, go to my father and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. Treat me as you would a hired worker.' So he got up and went back to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.' But his father ordered the servants, 'Quickly, bring the finest robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and slaughter it, then let us celebrate with a feast. Because this son of mine was

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dead, and he has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' Then the celebration began."

So really, if you break this story down, it's a son who wants his inheritance early. So he's communicating he wishes his father was dead. He gets the inheritance early, but then he doesn't do well with it. He doesn't do the things that he knows would make his father proud. He squandered it, literally, all of it gone. And then he remembered how good his father treated even his servants, and he returned home to work as a servant. And the father ran to him, put a ring on his finger, gave him a robe, killed the fattened calf to celebrate. And we learn later, and I didn't share this part of the story, but the older son actually got angry. But he failed to realize his father's heart, and his father's heart was always mercy, and love, and wanting to extend those even if his son slipped up. And just the fact that his son came home, he was ready to just lavish that mercy out. And obviously Jesus was telling this story because this is really the story of His people coming home to Him, and this is what God wanted to extend to the people that had wandered from Him.

In the New Testament we also have Ephesians 2:4-7 that says: ***But God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love He has for us, even when we were dead in our transgressions brought to life with Christ - by grace you have been saved. Raised up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavens in Christ, that in the ages to come He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace and kindness to us in Christ Jesus.*** So, again, we hear in the New Testament that God, He's described as being rich in mercy. And so we've seen it in the Old Testament, we've seen that richness of mercy unfold in the New Testament. But sometimes it's easier to look at how is that happening today, even in modern times, because the biblical times can feel so far away, and almost like bible land, and not even related to today.

So I think it's important to look at our modern times, and how is the God who displayed Himself so mercifully in the Old Testament and the New Testament still actively working today? Now, I'm going to just briefly give a rundown about how God's mercy is still playing out in our world today. If you want to do a little bit of a deeper dive, Father Michael Gaitley has books and resources and talks that are going to expand on what I'm going to just hit on very briefly. And I cannot recommend his resources enough, and how he really captures what God is doing in our modern times.

Okay. With all that said, let's dive into talking about St. Faustina. On the eve of World War 2, Jesus appeared to a young Polish nun named Faustina, and He revealed His message of Divine Mercy for the world, and that it can overcome all evil. I mean, guys, think about the timing here: The eve of World War 2. Like, this

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is huge. He gave her an image and special ways to devote oneself to His Divine Mercy. These devotions began growing in popularity among the faithful, but due to some translation issues and things like that, the Vatican wasn't sure if it was truly valid. That was until a Polish Bishop translated the messages in her diary correctly and resubmitted them. The Vatican then approved the devotion to Divine Mercy as something good and beneficial for the faithful to embrace. That Bishop was John Paul the Second, and 6 months after helping lift Rome's ban on Divine Mercy materials, he was elected pope. He was even quoted as saying "I consider this message of Divine Mercy to be my special task."

He actually then beatified and canonized St. Faustina, and he said "By this act of canonization, I intend to pass this message of Divine Mercy onto the third millennium. And now, for the Universal Church, that second Sunday of Easter will be known as 'Divine Mercy Sunday.'" So the week right after Easter Sunday is when we as a church celebrate Divine Mercy Sunday. John Paul the Second, at the banquet, he declared that day was the happiest day of his life, because he understood that the only hope for the modern world was Divine Mercy. And on April 2nd, 2005, his last words he said: "As a gift to humanity, which sometimes seems bewildered by the power of evil, selfishness, and fear, the good Lord opens hearts to love that converts hearts and gives peace. How much the world needs to understand Divine Mercy. Jesus, I trust in You."

On the last day of John Paul the Second's life, Cardinal Dziwisz kept getting prompted to celebrate mass. And at 9 PM that night they were able to celebrate mass one last time, and 20 minutes later John Paul the Second entered into eternal life. Now, this connection between the Divine Mercy Image, St. Faustina, St. John Paul the Second, and our modern church today is incredible. And there are so many details that I don't have time to go into, that's why I highly recommend going through Father Michael Gaitley's resources, because we are really in a special time in the church right now. This Divine Mercy is literally something our Lord is longing to pour out on the faithful in the church who ask for it.

Okay, we talked about the Old testament, we talked about the New Testament, we talked about the church and what's going on in our modern times. But I think sometimes even getting even a little bit more personal and kind of bringing it home, bringing it into our personal story is important, so that we can see how God's mercy and His desire to be merciful upon us really can play out in our individual lives. It's not just something He's calling the church to experience, but us as individuals. So I'm going to share with you just a little bit about my own story.

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I grew up Catholic, and I went to Catholic grade school, I went to Catholic high school. But when I went away to college, the first Christians that I really encountered were in non-denominational ministries. And they started asking me the hard questions and, you know, I had all of this Catholic stuff kind of dumped onto me, but I didn't know how anything really fit together. And so when they'd ask questions, I didn't know how to defend myself. And so it seemed easier just to go be Protestant than to actually stay Catholic, because I just didn't have the answers.

My sophomore year of college though I met a FOCUS missionary, and she said that somebody had gotten sick, and if I wanted the spot to go to the FOCUS conference they were literally leaving the next morning, and it was free. They were going to Denver, and it was a weekend conference. And I knew that a couple of my sorority sisters were going on that conference, and I kind of wanted to hang out with them and help them grow in their relationship with Jesus, even though I was really skeptical about the whole Catholic thing. But hey, I grew up Catholic, so it probably can't hurt anything, so I went off to the conference.

While I was at the conference, I decided to go to different talks based on things that I didn't understand. So I went to talks about Mary and the rosary, about the Mass and the Eucharist, about the sacraments, because these were the things that I didn't have the answers to, right. My friends were asking me and I didn't know how to explain them. And in these talks, it was incredible. It felt like I was not only getting a historical answer, but a biblical answer, and that it also made sense in the history of the church. And it just... they were powerful, and I felt like for the first time ever the Holy Spirit was kind of helping me make sense of not only my relationship with Jesus, but how that fit in the context of the wider church, and then the tradition and the history of our church.

And I remember I had never been to Eucharistic Adoration, but that night they were going to have it at the conference. And I went kind of thinking "Well, okay. If it's really Jesus, because I went to a talk earlier today and he said it was really Him - body, blood, soul, and divinity - in the Eucharist, and they're going to turn around this monstrance. And if it's really Jesus, I need You to tell me, Lord because, gosh, nobody else is teaching this stuff. I have to be Catholic if that's true. And, oh my goodness, if it's not You, Jesus, and this is truly idol worship, I have to do something, I've got to say something, I've got to stand up on a chair and yell out heresy and run out of the conference with as many people as I can scrounge up." So I was prepared for something to happen that night, I just didn't know what.

And as the priest began to walk in, he had the gold thing - I didn't know it was called a monstrance at the time - and I remember him turning it around. And I

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just... I sincerely had an open heart. I just wanted to know the truth, right. And I remember feeling just, like, smacked in the face, in the gut with the presence that was before me, and I was on my knees and I remember just kind of crumbling into a ball and just kind of feeling consumed by love. I have no other way to describe it, but there was no way that that was not Jesus in that moment.

And I remember hearing internally a voice that said "It's Me." And I remember tapping the FOCUS missionary nearby on the leg and saying "Let's go talk in the hall." And I, you know, let her know "Oh my gosh, that's really Jesus in the Eucharist, and so I have to be Catholic. I don't know what to do. And there's still a million questions that I have and things that I don't understand, but if He can become bread, I guess it will all make sense in the end, because everything else could be... everything else is possible, right?"

And so, over the next 12-18 months, she kind of took me under her wing and really taught me about what it meant to be Catholic, and how all the church teachings kind of came together and supported one another, and made sense in the context of church history and in the scriptures. And she really did teach me how to not only fall in love with Jesus, but also His bride, the church. And through that process, it was just overwhelmingly clear to me that God's mercy was so abundant on me. I mean, I had... I was walking away from the fullness of the Christian life, but He wouldn't let me, and He had mercy on me and drew me back to Himself.

And I have countless stories since then of ways I've tried to walk away from, you know, knowingly or unknowingly, you know, His best for me, and then Him having mercy and drawing me back to Him. And I think all of us have those stories. And it's important for us to pay attention to those, to write them down, and to be able to remember the ways that God's had mercy on us in our life, and the ways that He's called us back to Him, and the ways that He's orchestrated different events, you know, out of our control just to tell us that He loves us, just to call us back to the fold.

It's so important that we notice those, we pay attention to them, and that we internalize those, so that we can experience fully this mercy of God that's been so present from when Adam and Eve, you know, sinned against God in the Garden of Eden and He spoke the first gospel, all the way through the Old Testament, all the way through the New Testament, all the way through the modern times of the church, and even into our very own life. Because we are not separate from the story of mercy that's unfolding from the beginning of time. God's been weaving a story of His mercy, and it's truly beautiful. It's a message that our world needs and must hear. It's something we have to experience and show others, which is what we're going to get to in the next couple of talks.

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Now it's time to get a little bit practical and turn the mic over to you. What steps are you going to take to immerse yourself deeper into studying His mercy this Lent? Also, how has God had mercy on you in your life? I want you to ask yourself those questions. Take a couple of minutes, jot down the answers. Maybe you're coming up blank on what, you know, practical steps to take to actively study His mercy. You could get into a John Paul the Second encyclical, the Father Michael Gaitley resources, which is *The Second Greatest Story Ever Told* talk and DVD series, you could do Lectio Divina, or divine, you know, scripture reading with passages that involve mercy - we went over a ton today - you could read St. Faustina's diary, or other books that are devoted to the topic of Divine Mercy, or some other way. Just go ahead and take a few minutes to really think on that. How are you going to study His mercy, and how has God had mercy on you in your life?

Let's end in a prayer. *In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Heavenly Father, we continue to pray for open hearts and open minds, that we would be able to see the story of Your mercy, and just how merciful You truly are and long to be in our lives. Help us to notice the ways in which You are wanting to pour Your mercy out on us, and help us respond to that and to receive it. We pray these things in Your name, Jesus. Amen. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*