

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 C

First Sunday in Lent

Deuteronomy 26:1-11 - The process in which Israel was to bring its firstfruits is significant. The ceremony is a confession of faith that recognizes the faithfulness of God. Beginning with Jacob, the “wandering Aramean,” the people go back and travel with him – and those who followed – re-living the mighty acts of God that brought them out of Egypt and into the land God had promised them. Recalling and repeating the story of God’s intervention in the past offers strength for today and hope for tomorrow.

Romans 10:8b-13 - Israel had heard the story. Paul stresses that Israel’s failure to attain salvation is because they failed to believe the story. He removes any possible excuse by asserting that the gospel (the good news; the Word of the Lord) had been brought near to Israel. Paul outlines the conditions required to believe this good news: confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead. The end result... salvation!

Luke 4:1-13 - At the baptism of Jesus, the Holy Spirit descended upon him. Immediately, after Jesus returned from the Jordan, the Spirit led him into the wilderness. For forty days he was tempted by the devil. In each attempt of the devil, Jesus quoted the Word of God, resisting and defeating the intent of the enemy. The power of the Word that is near us is able to save – and deliver!

Choosing Between Good and Best

Sooner or later, this season of Lent – and certainly our journey through life – forces us to confront temptation. In it, we are able to see clearly our weaknesses and experience fully the grace of God, which is mighty to save.

It’s interesting to note the nature of temptation. Often, it comes in the choice between what is good and what is best. Satan tempted Christ in appealing to the reasonable need for physical nourishment. He tempted Jesus by simply asking him to function fully within His God-given authority. “Create bread to nourish you, call the angels to protect you.” There’s certainly nothing wrong in wanting to eat or be protected! But the temptation came in putting those legitimate needs ahead of the will of God.

We often face the same kinds of temptations. We want more time with our family... another educational degree... a better paying job. All of these are good and worthwhile pursuits. But if they become more important than a heart reconciled to God and surrendered to his will, they present a temptation between what is good and what is God’s best. Lent offers an opportunity to examine the desires of our hearts, allowing God’s Word to bring order and His salvation to the priorities of our lives.

Prayer:

God of mercy, come quickly in my time of temptation, delivering me from weakness and revealing your salvation; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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Second Sunday in Lent

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18 - Despite the promises of God, Abram had yet to own any land, or father an heir. Abram expresses his frustration with God. Rather than provoking an angry response, it leads to a reaffirmation and deepening of God's original promises.

Abram accepted God's reassurance and he "believed the Lord." This was active faith as he "kept on believing" the promise, continuing to rely on the Lord. God credited Abram's faith in God's promise as righteousness.

Philippians 3:17-4:1 - Citizenship has its privileges and its obligations. The Philippians could be proud of their citizenship in a Roman colony. However, as Roman citizens, they also encountered numerous hardships.

Paul reminds them – and us – that there is a greater value than earthly citizenship. Our future inheritance that we will receive, and for which we "eagerly await," will be realized in the reappearing of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Until then, Paul admonishes us to remain "firm in the Lord."

Luke 13:31-35 - In spite of the danger of Herod's wrath, Jesus was fully aware that the divinely appointed path for him led to Jerusalem. It would be at God's appointed time that he would suffer. Until that time, Jesus would continue his work, and then finish his course as a prophet in Jerusalem; the city that had so persistently rejected the messengers of God.

Waiting

If you've ever taken a child on a road trip, you've heard the question, "Are we there yet?" Lent can feel like that road trip. At some point in the Lenten experience, we grow tired of the journey. We're tired of cleaning our spiritual closets and being confronted with our weaknesses. Just give us Easter, resurrection power, and a few chocolate bunnies for fun!

God knows us – He understands how easy it is to lose heart and sight of the promise He sets forth in His Son. Like Abram, we can fully reveal our hearts to God, expecting him to come to us in mercy. We can trust him to confirm what He has already promised and expand our capacity to have faith and believe even when the road is long.

Prayer:

God of grace, renew in me the hope of your salvation and a steadfast heart to embrace the truth of your unchanging Word; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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Third Sunday in Lent

Exodus 3:1-15 - Even desolate areas can be holy when God is present. Moses encounters God in the desert, in the form of a burning bush. The miracle was not that the bush was aflame, but that the fire did not burn out; a visual reminder of the eternal God... who was, is, and forever will be. It's a visible sign that despite Moses' inadequacy, God calls him to lead Israel out of bondage.

1 Corinthians 10:1-13 - Paul illustrates the truth that the God of the Lord Jesus judged Israel for its idolatrous conduct, and that God would do the same to the Corinthians who insist on exercising their right to eat in idol temples, unless they flee from idolatry.

He stresses that 1) idolatry is forbidden, 2) sexual immorality is prohibited, 3) testing (or tempting God) to act brings dire judgment, and grumbling is not acceptable to God.

Luke 13:1-9 - Jewish belief held that the greatness of calamity somehow indicated the wickedness of sinners. In other words: The greater the calamity, the greater the sin.

Jesus challenges this assumption by drawing from two contemporary examples. His message was clear... the Jewish nation as a whole was sinful in God's sight, and its members would all suffer the fate of sinners if they did not repent.

Lent: The Great Journey

Moses didn't know God's name, yet was chosen to lead God's people out of captivity. God's people, who knew of their heritage in Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, died in the wilderness. What earned a pagan favor with God? What caused God's chosen people to die in the wilderness without seeing the Promised Land? The answer is found in their response to the journey.

Moses responded to God with humility and obedience. He freely acknowledged his lack of ability – yet was willing to walk toward God's calling. God's chosen people grumbled. Doubted. Rather than look expectantly toward the promise ahead, they continued to look back at the life they had left behind.

What is our response to the journey of Lent? Do we look in the rearview mirror, yearning for what we've left behind? Or is the promise ahead so compelling, we're willing to throw ourselves on the mercy of God, trusting Him to help our inadequacies?

Prayer:

Almighty God, strengthen and defend me in body and soul, fixing my eyes on the promise of your salvation; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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Fourth Sunday in Lent

Joshua 5:9-12 - Israel has entered the land God had promised them. They celebrated the Passover, remembering that they had begun this journey with God through His Passover. The tiresome forty years of eating manna in the desert is behind them. As Christians, we also partake in a Passover. In the Eucharist, we recall Jesus' blood that provides salvation from God's judgment and His flesh, symbolized by bread, which provides for our sanctification (setting apart for God).

2 Corinthians 5:16-21 - In Paul's pre-conversion days he judged Christ using worldly criteria and came to the wrong conclusion. Now, a follower of Christ, Paul sees great significance in Christ's power to replace the old with the new. This is possible because God has reconciled us through Christ. His highly compressed yet extremely profound theological statement regarding the work of Christ is this: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us."

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 - Jesus was criticized frequently by the Pharisees (religious leaders) for associating with common members of society; those regarded as sinful and unrepentant.

The parable of the prodigal son reinforces that the gospel (good news) is for the outcast. Its main character (the father) illustrates the character of God... ever loving his lost son and quick to celebrate and rejoice when His son returns.

A Joyful Lent

Only the sick need a doctor. Only the sinner needs a savior. Those who cannot – or will not – address their illness, die from disease of the body or soul. The gift of Lent is the revelation of the full extent of our spiritual sickness and sin. Only when we have seen our abject need can we truly appreciate and embrace the enormity of God's mercy and grace.

In the parable of the prodigal son, the young man enters a spiritual Lent after losing everything. The joy of his reconciliation with his father cannot be experienced or appreciated until he has first examined the error and need in his own life. It is only then that he gains an understanding of his father's compassion and kindness.

Our Lenten journey becomes a joyful one as the greatness of our sin is swallowed up in the vastness of God's loving desire to forgive, heal, and restore!

Prayer:

Gracious God, give me humility of heart to fully lament my sin that I may know completely the joy of your salvation; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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Fifth Sunday in Lent

Isaiah 43:16-21 - The prophetic words of Isaiah describe a clear promise, rooted in the covenant, of a great exodus. He assures Israel that God is able to perform wonders in the desert, equal to or surpassing those of the Red Sea experience.

Philippians 3:4b-14 - After citing his credentials, which should have made Paul confident to boast in his abilities, he quickly denounces them. He recognized all that he had relied upon in the past was insufficient in light of Christ. This awareness gives Paul assurance that acceptance in the Kingdom of God is based upon the righteousness of Christ – God’s gift – and not upon his accomplishments.

This understanding gives Paul the courage to let go of the past, hold on to the present, and strain toward all that lies ahead... with every fiber of his being set on the goal and prize ... Christ Himself.

John 12:1-8 - The costly ointment that Mary used to anoint the feet of Jesus reveals her deep love for Christ. It is not unusual for a follower of Christ to be criticized for their acts of love toward their Savior.

Mary’s example of devotion is worthy of our attention and obedience. She gave her best, she gave lavishly, she gave in spite of criticism, and she gave lovingly.

The Greatest Gift

The Israelites leaving Egypt’s captivity could not imagine a world outside of Pharaoh’s rule. It was beyond their ability to think of themselves as anything other than slaves. And yet, somewhere buried beneath the Red Sea, are the remains of a vast army God defeated so his people could know the freedom of discovering a new world and new way of living.

In the Gospel reading, Mary demonstrates the response to such a loving God. She knew what it meant to find freedom in Jesus. She couldn’t yet comprehend or imagine the new world Christ’s imminent death and resurrection would open to her. But his love had already changed her life and she was willing to give everything – even following him to the cross.

Lent offers us this same opportunity. It opens our hearts to a God who leads us through a wilderness and to a cross so we can discover Jesus –the fulfillment of our souls’ deepest longing. As our world and lives experience upheavals and uncertainties, remember the gift of Lent, which empowers us to fix our hearts on the source of eternal joy and life.

Prayer:

Merciful God, enable me through your Spirit to love you fully, follow you faithfully, and serve you humbly; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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Annunciation of the Lord

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. (cont'd.)

Annunciation of the Lord (continued)

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)

Isaiah 50:4-9a - Isaiah's portrayal of a suffering servant points to Jesus' obedience to God. What enabled the suffering servant's willingness to bear the most degrading of insults? He listened "morning by morning" with an intent to obey (v 4); an open ear to hear God's voice, and refusal to be rebellious (v-5)... allowed him to resist the temptation to become vengeful and remain obedient to the purpose of God.

Philippians 2:5-11 - More than "mind over matter," the attitude of Christ is displayed in humility and servanthood. We are to imitate the same attitude Jesus modeled. Though fully God, he did not consider himself but emptied and humbled himself in obedience to the purpose and will of God the Father.

Luke 19: 28-40 - The promised Son of David, spoken by the prophets of old, has arrived. This was God's day! Though Zechariah had prophesied he would come in meekness and humility (cf. Zech 9:9), Jerusalem does not receive Jesus as its King. Yet, his disciples sing with praise (vs. 37). Despite the opposition, if the disciples were to stop their praise, the stones themselves would break forth into song (vs. 40).

The Act of Being Present

Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week and our remembrance of the last days of Jesus' life leading up to the cross. Many of us mark Palm Sunday with great fanfare, waving palm branches and shouting, "Hosanna, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." We gather again a week later to rejoice in the resurrection of our Lord. Somehow, we skip over what came in between – betrayal, travesty of justice, abandonment, torture, unspeakable suffering, and death.

We cannot truly appreciate the power of the resurrection until we have walked in the path of Christ's suffering. This week, practice the act of being in the presence of Jesus. Walk with Him in the garden... listen as He pours out His very soul to God... gaze at the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Worship in silent wonder at the foot of the cross. Only then can the power – the joy – of Easter be experienced as we proclaim the ancient words, "Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed. Alleluia!"

Prayer:

God of infinite love, with humility you took upon yourself my nature... sin... death. 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.

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