

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT February 10, 2008 A

Open with a prayer: *Creator God, you formed the first man and woman from the clay of the earth and breathed into them the spirit of life, but they turned from you and sinned. We have also turned from you and your ways. During this Lenten season of prayer, fasting and almsgiving you call us back to you and to repent of our sins. Be with us when we face temptations. Give us the strength we need to remain faithful to you. Draw the elect preparing to join the church this Easter and all of us closer to you during this season. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Sharing of life: If your group is a new group or your small community has new members for Lent, share your name, home state, how long you have been in the parish and what motivated you to join a Lenten small group. If you are an ongoing small community with no new members, share what you like most about the season of Lent.

Facilitator reads focus statement: For *catechumens* (unbaptized) and *candidates* (already baptized), the season of Lent is a time of final preparation, purification and enlightenment prior to their baptism and reception into Full Communion with our church. For us, the already baptized, Lent is a *penitential season* during which we prepare to renew our baptismal commitment to Christ and his church. In a spirit of solidarity we journey with our brothers and sisters who are preparing for baptism and/or entry into the church... We pray for them and for ourselves that this season may be a time of renewal, purification and enlightenment for all of us.

The scripture readings: We can look at the readings as about good and bad choices or look at the notion of testing as connecting the readings - especially the first and third readings. In the second reading, Paul reminds us that what Adam “undid”, Christ has “redone” and more.

If you have not read the commentary on the three readings prior to your meeting, consider reading it either before or after you read each reading.

FIRST READING: Genesis 2:7-9, 3:1-7

This is the story of Adam and Eve’s fall from grace - loss of an intimate relationship with their Creator. The reading begins with the creation of the man. The man is brought to life by God’s breath showing the absolute dependence of the creature on his Creator. Then God creates a beautiful garden, which the first man and woman are given to enjoy – with one stipulation, namely, not to eat the fruit from the “tree of knowledge of good and evil” in the middle of the garden.

Enter the serpent, the most cunning of all creatures who tempts Eve to disobey her Creator. The serpent plants the seeds of doubt in Eve’s heart about God’s command and about God’s love for her. “If you eat the forbidden fruit, you shall become like a God.” This seems very attractive to Eve. When tempting us, Satan usually presents evil and bad as some desirable good. The forbidden fruit was ‘pleasing to the eye’ (the sensual dimension of temptation) and ‘desirable for gaining wisdom’ (the intellectual dimension). Having succumbed to temptation, the woman leads her man into the sin of disobedience. Sin always like company.

Having sinned, Adam and Eve’s ‘eyes are opened’ – they realize the wrong that they have done. They experience shame. Sin always leads to inner disease with oneself. They cover themselves up with fig leaves (the first ‘cover up’ story). If we read the whole of the Fall story, (Gen 3:1-24) we will see that Adam and Eve’s sin of disobedience not only ruptures their relationship with God, but also with each other and with themselves. Harmony with God, each other and self is replaced with disharmony.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM: 51

This is David’s prayer of contrition after God has opened his eyes to the poor choices he had made in committing adultery and planning a murder to “cover up” his sin of infidelity.

SECOND READING: Romans 5:12-19

In these verses, Paul draws our attention to the universal consequences of the sin of our first parents. Sin is pervasive. It exists even when there is no law to convict us of it. Then Paul goes on to contrast the sin of Adam to the infinitely greater gift offered to us when Christ entered the world. If there is a ‘sin-force’ at work in the world and in us, there

is an even *greater* ‘grace-force’ at work in the world and in us. While we may still struggle with sin and evil we must remember that our baptism into Christ has given us the divine power to say ‘no’ to the enticements of sin and the evil one.

GOSPEL: Matthew 4:1-11

At his baptism, Jesus became aware of his identity as God’s Son. In his gospel Matthew presents the Son of God as the new Moses who has the authority to bring the old law to its fulfillment.

In this gospel reading, Jesus resists every temptation to use his authority in any self-serving way. In each temptation, Satan seeks to tempt Jesus to abuse his power to prove that he is the Son of God. In two of the three temptations, the devil begins by saying: “*If you are the Son of God . . .*” The setting for the temptations of Jesus is the desert, where the Israelites spent forty years and frequently succumbed to temptations to disobey God.

The *first temptation* has to do with *hunger*. At the end of forty days of fasting, Jesus must have been very hungry. Satan tempts Jesus to abuse his power to transform stones into bread- use his power for himself. The temptation recalls the hunger of the Israelites in the desert when they rejected the bread God offered them. Rejecting Satan’s temptation, Jesus quotes Deut 8:3, “*One does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.*” Unlike the Israelites who argued with God about the bread he provided for them, Jesus acquiesced to be fed and sustained by the living bread of God’s word.

In the *second temptation*, Satan tempts the Son of God to *abuse his power* by using it in a sensational way. Refusing a temptation test God, Jesus once again refutes Satan by quoting a scripture that referred back to Israel’s rebellion against God: “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test (as the Israelites did at Massah (Deut 6:13).

The *third temptation* has to do with *idolatry*. Israel had failed this temptation many times, notably by their worship of the golden calf in the desert. Satan tempts Jesus to change his allegiance from God to him. With a touch of anger at his tempter, Jesus tells Satan to get lost saying: “*The Lord, your God shall you worship and him alone shall you serve.*” The temptations of Jesus remind us of a verse from Hebrews: “*For we do not have a high priest who is*

unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in everyway, yet without sin.” (4:15)

At the beginning of our Lenten journey, our church places before us stories of temptation and testing – temptations which Adam and Eve gave into and temptations which Jesus resisted. Like Jesus, we too are tested by Satan to abuse and misuse the gifts God has given us. We too are tempted to forget our true identity as beloved sons and daughters of our heavenly Father. During the forty days of Lent we pray, fast and do almsgiving so that we may have the strength to say ‘no’ to Satan and ‘yes’ to Jesus.

FAITH SHARINGS QUESTIONS

1. What verse spoke to you most and why?
2. Name some of the temptations that we, the children of God, face as we try to remain faithful to Jesus and his ways. What helps you to resist the temptation of the world, the flesh and the devil?
3. Looking at the readings with the eye of a steward, how might you be tempted to abuse and misuse God’s gifts to you?
4. Prayer, fasting and almsgiving are the three traditional practices placed before us at the beginning of Lent. How have you found these spiritual practices to be helpful to you as you seek to grow spiritually?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

St. James tells us that we must be ‘*doers of the word and not just hearers*’. Can you name one way that you can act on today’s readings? Suggestions: Name one way that you think Satan tries to allure you into sin and daily pray (and maybe even occasionally fast) for the grace to say ‘no’ to that temptation. Also be on the look out for grace that is always ‘floating in the air’ drawing us to Christ.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray for our catechumens and candidates. Pray for all who are being tempted to abort their unborn child, leave their spouse, priesthood or religious life. ©

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

February 17, 2008 A

Open with a prayer: *Loving God, in today's gospel, you call Jesus "beloved son". Through baptism we are your adopted sons and daughters. May we never forget our wonderful identity in you – Fill us with your light and wisdom as we prepare to share our lives in the context of your holy word. Lead us with the elect and candidates to a fuller life in you. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Sharing of life: What are you most and least grateful for this week?

(Note to newcomers: The question "what are you most and least grateful for?" is an excellent question to ask oneself at any time, and ask one's family or friends. In the context of your small group, the question gives you the opportunity to get to know each other in a personal way. You may be most grateful for health, the nice weather, a job you love, loved ones, etc. You may be least grateful for some health problem, an overcrowded schedule, a lousy work situation, some loss, etc. Share at a level that is comfortable for you. Your willingness to share on a personal level will, most likely, help to create a close bond as you journey together through this sacred season.)

Facilitator reads focus statement: In the gospel, Peter, James and John have a "heavenly experience" in which a voice tells them to listen to Jesus. In the first reading, we have a concrete example of a man listening to and obeying a heavenly voice. In the second reading, Paul reminds Timothy of the holy life he has been called to.

If you have not read the commentary on the three readings prior to your meeting, consider reading it either before or after you read each reading.

FIRST READING: Genesis 12:1-4

The Lenten *Period of Purification and Enlightenment* is a call to holiness of life issued to the *Elect* (those preparing for baptism), candidates (those preparing for Full Communion into our church) and for all of us a call to hear and respond with love to God's initiative in our lives – irrespective of when God comes knocking at our door.

Each year on the Second Sunday of Lent, the liturgy of the word begins with God's call to the 75 year old Abraham, a call to live a life of holiness and to enter into a covenant relationship with God. The call of Abram (later to be called Abraham – to signify his new relationship with God) is the beginning of what we call Salvation History. Last week we listened to the story of the Fall. The call of Abram is God's first step to redeem human kind. Today's reading consists of a *call a promise*, a *mission* and a *blessing* and Abram's *response* to God's call. "*Abram went as God directed him.*" Abram's obedience to God's call is model for all believers.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM: 33

This psalm emphasizes that God's word is trustworthy and that God protects us in our time of need. This is at the heart of what Abraham (and

every believer) discovers about God when we "place our trust in him".

SECOND READING: 2 Timothy 1:8-10

After exhorting Timothy to be willing to suffer for the Gospel, Paul reminds him of the holiness of life he has been called to and how Christ grants us the grace to live a holy life. We are able to live in holiness because of the "grace bestowed on us," not because of "our works."

GOSPEL: Matthew 17:1-9

This story is proclaimed each year on the second Sunday of Lent. As the *Elect* make their final preparation for their baptism, the transfiguration event presents us with a classic image of baptismal transformation. Just as Christ was totally transfigured on Mount Tabor, we are totally transformed into the likeness of Christ when we are baptized. Commenting on this gospel, the authors of *Living the Word '04-'05* writes:

The history of God's relationship with a chosen people begins in the story of Abraham, but it takes a new turn in the person of Jesus, the "beloved Son" in whom every human person is able to find salvation. The story of the Transfiguration is brimming with Old Testament allusions that signal the divine character of what transpires on the

mountaintop. The disciples are given a glimpse not only of Jesus in glory, but of their own destiny as well. For those who journey toward baptism during Lent, and equally for those of us already baptized, this glimpse of glory offers a powerful reminder of our own call to holiness and where that call will ultimately lead us. Jesus foretells his death and we modern-day disciples are reminded of the rigors not only of Lent but of discipleship itself. Nonetheless, in the face of whatever fears or misgivings we may harbor, Jesus speaks gently to us in today's Gospel: "Rise, and do not be afraid" (Matthew 17:7).

FAITH SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse spoke to you most?
2. God called Abraham and Sara in their old age. This means that there is no time in life when God is through making use of us. If up in years, do you feel God is still making use of you? If not up in years, do you know some people God is still using in their older years?
3. What can block us from hearing and responding to God's word?
4. In and through our baptism, God has called each of us to a *holy* life. What does this call to holiness mean to you?
5. In today's gospel, Jesus says to his overwhelmed disciples: "Rise up and do not be afraid". Can you recall a time when you particularly needed to hear these words?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on God's word in today's readings. Suggestions: Just as God called Abraham and Sarah to leave their place of security, try to be aware of how God might be calling you to leave your comfort zone. Sharing in a small group is one example of this for many people. Listen to God call you "beloved daughter" or "beloved son".

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray for the grace to hear and respond to God's call upon our lives. Pray for the older members of our community that they will always know that they can play an important role in the life of our church. ©

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

February 24, 2008 A

Open with a prayer: *Jesus, you are the Living Water that brings us here today. Thank you for pouring the living waters of faith, new life and love into us at baptism. Bless us as we journey together during this Lenten Season. May Easter find us washed of sin and more ready to embrace your ways. Amen.*

Sharing of life: What are you most and least grateful for this week?

Facilitator reads focus statement: During the next three Sundays of Lent, we will read and reflect on three powerful Gospels which tell us about Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman, a blind man and a dead man. All three Gospels speak to us of *baptismal themes*: living water, healing of blindness (enlightenment) and Jesus' power over sin and death. The three Gospels proclaim God's power to quench our deepest thirst (this Sunday), his power to heal our spiritual blindness (next Sunday) and his power to raise us from whatever tomb of death we may find ourselves in (the fifth Sunday). From the earliest days of Christianity, these three texts were used as sources of instruction for the *elect* who were preparing for baptism at Easter. In our Church, these three texts are used for the *Three Scrutiny Rites*, which our elect will experience on the next three Sundays as they prepare for their entrance into our Catholic community at Easter. The purpose of the scrutiny ritual is to uncover, and then heal all that is weak, defective and sinful in the lives of the elect: to call out, and strengthen all that is upright, strong and good. As we pray for the elect, we ask God to do exactly the same for us. This week's focus is the faith and trust that leads us to Jesus, the Living Water.

If you have not read the commentary on the three readings prior to your meeting, consider reading it either before or after you read each reading.

FIRST READING: Exodus 17:3-7

The grumbling, mistrust and lack of gratitude shown by the Israelites as they journey through the desert is the very opposite of the attitudes of faith and trust needed in those who seek Living Water. In the face of their grumbling, Moses, the great intercessor and mediator lifts up his hands in prayer. In contrast to the people's mistrust in God, Moses places his trust in his power to save his people – even his rebellious people. When “the going gets tough”, when resources are running low, we are called more than ever to place our trust in God. The water pouring from the Rock shows God's care for his people. The water also prefigures the living waters of baptism.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 95

This well-known psalm invites us to open our hearts to the Lord and to sing joyfully to him – something the Israelites in the desert failed to do and something the Samaritan woman did very beautifully.

SECOND READING: Romans 5:1-2, 5-8

This reading opens up by speaking of the “faith that justifies”, the gift of faith that makes us acceptable to God. The reading also reminds us that through

the Holy Spirit “*the love of God has been poured into our hearts*”. Our gospel story will give us a concrete example of the love of God being poured into the heart of a nameless woman. Finally, Paul reminds us that God is so gracious that he was willing to die for us *even* while we were still sinners.

GOSPEL: John 4:4-42

This is a beautiful story of a woman coming to faith in Jesus, the Living Water and leading others to place their trust in him.

The story opens with a beautiful image of the *human Jesus*. He is tired and thirsty. By speaking to a *Samaritan woman* in public, Jesus was violating some cultural taboos: Jews didn't speak to Samaritans and Jewish men didn't speak to strange women in public. So, by speaking to this woman, Jesus was attacking centuries of prejudice toward *women* and *Samaritans*.

As the story unfolds and as the woman opens up to Jesus, he *gradually* reveals his true nature to her. Initially, she calls him, “Sir” then “prophet” and finally, “Messiah”. Jesus reveals himself as the “living water” that she was *unconsciously* searching for in her relationship with her five husbands.

In verses 21-24, there is a discussion about true worship. Jesus tells us that worship is not made authentic by the *place* where one worships (Jerusalem or Gerizim) but by the *Spirit* and *truth* in which one prays.

In verses 27-38, Jesus has a dialog with his disciples who are very surprised, if not scandalized to see him talking to a Samaritan woman. “But no one asked him “. . . *why are you talking to her?*” they ask. Then they offer him food. Jesus responds by telling them that his “*food is to do the will of him who sent me*” (v.34). Doing the will of his Father was the central consuming passion of Jesus’ life. Then he urges them to pray that more workers be raised up to reap a harvest ready to be harvested – probably a reference to the Gentiles hungry for Good News.

In the meantime, the woman filled with the Living Water races back to her village to share her Good News. “*Come and see a man who told me everything I have done. Could this be the Christ?*” The rejected and scorned woman becomes a messenger of God’s love. The people invite Jesus to stay in their village. After a “retreat with Jesus” they say to the woman: “We no longer believe because of *your* word; for we have *heard for ourselves*, and we know that this is truly the savior of the world.” A favorite theme of John is that Jesus is known by “a personally experienced faith contact” and not just by hearsay.

Finally, this story brings alive many of the promises and verses of the Old Testament. For example: “*With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation*” (Is 12:3). “*All you who are thirsty come to the water...Come without paying, without cost, drink.*” (Is 55:1).

FAITH SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse spoke to you most and why?
2. Today’s first reading ends with the questions: “*Is the Lord in our midst or not?*” If someone asked you, how would you answer? What evidence can you give to suggest the presence of God in our world and in your life?
3. What do people thirst for today? What do you thirst for?

4. How is Jesus Living Water for you? How can you be Living Water for others?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today’s readings. Suggestion: Pray for an opportunity to share your faith this week. Reflect on the fountain of Living Water within you. Is it bubbling with life or has it become a dry well?

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray for the *Elect* who will be baptized this Easter. Pray for all thirsting for Christ and love. Pray for the **Gift of Water** ministry that seeks to provide clean water to the people of Haiti and Jamaica. For more information visit their web page: www.giftofwater.org. ©

CLOSING PRAYER:

Blessed are you, God of all life, we praise you for the water of life you offer us. Scrutinize us, heal us, and strengthen us along with the elect. We make our prayer through your Son, Jesus Christ our lord. Amen.

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT March 2, 2008 A

Open with a prayer: *Blessed are you, God of light for you have opened our eyes to see your truth and to know your love. Open the eyes of our heart as we journey through Lent so that we may perceive even more clearly the signs of your love that surrounds us. Enlighten our minds and hearts so that we may recognize the word you wish us to hear in our readings this week.*

Sharing of life: How is your Lenten journey coming? Have you lost your focus a bit or is your journey going pretty well?

Facilitator reads focus statement: In the early centuries of the church, baptism was sometimes called “enlightenment”. Light has been used as a metaphor for belief in God from Gospel times, and so it was a natural step to refer to the Christian initiation as a process of enlightenment, a “coming to see” that Jesus is Lord and Savior. This ‘seeing’ imagery dominates all of today’s readings and provides the key to interpreting them in the context of the Lenten season’s focus on preparation for baptism or renewal of one’s baptismal commitment to Christ. For the *Elect*, Lent is a *Period of Purification* and *Enlightenment*. As we journey with our brothers and sisters, we too seek to be *purified* of false values and sin so that we can more clearly *see* God’s truth and live as children of light.

If you have not read the commentary on the three readings prior to your meeting, consider reading it either before or after you read each reading.

FIRST READING: 1 Samuel 16: 1, 6-7, 10-13

Samuel is seeking a successor for Saul. He thinks that surely God’s choice is one of the seven sons who are present when he arrives. God’s choice of David is a concrete example of how God’s choices are not ours. Who but God would choose the young and inexperienced David to be the symbol of God’s power and strength? God sees in people what we fail to see. David may have been young and inexperienced, but he also had the inner disposition that God was looking for, namely, love of and loyalty to God. The anointing was a solemn ritual action sealing God’s election of David. During this Lenten season as we examine our consciences and as the elect prepare for baptism, this reading reminds us that we must always seek to see as God sees. At baptism we too were anointed with oil to remind us that God has a special mission for us.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 23

The sentiments in this most loved of the psalms can be applied to both David and the man healed in today’s Gospel.

SECOND READING: Ephesians 5:8-14

Commenting on this reading, Fr. Lawrence Mick writes:

Those who sin prefer the darkness. They do not want their deeds to be seen or their thoughts to be known. Thieves and murderers prefer the dark. So do those who commit lesser sins. Thus coming into the light is an image of conversion.

In this passage, though, Paul goes further and suggests that we not only live in the light of Christ but also become light for others. If we produce “goodness and righteousness and truth,” then we light the way for others and make their lives brighter. That’s a good goal for each of us this Lent.

GOSPEL: John 9:1-41

In last weekend’s gospel, Jesus revealed himself to a nameless Samaritan woman. In this week’s gospel, Jesus reveals himself to a nameless blind man as One who gives the Light of Faith. The atmosphere of hostility and controversy, which pervades the story, symbolizes the struggle, which goes on between light and darkness, belief and unbelief. As in last week’s Gospel, the story operates on different levels. On *one level*, we notice a man receiving *physical* sight. On *another level*, we see the same man receive *spiritual* sight. On a *third level*, there is a contrast between the openness of the blind man to Jesus and the closed-mindedness of the Pharisees to him.

The story begins with the disciples asking if the man's blindness was caused by his sin or the sin of his parents. Jesus answers "neither," thus dissenting from the traditional belief that sickness and suffering in a person's life were caused by one's sinfulness. As a result of a Ritual Washing, the man is healed of his blindness, which symbolizes the enlightenment we receive in the sacramental waters of baptism. Then the healed one undergoes a series of interrogations. During the interrogations, we notice how the blind man *gradually* comes to recognize the true nature of Jesus. First he calls Jesus "that man" then "a prophet" and finally, he worships Jesus as the "Son of Man". In the story, the blind man represents people who overcome many obstacles as they come to faith. He also represents those who suffer ostracization because of faith.

As we sadly watch the blind man gradually move into the "light of faith", we sadly notice the Pharisees move into the "darkness of unbelief", a movement, which reaches its climax when the Pharisees call Jesus "a sinner". The Pharisees also call the blind man a sinner. But as the story unfolds, we clearly see that the real sinners are the Pharisees, not because they do not see, but because they insist that they do see and, therefore, have no need for enlightenment. In the story, the Pharisees represent all those who claim that they "see" just because they have a head knowledge of their religion. In the story, the parents represent those who feared expulsion from the Jewish community for believing in Jesus. They also represent the weak side of us that is not willing to risk much for our faith.

The Christian journey is a movement out of the "darkness of unbelief" into the "light of faith". During the coming week, we might want to reflect on our own Christian journey. We may want to name and give thanks for the people and events that opened our eyes to Jesus and his values. We might also want to think about the things in our lives that presently hinder us from moving more and more into the light.

As for this gospel's *sacramental significance*, Jesus' cure of the blind man is replete with baptismal references. Healed and anointed and enlightened by Jesus, the blind man who came to see and believe in Jesus is the type of every baptized believer. Washed and anointed at baptism, we are to live in the light of faith, walk by the light of truth and follow Jesus who is the light of the world in all we are, in all we do, in all we say.

FAITH SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse spoke to you most and why?
2. The first reading is a good example of how God sees not as humans see. Name ways in which the world's view of things differs from the gospel view. What do we need to do to bring our view more in line with the gospel?
3. In the gospel the religious leaders move in the direction of darkness and unbelief. What happens in the souls of good people to move them in the direction of unbelief? Has it happened to you?
4. In the past year or more can you name one or more ways that you have become more enlightened?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on God's word in today's readings. Suggestions: Take the Pharisees question to prayer: "Since it was your eyes he opened, what do you have to say about him?" Reflect on this question and see where it takes you. Begin to prepare to receive the *Sacrament of Reconciliation* by asking the Holy Spirit to reveal to you areas of sinful attitudes and behaviors that you may be blind to.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray for all who suffer from physical blindness and for those involved in research to find a cure. Pray for the elect as they prepare for their second *Scrutiny*. Pray for all of us that we be graced with the ability to see as God sees.©

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

March 9, 2008 A

Open with a prayer: God of all creation, we gather together to share our lives in the context of your life-giving word. You came that we might have life in abundance. Help us to reject sin and evil so that we might come to fuller life in you. Open our graves to new life in your Son, Jesus. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sharing of life: What are you most and least grateful for this week?

Facilitator reads focus statement: On the Fifth Sunday of Lent our series of three Johannine gospel readings reach their climactic conclusion in the *story of Lazarus* raised from the dead. In communities where the *Elect* have been celebrating the scrutiny rites in preparation for baptism, this final story about resurrection from the dead serves to remind them and us of the ultimate purpose of Christian initiation: eternal life with Jesus Christ, the Risen One. All three readings speak of the victory over sin and death that we experience from living our lives in union with Christ.

If you have not read the commentary on the three readings prior to your meeting, consider reading it either before or after you read each reading.

FIRST READING: Ezekiel 37:12-14

This reading is intended to be a prophetic word of hope for the Israelites living in physical exile from their homeland and in spiritual exile from God. They felt God had abandoned them. Our reading is the final verses of Ezekiel's famous "dry bones" vision that God gave to him while living with his people in Babylon. The scene is one of complete devastation and desolation. The ground is covered with the bones of countless soldiers killed in battle. After bringing Ezekiel to this horrible scene, God asks him a startling question: "*Son of Man, can these bones come to life?*" The verses are a prophetic and challenging call to the people to believe that God will deliver them from the death of exile. Read in the context of Christian faith, one could understand these verses as a reference to personal individual resurrection beyond bodily death. When this text is read today with Paul's words to the Romans ("the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies" [Romans 8:11]), we understand how comforting the fullness of Christian faith can be in the face of whatever darkness, defeat, or disaster may strike us.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 130

This is a cry to God from the depths of one's being, a cry in which the psalmist trusts in God as he awaits forgiveness and deliverance.

SECOND READING: Romans 8:8-11

In this reading, Paul contrasts "life in the spirit" with "life in the flesh". Paul reminds us that we are

to live 'in the spirit' and not 'in the flesh'. This does not mean that we are to deny our human nature as flesh and blood creatures. When Paul uses the word 'flesh' he is referring to that part of us that is not yet surrendered to God and transformed by grace, that part of us that continues to be self-centered and rebellious against God and his ways. When Paul uses the term 'spirit', he is referring to that part of us that seeks to follow God and his ways over our sinful cravings. But, we can only make such good choices because our spirit has been infused with the Holy Spirit at baptism. For Paul, the Spirit was the life force behind Jesus' resurrection and is the same Spirit that will raise our mortal bodies from death to life. Our incorporation into Christ at baptism makes it possible for us to share in his victory over death.

GOSPEL: John 11: 1-45

In last week's Gospel, Jesus declared himself "*Light of the World*" and "proved" it by giving physical and spiritual sight to a blind man. This week, Jesus declares himself to be the "*Resurrection and the Life*" and "proves" it by raising a dead man from the sleep of death. The raising of Lazarus prefigures Jesus' own "hour" of death and resurrection.

The story of Lazarus addresses the ultimate test of faith: the challenge to believe in life, even in the face of death. The first Christians had a deep sense that they may be asked to pay the ultimate price for their faith in Jesus. The elect preparing for baptism in our communities today – as well as those of us already baptized – may not face the same imminent threat of martyrdom, yet we, too, must declare

ourselves regarding Jesus Christ. The pointed question of Jesus to Martha, “Do you believe this?” (that whoever believes in him will never die [John 11:26]) is in fact directed to each one of us. Baptism is our response, our great “yes” to the question of where lies our ultimate faith. Today’s readings – as all of our Lenten texts – prepare us to answer that question at Easter when we are invited to make or renew our baptismal promises in the midst of the assembled community. (Living the Word, ’05)

The great paradox of the story is that as Jesus gives life to Lazarus, the authorities begin to plan his death (v.49-53). Jesus is condemned to death for being a life-giver. How strange and evil! Also, in this story, we notice again the struggle between light/darkness, belief/disbelief. On the one hand, as a result of the story, many come to believe in Jesus, but others recede into the darkness of disbelief.

Also, this particular story gives us a beautiful blending of both the divinity and humanity of Jesus. We witness the *human* side of Jesus in his reaction to the death of his friend. He “weeps” and is “troubled in spirit” and the bystanders observe, “see how much he loved Lazarus.” We see the *divinity* of Jesus at work when he raises Lazarus from the tomb. The heart and center of this story are verses 25-26, when Jesus declares: “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he should die, will come to life. Whoever is alive and believes in me will never die.”

When Jesus goes to the tomb of Lazarus, he is confronted by the reality of death and is “troubled in spirit.” It seems Jesus is angered by the power and hold that death has over humanity. By raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus shows that he is more powerful than death. Of course, the “life” Jesus offers is much more than biological life, it is “eternal life”-a life that begins here and now as soon as we unite ourselves to Jesus. In John 5:28-30, Jesus says: “The dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God...and shall live.” The raising of Lazarus actualizes this promise.

FAITH SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse spoke to you most and why?
2. Have you ever felt that your life was in a grave? If so, what helped you to come forth from that grave?

3. According to John’s gospel, our three big enemies are the *world*, the *flesh* and the *devil*. The ‘flesh’ is that tendency in us to live life without reference to God and his ways. What causes us to sometimes live in the flesh and to ignore God and his ways?

4. At the grave of Lazarus, Jesus says “*unbind him and let him go free*”. What things can bind us/you so that you are not free to be fully alive?

5. When do you find it hard to believe in the new life Jesus offers us, the new life in the here and now and eternal life after death?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on God’s word in today’s readings. Suggestions: If you or a friend, neighbor, co-worker are in a season of death (grief, depression failure), be aware of and use the resources that can help one another. Name the things that may be keeping you bound at this time, stopping you from being fully alive. Decide on a step you can take to set yourself free.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Especially pray for the dying and for spiritual freedom, the freedom to say ‘yes’ to the Spirit no matter what it costs you. ©

IMPORTANT REMINDER

Next week’s gospel will be the Passion story. Decide now if you wish to have participants read it prior to the meeting or during your gathering.

PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION

March 16, 2008 A

Open with a prayer: *Almighty, ever-living God, you have given the human race Jesus Christ our Saviour as a model of humility. He fulfilled your will by becoming man and giving his life on the cross. Help us to bear witness to you by following his example of suffering and make us worthy to share in his resurrection. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever.*

Sharing of life: The Lenten season is nearly over. How did it go for you? What went well or fairly well? What, if anything, didn't go so well?

Facilitator reads focus statement: The readings for Passion Sunday revolve around the two meanings of the word "passion." Paul's letter to the Philippians illustrates how these meanings intertwine. Christ felt such passion (love) for humanity that he took on our human condition and endured the most extreme passion (suffering) we can imagine as the servant of God.

If you have not read the commentary on the three readings prior to your meeting, consider reading it either before or after you read each reading.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 50: 4-7

This reading is the third of four "*suffering servant songs*" found in the book of Isaiah. As the early Christians read these passages, they saw in them images of Jesus, the suffering servant of God.

In Isaiah's mind, the *servant* spoken about may have been an individual or the nation of Israel. The *servant* is entrusted with a special mission on behalf of God's people. The *servant* is, first of all, portrayed as a disciple, a listener to God's word. Morning after morning, the Lord "opens" the ear of the *servant* that he might hear God's word. Unlike the Israelites in the desert, the *servant* is not rebellious, nor does he turn back. Because of his faithfulness to God, the *servant* undergoes all kinds of humiliations and sufferings. (Looking at the servant as Israel, the sufferings might point to her time in exile.) In the midst of his sufferings, the *servant* displays great trust in God. "*The Lord is my help, therefore, I will not be disgraced.*" The phrase "*set my face like flint*" refers to the *servant's* determination to be faithful to God.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 22

This is the moving psalm that Jesus prayed on the cross. It is a combination of *lament* in a time of great suffering and *thanksgiving* for God's deliverance. The imagery used is very powerful and vivid. The opening verses describe the suffering and division that the psalmist endures from onlookers. Among other things, they mock him for placing his trust in God. But the mockery and brutality of the onlookers cannot undermine the devotion of the psalmist who

remains steadfast in his trust of God. The psalm ends on a positive note with the psalmist proclaiming, in the midst of the assembly, God's goodness.

SECOND READING: Philippians 2: 6-11

Writing from prison, Paul addressed the community of Philippi, a people with proud and independent ways, which often led to bickering and disharmony amongst them. Paul admonishes the community to set aside their bickering ways and to live in harmony. He holds up before them as a model the "attitude of Christ," who "emptied himself" and became like a "slave" (or like the servant in the first reading). Because Christ "emptied" himself and because of his humility, God "raised" him up and "exalted" him. Like the servant in the first reading, God came to the help of Jesus, the servant, *par excellence* and gave him the name "Lord," a name given only to God in the Old Testament.

GOSPEL: The Passion according to Matthew

Scripture scholars point out that each of the four accounts of the Passion of Christ have their own unique characteristics. We will look at three of the unique characteristics of Matthew's Gospel.

- **Fulfillment of the Scriptures** Matthew's gospel was written primarily for a Jewish audience who had embraced Christianity. Matthew goes to great pains to show that the events spoken about in his gospel, including his passion narrative, happened not because of some outside forces, but to fulfill what was foretold in their Hebrew scriptures to fulfill God's plan.

The passion story begins with the betrayal of Jesus by Judas for 30 pieces of silver. This event is alluded to in Zechariah 11:12-13. When Jesus was arrested, Matthew says: “*all this happened to fulfill the prophecies in scripture.*”(26:56) immediately after this statement, Matthew tells us: “*all the disciples left him and fled*” (v. 57), thus fulfilling Jesus’ earlier prediction (26:31) as well as the prophecy of Zechariah “*I will strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered*” (13:7). During his trial, Jesus behavior and the mistreatment heaped upon him recalled the experiences of the Suffering Servant Songs in Isaiah, (see today’s first reading). On the cross, Jesus prayed with the words of Psalm 22-today’s psalm.

- **Identity of Jesus.** The recognition of Jesus’ true identity plays an important role in Matthew’s gospel and passion narrative.

At the last supper, the disciples refer to him as “Lord” (26:22). Recognition of Jesus also comes from his opponents. This irony should not be overlooked. In their scorn, Jesus’ mockers acknowledge him as the Christ (26:28), Pilate calls him “King of the Jews”, as do the soldiers (27:11, 29). His taunters speak of him as the “Son of God” (27:40, 43).

- **Obedient and Faithful Son of God.** In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as the faithful Israelite who enjoys a unique relationship with his Father. Judas is mentioned more as a means of *contrast*: he is the “dark side of discipleship.” In Matthew’s Passion, Jesus is strong, peaceful and faithful despite all the infidelity, hatred, violence and cowardice around him. He especially shows himself to be a faithful friend to his Apostles. He forgives them for their weaknesses and failures. Most of all, he remains faithful to his Father. The seeming despair cry: “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” should not be interpreted as Jesus feeling abandoned by God. The cry, which is taken from Psalm 22, is a lament psalm, which “lays bare the tortured body and spirit of the believer who complains to God and cries out for relief, but *never* has any doubt that he will be saved and vindicated.”

Matthew contrasts Jesus’ faithfulness to the unfaithfulness of his Apostles and his own people who betray him, reject him, beat him jeer at him, deny him, fall asleep on him and abandon him in his greatest hour of need. Of course, all do not fail him. Simon helps him to carry his cross and the women are faithful, even if “at a distance.” Jesus is presented as the *suffering servant*, obedient unto death, even death on a cross (second reading).

On this Passion Sunday, the emphasis is on the *Cross of Christ*, this is lifted high. For our sake, Jesus “empties” himself. To be filled with God, we must first do the work of self-emptying: empty ourselves of the false self,

which is proud, jealous, greedy, rude, unforgiving, dishonest, self-sufficient, etc.

FAITH SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Which part of the passion struck you most deeply this year? Why?
2. What verse speaks to you most in the first reading? What, if anything, in the servant’s experience speaks to you most?
3. Fidelity to Jesus and his word is a daily challenge. What helps you to remain faithful? What distracts you or makes it hard?
4. How does listening to the Passion of Jesus help you deal with the big disasters that occur in our world, e.g. terrorist acts, hurricanes, Tsunami disasters etc?
5. What does Holy Week mean to you?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on God’s word in today’s readings. Suggestions: Be patient with the sufferings in your life. Join them to the sufferings of Christ and offer them up for some cause in the world. Pray for people carrying a heavy cross at this time. Pray that morning after morning, the Lord may open the ears of your heart to hear God’s word.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Especially pray for all who are suffering in body, mind, and spirit and for their caregivers. Pray that many people will participate in our Holy Week services. ©

MEDITATION

All disciples come to this same dark night when our faith in the Lord is shaken. There may be earthquakes and explicit denials, troubling dreams and profitable betrayals. Or we may simply fall asleep when our presence is needful, or run away when called upon to risk a stand. We may join with the crowds and call for Barabbas over Jesus, even shout for the blood of the innocent. We may be the ones who jeer and mock, or simply the ones who say nothing in the face of injustice.

The night when our faith is shaken is the bleakest night our soul can know. But the disciples survive it to become the apostles, turning the shame of desertion into the courage of martyrdom. The only one who is not transformed is the one who condemned himself for his failure, fearing God’s justice and forgetting God’s mercy.