

Ash Wednesday

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 - The prophet Joel reminds us that it is not too late to appeal to God. As important as it was for Israel to return to God, as urgent as it was for Joel to admonish them to do so, it continues to be an important reminder for each of us.

Repentance is more than saying, "I'm sorry." It is a pure and true condition of the heart that moves beyond words to action. When our heart is truly remorseful because of our sins, we sense a true desire to return to the Lord, change our ways, and follow Him.

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10 - Paul reminds us that God's grace has been given to us for a transforming purpose (vs. 1). He stresses "Now is the time" to receive God's grace that surrounds us, as demonstrated by Christ's suffering and death. He challenges us to stop looking at things from a worldly perspective, but rather to view our lives from God's perspective (vs. 8-10).

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 - Relationship with God is a personal, not a public kind of thing. Thus our acts of righteousness (6:1), our gifts of loving concern (vv. 2-4), and our prayers of devotion (vv. 5-8) are to be done "in secret" to please Him rather than to win a reputation for piety with our fellowmen.

The "in secret" relationship we have with God will transform our attitude toward others (vv. 14-15). We will put aside all hypocrisy, and our expressions of commitment will be directed to God rather than to others (vv. 16-18). An "in secret" relationship with God will free us to value heavenly rather than earthly treasures, thus transforming our values (vv. 17-24).

Light Through the Cracks

Lent is perhaps seen as a time of austere introspection – a time to dig down deep into issues tangled and dark. Many view Lent as the "dark night of the soul" for Christians. Afraid of what they might discover, they choose to ignore or skip over this season in the Church.

But the presence of doubt does not imply a lack of faith. Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg once said, "How can a rabbi not live with doubt? The Bible itself is a book of doubt." The words of Saint Paul echo this sentiment as he lists his trials... beatings, imprisonments, sleepless nights, and hunger to name a few. To experience hard times and hard questions is to know the dark shadows of doubt. And yet faith shines through these cracks of doubt in our lives just as it did in Saint Paul's... *"We are treated as impostors, and yet are true... sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything."*

Don't let questions or doubt keep you from receiving the gifts of this Lenten Season. Enter in. Where the cracks appear is where you'll see faith shining most brightly.

Prayer:

God of holiness, as I acknowledge my sin and doubt, help me also recognize Your mercy and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A

First Sunday in Lent

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 - The disobedience of Adam and Eve shatter the innocence and harmony of original Creation. The significance of that defiance has impacted the entire human race. The craftiness of the enemy tempted Adam and Eve. Sin is always enticing, but its consequence is devastating.

The story of the Fall is Scripture's explanation for the sin and evils that mar society, corrupt personal and international relationships, and doom us to biological and spiritual death.

Romans 5:12-19 - In this passage, Paul addresses "death," not so much as biological, but as a spiritual condition rendering humankind powerless. He reveals that "sin" is an inner moral corruption alienating humans from God and making final judgment a dreaded certainty.

Adam's sin, which introduced biological and spiritual death, poses a dark and grim situation for our present life, and the life to come. In contrast, Paul reminds us that through the death of Jesus Christ, God's own Son, Jesus intersects our dilemma and offers us life rather than death.

Matthew 4:1-11 - Jesus is also aware of the powers of temptation. In His temptation in the wilderness, even in His weakened condition, Jesus gives us a model of how we, too, can overcome temptation: By acting on principles found in God's Word. By understanding – and acting – on the Word of God, we overcome temptation.

What's the Word?

In the Gospel reading, Jesus experiences His own Lent. He's isolated. He's hungry. And He's without provision. In these moments, it's easy to look for the quick fix – tempting to find an easy out and avoid the pain. But Jesus doesn't do this. Instead, He gives us an example to follow... "It is written..."

Jesus relies on the Word of God as His foundation for decisions of action and attitude. Notice He makes no attempt to dismiss or refute feelings of hunger, hardship, or loneliness. He hurts – and He knows it. But He doesn't allow His hurt to direct His decisions. In allowing God's Word to serve as His compass, Jesus enters a place of divine protection and provision.

What's guiding you this Lenten Season? Whatever you're facing – whatever you're feeling – God's Word leads to a place of refuge and refreshing.

Prayer:

God of mercy, although I am tempted and weak, help me find You mighty to save; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

**Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

Second Sunday in Lent

Genesis 12:1-4a - Both Jews and Christians believe that by His call to this one individual God set in motion a series of acts of grace and judgment which would fashion a special people for Him, who would lead a lost mankind back to their true home. As Christians, we belong to that special people. And with our Jewish brethren, we also look back to Abraham as father of the faithful.

If he had not answered that call, Israel would not have reached her Promised Land, the Church we love would not exist, there would be no Scriptures for us to study, and our lives would be emptied of everything that makes them worthwhile.

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17 - Paul stresses that Abraham was justified by faith, not works (vv. 1-8), and he was justified by grace, not Law (vv. 9-17). If salvation depended upon our abilities, we would all be hopelessly lost.

Thankfully, God keeps His promise to those who believe (trust in God), and mercifully and generously offers us His grace.

John 3:1-17 - The fact that Jesus did perform miracles was beyond dispute. This brought a Pharisee named Nicodemus to question Jesus (3:1-2). Jesus stunned Nicodemus by saying that before any spiritual questions can be dealt with a man must be “born again” (v. 3). Even though the concept of a spiritual rebirth has roots in the Old Testament, Nicodemus was totally confused (vv. 4-9). Jesus challenges Nicodemus to accept Christ’s testimony (vv. 10-15) and goes on to explain the awesome cost to God of making eternal life available to humankind (vv. 16-17).

Comfort Zones

Today’s readings are all about comfort zones – specifically, getting out of them! At times God uproots us, just as He did Abram. *Get out! Leave your family and friends! Take a journey to a new place you have yet to discover.* Sometimes we can identify with Nicodemus, when everything we think we know is turned upside down by the Word of God. And always, we find ourselves in the vulnerable position of relying on faith and the grace of God. We want to “pay our way” and “earn our keep.” But salvation cannot be bought or earned. Instead, we must trust that, in spite of our weakness and flaws, an all-powerful God loved us enough to redeem us.

In each situation, we are stretched. We become uncomfortable. God asks us to move beyond what we know and function outside of our comfort zone. This is the opportunity of Lent – and it’s the result of our faith being deepened and refined.

Prayer:

God of grace, as You call me to follow You in new ways, give me a steadfast faith to hold tightly to Your Word; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

**Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

Third Sunday in Lent

Exodus 17:1-7 - In their thirst for water, the Israelites “tested the Lord.” It is appropriate for God to test us, as He did Abraham (Gen. 22:1). Such tests strengthen us, as they confirm our loyalty to the Lord, or correct us, by showing some flaw in our commitment. However, it is never appropriate for us to test God.

Our relationship with Him is rooted in faith’s firm conviction that God is God, and we’re not. God is the one truly trustworthy Being in the universe. It is not only a lack of faith to test God... it is arrogance.

Romans 5:1-11 - Because we are justified by faith (not works), our perspective changes. We come to recognize that even suffering produces endurance, and the more we endure the more our character changes... producing a harvest of hope!

Because of God’s love, “poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit,” the hope we have is God-given, and that it will never disappoint us. We can trust God, who – “while we were enemies” – [He] reconciled us through the death of His Son, Jesus Christ.

John 4:5-42 - Traveling through Samaria, Jesus engages a woman at a well in conversation (4:1-8). When Jesus speaks of the “water” He can provide that will quench her deepest thirst, and shows that He knows her sins, she turns the conversation to theological controversy (vv. 9-26). Convinced that Jesus is the Messiah, the woman hurries to call her fellow villagers out to see Him (vv. 27-30). The salvation of the woman at the well is deeply satisfying to Jesus (vv. 31-38). And when the Samaritans come to see Jesus for themselves, He stays two more days and many more believe (vv. 39-42).

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Countless generations before us have faced that moment of being between a rock and a hard place. For Moses and the Israelites, it was a literal rock at Horeb and the hard place of wandering the hot, dry desert. For the woman at the well, it was the proverbial Rock of Jesus confronting her with truth and choice and the hard place of her past and present-day circumstances. We can learn much from comparing the two responses.

The Israelites had seen God perform miracles on their behalf. They had witnessed the power of the plagues to free them from Pharaoh’s rule. They had crossed the Red Sea on dry ground when God parted the waters. Yet “seeing was not believing,” and the hope of the Promised Land for their generation was crushed between the rock and the hard place.

The Samaritan woman knew the hard realities of being a second-class citizen in the Jewish culture. She understood what it meant to thirst for approval from God – and man. Jesus presents Himself, offering the woman an unexpected choice between the rock of her cultural identity and the hard place of her past choices. With faith, she chooses to believe. Her life was transformed, as were the lives of those who met Jesus through her.

Do you find yourself between a rock and a hard place? It is in this moment when faith changes us, producing endurance... character... hope!

Prayer:

Almighty God, in Your power, protect me outwardly in my body and inwardly in my soul from evil and unbelief; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

**Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

Annunciation of the Lord (pg1)

Isaiah 7:10-14 - When offered a sign to prove God's faithfulness, Ahaz, out of fear of the Lord, says he will not ask. God, seemingly exasperated responds with something incredibly out of context. "Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel." When faced with armies, invasion and possible destruction a virgin getting pregnant isn't at the top of the list for help.

Part of the key for those in Isaiah's day was the name of the child; Immanuel. This name means something far more than David, Moses, Abraham or any other name. Immanuel means God with us. It is a promise to his people that he will be with them. This promise means deliverance from her enemies and establishment of the Jewish people. God with them is a sign and an action. God has heard his people. He is coming to save.

Hebrews 10:4-10 - In the ancient world, sin = death and blood = life. Consequently, in order to respond to death or sin in the community, blood needed to be shed. This was usually done with an eye for equality i.e.; big sin, lots of blood, little sin, little blood. There was a never-ending cycle of sin and sacrifice.

Faithful people were made clean through these offerings until they sinned again. One could only dream of a sacrifice that would be once and for all. No more offerings, no more blood, no more shame, no more guilt. If such a sacrifice could be made it would change the entire order. The very foundation of their relationship with God would be transformed. The people would be holy, set apart and called to live in a new way for a new world.

Luke 1:26-38 - Luke's Gospel betrays its goal from the very beginning. *"Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, 2 just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. 3 With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught."* (Luke Chapter 1)

His goal is to help his readers understand what has happened. Because this account has occurred with careful investigation, Luke wants us to know the connecting points with history and the main characters. We have the angel Gabriel, Galilee, Nazareth, a virgin named Mary, a husband named Joseph from the house of David. We are told that Mary is "highly favored" because she is to bear a son "who will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

As if that weren't enough detail and backstory, Luke shares how Elizabeth in her old age is having a baby as well! The stage is set; the players are in place. The reader, especially Theophilus, can't help but know he is about to learn the history, prophecy and certainty of his faith. If we have ears to hear, so are we.

A Living Gospel

Have you ever found yourself saying, "If I were God, I wouldn't do it this way." Many have said something similar to this. This normally happens in a conversation about God's existence. Why is there suffering if there is a loving God? This is a legitimate question.

God's response to suffering and a whole host of other ills in the world is a baby. Not exactly what one would expect. However, that is just like him. He chose a back-water people, not a great nation, to represent him. He picked a boy king, not a strong military man to lead his people. He picked Moses, who had trouble speaking, to lead his people out of exile. It should be no surprise when God chooses a baby to counter the evil the world is enslaved to.

This baby will change human history. This baby will transform how humanity is to relate to the God of heaven and earth. This baby will recall mankind to what it means to be truly human.

(continued on Annunciation of the Lord page 2)

Annunciation of the Lord (pg2)

We, like Theophilus, are offered to find ourselves in this story. We are invited to not only watch what has happened but to play a role in what God is doing in and through Jesus. Calling people like you and me to play a role is just like him. Unexpected to be sure. Would it be the way we would do it? Probably not. None the less, we are invited into the beauty and mystery of this story.

We are invited to play a part in the Big Story and in the stories of those around us.

Prayer:

God of impossibilities, you chose to enter human flesh through the one who called herself lowly. Teach us who daily receive announcements of Christ's coming to live as Mary did, trusting in your power to bring your desire to fulfillment. Amen.

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Fourth Sunday in Lent

1 Samuel 16:1-13 - Kingship was not meant as a gift to the individual, to feed his arrogance and vanity, but as a gift to the nation, to whom the king's duty was to act as shepherd. In contrast to King Saul's outward stature, God selects a humble shepherd boy to shepherd Israel. God is more concerned with "heart" (inner man) than the appearance (outward persona) of a person.

Ephesians 5:8-14 - It is our transformation from darkness to light that reveals God to others. So, we must be careful to live in the light. There is to be a dramatic, visible difference between the lifestyle of Christians and the people of this world. When we compromise with the world's ways and values, a clear moral distinction is lost, diminishing our reflection of Christ's light to other.

John 9:1-41 - At the time Christ walked this earth suffering was attributed to sin. The common logic of the day held that the person who suffered had sinned, or his or her parents had sinned. Jesus denies this explanation and shifts attention from cause to purpose. By doing so, he presents an opportunity for God to act.

The restoration of sight to the blind man, though undeniable, failed to open the eyes of the religious authorities. Their own spiritual blindness demonstrated their own sin.

Here Comes the Sun

The Beatles had it wrong. The coming of the sun (and Son) does not make it all right – at least not for everyone. When things are dark, everyone has an excuse for bumbling about in life and making a mess. After all, we can't be responsible for what we can't see, right?

Notice the response to the Light of God revealed in today's readings. Samuel was grieving for Saul, his friend whom God had rejected as King of Israel. When God appeared, He brought the light of revelation to Samuel, identifying a new King. Samuel could have remained blinded by his grief. Instead, he chose to follow and obey God, making visible a new King to lead God's people.

Today's Gospel reading demonstrates how God's light evokes vastly different responses from people experiencing the same circumstances. For the blind man, God's Light brings healing, dignity, and worship. For his parents, God's light brings fear. Their status quo has been disrupted. Their place within the temple is in danger and their resulting social standing within the community is at risk. For the Pharisees, the Light causes anger. Their rules – and the resulting ability to control the people – have been usurped. Darkness is fading and people are now responsible for what they see.

Back to The Beatles – and you. *Here comes the Son, here comes the Son.* What do you see... and say? Is it all right?

Prayer:

Merciful God, as You reveal Yourself to me, help me both follow and reflect You to a watching world in need of Your light; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

**Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Ezekiel 37:1-14 - In a strange vision of a valley of dried bones, Ezekiel identifies that these bones represent Israel. Having been dry and “dead” for a great period of time, Israel appeared to be without hope of seeing God’s covenant promises fulfilled.

In remarkable imagery, Ezekiel sees these “dead bones” come to life. This speaks of a physical restoration, which symbolizes national restoration, and a return to life, which symbolizes spiritual restoration.

Romans 8:6-11 - Old Testament Law failed to produce righteousness. Paul reminds us that in Christ God condemned “sin in sinful man” and provided His Spirit, who enables believers to fully meet the Law’s requirements without “trying” (vv. 3-4).

As we focus on responding to God’s Spirit, rather than on trying to keep laws (vv. 5-8), we submit ourselves to be led by the Spirit who brought life to Christ’s dead body. In this process we discover He brings life to us who are spiritually dead (vv. 9-12). Our obligation is not to the Law, but to respond to the Spirit’s promptings (vv. 13-16).

John 11:1-45 - Jesus was close to a little family living in Bethany, near Jerusalem. When Lazarus became sick, his sisters sent an urgent message to Jesus (11:1-3). Inexplicably, Jesus did not respond for several days (vv. 4-16). When He finally arrived, Lazarus was dead.

Jesus spoke to the sisters of Himself as “the Resurrection and the Life,” a reality they acknowledged. But even these firm believers limited Jesus’ power to “the last day” (vv. 17-27). Jesus, deeply moved at the pain of the two sisters, called for Lazarus’ tomb to be opened (vv. 28-40). When this was done He called to Lazarus—and the dead man, restored to life, came out of his grave (vv. 41-44).

Signs of Life

Editorialist and journalist Ambrose Bierce once said this: “Who never doubted, never half believed. Where doubt is, there truth is – it is her shadow.” He might well have been referring to today’s readings.

Can these bones live? We can hear the half-doubt, half-belief in Ezekiel’s response to God’s question. “O Lord God, you know,” he replies. God builds upon the belief, revealing signs of life to Ezekiel. Before long, Ezekiel has the faith to speak life over the graves of Israel.

Mary and Martha have the same mixture of faith and doubt. *If only You had been here, Lazarus would have lived.* They have faith in Jesus’ ability to heal; doubt in His ability to bring renewed life to what has died.

What about the graves in your life – the hopes cut down in their prime? *Can these bones live?* There’s a Savior approaching, speaking new life to what appears dead. Look beyond the shadows of doubt and see Jesus – see life.

Prayer:

Loving God, as my life and world continually change, help me to steadfastly see You, the source of true life and joy; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

**Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

Sixth Sunday in Lent - Palm Sunday

Isaiah 50:4-9a - In this third servant song Isaiah declares his confidence in God. He had not drawn back from the Lord's commission, despite severe opposition and humiliation. He persevered, confident that Yahweh would one day vindicate him before his enemies.

Jesus, our Redeemer, was wise above all men, able to speak the word of comfort to every heart. He was to have the ear of the learned to receive instruction in all things from His Father. In spite of this, He was to be smitten and insulted by men, yet unshaken in constancy and resolution, he suffered all patiently and voluntarily for the salvation of the world. Let all who fear God, build their hopes upon Christ who has proven Himself the Savior of mankind.

Philippians 2:5-11 - Saint Paul desires the church at Philippi to be a strong, united fellowship. He recognizes that humility is essential for this to happen. He elicits the supreme example of Christ's humble attitude, admonishing them (and us) to have the same mind-set of Jesus.

Jesus' self-emptying serves as the basis for the apostle's exhortation, and is the true model to help us reflect an attitude of humility.

Matthew 27:11-54 - Jesus was brought before the religious court of the Jews, then the civil court of Rome. The civil trial was necessary because the Jewish leaders did not have authority to execute the death penalty (John 18:31). The governor's question to Jesus focused on political issues, whereas Caiaphas is more concerned with Temple and messianic claims.

All the mocking (from trial through crucifixion) was thematically similar. The mockers expected that if Jesus was the Messiah, he would be able to get off the cross. They were questioning his ability to fulfill the Messianic role that he claimed to be fulfilling. But the problem was not with Jesus' ability. It was with the people's conception of what the Messiah's role was. What looked to the unenlightened like a humiliating disaster was really the powerful work of God fulfilling his promise of redemption.

Walk On

Imagine the confusion of the disciples. They had watched with hope as Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem, crowds cheering. *This was the time! God's victory was at hand!* Now, their Savior – their hope – hung in agony dying on a cross. What happened to that path of victory?

We often ask ourselves the same question. We believe we're walking a path of victory, only to discover it leads to a cross... to sacrifice and death. And it hurts.

Keep walking – just as Jesus did. Look for His footsteps, knowing He has already been there – has already transformed suffering and death into a pathway to new life!

Prayer:

God of infinite love, give me grace to walk in the way of your suffering so I may also share in the joy of your resurrection; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

**Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*