

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

February 26, 2012 B

Note to Facilitator: If possible, set up a Lenten environment in the center of your meeting place, e.g., a purple cloth placed on a small table, an open Bible, a candle, a barren branch, a bowl of water to remind us that we are preparing to renew our baptismal promises at Easter.

Opening prayer: *Lord of heaven and earth, you created water to nourish and cleanse us. Yet water can be also deadly, as it was in the days of Noah. As we journey toward the water of the baptismal font, prepare us to die to sin and rise to fuller life in your Son. Let this time of sharing reflect our gratitude to you for your many blessings. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Sharing life question for ongoing groups: What does the Lenten season call you to?

Note to new seasonal groups: The purpose of the “sharing of life” question is to help you to get to know each other in your joys and sorrows. Share at a level comfortable for you. This week share the name of your home state, how long you have been in the parish, your favorite pastime, and what motivated you to join a small group.

Facilitator reads focus statement: The Cycle B readings of Lent have a strong emphasis on the covenant and renewal of the covenant between God and his people. This covenant theme is particularly evident in several of the first readings. During this Lenten season, God is calling us to renew and deepen our covenantal relationship with him. Also during this season, we join in prayerful spirit with the “Elect” who are preparing for initiation into our Church. We also prepare to renew and deepen our baptismal commitment to God and his Church.

In this week’s first reading, God makes a covenant with all of creation promising never to destroy it again as he did in the Great Flood. In the second reading, Peter sees the cleansing water of the Flood as a prefigurement of the cleansing waters of baptism. In the Gospel, we encounter Jesus out in the desert fighting the powers of evil. The readings can also be seen in the context of *how we live our lives in the midst of conflict*. In the first reading, people are dealing with the conflict that follows a natural disaster. The second reading focuses on the spiritual conflict between right and wrong. The Gospel has Jesus in conflict with Satan.

Consider reading the commentary before or after each Scripture reading.

FIRST READING: Genesis 9:8-15

These verses recount for us the covenant God entered into with Noah, his descendants, and all living creatures after the Flood. What is unique about this covenant with Noah is its *universal* character. Unlike conventional treaties between tribes or nations, God’s covenant with Noah extends to every living creature. It is a covenant between God and the whole earth. In the covenant, God promises that never again will unruly waters destroy the world and its inhabitants. Like the forty days of Lent, forty days of deluge rains are required to cleanse the earth of its sin and rebellion against God. In and through the Ark, God protects a few faithful people and reproductive pairs of every kind of animal. The *rainbow* in the sky is intended to be a visible sign of the covenant between God and humanity. It is also a sign of God’s presence and serves as a reminder to the people of their responsibilities before God.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 25

The author is seeking divine guidance, remembering God’s compassion, especially for sinners and for the humble.

SECOND READING: 1Peter 3:18-22

This reading may have been part of an instruction on baptism in the Early Church. The key point of the instruction reminds us of the efficacy of Christ’s sufferings and death. Through his death and Resurrection, all have access to God. The reference to Christ preaching to the “spirits in prison” has baffled biblical scholars for years. No one is clear as to who these “spirits” might be. The gist of the verse is that Christ’s saving work extends to all, even to those beyond the confines of this life.

The author then goes on to contrast the waters of the Flood to the waters of baptism. (Both the New Testament writers and the Early Church Fathers

looked to the Old Testament for hidden signs and symbols that foreshadowed and prepared the way for events and teachings in the life of Christ and his Church.) Just as Noah saved others from the devastating waters of the Flood, so Christ saves us from the ultimate destruction of separation from God. Peter then insists that baptism is not just some external cleansing. Rather, it brings about an inner transformation making us like Christ. Remember the old definition of a sacrament? It is an outward sign (in Baptism, this is water) signifying an inner reality (in Baptism, cleansing the soul of sin and filling it with the grace or the life of Christ).

GOSPEL: Mark 1:12-15

Each year the Gospel of the first Sunday in Lent has Jesus led by the Spirit into the desert to confront the powers of darkness and to prepare Jesus for his public ministry. The desert is a place of testing for Jesus' ancestors. In the desert, the Israelites fail to remain faithful to God. In contrast, Jesus is faithful.

The reference to "wild beasts" is intended to communicate the savage nature of the temptations. "Angels ministering" to Jesus is a reminder of how the angel has visited Elijah in his time of trial, bringing him bread and water. It is possible that Mark is seeking to convey to his community that in time of trial and testing, Jesus will also be present to sustain them.

After his time in the desert, Jesus begins his public ministry of preaching the Good News of God's unconditional love, the Good News of God's presence with us in times of darkness and suffering. Jesus also preaches a message of repentance; a call to change, in the most radical of ways, one's vision of life; a call to make God and his values the center of one's life.

Mark, unlike Luke and Matthew, does not outline for us the three temptations of Jesus. For Mark, Jesus' conflict with Satan only begins in the desert. The conflict will continue when Jesus meets individuals who are possessed. Satan is seen as the "strong man" whom Jesus will bind.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. In the Great Flood, God cleanses creation polluted by sin. How do we pollute creation today? How aware are you of environmental issues? Do you recycle? Do you conserve water and use reusable items?

2. In the second reading, Peter speaks of our baptism and its meaning. Would your life be different if you had never been baptized? What does being a baptized Catholic or Christian mean to you?

3. In the Gospel, Satan tempts Jesus right after he is baptized. What temptations do you face that makes it difficult for you to live out your baptismal commitment?

4. Spiritually, Lent is a "desert time." What do you need to do as a disciple to create a desert atmosphere in your environment? Examples: fasting, less television.

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

The purpose of this part of your gathering is to name one way you might *act* on the Word that you have just discussed. St. James reminds us that we must be "*doers* of the word and not just hearers" (1:21-24). It is often a challenge for participants to name ways that they can act on the readings. Hence, the following suggestions are offered.

Reflect on how Satan might be trying to pull you away from Christ and his ways. What will help you to resist his temptations and allurements? Can you name one way you can respond to or put into action a message in today's readings?

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Each gathering ends with some prayers of *petition* (prayers for oneself) and *intercession* (prayers for others). Ideally, this would include prayers related to the readings. Some suggestions are usually offered. Since Lent is a time of final preparation for the Elect's Baptism and entrance into the Church, keep them in your prayers. Pray also for all who are battling with floods, literally or metaphorically.

CLOSING PRAYER

Blessed are you, God of Creation, for you have placed us in a world of wonders and then sent your Son to redeem us and teach us your wisdom. Help us to use your gifts as you intend. Draw the Elect and all of us closer to you in this holy season. We make our prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Note to all Participants: Try hard to prepare for next week's session by reading beforehand the commentary on the readings. Finally, remember if this is your first meeting, Satan will be working overtime to give you good reasons why you should not return next week.

Lessons from Noah's Ark

- One:** Don't miss the boat.
- Two:** Remember that we are all in the same boat.
- Three:** Plan ahead. It wasn't raining when Noah built the Ark.
- Four:** Stay fit. When you are old, someone may ask you to do something really big.
- Five:** Don't listen to critics; just get on with the job that needs to be done.
- Six:** Build your future on high ground.
- Seven:** For safety's sake, travel in pairs.
- Eight:** Speed isn't always an advantage. The snails were on board with the cheetahs.
- Nine:** When you're stressed, float a while.
- Ten:** Remember, the Ark was built by amateurs, the Titanic by professionals.
- Eleven:** No matter the storm, when you are with God there's always a rainbow waiting.

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

March 4, 2012 B

Opening prayer: *God, our Father, you have chosen us to be your sons and daughters. You love us even more than Abraham loved Isaac. You cherish us as you cherish your beloved Son. Though we do not deserve it, we rejoice in your love. Help us to trust in that love and to find more ways to share your love with others. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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

Note to new groups: The above “sharing of life” question offers you the opportunity to share some of the good and not so good things in your life. You might be most grateful for health, a good report from the doctor, lunch with a good friend, some conflict that got resolved, etc. You might be least grateful for some physical pain, emotional stress, overcrowded schedule, an attitude or behavior that makes life more difficult for you. Try to think deeply about this question and share at a level comfortable for you. Having the courage to share something quite personal could free others to open up in a similar manner. Such sharing usually creates a deep bond between participants. We come to see that we are not alone in our struggles. So now take a moment to name one thing that you are most and least grateful for this past week.

Facilitator reads focus statement: Today’s first reading and Gospel speak to us about the relationship between two fathers and their sons. In the first reading, Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his beloved son prefigures the sacrifice of Jesus, God’s beloved Son. In the second reading, Paul reminds us that with God on our side we cannot lose. From another viewpoint, we can say that all three readings give us a glimpse of what it was like for Abraham, Peter, James, John and Paul to “walk in the presence of the Lord.”

Consider reading the commentary before or after each Scripture reading.

FIRST READING: Genesis 22:1-2, 9-13, 15-18

The story of Abraham is about a man who listens to God and responds with faith and obedience. When he hears God’s call to leave his homeland, he obeys. When God promises him and his wife Sarah a child, he believes even though Sarah is advanced in years. When God asks him to sacrifice his only son, he does not question God. This is a story of a man trusting God even when it makes no sense to trust him. Being a man of great faith, *Abraham presumes God knows what he is doing*. Abraham’s response to God is not “Why, God?” or “Why me?” but one of obedience, trust and action. In the context of our Lenten liturgy, this reading points to the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. This story is also intended to teach the Israelites about the immorality of human sacrifice—something that was normal during Abraham’s time. As beloved sons and daughters of God, we are called to faithfulness and obedience especially in times of trials.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 116

This is a song of thanksgiving sung in the temple by the Israelites in gratitude to God for helping them in their time of distress. One could easily imagine

Abraham and Isaac singing this psalm after the Lord delivers them from their ordeal.

SECOND READING: Romans 8:31-34

These verses may have been written by Paul to encourage people whose faith is being tested because of suffering. Paul’s question, “*If God is for us, who can be against us?*” is intended to elicit a response of faith. Who can defeat those who have God on their side? God’s willingness to sacrifice his only Son on our behalf should surely prove, without doubt, his love and interest in us.

GOSPEL: Mark 9:2-10

In this indescribable event, Jesus and his three apostles experience the glory of God. They are, as it were, transported into another reality. The references to Jesus’ face “dazzling as the sun” and his “clothes radiant as light” are reminiscent of Old Testament theophanies (appearances of God). The presence of Moses and Elijah symbolize “the Law” (given to Moses) and “the Prophets.” In Jesus, both converge and are brought to fulfillment. The response of the apostles is one of incredible *joy* and *holy terror*. They are so over-awed that they do not want to leave: “*Let’s build three booths.*” But they

are also overcome with fear. Spiritual theologians tell us that the “*experience of the holy*” can cause us to be overjoyed and terrified at the same time. Sometimes that which we most deeply desire, e.g. intimacy with God or another, may also be most terrifying to us. We are afraid of losing ourselves to another. The heavenly voice tells the apostles to *listen* to Jesus for he is God’s anointed Messiah. In the dark days ahead, this mountaintop experience will sustain both Jesus and the apostles. Remember the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the night before he died, “*We have some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t matter now. Because I have been to the mountaintop...mine eyes have seen the glory of the Lord.*”

CLOSING PRAYER

Blessed are you, God of Abraham. You called him to serve you obediently. Give us the courage to respond as wholeheartedly as he did. May we always listen to your beloved Son and be obedient to your will. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse, image or idea in the readings spoke to you most and why?
2. What was the toughest thing God ever asked of you? Abraham would have answered, “When God asked me to sacrifice my only son.” What would your answer be?
3. Who are or what are our Isaacs that we may find very hard to surrender to God if asked?
4. In the second reading, Paul says, “*If God is for us, who can be against us?*” To what extent have you felt God’s providential care down through the years? Was there ever a time you felt God had abandoned you?
5. Spiritually, have you ever had a “mountaintop” experience? If so, what was that like for you? How did it change your life?

RESPONDING TO GOD’S WORD

Name one way you can act on this week’s readings. Suggestion: This week, pray frequently for a transfiguration of a difficult relationship.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Include all those who feel abandoned by God and Church, those who have recently lost a child, and couples who desire to have a child.

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

March 11, 2012 B

Opening prayer: *Blessed are you, God of the Covenant. You formed Israel as your covenant people. You invite us into a new covenant of love in your Son. Help us to live always in accord with your will. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Sharing life: What thus far has been the highlight of 2012 for you?

Facilitator reads focus statement: Our first reading tells about the covenant God made with Israel by giving them the Ten Commandments to live by. In the Gospel, Jesus reacts with anger to abuses in the Temple which he sees as violating the covenant. In our second reading, Paul calls us to embrace divine wisdom though the world may see it as foolishness.

Consider reading the commentary before or after each Scripture reading.

FIRST READING: Exodus 20:1-17

This is one of two versions of the Ten Commandments that we find in the Old Testament. (The other version can be found in Dt 5:6-21.) On Mount Sinai, God enters into a holy covenant relationship with the people of Israel whom he has just delivered from the slavery of Egypt (Ex 19). Briefly, the covenant relationship states: “*God (alone) will be Israel’s God. He will travel with them offering protection and guidance. In response, Israel will follow God’s ways.*” To help the people of Israel understand more concretely what God expects of them, he gives them the Decalogue (“Ten Words”), better known as the “Ten Commandments.” The first three commandments pertain to Israel’s relationship with God while the last seven bear upon the people’s relationship with each other.

In the *First Commandment*, God calls Israel to worship God *alone* and forbids them to carve any images of him. Israel’s neighbors have many gods and have carved images of them. God is greater than any human attempt to capture him in an icon or statue. God knows that it is easy to move from the *veneration* of an image to *worship* of it.

“*I am a jealous God.*” God’s “jealousy” is like the protective care a parent has for his/her children. It also means that God must be first in our lives. He will not tolerate competition. That being the case, if we sincerely abide by the *First Commandment*, following the other nine will be much easier. On the other hand, if we ignore that commandment, we will all too easily fail when it comes to following the other nine.

The *Second Commandment* calls on Israel to honor God’s name. In fact they so revere God’s name that they avoid using it. In prayer, they use another name for God—*Adonai*, i.e., Lord. Especially forbidden is the use of God’s name for purposes of perjury, magic and curses.

The *Third Commandment* calls on Israel to set aside one day a week for worship of God. This commandment also ensures that workers, especially slaves, have some time off.

The *Fourth* through the *Tenth Commandments* are intended to safeguard, protect, and uphold those values upon which a holy and wholesome society is built, e.g., family ties and parental respect (*Fourth*); reverence for life (*Fifth*); marriage and fidelity (*Sixth*); the rights of proprietorship (*Seventh*); honesty and sincerity (*Eighth*); and home and hearth (*Ninth* and *Tenth*).

The seven commandments which address Israel’s social relationships are very much derived from the first three commandments, for when life with God is rightly ordered and honored, life with others will most likely be also healthy and holy.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 19

The faithful Israelite sees God’s law as a guide and not as a hindrance to true freedom. “*The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul*” (v.8).

SECOND READING: 1Corinthians 1:22-25

Commenting on this reading, Fr. Lawrence Mick writes:

This brief passage confronts us with a basic decision each of us must make. Will we live by the wisdom of the world or by the foolishness of God? So much of our faith life defies conventional wisdom. Our society certainly doesn't teach us to serve others, to fight for justice for the oppressed or to put love above money, just to mention a few values. The gospel teaches us a whole different way of viewing the world and of responding to life. If we try to live the gospel, many will consider us foolish. Are we willing to risk that?

GOSPEL: John 2:13-25

The cleansing of the Temple can be seen as an enactment of the first two readings. Jesus rejects those who put commerce ahead of worship of the Father. He acts foolishly in the eyes of those around him, rejecting what was commonly accepted and risking a violent reaction.

John places this event at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, while the synoptic gospels place it just before the passion. John probably positions it here to illustrate the meaning of Jesus' mission. John links the cleansing of the Temple to its destruction, indicating the end of the old covenant and its forms of worship. The new covenant is in Jesus' body, and the new worship, as Jesus tells the woman at the well, is in spirit and in truth.

To remain in this covenant then, we must be faithful members of Christ's Body, the Church. We must worship in the Holy Spirit and in truth, and we must live in that same spirit of truth.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What spoke to you most in today's readings? Why?
2. Name some ways you see people today violating the First Commandment. What helps you to keep God first in your life? What makes it difficult?
3. Can you give an example where living the Gospel can make you look foolish to others? If you have a personal example, what gave you the courage to be true to your beliefs?
4. How do you react or respond to the image of Jesus portrayed in the Gospel?

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Name one way you can act on today's readings. Suggestions: Is there one of the Ten Commandments that you are neglecting? If so, pray for the grace of true conversion. What in your life competes for first place with God? Be sure it doesn't become a false idol.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray especially for the purification of our Church and ourselves, and for the grace and skill to express our anger in a constructive way. Pray for the Elect preparing for Baptism and entrance into our Church this Easter.

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you cleansed the Temple so that it would be dedicated to worship. Cleanse our hearts that we might be dedicated to you. We ask this of you who live and reign with the Father and the Spirit forever. Amen.

(Note: If your parish does the three scrutinies for the Elect on the 3rd, 4th and 5th Sundays of Lent, the readings may be from Cycle A at one of the Masses.)

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

March 18, 2012 B

Opening prayer: *God of our ancestors, we thank you for gathering us together in your name. We thank you for continuing to be patient with us when we fail to follow your ways. Help us during this Lenten journey to commit ourselves more fully to you. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Sharing life: How is Lent coming for you?

Facilitator reads focus statement: The first reading speaks of Israel's infidelities to God despite his "early and frequent" outreach to them. The second and third readings emphasize that our salvation is a *free gift* which we can accept or reject.

Consider reading the commentary before or after each Scripture reading.

FIRST READING: 2Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23

The author of the two books of Chronicles judges Israel's kings and people according to their fidelity or infidelity to their covenant with God. In this reading, which has three parts to it, we first hear about the people's outright infidelity to God despite his mercy and warnings to change. In the second part, we hear how God finally "loses his cool" with Israel. The Chaldeans are God's instrument of punishment. The Israelites' beloved Jerusalem and temple are destroyed. Many people are killed. Survivors are carried off to Babylon to live in exile and slavery. The reading ends on a note of hope—a new pagan king named Cyrus issues a decree permitting the exiles to return home and rebuild their city and temple.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 137

This psalm is sometimes called "*The Song of the Exile.*" It gives us a vivid description of how the Israelites felt during their exile in Babylon.

SECOND READING: Ephesians 2:4-10

In these beautiful verses, Paul calls to mind God's amazing mercy and grace, which raise us up from the death that comes through sin. Our salvation is pure gift. We can do nothing to earn it. But we can thank God for his saving grace by living lives filled with good works. Commenting on these verses, William Barclay writes: "*All the good works in the world cannot put you right with God; but there is something radically wrong with the Christian life that does not express itself in good works.*"

GOSPEL: John 3:14-21

On their way through the desert, many of the Israelites are bitten by serpents and some of them die. At God's command, Moses makes a bronze serpent and mounts it on a pole. Whoever looks at the serpent is healed. Likewise, all who look to Christ with faith and repentance will be saved. Believing in Christ is a choice to live in the light. We can open our hearts to the light or we can reject the light. The choice is ours. Acceptance of the light will lead us to heaven. Rejection of the light will lead us to eternal damnation. In reality, God sends no one to hell. It is something we opt for by deliberately and consciously choosing to live our lives without God.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse spoke to you most and why?
2. In last week's Gospel and in this week's first reading, God is angry. What helps you deal with your own anger and other people's anger?
3. The second reading clearly states that we cannot *earn* salvation with good works. So what is the purpose of good works in the life of a Christian?
4. Do you believe in hell? How do you square its existence with an all-loving God? What kinds of behaviors deserve hell for all eternity?

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Name one way you can act on today's readings. Suggestions: If you still act as if you have to *earn* your salvation, try to change your mindset. Instead see your actions as a response to a God who loves

you very much. If you have quit on your Lenten resolutions, start up again. If you have been faithful, praise God for the grace of fidelity.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray for all who suffer from a hardened heart and have no desire to seek God and his ways. Pray for our Elect.

CLOSING PRAYER

Thank you, God of love, for loving us so much that you sent your Son to save us. Free us from any tendencies we have toward believing we must earn our salvation. Help us to cooperate with your grace.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

March 25, 2012 B

Opening prayer: *God of our ancestors, you have entered into a new covenant with us through the death and Resurrection of Jesus. Help us to be more faithful to our covenant relationship with you. Bless us now as we prepare to share our lives and your Word. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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

Facilitator reads focus statement: In our first reading, Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant that God will enter into with his people. This promise of a new covenant is fulfilled in the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus. The second reading is a beautiful example of the humanity of Christ.

Consider reading the commentary before or after each Scripture reading.

FIRST READING: Jeremiah 31:31-34

The verses that make up this reading are recognized as some of the most important verses in biblical literature because they speak of a ‘new covenant’ that God will enter into with his people.

Even though Jeremiah is a southern prophet (Judah) who prophesied long after the collapse of the northern kingdom (Israel), his message in today’s reading looks to a future time when God “will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.” While the demands of the old covenant were written on stone tablets, the law of the new covenant will be inscribed on the hearts of each individual member of the community. While the old covenant called for *external* conformity, the new one will necessitate interior commitment and transformation. This is only possible when we cooperate with the grace of God and the Holy Spirit. The verses that say: “*I will place my law within them and write it on their hearts.... No longer will they have need to teach their friends and relatives how to know the Lord...*” should not be interpreted as a reason to do away with religious education and catechesis programs. Rather, these verses express how God can speak directly to our hearts. Intimate union with God occurs as we cooperate with God’s grace. Catechesis has an important role to play in our faith formation and spiritual growth. But we only grow spiritually when we open our hearts to God and develop a personal relationship with him.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 51

This is David’s famous act of contrition, which he prays after he commits the sins of adultery and murder. David pleads for mercy and a new heart.

SECOND READING: Hebrews 5:7-9

This is a beautiful passage on the *humanity* of Jesus. It speaks of Christ as pleading with God “in tears” and “loud cries.” He becomes perfect or mature by the way he handles hardship, suffering and death. Because of his own experience of suffering, Jesus, our High Priest and brother, can sympathize with us in our pain and suffering. Furthermore, through his suffering, Jesus is exalted and gains salvation for all who accept him.

GOSPEL: John 12:20-33

The religious leaders are worried that the “whole world” is flocking to the side of Jesus. The first evidence of this is the appearance of some Greeks who come to Philip and ask him if he can arrange for them a meeting with Jesus. Their presence shows that Jesus has come to save not just the Israelites, but all people. Following are eight comments on this discourse from John’s Gospel:

1. Jesus begins his discourse by speaking of his “*hour.*” This is a reference to Jesus’ return to God. He will pass through death, be raised up, and return to his Father.
2. Jesus uses the analogy of a *wheat grain* to speak of life and death. Just as a grain of wheat must first die before it bears fruit, so too must Jesus die prior to his Resurrection, and so too must we die to sin and selfishness before we bear godly fruit in our lives. Married couples know this more than other people. For the marriage to grow, each spouse must frequently die to his/her own desires.
3. “*Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life, will preserve it.*” This means that those who cling to their lives, concerned only about themselves, will eventually lose out on the meaning

of life, which is to love and serve others. Thomas Merton talks about our *true self* and *false self*. The *true self* is that part of us that seeks to follow God and his ways. The *false self* is that part that wants to be independent of God and his ways, the part that is self-centered, controlling, jealous, etc. This self we must “hate”—or we might say “deny”—and not allow to control our lives. This false self must be transformed by praying, fasting and penance.

4. “*Whoever serves me must follow me... The Father will honor whoever serves me.*” Serving Jesus means, among other things, being willing to lay down one’s life for others—to die to the desires of the false self. To serve Jesus is to follow him in his path of love and to carry one’s cross. Such service and love will honor the Father.

5. “*Save me from the hour*” is a reference to Jesus’ agony in the garden. It is a beautiful statement about Jesus’ humanity. As a person who loves life and people, he has no desire to die. He recoils from it. Yet, if going through this “*hour*” is what he must do, then he is willing to embrace it.

6. “*Then came a voice from heaven*” is reminiscent of the voice that spoke at Jesus’ baptism and transfiguration. “*I have glorified the Father.*” Jesus gives “glory” to the Father (and so do we) by following the will of God. Jesus also says: “*I always do the things that please the Father.*”

7. “*Now is the time of judgment in this world. Now the ruler of this world will be drawn out.*” The judgment is our “yes” or “no” to Jesus. When we say “yes,” love is released into the world, and darkness and evil are overthrown, and vice-versa.

8. “*When I am lifted up, I will draw everyone to myself*” is a reference to Jesus’ cross and how the force of his love will attract and draw people to him.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse spoke to you most? Why?
2. Many go through our Catholic school system yet do not develop a personal relationship with Jesus, i.e., catechesis without a conversion of heart. When and how did you come to have a personal relationship with Jesus? Have you had the experience of God *directly* communicating with you?
3. How does the picture of a vulnerable Jesus praying to God with “loud cries and tears” touch

you? How easy or hard is it for you to be this vulnerable before God? Do you tend to pray more with your head or heart?

4. In the Gospel, Jesus speaks of the “*wheat grain that must die*” and proclaims that “*whoever loses his life will preserve it.*” What is Jesus asking of us in these verses? Can you give one example of how losing your life may lead to spiritual growth?

5. Also in the Gospel, Jesus says: “*Father, save me from this hour*” (the hour of his suffering and death). Can you share an event in your life when you might also have said the same thing to God? What helped you to get through that hour?

RESPONDING TO GOD’S WORD

Name one way you can act on today’s readings. Suggestions: Die to sinful attitudes/behaviors. The Sacrament of Reconciliation gives us an opportunity to look at where sin lives in our lives. It also gives us the opportunity to name that sin, renounce it and renew our covenant relationship with the Lord. Consider participating in your parish’s Lenten Penance Service.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray especially for all those carrying a cross. Pray for the Elect of our parish. Ask God to move “Easter churchgoers” to return to the Eucharist more frequently.

CLOSING PRAYER

Blessed are you, Father of Jesus, for you have brought us into the new covenant. You have made us brothers and sisters of Jesus and of one another. Help us always to live in your love. We make our prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Note to Facilitators: Next week is Palm Sunday—the Gospel is the Passion according to Mark. If you are going to read the Passion during your meeting, perhaps you can assign various members of the group to be prepared to read specified sections of the story. Or you may decide to read the Passion prior to the meeting. In addition, read the extended commentary on the passion, which will help you to see Mark’s specific objectives.

PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION

April 1, 2012 B

Opening prayer: *Father, we once again prepare to celebrate the holiest week in our Church year, the celebration of Jesus' Passion, Death and Resurrection. May your holy spirit give us new and fresh insight and appreciation of those events in your Son's life. This we pray through Christ Our Lord. Amen.*

Sharing life: Is there a Holy Week that stands out for you as particularly special?

Facilitator reads focus statement: This weekend we begin Holy Week, the holiest week of our Church year. We recall and enter into the central events in the life of Jesus, his suffering, death and Resurrection. 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 not reading the Passion, consider going over the other assigned readings, pausing briefly at the end of 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 see in them images of Jesus, the Suffering Servant of God.

As we listen to this reading, we can see why it is chosen for today's liturgy. The servant speaks of himself as a preacher of God's Word. God opens his servant's ear everyday to receive the Word and he has been faithful in proclaiming it to others.

Those to whom he proclaims it, however, have often not responded with gratitude. He has been beaten, spit upon, and has his beard plucked. Despite this abuse, however, he remains steadfast, relying on God as his strength. "*The Lord is my help. 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 a prayer of lament describing the suffering of the psalmist and his deliverance. Jesus on the cross makes this psalm his own.

SECOND READING: Philippians 2:6-11

Writing from prison, Paul addresses a community with proud and independent ways. They often bicker among themselves. Paul admonishes the people to set aside their bickering ways and to live in harmony. He holds up to them as a model "the attitude of Christ" who "emptied himself" and

became a slave. Notice in this beautiful and well-structured hymn a *downward* and *upward* movement. Jesus taking on our human status is the downward movement. Though equal to God, Jesus does not cling to his divinity for his own ends. Without losing his godlike status, he takes on the likeness of human beings. He experiences humiliation and debasement that few humans suffer. Having experienced the depths of human suffering and having been totally faithful to his mission, God "*exalts*" him and bestows on him a name above every other name. (This is the upward movement in this hymn.) The entire universe is brought under his lordship and all bend down before him. Like the servant in the first reading, God comes to the help of Jesus, the servant *par excellence*, and gives him the name "Lord"—a name given only to God in the Old Testament. In and through his weakness, obedience, and servant-like attitude, Jesus achieves greatness and lordship.

THE PASSION OF JESUS ACCORDING TO MARK—14:1-15:47

The suffering and death of Jesus are the centerpiece of Mark's Gospel. Hints of the passion are found already in chapters 1-2, and by chapter 3, a plot against Jesus is being planned. Halfway through the Gospel, Mark has Jesus predicting three times the details of his passion. In chapter 11, Jesus arrives in Jerusalem for the events which this Sunday's liturgy enacts ritually. Six of the 16 chapters of Mark are devoted exclusively to the last week of Jesus' life. This has led scholars to call Mark's Gospel a "passion narrative with an extended

introduction.” Two central themes to watch for in Mark’s Gospel are:

- The contrast between *Jesus’ fidelity* to God and his mission no matter what the cost, and the *infidelity* of the disciples and crowds. Jesus has no desire to die. He prays three times that God would spare him, but if fidelity to God and his mission involves embracing the cross and death, he is willing to do this. This fidelity is expressed in his wonderful prayer of surrender, “*Not my will but your will be done.*” In stark contrast, we notice weakness and infidelity in the disciples. They fall asleep when Jesus needs their support in the garden. Peter, the leader, denies Jesus. Judas betrays him. At the time of his arrest, they “*all fled and left him.*” At the time of his trial, the crowds who have previously sang his praises now chant “*Crucify him! Crucify him!*” But not all are unfaithful. A few women remain faithful. One anoints him; others keep watch as he dies on the cross.
- Mark’s passion presents us with a very *human* picture of Jesus. In the garden, he begs the Father three times to free him from dying. We can *feel* Jesus’ disappointment when he finds his beloved disciples asleep not just once but three times. What must he have felt when all his disciples “fled and left him”? How painful it must have been for Jesus to hear the crowds call for the release of the criminal Barabbas and call for Jesus’ crucifixion. Then consider the scourging of his body, the crowning with thorns, the crucifixion and, most of all, the sense of his Father abandoning him: “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” This is a cry of one steeped in human agony. Jesus pays the ultimate price for fidelity to his call.

AN EXTENDED COMMENTARY ON MARK’S PASSION

A Woman and a Betrayer

Mark’s Passion opens with a beautiful story of a woman showing tender love for Jesus. This story is sandwiched or bracketed by two ugly scenes: the chief priests looking for a way to arrest Jesus and Judas plotting with them for a way to hand Jesus over to his enemies. There is a strong contrast between the two scenes.

Betrayal within the Eucharist

Using his characteristic bracketing technique, Mark places a conversation about betrayal in between the Preparation for the Last Supper and the actual Last Supper.

Gethsemane

After the Last Supper, Jesus goes out to Gethsemane with Peter, James and John. Peter has just said how he will stand by Jesus no matter what. Earlier in the Gospel, James and John assert that they can “drink the cup of suffering” with Jesus. Now we see the vast difference between words and actions. They fall asleep when Jesus most needs their support. Later, they will all flee and Peter will deny Jesus. In contrast, Jesus remains faithful to God but not without a struggle. He hopes against hope for a way other than the way of the cross. In the end, he surrenders to God’s will (“*not my will but your will ...*”). In John 4:34, the Apostles offer Jesus food, to which he responds: “*My food is to do the will of Him who sent me.*” In the Passion event, it is important for us to remember that God is *not* demanding that Jesus die a cruel death. Rather, he wants Jesus to be faithful to his mission even if it means a cruel death. It is in truth the sin of humanity that brought about Jesus’ sufferings and death.

The Arrest of Jesus

In this scene we witness further the abandonment of Jesus. We just read how Jesus is abandoned through the human weakness of Peter, James and John. Now, we have the betrayal of Jesus by Judas. He treats Jesus as a friend by kissing him and, at the same time, plants the kiss to point Jesus out to the authorities. Then Mark tells us, “*all left him and fled.*” Jesus is now left alone with his enemies. Not one of his friends shows faithful discipleship. In contrast, Jesus shows himself to be fearless and speaks up with dignity to those who come to arrest him.

Peter’s Denial and the Trial of Jesus

The trial of Jesus is a farce. Trials are not allowed at night. False witnesses fail to agree with each other. During his trial, Jesus continues to show himself to be courageous and confident. When he declares himself to be the Christ, the blessed one, he knows he is signing his own death sentence and yet he does it. Then follows the threefold denial of Peter. These two stories are another example of *contrast*

so strong in Mark's Passion. As two examples of behavior under pressure, Jesus shows us what to do and Peter shows us what *not* to do. Jesus exemplifies courage; Peter cowardice. Jesus, while losing his life through steadfast witness, ultimately saves it; Peter, trying to save himself, in fact, condemns himself. Readers are called to follow Jesus. We notice that during his trial, Jesus does affirm that he is the "*Christ, the Son of the Blessed One.*"

Jesus before Pilate

Then Jesus is brought before the Jewish and Roman authorities. Both share in the brutal humiliation of Jesus. Pilate believes Jesus to be innocent but he is too much of a crowd-pleaser to let him go free. He shows himself to be a coward just as Jesus shows himself to be fearless and strong, the innocent sufferer who identifies with all who are unjustly and falsely accused. The crowds also fail Jesus, choosing a criminal before him.

The Crucifixion

Jesus is led away to Golgotha to be crucified. A stranger named Simeon is forced to help Jesus carry his cross. After Jesus is crucified, the bystanders mock and verbally abuse him. Darkness covers the land for three hours. In this time of darkness, Jesus even feels abandoned by God ("*My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?*"). Sin separates us from God. Having taken the weight of the sin of humanity upon his shoulders, Jesus experiences separation from God.

"The veil of the temple is torn in two from top to bottom." This is the veil that separates people from the Holy of Holies into which no one is allowed to enter except the High Priest. The veil is torn back and the way to God is now wide open to all and not just to the High Priest. Then a Gentile soldier, a most unlikely one, recognizes the true identity of Jesus: "*Truly this man is the Son of God.*" We notice the presence of the women who continue to follow Jesus after all his male disciples have fled.

The Burial

In the early days of Christianity, some may have claimed that Jesus never really died. So it is important for Mark to include an account of Jesus' burial so that people will know that Jesus really died. Dying is an essential dimension of being a human person. Joseph of Arimathea, a devout Jew and a member of the Council, shows himself to be

an admirer of Jesus by asking Pilate for his body so that he can give it a proper burial.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What strikes you most about the servant in the first reading? In what way would you like to be more like him?
2. In the second reading Paul speaks about the 'self-emptying' of Christ, something that is required of all of us if we are to be 'filled' with Christ. Concretely, what does this self-emptying process involve? Can you give some examples of it from your life or the lives of others?
3. Which scene in the Passion stirs you the most? Why?
4. Jesus' apostles and friends fall asleep and abandon Jesus when he needs them most. How does this happen today? Do you ever wonder how you would have acted if you had been in the disciples' place 2,000 years ago?

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Name one way you can act on the readings. Suggestions: Be a Simeon to someone carrying a cross. Reflect on what "self-emptying" needs to occur in you so that you will be more filled with Christ.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

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

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