

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 B

First Sunday in Lent

Genesis 9:8-17 - God establishes a covenant to give Noah and his sons, assuring them of the prosperous continuance of the human race. To remind them and their descendants of this covenant, God gives them a visible sign in the form of a rainbow.

Signs remind participants in a covenant to keep the required stipulations. Today, whenever we see a rainbow, it is a reminder of the covenant God made to Noah (and us) that He would never again destroy this world by a flood.

1 Peter 3:18-22 - Peter reminds us that when we find ourselves being mistreated for doing good, we are to remember that this happened to Jesus, too. By pointing to the suffering Jesus, Peter reminds us that His sorrow brings us to God and makes possible the cleansing and salvation that baptism symbolizes. Christ's mistreatment did not keep Him in the grave or prevent Him from being raised to the pre-eminent position of power and glory. The suffering of Jesus was not pointless... nor is ours!

Mark 1:9-15 - Mark shows how Jesus was approved. He received the approval of John, known far and wide as God's prophet. To this was added the approval of John's baptism. Then came the certification of God himself, at the time of the baptism. The voice of the Father and the presence of the Spirit as a dove both acknowledged the deity of the Servant.

Jesus was not baptized because He was a repentant sinner, since He is the sinless Son of God. His baptism in water was a picture of His baptism of suffering on the cross (Luke 12:50) when the "waves and billows" of God's judgment went over Him (Ps. 42:7; Jonah 2:3). Christ "fulfilled all righteousness" through His death, burial, and resurrection (Matt. 3:15).

Mighty to Save

We most often view temptation as an action – something to do, somewhere to go, something to experience. The real temptation, however, is to look away. We don't want to look at ourselves. We don't want to examine what's inside. Instead, we close our eyes – put our proverbial fingers in our ears. We distract ourselves with the noise and activity of life so we are not left in silence with ourselves.

But Lent challenges us to gaze inward. If we dare to look long enough, we see God moving toward – not away – from our chaos. Like Noah, we experience His ark of protection and provision, even when the waves threaten to overwhelm us. Like Peter, we encounter Him in the midst of our suffering. Finally, we see Jesus, submerging Himself into the abyss of our own lives – only to raise us up by His own power.

Don't look away. See yourself fully as you are – and see Jesus your Savior, mighty to save.

Prayer:

God of salvation, as I look at my weakness and myself, help me see You, mighty to save, through Your Son's death, burial, and resurrection; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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Second Sunday in Lent

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 - Once more the Lord affirmed His covenant intentions. Abraham would be the father of nations (17:1-8), but the nations would be born of Sarah, not Hagar (17:16). Abram means: “father,” while Abraham means “father of a multitude.” What faith it must have taken for the aged Abram, parent of a single child, to announce that change of name! Faith is like this. It enables us to act as if the “not yet” were “now,” in full assurance that it soon will be!

Romans 4:13-25 - If salvation depended in any way on us, we would certainly be lost. However, since our salvation depends on God keeping His promise to those who believe, we have can be assured of His promise.

In history God’s promise, whatever that promise might be, was the object of a believer’s faith. Despite their advanced age, Abraham believed God’s promise that he and Sarah would have a child. Today, however, the basis of salvation and the object of faith are one: Jesus Christ. All God’s promises are focused in and through Him. It is faith in Jesus, and faith in Him alone, that saves today.

Mark 8:31-38 - Peter was not happy with Jesus’ discussion concerning Christ’s pending death. Jesus’ rebuke is a summons to faith. You cannot affirm Jesus as Christ and then challenge His choices! He is either God, and we submit to Him, or He is not, and we may go our own way. When a person makes a decision to “deny,” it means that they “reject.” However, when a person has a strong personal faith in Jesus, to “deny” denotes unfaithfulness... an act of abandoning the relationship.

To deny “yourself” means to decisively reject the motives and desires prompted by our sin nature. We choose instead to follow Jesus completely. When we take daily steps of obedience we gradually become the new person that Christ died for us to become.

But God

Today’s readings are meaningful for any of us who have made our plans and ordered our lives. I’ll get married and have children. I’ll raise a family. Be involved in my church. Serve my community. Live my life in such a way that goodness, truth, and beauty shine a light. And then we fail. Or life blindsides us with difficulty. Disappointment. Detours. We find ourselves sitting in the midst of failure and destruction, wondering how we could have failed so miserably.

But God... What comfort and strength in those words! When it looks like our dreams are dashed and our hope is helpless, we see Him. He shows up. Picks us up. Heals. Redeems. Rekindles hope. Reveals a future only possible through the miracle of faith. He gives a child to an old, barren woman. He creates a nation out of an old man. He builds a Church out of a disciple who rebukes Jesus as He’s speaking.

Finances may dwindle. Health may deteriorate. Dreams may die. Life may derail. Faith may grow faint. But God... Take comfort in the God who turns the end of our story into a beginning point for His.

Prayer:

God of mercy, give me a steadfast faith and heart, empowering me to hold fast to Your unchanging Word; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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Third Sunday in Lent

Exodus 20:1-17 - The critical list of basic spiritual and moral commandments is introduced: “And God spoke all these words.” These principles for living in harmonious relationship with God and with one’s fellowman are no mere human invention. While they provide moral guidance for all, they are specifically intended for the covenant community: for men and women who share a common relationship with God.

1 Corinthians 1:18-25 - Paul argues that human wisdom (the ability to see and understand reality) is shown to be foolishness by the Cross. Human philosophy’s appeal to rationalism must be guarded. Faith demands that we look beyond the “known” and accept God’s promise, even when it defies logic. It is through the eyes of faith that our differences are resolved and our essential unity in Christ is maintained.

John 2:13-22 - In the clearing of the temple, Jesus brought forth God’s standards of what is right and what is wrong. Present for the Passover, a time of remembrance for Israel’s deliverance from Egypt, Jesus encountered individuals who were profiteering from the religious festival. Jews who had traveled great distances needed to purchase animals for sacrifice, as well as exchange their money into local currency. They encountered entrepreneurial individuals who offered both services.

The issue at hand was not business or profit making as such, but the mockery of the entire sacrificial system of the temple and the exploitation of devout men and women by greedy individuals who were capitalizing on religious sentiment. This spectacle aroused the indignation of the Jews. Their concern was not the moral issue of whether the sellers and money exchangers should have been there in the first place, but on what grounds Jesus took it upon Himself to expel them.

Voices

Our world is filled with voices of how to make life better. Richer. Happier. Too often, those voices fill our heads with their noise and their messages vie for a home in our hearts, defining how we view our worth, our value systems, and ourselves. Today’s readings point out the contrast between the voices in our heads and the voice of God.

It’s your life – you’re in charge. I am the Lord your God Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Work hard to get ahead. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Get what you want, when you want it. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. Make yourself look good at all cost. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. Whoever has the most money wins. You shall not covet your neighbor’s house, wife, or possessions.

Lent offers us an opportunity to examine to Who – and what – we listen. God is speaking. Can you hear Him?

Prayer:

God of wisdom, preserve me, body and soul, from the evil that assaults my soul; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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Fourth Sunday in Lent

Numbers 21:4-9 - The fiery snakes may have been an adder, which is found in the sandy desert land of Sinai. These adders are very poisonous. The antidote was to look at a bronze snake held up on a pole.

The lifting up of Christ was compared to this incident in the desert, as those who look to him will live (Jn. 3:14-15). The means of deliverance in both cases was faith.

Ephesians 2:1-10 - One theologian introduced this passage section as: “Transformed from transgressors to trophies.” Paul reminds us that we were lost in sin and under God’s curse (2:1-3), but now by grace we have been saved and given a place in God’s eternal plan (2:4-7). This salvation is “a gift from God” given “by his special favor” (2:8). God’s “special favor” is also referred to as grace, and it describes God’s part in offering salvation apart from any requirement to keep the law. “When you believed, describes faith, our part in accepting that offer. It is apart from works (2:9) but is also for the good works God created us to do (2:10).

John 3:14-21 - Jesus reminded Nicodemus of the time when a bronze serpent on a pole was lifted-up, saving Israel from a plague (Numbers 21:4-9). He predicted that his own approaching death would – in the same way – bring spiritual healing to all who believed in him (3:14-16).

Presenting the gospel in a nutshell, verse 16 clarifies: 1) The source of the gospel: God’s love, demonstrated in the giving of His only Son to die on the cross; 2) The beneficiaries of the gospel: “everyone who believes”; 3) The required response: simple faith in Jesus, and; 4) The importance of that response: Those who believe will live forever, and those who do not believe will perish.

What Do You See?

There’s an old adage that says, “What you see is what you get.” But is it? Perhaps what we get is a result of what – and how – we see. Today’s readings certainly give us a reason to examine this statement.

Had we been in the desert with Moses and the Israelites, we might have merely seen a statue or a piece of art erected on a pole. Had we been standing on Golgotha, we might have seen three lawbreakers facing justice. But what we initially see is not necessarily all we get. Through eyes of faith, God’s people viewed these subjects through a different lens. They saw healing and salvation and lived.

Faith does the same for us. Faith invites us to come closer. See life from a different angle. View God from a new perspective. Faith makes the case that what we see is not what we get. Faith dares us to believe that we get what can only be seen through God’s eyes.

What do you see? Lent gives us the opportunity to see ourselves – and God – differently. Take a look. Examine life from a different angle. See God as He presents Himself, rather than as we envision Him to be. Watch as life changes as you see it through His eyes.

Prayer:

God of grace, help me see You living in me, giving me a changed life as a result of Your indwelling; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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Fifth Sunday in Lent

Jeremiah 31:31-34 - The Lord makes an amazing announcement! Unlike the present Mosaic covenant (vs. 32), “The day will come ... when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah.” This new covenant would be written on his people’s hearts. It would bring about a new kind of relationship with God and a permanent remission of sin. The New Testament clearly identifies this New Covenant as God’s promise of forgiveness through the death of Christ on the cross (Hebrews 8:1-13).

Hebrews 5:5-10 - A Jewish high priest had to be chosen by God and had to be compassionate (5:1-4). Jesus fulfilled both requirements. God selected him to be an eternal priest like Melchizedek, as David had predicted (5:5-6, 10; Psalm 110:4). While on earth, Christ showed great compassion (see Matt. 9:36; 14:14; 15:32). He learned much about our suffering through his own suffering (5:7-10).

John 12:20-33 - While the Greeks may have expected Jesus to talk about his triumphant reception at Jerusalem’s gate, instead he spoke symbolically of his fast-approaching death. Just as a grain of wheat must be planted and die to produce more wheat, Jesus must now die to give spiritual life to all who believe in him (vs.23-24). Likewise, his followers must die to their own lives to produce the fruit of God’s Kingdom. If they do so, they will be richly rewarded in due time (vs. 25-26)

As Jesus contemplated his approaching crucifixion, God the Father audibly spoke words of comfort to him. The people mistook it as either an angel or thunder.

Surrender

What do you think you know about God? What do you believe to be true of yourself? Lent – and today’s readings – challenges us to rethink our assertions. Is God a scorekeeper of rules and deeds? Do we ever find purpose and meaning in this life?

Jeremiah shows us a God who is passionate about a relationship – so much so, that He is willing to do away with a system He created in order to bring about personal intimacy with His people. Paul echoes this by explaining how much God learns about us through Jesus’ earthly suffering.

Take off your mask. Let down your guard. Lower your defenses. Surrender. Find yourself embraced by the One who already set aside all the rules and regulations for a shot at a relationship with you. Discover a Savior who understands how life batters and bruises, leaving us broken and bloodied. He’s been there. And He’s waiting to resurrect purpose out of life’s every pain. Surrender your judgments – of God and yourself. Allow God to amaze you, revealing a new perspective of Him and your life – one you never thought possible.

Prayer:

God of love, give me Your desires and promises, that I may see with focused and clear vision Your eternal joy; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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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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Liturgy of the Passion - Sixth Sunday in Lent/Palm Sunday

Isaiah 50:4-9a - In this third servant song, Isaiah reveals the servant's declaration of confidence in God. He had not drawn back from the Lord's commission, despite severe opposition and humiliation. He persevered, confident that the Lord would one day vindicate him before his enemies. The song concludes with an appeal for the servant's faithful followers to continue to trust the Lord and with a warning of judgment to those who reject the Lord's guidance.

Philippians 2:5-11 - Christian humility begins with the example of Jesus.

Paul stresses that Jesus is God – equal with God the Father in status and glory. As a human being, Jesus willingly laid aside his status and glory. He didn't cling to it or grasp at it. Jesus was unwilling to use his godly nature and power to promote himself in any way. He emptied himself, put aside his heavenly glory to be human. And then, he shed every layer of human status and dignity. As a result, God has given him the highest place in heaven.

God's nature is to give and his glory is to serve. This is also to become the nature and glory of his Christ-like people, the church.

Mark 15:1-39 - The events leading to the death of Jesus move swiftly. He is taken to Pilate, who gives in to the pressure applied by Jewish leaders and orders Christ's crucifixion (15:1-15). Jesus is beaten and mocked (vv. 16-20). He falls on the way to Golgotha and a pilgrim is forced to carry Jesus' cross (v. 21). At Golgotha He is crucified and ridiculed by His enemies (vv. 22-32). With the cross, shrouded in a supernatural darkness, Jesus utters His last cry and dies.

Mark's story of Jesus' life is enclosed by the centurion's affirmation: "Truly this man was the Son of God." Jesus – God's only Son – died for us that we might live for him.

Learning To Love What Is Good

We teach our children to eat their vegetables before they get dessert. Children fuss and complain because they have not yet developed the maturity to ask for and love what is good. In a sense, the crowds that called for Barabbas' release were like children.

Barabbas offered immediate gratification and peer approval. The crowd didn't want to think critically about what they were asking for; didn't want to face the fallout of going against the wishes of the high priests. They wanted their cake and to eat it, too.

Thankfully, God is our loving parent. He understands the lifelong process we face in learning to love what is good. That's why, in a very real sense, He "kept Jesus on the table" even when the crowds chose Barabbas over Him. Obviously, we're not comparing Christ to cauliflower. But to become a follower of Christ, our tastes and choices must mature. Like the crowd that rejected His Son, God knows in time our own choices grow in understanding and maturity. With His grace, we learn to love what is good.

Prayer:

God of tender mercy, who sent Your Son to suffer death upon the cross on my behalf: give me that same humility to share in Your suffering so I may also share in the joy of Your resurrection; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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