

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

February 21, 2010 C

Opening prayer: *Loving and caring God, this week we begin another Lenten season of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. As we gather together to share your Word, open our hearts to hear and discern your call to each of us and help us to respond to it with generosity. Help us to grow in faithfulness to you and to reject the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Sharing life: If your group is new, or one with some new members, introduce yourselves and share information such as your home state, length of membership in the parish, what you like best about the parish, etc. If you are an ongoing SCC with no new members, share what the season of Lent means to you.

Facilitator reads focus statement: One way to connect this week's readings is to see them as an invitation to be *faithful* to God's call or divine election. In the desert, both Israel and Jesus were *called* to be *faithful* to God. In the first reading, Moses reminds Israel of God's *faithfulness* to them and their call to be *faithful* to him. In the Gospel, Jesus shows *fidelity* to God by saying "no" to Satan's temptations. In the second reading, Paul challenges his readers to show faithfulness to God by *living* what they profess with their lips.

If you have not read the commentary on the readings prior to the meeting, consider doing so after each reading.

FIRST READING: Deuteronomy 26:4-10

The book of Deuteronomy is a series of instructions or homilies given by Moses to the Israelites before they enter the Promised Land.

In this week's reading, Moses tells the people that after their first harvest, they are to take the *first fruits* of the various products of the soil, put them in a basket and offer them to God as an act of thanksgiving. Then during their Harvest Festival, they are to tell the story of God's saving presence in their lives and in the lives of their ancestors. What follows is an important *creedal statement* which identifies three important events in Israel's salvation history. *First*, there is a reference to a "wandering Armenian" who ended up in Egypt. This is probably a reference to Jacob and his sons who went down to Egypt while Joseph was chancellor in Pharaoh's court. *Second*, the *Exodus* is remembered as God hearing the cry of an enslaved people. *Third*, the giving of the *land* "flowing with milk and honey" is remembered. Then Moses reminds the people that their good and faithful God who entered into the history of their ancestors blessing them, *continues* to be a saving presence in their lives, blessing them *now* with a bountiful harvest.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 91

This psalm affirms the nation's reliance on God who delivered them out of slavery. He came to them in time of trouble.

SECOND READING: Romans 10:8-13

These verses also contain a creedal statement of faith by the first Christians. It states that *Jesus is Lord; he died for our sins and was raised up for our justification*. This faith involves "*confession on the lips*" and "*belief in one's heart*" – two aspects of the same act of faith. It is the equivalent of saying that faith has to be a "lived reality" in which the words one professes are backed up by the witness of one's life. A faith *confessed* and *lived* enables one to appropriate for oneself the gift of salvation offered by Jesus. Salvation is God's *free* gift to undeserving sinners. Our task is to graciously *receive* God's gift and then to *act* like saved people.

GOSPEL: Luke 4:1-13

Reflecting on this Sunday's Gospel, the authors of *Living the Word* '10 write:

The Gospel reading today shows how the very obstacles to ministry can be a source of strength if they are met correctly.

After Jesus' baptism he is led by the Spirit into the desert, where he fasts for forty days. This is his identification with the experience of the Israelites in the wilderness for forty years following the Exodus. For the generations of both Moses and Jesus the wilderness experience is a time of testing. God tests the wilderness generation (Exodus 16:4), and the devil tempts Jesus (Luke 4:1-13). While the Israelites repeatedly failed their tests, however, Jesus successfully resists the three temptations.

The challenges confronted by Jesus represent three temptations that are common to all people, temptations that turn us away from others and into ourselves.

- *The inducement to turn a stone into bread tests our trust in God to sustain our life at difficult times.*
- *The enticement to worship the devil in return for all the kingdoms of the world speaks to the pull that riches and power exert over our hearts.*
- *Finally, the temptation to jump from the parapet of the temple represents the tug that self-glorification exerts in our lives.*

In Luke's version of this story, which is the Gospel for today, after successfully resisting the temptations Jesus moves to his ministry "in the power of the Spirit" (4:14). It was the Spirit who led Jesus into the desert where the temptations began (4:1-2). Luke is saying that by resisting the attempts (1. to think and act as if we sustain our own lives, (2) to make wealth and power our goals, and (3) to exult in our own glorification, we live in "the power of the Spirit" from which effective ministry develops and through which it progresses.

Only Luke writes that after his baptism Jesus was praying when the Spirit first descended upon him and then led him into the desert (3:21-22; 4:1). In doing so, Luke is suggesting that in order for Christians to stand firm against temptations they need to remain rooted in prayer.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse, image or idea spoke to you most in the readings? Why?
2. In the first reading, Moses reminds the people of God's goodness to their ancestors. As you reflect over your life, what are some of the things you are most grateful to God for?
3. In the second reading, Paul speaks about "confessing with our lips" and "believing with our hearts" that Jesus is Lord. How easy or hard is it for you to share your faith with others? Can you recall when you shared your faith recently?
4. Jesus called Satan the "father of lies" (John 8:44). What might be some lies that Satan may want to tell us or has told you?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Note to newcomers: in the "Responding to the Word" part of our session, we are invited and challenged to name one way we can act or practice the word we have heard and discussed. St. James tells us that we must be *doers* of God's word and not just hearers. The following are only suggestions for those who may have a difficult time naming one way to act on today's readings. Name one temptation or weakness that you frequently struggle with, and make a big effort this Lent to resist giving in to it. Fast one day this week to remember those who have little or no food.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray for the catechumens and candidates who will be received into our church this Easter. Pray for the strength to resist the temptations of Satan. Pray for guidance on doing something special for this Lent. ©

P.S. If new to this process, you can be sure Satan will be tempting you *not* to return to your small group next week.

Suggestion for Ongoing Group

If you are ill, going for a medical test, or heavily burdened in other ways, consider asking the members of your SCC to pray for you. Such prayer can be very comforting or even very powerful or healing.

PRAYER TO MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL

Saint Michael the Archangel,
defend us in battle;
be our protection
against the snares of the devil.
May God rebuke him,
we humbly pray; and do thou,
O Prince of the Heavenly Host,
by the power of God,
thrust into hell Satan and all evil spirits
who wander throughout the world
for the ruin of souls.
Amen.

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

February 28, 2010 C

Opening prayer: *Good and gracious God, in today's readings you give Abraham, Peter, James and John, a glimpse of your awesome nature. Open our minds and hearts to the Word you want us to hear and act upon as we gather together. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Sharing life: Note to newcomers. The purpose of *sharing life* is to help us to get to know each other. Here we are asked the question: *What are we most and least grateful for this week?* Sample responses: "I am most grateful for the positive results of a medical test for a family member"; "I am least grateful for bad health, for my busy lifestyle," etc.

Facilitator reads focus statement: In the first reading, God makes a fiery appearance to Abraham as a way to renew his covenant with him. In the Gospel, three Apostles are blessed with a glimpse of the glorified Christ. In the second reading, Paul exhorts his worldly centered readers to keep their focus on the world that is to come.

If you have not read the commentary on the readings prior to the meeting, consider doing so after each reading.

FIRST READING: Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18

This covenant-making reading opens with God promising Abram *descendants* and *land*. Considering that both Abram and Sara are nomads and beyond childbearing years, God's promise seems entirely impossible to fulfill. Nevertheless, Abram places his *trust* and *faith* in God's ability to fulfill his promises. When Abram wonders how God can fulfill such outlandish promises, God responds by creating a covenant ritual. Several animals are sliced in two parts. In ancient times, the contracting parties would walk between the divided animal, understanding that if they failed to keep their piece of the contract, they would accept their fate like that of the animal. "Birds of prey swooping down on the carcasses" symbolize forces hostile to Israel.

Then Abram is induced into a deep sleep suitable for divine communication. But note only God, symbolized by a "smoking fire" and a "flaming torch," walks between the divided animals. By acting thus, God is entering into a unilateral covenant of unconditional love with Abram and his descendants. Even if Abram or his descendants fail to trust, God will still continue to love them. The covenant enacted in this reading leads to the covenant at Sinai and culminates in the new and eternal covenant which Jesus sealed in his own blood on Calvary.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 27

This psalm speaks of trust in God. Abram, against all odds, lives this call to trust God.

SECOND READING: Philippians 3:17 - 4:1

In these verses, Paul is expressing concern that his beloved Philippians will be misled by the bad example of some people in their midst who are "enemies of the Christ" and whose "god is their belly." Paul tells his readers not to imitate such people. Rather, they should imitate him who is dedicated to following the true teaching of Christ. Paul reminds the Philippians that here on earth they are pilgrims. Their true home is in heaven. Their involvement in the world must be tempered by the realization that everything here on earth is of a temporary nature as natural disasters bring home to us so clearly.

GOSPEL: Luke 9:28-36

The Transfiguration of Jesus is an epiphany story. In epiphany stories, the veil which separates the invisible world from the visible, and the future from the present, is removed temporarily and the divine is revealed. In the Transfiguration story, Peter, James and John catch a glimpse of Jesus in his glory.

In today's Gospel, Jesus goes with his inner circle to *pray*. Some scholars suggest that at this point in Jesus' ministry, he wonders if he should stay in Galilee to continue preaching the Gospel or to go to Jerusalem where he would most likely be killed. During his prayer on the mountain, Jesus has a mystical experience. God's presence is revealed to him in a very powerful way. "*While he was praying, his face changed in appearance.*"

Then the two giants of Israel's religion appear, Moses (symbolizing the Law) and Elijah (symbolizing the Prophets). They "*spoke of his Exodus that he was*

going to accomplish in Jerusalem.” This is a reference to Jesus’ passage through death to new life. Jesus now knows he must go to Jerusalem even if it means death. (This is not unlike great leaders who know they must go to places that may well cost them their lives.)

Then Luke tells us how this story is also a “mountaintop” or awe-filled experience for Peter, James and John. They are so overcome with what is going on that Peter suggests they set up camp and never leave the place (just like how we might feel after a wonderful retreat experience). But Peter is “in over his head.” He does not know what he is saying. He doesn’t yet know that before the glory comes the cross.

Then a heavenly voice speaks: “*This is my Chosen One; listen to him.*” These words are a wonderful act of affirmation for Jesus by his Father. For the Apostles, it is a moment of great revelation. The One in their midst is truly God’s Chosen One! They must *listen* to him and *follow* him. Of course, they will only recognize the full meaning of this awe-filled event after Jesus has passed through death into new life. This event is a glimpse of what is ahead for Jesus and his inner circle.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse, image or idea spoke to you most in the readings? Why?
2. In the second reading, Paul says that some people “conduct themselves as enemies of the cross” (they don’t want to deal with the tough stuff of life). How easy or hard is it for you to negotiate the tough challenges of life, e.g. loss, aging, relational conflicts, etc.? What helps you to face and deal with life’s tough challenges?
3. In the Gospel, Peter, James and John have a powerful, unforgettable, indescribable experience of God. Have you ever had an experience of God that transformed your life? If not, share a time when you felt especially close to God.
4. Also in the Gospel, the three apostles are told to *listen to Jesus*. How do you go about listening to Jesus? What helps you to listen?
5. What are the characteristics of a good listener (to other people)?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on these readings. Suggestions: Try to be a good witness or example in your environment. Be attentive to the in-breakings of God into the everyday events and encounters of your life. Say “no” to the desires of your belly by fasting one day this week.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Especially pray for people who work in retreat houses and for spiritual directors. ©

When I Ask You to Listen

When I ask you to listen to me
and you start giving advice,
you have not done what I asked.

When I ask you to listen to me,
and you begin to tell me that I shouldn’t
feel that way,
you are trampling on my feelings.

When I ask you to listen to me,
and you feel that you have something
to solve my problem,
then you have failed me, strange as that may seem.

Listen! All I ask is that you listen,
not talk, not do: just hear me.

Advice is cheap, and I can do things for myself.
I’m not helpless
you contribute to my fear and weakness.

But when you accept as a simple fact
that I do feel what I feel, no matter how irrational,
then I can stop trying to convince you,
and get on with the business of understanding
what’s behind my feelings.

Perhaps that’s why prayer works, sometime,
for some people, because God is quiet,
and He doesn’t give advice or try to fix things.
He just listens and lets you work it out for yourself.

So please listen and just hear me.
And if you want to talk, wait a minute for your turn,
and I’ll listen to you.

Anonymous

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

March 7, 2010 C

Opening prayer: *Liberating God, thank you for gathering us together as your people to share life and your Word. Just as you revealed yourself to Moses, reveal yourself to us as we listen to your word. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Sharing life: How is your lent going? What makes it hard to stay on track?

Facilitator reads focus statement: Lent is a time for conversion, a turning toward God and away from anything that separates us from him. Today we hear the story of Moses turning toward a burning bush and finding the living and saving God. In the second reading and Gospel, there is a call to repentance.

If you have not read the commentary on the readings prior to the meeting, consider doing so after each reading.

FIRST READING: Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15

When God appears to Moses in the burning bush, Moses is a fugitive, having murdered a man in Egypt some years previously. Now he is married and is a shepherd of his father-in-law's flock. God identifies himself as the God of Moses' ancestors – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God also tells Moses that he has heard the cry of his suffering people in Egypt and that he intends to free them. (Unfortunately omitted from today's passage is Moses' actual call: "Come now! I will send you ..." [v.10], and God's reassurance to Moses that he will be with him during his mission [v.12]). Moses asks God his name. God answers: "*I am, who I am*"—a name that defies accurate definition. A possible translation is: "*I am Someone who will be with you and for you no matter what.*"

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 103

This psalm of thanksgiving recounts God's goodness to Moses and the Israelites and God's desire to deliver the oppressed.

SECOND READING: 1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12

In this reading, Paul warns the Corinthians (and us) not to equate election (being chosen) with salvation. Their ancestors received many blessings from God, yet most did not follow his ways. Then Paul, in a daring and remarkable act of creative interpretation, reads back into Israel's history the presence of Christ, the Rock, and sees in the waters of the Red Sea and the desert manna prefigurements of the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist. While traveling through the desert, the Israelites receive many spiritual blessings (sacraments in a way) and yet they fall away from God. Paul reminds the Corinthians that despite the salvation they have received through the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, *they must work at continu-*

ous conversion lest they perish like their ancestors. Failure to heed God's call to ongoing conversion will bring dire consequences.

GOSPEL: Luke 13:13-19

Today's Gospel makes reference to two disasters which the people ask Jesus to comment on. They seem to believe that bad things have befallen the victims because they are sinners. The absence of bad things in the questioners' lives implies that they are righteous and not in need of repentance.

Jesus quickly sets his questioners straight on this issue: "Bad things didn't happen to the victims in either incident because they were unrighteous or bad people. And the absence of bad things in your lives does not mean that you are not in need of repentance. Indeed you are." Jesus says: "*You are all in need of repentance and if you do not repent, you will perish.*" The unrepentant will suffer a fate worse than the victims of the disaster. Jesus uses the two terrible events as a metaphor for the catastrophic ending that awaits those who refuse to repent. Jesus is saying the big tragedy in life is not being abused or killed accidentally. Rather, true tragedy rests in the hearts of each of us and our capacity to reject God's call to repentance and change of heart.

Jesus is saying to his audience and to us: "Don't be preoccupied with why bad things happen to people. Rather, be concerned about the condition of your own soul." When people are tragically killed, it is indeed awful. But for Jesus, a worse tragedy is a mind and heart closed to God. *No one* can afford to be spiritually complacent.

Then Jesus tells the parable of the *Fig Tree*, sometimes called "*The Parable of the Second Chance.*" The owner of the fig tree notices that it is bearing no fruit so he wants to cut it down. The vinedresser asks

that it be given one more chance: “*Sir, leave it for another year.*” The fig tree represents Israel. The Vinedresser represents God. Just as the gardener is patient with the fig tree, so is God patient with sinners. In his youth, Moses kills a man but God doesn’t write him off. God sees immense potential in this former murderer and calls him to carry out a great mission. Church history is full of examples of barren fig trees that, in time, became fruitful, e.g., Paul, Augustine, Thomas Merton. But the parable also makes it clear that time may run out on the unrepentant. If people refuse chance after chance to turn their lives around, God will not quit on them, but they will, by deliberate choice, shut themselves out of God’s Kingdom. This parable calls us to be fruitful trees in God’s Vineyard.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse or image spoke to you most in the readings? Why?
2. Our first reading, among other things, is an election story. Moses is called to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and into a covenant relationship with God. Can you name one time when you felt called by God to do some particular work or ministry? If so, share.
3. In the second reading, Paul reminds us that the Israelites received many spiritual blessings from God and yet they failed to be faithful to him. Our reception of the sacraments is no guarantee that we are being faithful to God. There is always need for ongoing conversion. What helps you from falling into the trap of “spiritual smugness”?
4. The Gospel is a clear call to repentance “lest we perish.” What can help you (or others) to *see* what unchristian thoughts, words or deeds you may need to repent of?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

For the next three Sundays, our church will be celebrating the *Rite of Scrutiny* with those who will be baptized at Easter. But all of us need to scrutinize our lives, i.e., search out where there are still pockets of collusion with the powers of darkness, pockets of resistance to God and his call to repentance and where there is need for enlightenment. This week begin your preparation for a good Lenten celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation by asking the

Holy Spirit to point out areas of sin in your life, to face and name attitudes and behaviors that are contrary to Jesus and his Gospel.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Especially pray for the grace of true contrition and repentance for yourself and for all who are away from God and church. Pray for all who are preparing for Baptism and entry into our church. ©

Please Note: If you belong to a parish that celebrates the *Rites of Scrutiny*, you may attend Mass the next three weekends which will have the readings from Cycle A. Where the *Rite of Scrutiny* is celebrated, Cycle A readings are normally proclaimed.

PRAYER FOR GUIDANCE

Grant me, Lord, to know what
I ought to know,
to love what I ought to love,
to praise what delights you most,
to value what is precious in your sight,
to hate what is offensive to you.
Do not allow me to judge
according to appearances,
nor to pass sentence following
the judgment of the ignorant,
but to discern with true judgment
between things visible and spiritual,
and, above all things,
to seek to know what is the good
pleasure of your will.
Amen.

Thomas A. Kempis

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

March 14, 2010 C

Opening prayer: *God of compassion, we rejoice in your holy Word, Jesus, who again and again offers us mercy for our sins and helps us to forgive one another. As we continue our journey to Easter, may heaven grant us the courage to change what needs to be changed in our lives and fill us with the joy that comes from experiencing you as a God of mercy. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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

Facilitator reads focus statement: All three readings express the *homecoming* that we experience when we repent of sin and allow God to remove our guilt and shame. This Sunday is also called *Laetare* (“let us rejoice”) Sunday. A mood of joy in God’s mercy underlies our readings.

If you have not read the commentary on the readings prior to the meeting, consider doing so after each reading.

FIRST READING: Joshua 5:9-12

Our first reading today describes a moment of huge transition in Israel’s history and at the same time celebrates God’s faithfulness to his promises. Previous to this moment in time, the Israelites were an *enslaved people* in Egypt, and then they were a Nomadic *desert people*. Now they are about to enter the Land God promised to their ancestors. No longer will they be an enslaved people on alien soil and no longer will Israel feed on manna (symbolic of the desert). Now they will possess their own land and enjoy the abundant fruits of its soil.

Israel’s entry into the land is an experience of mercy and reconciliation with God from whom they felt alienated while in Egypt. To celebrate this moment of transition in their history and their reconciliation with God, the Israelites have a Passover feast for the first time in their new homeland. Their reconciliation with God and the feast that follows prepares us to hear the story of the return of the prodigal son and the banquet given to celebrate his homecoming.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 34

This psalm of joy celebrates a God who blesses his people with good things.

SECOND READING: 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

In Christ, the believer becomes a new creation. Christ, through his death and resurrection, has reconciled us to God. In turn, we must be ambassadors of God’s reconciling work.

“*Christ was made to be sin,*” i.e., Christ became sin in the sense that he was born in weakened “flesh” and took upon himself all human sinfulness. Christ took

on our sinful humanity so that we might take on his righteousness.

GOSPEL: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

This story should be renamed *The Parable of the Forgiving Father* since its central focus is not the son and his sin, but God and his mercy (which is also the primary focus of the Sacrament of Reconciliation).

The return of the son is celebrated with a festive meal symbolic of our return to the Eucharist after a time of being distant from God and Church.

The *younger* son symbolizes the tax collectors and sinners who distance themselves from God by their sinful behavior. The *older* son symbolizes the Pharisees who distance themselves from God by their sin of self-righteousness. They would rather see a sinner damned than saved. Both are sinners and in need of God’s mercy. The difference between the two is that the younger son *knows* that he is a sinner and in need of God’s mercy.

However, it seems that the younger son’s repentance is only skin deep. He goes home because he has run out of money. Yet, his father offers him full and total mercy. Hopefully, the son’s experience of his father’s love will lead him to a more authentic and sincere repentance and commitment.

The older son only pays lip service to the law. As one writer states: “he was lawless within the law.” His heart is resentful and cold. Part of his sin is his refusal or inability to share in the joy of his father over the return of his younger brother—not an easy thing to do. Yet, in God’s eyes, this is the response that is being asked for.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse, image or idea spoke to you most in the readings? Why?
2. In the first reading, the Israelites experience a huge *transition* moment in their lives. They are transformed from being an *enslaved* and nomadic or *desert* people to a people with their own land. What is the biggest transition you have had to negotiate in your life? What helped you to successfully move through that time?
3. In the second reading, Paul says that we have been called to be “ambassadors of reconciliation.” Can you name one way that you try to live this part of being a faithful disciple? Can you recall a time when you were called to be an ambassador of reconciliation?
4. Which of the brothers in the Gospel do you identify the most with? Why?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today’s scriptures. Suggestions: Is there someone in your world that you need to welcome home? If so, pray and work to make it happen. If not, work at being an ambassador of Christ for someone who is away from Christ and/or his Church.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray for your enemies if you have any. Pray for reconciliation within your own family, if needed. Pray for reconciliation between churches and religions, especially between Muslims and Christians. ©

On the lighter side...

Sunday school teacher asked her 3rd grade students: “Who most regretted the return of the prodigal son?” After a long pause, Johnny raised his hand and said “the fatted calf.”

PRAYER FOR GOD’S MERCY

Almighty Lord God,
your glory cannot be approached,
your compassion knows no bounds,
your love for all mankind
is beyond human expression.
In your mercy look on us
and on all your people;
Do not leave us to our sins,
but deal with us according
to your goodness.
Guide us to the haven of your will,
and make us truly obedient to your
commandments, so that we may
not feel ashamed when we come
before your judgment seat.
For you, God, are good and ever-loving.
We glorify you, Father, Son,
and Holy Spirit,
now and forever, to the ages of ages.
Amen.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

March 21, 2010 C

Opening prayer: *God of mercy, this week we listen to readings that powerfully speak to us of your mercy and at the same time call us to turn away from sin. Help us to make this message our own. Help us to always remember that while you hate and condemn sin, you always love the sinner. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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

Facilitator reads focus statement: The Gospel story is one of the most dramatic in the New Testament: one man standing against a crowd surrounding a woman they want to stone. The power of Jesus' words transforms the stone they have raised. Literally, Jesus' words save a life. The Gospel is also a fulfillment of the "new thing" that Isaiah speaks in the first reading: God is doing a new thing for the exiles, showing them mercy and love. Paul is also a recipient of God's mercy.

If you have not read the commentary on the readings prior to the meeting, consider doing so after each reading.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 43:16-21

Today's first reading is from what is called in Isaiah the *Book of Consolation* (chs 40-55). These chapters were written to encourage the Israelites while they were living in exile in Babylon and in danger of losing hope in God's love for them. With imagery that hearkens back to the Exodus story, as well as the creation story of Genesis, the author exhorts his fellow Jews to trust that God will have mercy on them and come to their aid. The prophet assures them that God is about to do a "new thing" for them. They will experience a new Exodus. The mighty God who created the world and freed their ancestors from Egypt is about to perform another mighty saving event on their behalf.

PSALM 126

These verses reflect the exiles' joy after their liberation from captivity.

SECOND READING: Philippians 3:8-14

When Paul encounters Christ on the road to Damascus, he too becomes the recipient of God's mercy and unconditional love. In today's verses, Paul shares with us what this new life in Christ means to him. "I consider everything as loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus." His new life is a total gift. Prior to his Damascus experience (Acts 9), Paul believed himself to be a "self-made" man, someone who saved himself by his observance of the law. Now he has a totally new mind-set. He now knows that all that he is, is a total gift from God. He is a "graced sinner." The imprisoned Paul says that his present sufferings are a way for him to conform

himself a little more to his Savior who suffered so much for him.

GOSPEL: John 8:1-11

While this story appears to be an honest attempt by some of the scribes and Pharisees to pursue justice, it is really the story of another trap set by Jesus' enemies to ensnare him. According to Jewish law, adultery was a capital crime punishable by death (Leviticus 20:10). But according to Roman law which governed occupied Palestine, Jews had no authority to put a man to death. So if Jesus had agreed with the Pharisees, he would be violating the Roman law. But if he disagreed, he would be identified as a false teacher. Jesus' opponents must have felt very secure about their trap.

But Jesus outsmarts them by turning the focus on *them* and *their* sins. "Let the one among you without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Then Jesus writes on the ground. Some have suggested that he wrote the sins of the accusers. "They went away, one by one, beginning with the elders." Jesus turns the tables on the accusers. Now they become the accused. They come to Jesus only aware of the *woman's* sins. They go away aware of *their own* sins.

Finally, Jesus is left with the woman. Commenting on this story, St. Augustine says, "only two are left, misery and mercy." Jesus communicates to the shame-filled woman God's mercy and unconditional love. She experiences the "new thing" (God's mercy and love) which Isaiah spoke about in the first reading. Then Jesus challenges the woman to "go and sin no more." Jesus condemns the sin, pardons the sinner and calls her to repentance. He also calls

the woman's accusers to conversion. They are called to let go of their sin of condemnation of the woman.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse, idea or image spoke to you most in today's readings? Why?
2. In the first reading, Isaiah speaks about God doing a "new thing". What "new thing" do you see God doing in our world, church, or your life today?
3. Also in the first reading Isaiah tells us to "*remember not the events of the past*" and in the second reading, Paul tells us that "*he gives no thought to what lies behind.*" Why do some of us have such a difficult time letting go of the past?
4. What is the darkness or sin in *us* that gives us satisfaction of pointing out the sins of *others*?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can put into practice the message of these readings. Suggestions: Pray for the grace to let go of what in your past you need to let go of, *and* for the grace to see what "new thing" God may be now doing in your life. If you have a tendency to judge others and name their sins, try to focus on your own sins and seek the grace of true repentance for them.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Especially pray for the grace of true repentance of sin and the grace to totally accept God's mercy. Pray that the Parish Penance Services may be grace-filled events for all who come. Pray for all preparing for Baptism and entry into our church this Easter.©

Note to facilitator: Next week is the Passion story. You may want to decide if you want the participants to read the Gospel prior to the meeting or during your gathering.

AN IRISH TOAST

May you have many friends
and may they be as mature in taste
and health and color and sought after
as the contents of this glass.

May you have warm words on cold evenings,
a full moon on a dark night,
and the road downhill all the way to your door.

May every hair on your head turn into a candle
to light your way to heaven.
And may God and his holy Mother
take the harm of the years away from you.

And...may you have no frost on your spuds,
no worms on your cabbage;
may your goat give plenty of milk,
and if you buy a donkey,
please, God, she be pregnant!

Note to facilitator: Next Sunday is Palm Sunday which will have the long passion story as the Gospel. As a group, you can decide if you want the participants to read the passion story prior to the meeting or read it during your gathering.

PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION

March 28, 2010 C

Opening prayer: *Lord Jesus, you emptied yourself to take on the form of a human person, humbling yourself even to death on the cross. May this cross be a sign for all generations of your triumph over evil, suffering, sin and death. Unite us with your passion that we might truly recognize you in our own suffering. Amen.*

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

Facilitator reads focus statement: This is the holiest week of the entire liturgical year and the Triduum is the peak event of the week. Jesus' passion, suffering and death are the focus of all three readings.

If you have not read the commentary on the readings prior to the meeting, consider doing so after each reading.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 50:4-7

The mysterious servant spoken of in this reading is a faithful disciple who can speak a dynamic word to his people because he has a "well-trained ear" that listens to what God has to say to him. Unlike Israel, he is not rebellious and, with the help of God, he is able to bear his sufferings. It is easy to see why the early Christians saw in this suffering servant the figure of the suffering Christ.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 22

This is a psalm of lament that speaks of the writer's affliction. It also speaks of trust in God in the midst of trial.

SECOND READING: Philippians 2:6-11

Writing from prison, Paul addresses people with proud and independent ways which often lead to bickering and disharmony among them. To this community Paul offers, as a model of humility, the suffering figure of Christ. He *emptied* himself of this divinity (i.e. the privilege of divinity) by becoming one with sinful humanity. He experienced total *humiliation* by dying a criminal's death. His obedience made up for humanity's disobedience. Then God rewarded his obedience by *exalting* him and restoring to him his glory. And now, Jesus is Lord of the universe. Paul encourages us and the Philippians to empty ourselves of all that is not of God so that we might be filled with God and his love.

THE PASSION ACCORDING TO LUKE 22:14-23:56

While Matthew, Mark, Luke and John have lots in common in their account of Jesus' passion, each evangelist has his own unique characteristics.

Following are some of the unique characteristics of Luke's Passion account:

- Luke repeatedly speaks of the *innocence* of Jesus, suffering unjustly for his beliefs and lifestyle (23:4, 14, 15, 22, 41, 47). Luke emphasizes the innocence of Jesus in order to connect him with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah whose innocent suffering was redemptive. The innocent martyrdom of Jesus would also have been an important motive for the early Christians who themselves were facing persecution and death for their belief in Jesus.
- Jesus is the Savior of *all* people, Jew and Gentile, outcast and sinner. We see this when Jesus reaches out to the good thief who was a total outcast (23:39-43). He also reaches out to the servant and heals his ear (22:51).
- Luke shows Jesus as one filled with God's mercy and forgiveness. We see this when Jesus forgives his executioners: "*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do*" (23:34) and again when he forgives the repentant criminal.
- The devil that departed from Jesus after the temptations now returns, "entering Judas" (22:3).
- Luke features women more than all the rest. In his Passion narrative, Jesus comforts the weeping women of Jerusalem (23:27-32).
- Like the Old Testament prophets who suffered and died for righteousness, Jesus is presented by Luke as a model for the disciples who will also suffer and die because of their faith in him.
- In Luke's Passion, we often find Jesus in prayer and recommending prayer as the only sure defense against temptation and trouble (Luke 22:22, 32, 34, 40, 46).

- The disciples are presented in a more positive light. Unlike the other evangelists, Luke does not mention the disciples fleeing from Jesus.
- Jesus is presented as one with total trust in God. His final words are, “*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit*” (23:46).
- Writing primarily for people with a Greek background, Luke presents Jesus as a heroic figure. The ideal of the Greek hero confronting death is embodied by Socrates who, though innocent, is condemned to death; though he could have avoided death by renouncing his teaching, he chooses not to. Up to the very moment of his death, he is shown teaching his disciples. He faces execution (death by hemlock) with courage and serenity, willingly taking the cup, drinking the poison, lying down and dying peacefully.
- Finally, Luke stresses *discipleship* as following the way of the Master who freely takes up his cross (9:23, 14:27) just as Simon the Cyrenean did.

Jesus died as he had lived—healing, reconciling, forgiving, reaching out to the outcast, and trusting totally in his Father.

AN EXTENDED COMMENTARY ON THE VARIOUS SCENES IN LUKE’S PASSION

21:14-20 ♦ Last Supper – Institution of the Eucharist, Passover Meal

It is the night before Jesus will sacrifice himself for humanity, the night before his body will be broken and his blood poured out. On this holy evening, now called Holy Thursday, Jesus dramatizes during the Passover Meal what will happen the next day, the offering of himself as the new Paschal Lamb. During the meal, Jesus interrupts the ritual to offer himself to his disciples in the form of bread and wine. This signifies the making of the New Covenant between God and humanity. The Old Covenant was sealed with the sprinkling of a lamb (Ex. 24:5-8); the New Covenant is sealed with the blood of the One John calls the Lamb of God. The Old Covenant was based on the law and keeping it; the New Covenant is based on faith in Christ which empowers us to keep his law of love.

22:21-38 ♦ Unseemly Behavior at Eucharist

Don’t we sometimes wonder today how people can say and do bad things and yet partake of the Eucharist? Well, it’s not surprising to know that such behavior which is very contrary to the spirit of the

Eucharist, has existed since its institution. In verses 21-38, we hear of Judas partaking of the Eucharist even as he plots to betray Jesus. We hear the other Apostles engaging in a conversation as to who is going to be ‘top dog’ in Jesus’ new kingdom. We hear how Peter will deny the Master and we hear talk about wielding swords. Bottom line: one can sit at the table with Jesus and yet betray him in some big or small way. Needless to say, we should always seek to present ourselves at Eucharist with clear hearts. In verses 35-37, Jesus seeks to prepare his Apostles for the rough days ahead.

When Jesus speaks about taking up swords, he is speaking figuratively to alert his Apostles to the seriousness of the struggle ahead. They take him literally and produce two swords. In the difficult times ahead, swords will be of no use but prayer will, as we shall see in the next scene.

22:39-53 ♦ Agony in the Garden and Arrest of Jesus

The main emphasis in Luke’s Gethsemane scene is Jesus’ *prayer*. Repeatedly, Luke presents Jesus as a man of prayer and as a teacher of prayer. Now his prayer to his Father sustains him in the face of a Satanic attack in his hour of severe darkness. In contrast, the Twelve fall asleep. But we should note the struggle is not easy. Jesus prays that the upcoming cup of suffering will pass, but not if it means not following God’s will.

Then the betrayer, soldiers, chief priests (the clergy) and temple guards come to get Jesus. Their arrival at night symbolizes the darkness of their actions. Jesus rejects violence as a way to stop what is about to happen. He heals the servant’s ear.

22:24-62 ♦ Peter’s Threefold Denial of Jesus

In verse 31, Jesus tells Peter that Satan will attack him. This happens in the courtyard. Peter shows a mixture of courage and cowardice. It takes courage to follow Jesus into the courtyard. He is the only disciple there, but then he loses courage when two women and a man accuse him of being an associate of Jesus. After his third denial, Peter encounters Christ who looks upon him with mercy. Peter is so aware that he has sinned against the Lord, that he weeps bitter tears of repentance.

22:66-23:25 ♦ Jesus’ Trial and Death Sentence

Jesus is brought before the Jewish authorities, Herod and Pilate. Various accusations are made. One important thing to note in these verses is Luke’s emphasis

on the *innocence* of Jesus. Pilate pronounces Jesus innocent three times, but his fear of the people blocks him from setting Jesus free. The people cry out for the blood of Jesus. They say he is dangerous, but ironically they choose to set Barabbas free even though he is an insurrectionist and a murderer. In all this, Satan has his hour of triumph. In emphasizing Jesus' innocence, Luke is telling his audience several decades later that they too, though innocent, may also be interrogated, persecuted, jailed and executed. During such times of trial, prayer against the temptation to lapse will be their strength.

23:26-49 ♦ Journey to Calvary and Crucifixion and Death of Jesus

We note the following in these verses:

- Simon carrying the cross "*behind*" Jesus comes to be seen as the symbol of true discipleship—one walking behind the Master, sharing his sufferings.
- When Jesus encounters the weeping women, he tells them that they should be weeping for their city and their children who will have to suffer through the destruction of Jerusalem.
- The taunting and mockery of Jesus by those at the foot of the cross and by one of the criminals crucified with Jesus, is sometimes seen as the "last temptation" of Jesus, namely, to come down from the cross, the temptation to use his divine power for his own self-preservation. "*He saved others, let him save himself.*" (v. 35) "*If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself.*" (v. 37)
- Darkness covering the earth symbolizes the cosmic struggle between light and darkness, between the forces of good and evil.
- The curtain of the temple torn in two means that the way of access to God through Jesus' work of redemption is now available to all.
- Jesus' innocence is noted by the repentant thief (v. 40-42) and the centurion (v. 47); the crowd beat their breasts (v. 48).
- Jesus' expresses forgiveness for his executioners (v. 34) and for the repentant criminal (v. 43).
- Jesus' obedience and total surrender to God's will: "*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.*" (v. 46) Scripture scholar, Charles Talbert, writes: "In his horizontal relations with others, Jesus' *innocence* is accepted. In his vertical relationship with the Father, Jesus' *obedience* is highlighted." Jesus dies quietly,

full of trust, a model for Christian martyrs to follow (Act. 7:59).

23:50-56 ♦ Burial of Jesus

We note two things:

- Joseph of Arimathea, though a member of the Sanhedrin, is an upright man like Simeon who looks forward to the coming of the Messiah. He also believes in the *innocence* of Jesus.
- Luke wants all to know that Jesus' body is buried (our Creed states: "he died and was buried."). Jesus' death is real.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse or incident in today's readings speaks to you most?
2. Judas is a tragic figure in the Passion story. What do you think went wrong for him? How can we be like Judas?
3. "Whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care lest he fall" (final verse of second reading, third Sunday of Lent). It seems Peter feels he is standing secure when he says in today's Gospel: "Though all may have their faith in you shaken, mine will never be." The next day, Peter denies Jesus three times. Do you ever have a sense that even though you may think that your faith in Jesus is very strong, it may in another way be very fragile?
4. Which of the fourteen Stations of the Cross speaks to you most?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can respond to Luke's Passion. Suggestions: Spend some time reflecting on where the *Stations of the Cross* are happening in your community or global world. Participate in your parish's Holy Week services.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Especially pray for all who are carrying a big cross at this time. Pray that many will participate in the celebration of the Triduum. Pray for the elect who will be baptized and the candidates who will be received into full communion with our church during the Easter Vigil.©