

March

<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>6</u>
<u>7</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>11</u>	
<u>12</u>		<u>13</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>15</u>	
<u>16</u>		<u>17</u>	<u>18</u>	<u>19</u>	
<u>20</u>		<u>21</u>	<u>22</u>	<u>23</u>	
<u>24</u>		<u>25</u>	<u>26</u>	<u>27</u>	
<u>28</u>	<u>29</u>	<u>30</u>		<u>31</u>	

**YEAR A
WEEKDAYS II**

SUNDAY, MARCH 1, 2020

(Lec. 22)

- 1) Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7
- 2) Romans 5:12-19
or 5:12, 17-19
- 3) Matthew 4:1-11

Gospel related: **CCC** 333, 394, 2083, 2135, 2835, 2849 **CSDC** 175, 379

**FIRST SUNDAY
OF LENT**

FOCUS: May this journey of Lent help us to return to God and put him first in our lives and hearts.

Today's readings, as we begin the season of Lent, give us two special reminders that will help us on our journey: Who God is and who we are as human beings.

The reading from Genesis presents our creation story: The Lord God formed us out of the clay of the ground, and animated us by breathing life into us. Without God, we simply would not exist.

Yet from the very beginning, it has been hard for us as human beings to remember this basic fact. Like Adam and Eve, it is very easy for us to fall into the trap of wanting to be like God – wanting to be in charge of our lives and wanting to know good from evil. We certainly can go through our lives reacting to our problems and challenges as if we're in charge of everything, and forget to rely on the wisdom and guidance of God. Perhaps, however, as we begin our Lenten practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, our focus should be to remember to put God first in our lives, and to wrest out of our lives anything we want to put before God.

Jesus gives us a masterful example of how to do just that in the Gospel, as he's confronted with various temptations by the devil. For every temptation that Satan puts before him, Jesus counters with a reminder that God comes first. Tempted to make stones into bread after 40 days of fasting, Jesus notes that we live not only on bread, but on the word of God. Tempted to fall down and let God save him, he reminds the devil that he is not to put God to the test. Finally, tempted with all the riches of the world if he only worships Satan, Jesus counters that God alone should be worshiped. Jesus gives us a clear model: In all temptations to hunger, power and wealth, we are to remember that God, our Creator, comes first.

As we begin our own challenging journey of Lent, let us be assured by the words of Paul in today's second reading. Although sin abounds in our world, God's grace abounds even more. As we struggle in the weeks ahead to put God first, to remove from our lives the obstacles to our union with God, God gives us graces to help us in our struggle. We are never alone on the journey when we strive to come closer to God – God is always waiting to give us any help we need, if only we remember to turn to him. Let us face the Lent ahead with the courage and strength of Jesus.

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Monday, March 2, 2020

(Lec. 224)

1) Leviticus 19:1-2, 11-18

2) Matthew 25:31-46

Gospel related: **CCC** 331, 544, 598, 671, 678, 679, 1033, 1034, 1038, 1373, 1397, 1503, 1825, 1932, 2443, 2447, 2449, 2463, 2831 **CSDC** 57, 58, 183, 265, 403

MONDAY OF
FIRST WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: Love your neighbor as yourself.

God's standard for our behavior is high, as we heard in today's first reading: *Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.* God draws us to himself, and calls us to be like him. He wants our lives to reflect the divine life.

The first reading from Leviticus is a bit of a re-working of the Ten Commandments first found in Exodus, with a focus on social interaction and conduct toward one another. The Lord emphasizes the need for the Israelites to be honest, faithful, just and honorable with each other. Or, in sum, *love your neighbor as yourself.*

When Jesus refers to the end time in our Gospel today, those who heard him would have been aware of the precepts and commandments found in their holy Scriptures, just as we heard them. Taking care of those in need was not a new concept. What Jesus teaches them anew, however, is that there is a direct connection between how they treat others, and how they love Jesus himself. In becoming like us, Jesus elevated us to being like him; therefore, what we do to one another, we do to him. Christ is found in each one of us.

Jesus is thus emphasizing this way of being holy, of being "like God," as the first reading instructed, in loving our neighbor as ourselves. There will be eternal reward or consequence for us all based on how we treat the less fortunate in our lives. We'll be with the sheep or the goats. It's that clear-cut.

These readings are not intended to scare us, but to point out the natural consequences of our choices and actions. They help us focus on the Lord's commands, and instructions on how to be like him. For these two commandments are intertwined. If we are loving God, we are tending to our neighbors. And if we are loving our neighbors, we are simultaneously loving God.

Lent is a penitential time offered to us for the sake of realigning ourselves with what God desires of and for us. Today's readings are a springboard for self-reflection as to whether we are loving our neighbor, and whether we are holy in the Lord's eyes. Any day could be judgment day, and our desire is to be with the sheep, and not the goats. We move forward, then, knowing that with the sacramental graces we receive in reconciliation and in our partaking of the Eucharist, we are fortified in our efforts. May our efforts bear fruit; may we indeed love our neighbor as ourselves.

Tuesday, March 3, 2020
(Lec. 225)

- 1) Isaiah 55:10-11
- 2) Matthew 6:7-15

TUESDAY OF
FIRST WEEK
OF LENT
(Opt. Mem.)

USA: Saint Katharine Drexel, Virgin)

Gospel related: **CCC** 268, 443, 1165, 1969, 2608, 2632, 2659, 2668, 2736, 2759, 2776, 2792, 2841, 2845 **CSDC** 492

FOCUS: God's sovereign power and will provide for us all.

Lent is a graced and opportune time to focus on prayer, as well as participate in fasting and almsgiving. These are the three traditional Lenten practices with roots in the Old Testament. Today's readings allow us to enter into the mystery and efficacy of prayer.

In the first reading, we hear how God's word does not fail to achieve his will. God's word is like the falling rain from heaven that inevitably affects the earth, making ground fertile to provide seed for our daily bread. It is not our words, but God's word, that is powerful and effective in accomplishing his will in heaven and on earth.

Prayer is about God's sovereign power and will, his knowledge of our needs and will to fulfill them. We do not need a lot of words. We do not need to convince God of our needs. We do not need to worry if God will provide. This conviction focuses and simplifies our prayer, as in the Our Father.

Jesus teaches us this prayer because it literally covers every need. The first five lines of the Our Father offer adoration, giving God praise and honoring the sovereign power of his will on earth, as in heaven. The last five lines offer our petitions, asking God to grant what he already knows we need: daily bread, forgiveness and deliverance from evil. Brief and simple, this prayer needs no extra words to be effective.

Jesus teaches one final thing about prayer when he emphasizes our need to share forgiveness: If we want to be forgiven by God, we must be willing to forgive. God's forgiveness is not a possession that we take and keep; God's forgiveness is given to be shared. Forgiveness is like God's word that rains down from heaven, providing an abundant harvest for all.

Forgiveness – like all effects of prayer – is a gift from God given for all of us. When we pray as Jesus taught us, we pray to *Our* Father, not *My* Father; we pray for *our* daily bread, not *my* daily bread; we ask God to forgive and deliver *us*, not just *me*. As we prepare to share together the Bread of Life – the Body of Christ given for us and our salvation – we will pray the Our Father with conviction, trusting in the sovereignty and graciousness of our merciful God.

Saint Katharine Drexel (1858-1955) – Katharine was a Philadelphia heiress who founded the Missionary Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. Katharine used her inheritance of \$20 million to build schools for minority children. By 1942, she had established black Catholic schools in 13 states and 50 missions for Indians in 16 states. In 1917, she established a school to prepare black students to become teachers, chartered as Xavier University of New Orleans, the only historically black and Catholic college in the United States. Today it is known as Xavier University of Louisiana.

Wednesday, March 4, 2020

(Lec. 226)

- 1) Jonah 3:1-10
- 2) Luke 11:29-32

WEDNESDAY OF
FIRST WEEK
IN LENT
(Opt. Mem.
Saint Casimir)

FOCUS: A clean heart, free from sin, yearns to love God and to love one another.

A heart that beats with renewed strength is a heart that has a new appreciation for life and for love. Today's psalm, *A clean heart create for me, O God*, can call to mind not just the spiritual, but the physical. Heart surgeries that were thought to be impossible are now routine procedures, allowing blood to flow freely to and from the heart. Patients are restored to a fullness of life that was once not possible.

God's Incarnation offers that same fullness of life, only on the eternal level. The crowd in today's Gospel doesn't get that. They don't see the sign of that clean heart right in front of them. So Jesus refers to Jonah because he wants the crowd to remember their history, and God's faithfulness.

We can consider the difficult job the prophet Jonah had in our first reading. He was like a doctor who must deliver a life-threatening prognosis. The kind who offers a cure, but who knows the patient must comply. He comes to Nineveh, announcing that the city will be destroyed. The people take to heart his prophetic words, and so they fast, and turn away from evil and violence. God sees them repent of their evil ways, forgives them, and does not destroy their city. The Ninevites, by their actions, have cleaned their hearts of evil.

Just as Jonah and the queen of the south were signs of God's fidelity, so is Jesus the cure for all earthly ills, who offers his message of repentance not just to the Jewish people, but to all people. The Son of Man will welcome all who come to him seeking forgiveness for the evil in their hearts.

As we settle into our observance of Lent, this is our opportunity to truly hear and heed our doctor's voice – that of Christ, the Divine Physician. To care for our hearts so as to be free to live and love as God desires. Let us implore God to create clean hearts for each of us. May we repent of the evil we have done, which corrupts our hearts and harms our brothers and sisters. May any blockages be removed, so that no barriers separate us from the love that God lavishes without measure.

Saint Casimir (1458-1484) – Casimir was a prince of the Kingdom of Poland. But Casimir rejected his princely status, wearing plain garments, sleeping on stone floors and choosing celibacy instead of marriage. When Casimir abandoned a military campaign, his father exiled him. Casimir then gave of himself to Christ's poor, strangers, the sick and all who suffered. He became ill from fasting in exile and died at age 26.

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Thursday, March 5, 2020

(Lec. 227)

1) Esther C:12, 14-16, 23-25

2) Matthew 7:7-12

Gospel related: **CCC** 1789, 1970, 2609, 2821 **CSDC** 20

THURSDAY OF

FIRST WEEK

OF LENT

FOCUS: God will always give us what we need and what is good.

Good parents want good things for their children. But not everything that a child wants and asks of their parents is good for them. Maybe a child doesn't want to go to school and begs and pleads to be allowed to stay home, but the parents do not agree. They hope that the child, who does not and cannot see the whole picture, will someday understand how this decision was good for him.

When it comes to prayer, perhaps we sometimes approach God in a manner not unlike a young child who doesn't understand or see the bigger picture. We turn to God in prayer, asking that he change our lot. Not only do we ask him to change our lot, we hand God our laundry list of how we want it to be done. And when things don't work out the way we had hoped, when we feel we have failed or have nothing to show in life, when the things we prayed for don't materialize in our lives, we feel that God is giving us a rock instead of bread – or a serpent instead of fish.

This is how Esther felt, in our first reading: She was *seized with mortal anguish*. But she trusts. She trusts that the God who has been faithful to her forefathers will not forsake her. She understands that she does not – in our phrasing – see the whole picture. She knows only that God will help her.

Our true good is our ultimate end: eternal life with God. Everything prior to this in our lives is directed by God toward that end in order to create in us holiness and goodness. We may not always see clearly, but God knows how everything he gives us will help us and thus be good for us.

We can continue to turn to the Lord in prayer, no matter how we *feel*, asking for what we need, and trusting that the Lord will always give us what we need and what is good for us.

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Friday, March 6, 2020

(Lec. 228)

1) Ezekiel 18:21-28

2) Matthew 5:20-26

Gospel related: **CCC** 678, 1034, 1424, 2054, 2257, 2262, 2302 2608, 2792, 2841, 2845

FRIDAY OF
FIRST WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: Jesus took all sin upon himself for our salvation.

As we begin the Lenten season, we have cause for hope. In the first reading, we hear the Lord promise that those who can turn their lives away from sin will not have their past held against them. This is good news indeed! It is a promise we know came to fruition in Jesus Christ, who called sinners to repent and believe in the Gospel, and who took all sin upon himself for our salvation.

This is what the Pharisees have yet to understand at this point in the Gospels. In today's passage, Jesus is telling this to his disciples, by exhorting them to be even more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees in order to enter the Kingdom. For there is another part to the promise in the first reading: Those who do evil will be left out.

The Pharisees were focused on studying the law and following every minutiae that was externally discernable, with the idea that it was the ultimate way of holiness. However, their practice often led to an empty legalism, devoid of love. Jesus teaches his disciples a correction in attitude in order to escape these pitfalls of hypocrisy and meaningless action. He uses the commandment, *You shall not kill*, as an example of the high bar, not the low bar, in how we relate to one another. He gets to the root of the directive: All relationship-damaging behaviors and things that suck the life out of another, not just the grave sin of murder, are abhorrent.

Lent is an opportunity for us to shine a spotlight on our lives to examine our deeds and intentions, and heal the dark places and the ways in which we may hurt others. Those of us who can root out sin in our lives will truly receive the reward of Easter joy!

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Saturday, March 7, 2020

(Lec. 229)

- 1) Deuteronomy 26:16-19
- 2) Matthew 5:43-48

SATURDAY OF

FIRST WEEK

OF LENT

(Opt. Mem.

Saints Perpetua and Felicity,

Martyrs)

Gospel related: **CCC** 443, 1693, 1825, 1933, 1968, 2013, 2054, 2262, 2303, 2608, 2828, 2842, 2844 **CSDC** 40

FOCUS: As imitators of God, we have the grace of God and the assistance of the Holy Spirit.

This day the Lord, your God, is commanding you to observe these statutes and decrees. Be careful, then, to observe them with all your heart and with all your soul. These are the words Moses speaks to the children of Israel in the first reading. The Gospel builds on this message, familiar to the Jewish community that surrounds Jesus, as he says to his disciples, *Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.*

Moses' words signify the agreement God is making with the Israelites: *he is to be [their] God, and they are to be a people peculiarly his own.* Jesus' words show the fulfillment of that covenant in himself, while bringing to bear on the entire world, not just the Israelite people, the saving power of God. Jew or Gentile, bad or good, *the just and the unjust* – all are *children of [the] heavenly Father* and subject to his mercy.

Thus, as the Father loves without distinction or category, so are Christ's disciples to do so. This is what it means to be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect. Before Christ, this exhortation was impossible to follow, for we had created a chasm between us and God through original sin. But in taking on the form of humanity, Christ conformed us to his divinity and bridged that chasm of sin, reconciling us to the Father. And through Christ's communion with us, we become children of God, capable of imitating the Son and the Father in all we do (CCC 460). So, while the command to *Love [our] enemies, and pray for those who persecute [us]* sounds difficult – and it can surely be so – it is not impossible. In fact, it comes with power. For as imitators of God, we have the grace of God and the assistance of the Holy Spirit to help us (Cf., Ephesians 5:1).

The familiar phrases of today's Scriptures, taken together, remind us that the story of our salvation has always shown God to be faithful and ever-present, and never commanding of us something we are incapable of doing. There is immense freedom and empowerment in that. As we aspire to holiness as our vocation, God desires to strengthen us along the way. So when we go forth from our liturgy today, we do so with confidence that we can be obedient to God's commands – especially with his help. We pray, as Saint Augustine did: "Lord command what you will and grant what you command!"

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SUNDAY, MARCH 8, 2020

(Lec. 25)

- 1) Genesis 12:1-4a
 - 2) 2 Timothy 1:8b-10
 - 3) Matthew 17:1-9
- Gospel related: **CCC** 444, 554

**SECOND SUNDAY
OF LENT**

FOCUS: The Lord gives us strength for all things.

Bear your share of hardship for the gospel with the strength that comes from God.

These words from Saint Paul to Timothy in today's reading are a wonderfully encouraging summary of the Christian life. First, the Gospel is something we all share. While God calls each one of us to himself, and we each have a responsibility to respond in faith, we are not a group of discrete individuals, alone in our journey. Instead, we are baptized into a community, whose communal presence forms the Church. We celebrate together, worship together, pray together and for one another, and we literally grow the kingdom of heaven here on earth by loving one another as God loves us.

Second, there will be hardship in this life. While that is not news to us, Paul's words remind us that, as we share in the good news of the Gospel, we also share in the inevitable hardship that arises in being faithful to Christ's message and our call to holiness. Whatever the hardship is, we are called to share with one another. Sharing provides strength in numbers, and makes burdens easier to bear. And bearing one another's burdens is another command of the Gospel (Cf., Galatians 6:2). This is why we pray for one another, or offer material or financial assistance to one another. It's why we celebrate baptism, but also attend each other's funerals.

It is also why the sacrament of penance is more than "just" confessing our individual sins, and receiving absolution from God. The sacrament restores our relationship to the greater Catholic community which has (even in unseen ways) been broken. Just as every part of the human body is important and must be in perfect order for the body to function at its best, so every person of Christ's body is important and must be reconciled to the whole with forgiveness and grace in order for his body, the Church, to be at its best for the world.

Finally, we do all things fortified by the strength of God. God never abandons us, never leaves us to face things on our own. We can choose not to ask him for help; we can choose to ignore his commands or to cooperate with his grace. But God never withholds that grace when asked. Never withholds his strength. If we ever feel far away from God, we can be sure that it is we who have moved, not him.

When Jesus took his disciples – James, John and Peter – up the mountain and was transfigured before them, they had a glimpse of the glorified future that awaits all who are faithful to the Gospel. We who celebrate this liturgy today also have a glimpse of that glorified future, as we literally and metaphysically share in the heavenly banquet with the communion of saints. So, as we strive in holiness to join them, in the fullness of time, may we take to heart the good news and encouraging words of Paul, sharing in the promise of God and knowing that the Lord gives us strength for all things.

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Monday, March 9, 2020
(Lec. 230)

- 1) Daniel 9:4b-10
- 2) Luke 6:36-38

MONDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
OF LENT
(Opt. Mem.
Saint Frances of Rome,
Religious)

Gospel related: **CCC** 1458, 2842

FOCUS: God has shown us mercy and forgiveness, which we can extend to others.

On the 50th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp, an unlikely pair stood before the ruins of the gas chambers that contributed to the murder of millions of Jews and other groups during the Holocaust.

The pair was Dr. Hans Münch, an SS physician, and Eva Mozes Kor, a Romanian-born Jew who – along with her twin sister, Miriam – was subjected to Dr. Josef Mengele’s human experiments. On January 27, 1995, Kor signed a document publicly forgiving the Nazis. She forgave the “Angel of Death” whose experiments led her twin to an early death, the Nazis who had killed her parents and older sisters, and the governments who facilitated the Holocaust in any way.

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. That’s what Jesus tells his disciples and us. What could he mean by *just as your Father is merciful*?

Eva Mozes Kor knows. The prophet Daniel knew.

In the first reading, Daniel confesses the sins of the people. He admits that justice is *on [the Lord’s] side*. Where a just judge would condemn the people, Daniel praises God for his compassion and forgiveness. And we begin to understand that mercy is something that can be extended only when someone has been wronged, and in a situation where everyone would understand the seeking of revenge or punishment.

As God forgave the Israelites and continues to forgive us, we are called to extend that forgiveness – that mercy – to others. There are modern examples of people who forgave those who wronged them terribly: Saint John Paul II forgave his would-be assassin, Mehmet Ali Ağca. Eva Mozes Kor forgave the Nazis. Surely, if these figures could forgive, we can do the same for our brothers and sisters in Christ.

God gives us a perfect model for mercy: endless, inexhaustible, complete. Thankfully, our Father never says “Three strikes and you’re out!” or “That’s it; no more chances!” He forgives and forgives, as many times as we return to him and, like Daniel, confess our sins and ask for his mercy.

But we are not God. Forgiveness can be hard, especially when someone has hurt us. Forgiving does not mean that we forget, but Jesus does promise that we will be judged as we judge others, and we should take that warning very seriously. As we approach Jesus in the Eucharist today, we can ask him to soften our hearts. If there is someone in our lives whom we need to forgive, may the God of compassion give us the strength to do so.

Frances of Rome (1384-1440) – Saint Frances was born into a wealthy family in Italy. Although she wanted to dedicate her life to God from an early age, she succumbed to her father's insistence to marry. During a famine, she turned a portion of her family estate into a hospital and fed the poor. After her children died, she established the Oblates of Mary, a group of laywomen dedicated to serving God and the poor in the city of Rome.

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Tuesday, March 10, 2020

(Lec. 231)

1) Isaiah 1:10, 16-20

2) Matthew 23:1-12

Gospel related: CCC 526, 2367

TUESDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: All that we have comes from God.

The readings for today encourage us to respond to God's challenge to set things right and make justice our aim.

Often, the stumbling block for this transformation is our pride, or our belief that we are in complete control. Although this attitude denies the transformative grace God offers, God is willing to overlook our failings. As we heard in Isaiah: *Though your sins be like scarlet, they may become white as snow.*

Our transformation begins when we truly believe that all we have comes from God. This humble admission opens our hearts and minds to see that the gifts we have been given are not for our sake only, but also for the sake of others. This realization implores us to serve those in need, and identify ourselves as one family. If we do this, then we are truly exalted.

With prayer and repentance, we can make this time of Lent one when our pride takes a backseat. When we take time to listen to Jesus, his teachings provide the key to fulfilling God's call to set things right. Instead of doing things that will exalt us, we can do things that will relieve the burdens of others. Rather than acting in self-serving ways, hoping to be noticed for our good works, we can seek to redress the injustices in our midst.

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Wednesday, March 11, 2020

(Lec. 232)

1) Jeremiah 18:18-20

2) Matthew 20:17-28

Gospel related: CCC 440, 572, 601, 605 622, 786, 2235

WEDNESDAY OF

SECOND WEEK

OF LENT

FOCUS: *The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve.*

In today's Gospel, the mother of John and James approaches Jesus for a favor. Like a good mother, she lobbies on behalf of her beloved sons, asking, *Command that these two sons of mine sit, one at your right and the other at your left, in your kingdom.* At first glance, this mother appears to do well. She asks nothing for herself; she acknowledges Jesus' coming reign; she even gets down on her knees before her king.

Yet one could interpret the mother's actions as zealous and haughty, like an over-confident athlete who predicts a championship after winning only the first two games of the season. For the real problem at hand is that she fails to understand the mission and identity of Jesus.

The secret to the kingdom is summed up by Jesus in today's Gospel: *Whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave. Just so, the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.* In fact, as Jesus continues on his way to the cross, he will get down on his knees before his disciples to wash their feet, and before the whole world, to wash away their sins.

In a culture where many of us are tempted, in our own unique ways, to focus on power and prestige, Jesus stands as a radical contradiction. He lived a life of service over supremacy – of being last instead of first, of dying out of love for others. The true kingdom of God is a kingdom where love unites all, and where we are brought to our knees in hopes of lifting up someone else.

As we continue this Lenten journey, and right now as we approach the Eucharistic table, may we follow the example of the humble king, who reigns in loving service to others.

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Thursday, March 12, 2020
(Lec. 233)

1) Jeremiah 17:5-10

2) Luke 16:19-31

Gospel related: CCC 366, 633, 1021, 1859, 2831

THURSDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: Trust in the Lord.

On Ash Wednesday, we received a reminder of our mortality: “Remember you are dust, and to dust you will return.” Today’s Gospel fits into this remembrance. Like Lazarus and the unnamed rich man, we, too, will die, and the type of life we lead on earth will determine the life we live thereafter.

Prior to today’s Gospel, in Luke chapter 6, Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Plain, in which he provided a list of blessings and woes. Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the weeping and the hated. Woe to the rich, the well-fed, the laughing and the well-liked. Today’s parable puts flesh on these concepts. Lazarus is hungry, homeless and outcast, and he lives right outside the door of a man who is rich, well-fed and well-dressed.

Presumably, the rich man walked by Lazarus every day without paying him much mind. However, after he dies, the rich man calls Lazarus by name. He asks Abraham to send Lazarus to cool his tongue and relieve his torment. Not only does the rich man appear to know exactly who Lazarus is, but even in the afterlife, he expects Lazarus to serve him. This detail adds to the story, for it seems to indicate that the rich man’s previous neglect of Lazarus was deliberate. The rich man died as he lived, concerned only about his own needs, and (belatedly) those of his immediate family. He did not see Lazarus as his brother.

This story allows us to examine our own lives in light of the fact that our stay here on earth is only temporary, and Lent is the perfect liturgical season to do so. We can be more aware, and honest, about where we are being willfully ignorant. We can consider what habitual sins we are writing off as “not that big of a deal.” Lent is the time to root them out through prayer and fasting. What group of people in need have we failed to help, because “someone else will do it,” or “I’m too busy”? Lent is the time to exercise responsibility toward our neighbors through almsgiving.

In the first reading, Jeremiah instructed his listeners not to put their trust in human beings, but to trust in the Lord. His words help us, too, for the Lenten practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving are not meant to prove our spiritual strength and self-reliance, but to strengthen our relationship with God by making us more aware of our dependence on him.

Jesus desires to hold us to his heart, as Abraham held Lazarus. As we continue to prepare, in these next four weeks, for the celebration of God’s triumph over death in Christ’s resurrection, may we heed the warning of the rich man, and listen to the call of the prophets to repent and trust in the Lord.

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Friday, March 13, 2020

(Lec. 234)

1) Genesis 37:3-4, 12-13a
17b-28a

2) Matthew 21:33-43, 45-46

Gospel related: **CCC** 443, 755, 756

FRIDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: Though we are sinners, God's grace redeems us.

In the season of Lent, the Church puts before us readings that are appropriate for this time of repentance. As we have embarked on this Lenten journey, we are encouraged to take up practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving to prepare for Easter. Yet it can be difficult, can it not? Our sinful nature may resist change, and so we may find ourselves stumbling through. We, indeed, are made for God, yet as sinners, we sometimes respond to God's gifts in our lives with envy, jealousy and vice.

We certainly see this in our readings today. Joseph was loved best by his father, and his brothers hated him for that. Their envy leads them to first try to kill their own brother, and then to finally sell him as a slave. In the Gospel, Jesus tells the parable of the vineyard that is planted, built up and protected, only to have the tenants working the vineyard kill the visiting servants, and then, even the vineyard owner's son, out of greed.

These stories in Scripture show the need for repentance. Our own stories, too – the stories of our lives – all have in them examples of sin, weakness and failure, and they can reveal the ugly side of the human condition. Yet the stories of the Gospel – and indeed the stories of our lives – are not, first of all, narratives about us, but of God's grace which redeems us. At the end of the Joseph story in Genesis, he will tell his brothers that they intended many things for evil, yet God used it for good. So, too, in the Gospel. It is God's mercy that will not simply exact punishment on those wretched servants; rather, Christ will die and rise for sinners that they may believe in him and have eternal life.

As we continue our Lenten journeys, we will likely uncover resistance, weakness and failings in ourselves. If we do, let us remember that this journey is not primarily about our sin. We journey toward Easter to enter more deeply into God's grace, which can and will break over and transform us – sinners who are deeply loved by our God. As we approach the table of grace, to be fed by him, may we be compelled to keep our eyes fixed on God, and persevere in the work he is calling us to, this Lent and always.

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Saturday, March 14, 2020

(Lec. 235)

1) Micah 7:14-15, 18-20

2) Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Gospel related: CCC 545, 589, 1423, 1439, 1468, 1700, 2795, 2839

SATURDAY OF

SECOND WEEK

OF LENT

FOCUS: God seeks us, in our fear and anger, and reaches out to us with love.

He became angry.

This short line in today's Gospel zeroes in on an emotion that so many of us feel at different points in our lives: anger.

The older son *became angry*. His father has given his brother his inheritance, and he has squandered it all. Giving him his inheritance early meant splitting up land and property that belonged to the father and to the entire family. Now it is gone. The older son must be aware of this loss.

Moreover, the older son had been *working* in the fields. He has heard nothing from his brother about sorrow or regret; only the father has heard the younger son apologize. The older brother, on the other hand, only gets news of the celebration. After all he has done, the celebration is for his brother.

He became angry.

It is such a strong word, such a strong emotion. Like many strong emotions, it can have more than one root. Often, anger does not begin with wrongdoing, but with *fear*. Even our popular culture understands this. "Fear," says the Jedi Master, Yoda, "leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate leads to suffering" (Star Wars, The Phantom Menace).

What do we do when we are afraid? We get our defenses ready: *I will not be hurt again. I will be tough! We harness our anger: How dare he talk to me like that! I'll show him.*

If this is the case, what is the older son afraid of? That his father loves his brother more than himself? That all his labors will never win his father's respect? Or perhaps he really loves and cares for his younger brother and was hurt when he left. Perhaps he was worried about him and feared *for* him.

This parable, however, shows that anger and fear do not have the last word. For the father sees the hurt and anger in the older son. He sees the insecurity, the fear. *My son*, he says, *everything I have is yours*. He is saying, "Do not fear. All I have belongs to you."

(It is quite telling that the words "Do not fear" occur in the Bible over and over, as a constant reminder to us.)

Today, we can ask ourselves: About what are we angry? About what are we afraid? That our sin is too great for God's mercy? *No, fear not*. That we will never be loved for who we really are? *No, fear not*. Whatever it is, God comes to us where we are. God comes to us in our sin, as the father does for the younger brother; God comes to us in our fear and anger, as the father does for the older brother. God comes as a loving parent, easing our fears, bridging our divisions, loving us no matter what, reminding us of our cherished place as his sons and daughters.

SUNDAY, MARCH 15, 2020

(Lec. 28)

- 1) Exodus 17:3-7
- 2) Romans 5:1-2, 5-8
- 3) John 4:5-42

or 4:5-15, 19b-26, 39a, 40-42

Gospel related: CCC 439, 528, 544, 586, 606, 694, 728, 1137, 1179, 1999, 2557, 2560, 2561, 2611, 2652, 2824

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

FOCUS: God's mercy flows like living water.

What does Paul mean when he writes: *Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ?*

It helps to remember and understand that faith and salvation are not something we can achieve on our own, but are God's freely given gift. That does not mean we are mere puppets in a cosmic salvation show, or passive recipients of God's actions. The truth is, that with free will, our actions and choices – our commitment to Gospel living – does matter before God.

But Paul didn't stop at telling us that we have been justified. He went on to say that we now have hope and access to grace. Because we have been justified, we can boast: For God's love has been *poured out into our hearts*, reconciling us to him. In other words, because of what Christ has done by his death and resurrection, we have hope – hope for an eternal life in God. It is a confidence that, at the moment of judgment, God will not prove hostile to those who are faithful and in a state of grace, but his mercy will pour forth like water, giving life to all who believe in him.

The image of mercy flowing like water is present in today's Gospel, where Jesus encounters the woman at the well. From the start, we know this is no ordinary meeting: It is with a Samaritan with a mixed marital history, spurned by others such that she must come to the well at the hottest time of day, when no one else is there.

But there *is* someone there: Jesus. And despite her situation and cultural conventions, it is Jesus who first speaks to her. And what a conversation it is! For in looking at where the woman "is," spiritually, at the start and again at the end, it is almost like two different people. This simple encounter with Jesus radically changes her. Into the desert of her sinful, sad and lonely existence Jesus pours the fast-flowing water of God's mercy and love.

Initially, she so easily misunderstands his words; she cannot let go of her limited understanding of water. Her very questions and replies betray this failure to understand what Jesus is saying on a much deeper level. And yet Jesus gently affirms and brings to the surface her deepest need – to drink from the waters of salvation – to be renewed in her relationship with God and her community.

She slowly begins to hear his message, and moves from being a woman of great suspicion to one who rushes to tell others that she has met the Messiah. Look how she describes Jesus: first a *Jew*, then *Sir*, then a *prophet* and finally, the *Christ*. Along the way she is changed from being an outsider/sinner to an evangelist.

Like the woman at the well, we, too, are seeking the living water of God's mercy. Lent invites us to be more purposeful in our efforts, as it reminds us that God is also seeking us. He is taking the initiative to engage us so that we might experience this flowing water, and so live in ways that are worthy of him. This is our hope and our faith. With God's help, we pray that God's flowing water will wash us clean and refresh us today and always.

The following readings may be used on any Lenten day this week, especially in Years B and C when the Gospel of the Samaritan Woman is not read on the Third Sunday of Lent: Ex 17:1-7/Jn 4:5-42 (236).

Monday, March 16, 2020

(Lec. 238)

- 1) 2 Kings 5:1-15b
- 2) Luke 4:24-30

MONDAY OF
THIRD WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: God desires healing for us that we might live with him forever.

In the readings today, we get a glimpse of how God's plan of salvation unfolds over time. In the first reading, we follow Naaman through his journey of healing from leprosy. Then in the Gospel, Jesus teaches the people, and in revealing more to them of who he is, he refers to Naaman, thus calling upon his listeners to understand their own Scriptures.

It is tempting to focus simply on the end result in the first reading: Naaman the Syrian is healed of leprosy. But the context is larger than that. We know, from Jesus' words, that *there were many lepers in Israel during the time of Elisha the prophet; yet not one of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian*. God desired to show his power in this way, through the work of the prophet Elisha. And the power he showed was less about the result than who was involved. For in healing Naaman, God showed mercy on a Syrian, a Gentile – a member of a people who were the deadly enemies of his own. It prefigures what Christ will do when he comes, in offering salvation to all.

We cannot see the whole picture of salvation, and God's plan for each one of us, while we are here on earth. We may at times have difficulty understanding why God seems to bring healing to a particular person or community, and not to others. But one thing we can definitively state is that God desires to heal. And Jesus Christ is that healing balm. From the moment of our first sin in the Garden, God desired to heal. Throughout history, God desired to heal. In sending his Son, God healed. And today, here and now, God desires healing for us all, that we might live with him forever.

Tuesday, March 17, 2020
(Lec. 238)

- 1) Daniel 3:25, 34-43
- 2) Matthew 18:21-35

TUESDAY OF
THIRD WEEK
OF LENT
(Opt. Mem.
Saint Patrick,
Bishop)

Gospel related: **CCC** 982, 2227, 2843, 2845

FOCUS: God asks us to be faithful, to follow him and not to count the cost.

We are often tempted to try to measure our faith. To quantify it and compare it. We think about how many programs we are involved with, about what percentage of our income we give away, about how often we go to Mass and confession. During Lent, the temptation is even more palpable: We ask each other, “What did you give up?” and we think about how many times we have failed in our own resolutions. In each of these ways, we become concerned with being “successful” followers of Christ – about having a “successful” Lent. Even though we may say on one hand “it’s not about the numbers,” very often the numbers are at the forefront of our mind.

Today, we hear Peter ask Jesus, *How often must I forgive ... as many as seven times?* Presumably, Peter thought this was a generous number – that in going so far as to forgive his brother *so many times*, surely he must be living as Jesus expects. What a bold question from a man so deeply in need of forgiveness himself! As such, Peter is a fascinating example of the fruitlessness of trying to measure faith.

We know Peter to be the first pope, the leader of the Apostles and an obedient friend to Jesus. We also know that he struggles. He doubts, he misunderstands and he gets scared. Yet he always remains faithful.

A quote often attributed to Saint Teresa of Calcutta says, “God has not called me to be successful; he has called me to be faithful.” Whether she coined the phrase, or repeated one she had heard, there is a large element of truth to it. As we heard in the first reading, Azariah and his companions were faithful to the Lord. In the face of the threat of suffering and death, they chose to be faithful to God rather than offer sacrifice to any earthly king.

In the moment, this choice does not seem to have much hope of being “successful” because the fire and the furnace seem to be inevitable. Nevertheless, the prayer Azariah prays today in the first reading is spoken from the midst of that very fire. Azariah and his companions follow God unreservedly: With tremendous trust, and with their whole hearts, they are faithful. In their fidelity, they are treated with great mercy; they are saved from the fire and, in the end, this is all God desires of us.

Azariah and Peter were faithful. We, too, with God’s grace, can be faithful even in, and especially during, difficult times. Temporal success is not our goal – unreserved trust in the Lord, and his faithfulness to *us*, is the measure we seek. May the Eucharist we are about to share, that which is the very embodiment of faithfulness and trust, give us the grace for a life faithful and pleasing to the Lord.

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Wednesday, March 18, 2020
(Lec. 239)

- 1) Deuteronomy 4:1, 5-9
- 2) Matthew 5:17-19

WEDNESDAY OF
THIRD WEEK
OF LENT
(Opt. Mem.)

Saint Cyril of Jerusalem,
Bishop and Doctor of the Church)

Gospel related: **CCC** 577, 592, 1967, 2053

FOCUS: Christ comes to fulfill the law – he is the fullness of goodness, truth and love.

In the first passage from Deuteronomy today, we are reminded that all the laws and teachings God has given his people are for our benefit. They are not arbitrary. Far from being rules we should mindlessly obey, they are gifts that our reason can explore and understand. They are gifts to help us grow in wisdom and intelligence. They are gifts generously poured out for our benefit, not because of anything God needs, for God, in his perfection, needs nothing.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus reminds us that all of the Old Testament – the law and the prophets – is not destroyed by the revelation he brings. Instead, he says, it is *fulfilled*. The laws were intended to free us, to free us from harm, to free us from broken relationships, and Jesus truly is the fullness of this hope.

The law of the Old Testament was given to us by God to guide us to life and love and goodness – in other words, to God. Jesus comes to lead us beyond the letter of the law, per se, to the spirit of it – to authentic love. Christ does not only give us the instructions we need to choose the best good possible, he gives us his very self – his goodness and his truth, alive in our hearts and minds. Jesus comes to fulfill the law by giving us all we need to follow it: the strength, the love, the wisdom we need to be holy.

We all have moral struggles. We all wrestle with knowing the right thing to do at times, and with actually doing it when we know it. We strive to love as we were created to love. Jesus wants to give us all that we need to win these battles! So as we approach the Eucharist today, we pray that God will open our hearts to receive these gifts, that we may go forth from here to share them with the world.

Saint Cyril of Jerusalem (315–386) – Cyril, the bishop of Jerusalem, was the author of catechetical lectures on the liturgy and sacraments of the early Church. Caught in the power struggle between Arians (who believed Jesus was not divine or one with the Father) and those faithful to the Church's teaching, Cyril was exiled multiple times from Jerusalem. He was declared a Doctor of the Church in 1822.

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Thursday, March 19, 2020
(Lec. 543)

- 1) 2 Samuel 7:4-5a,
12-14a, 16
- 2) Romans 4:13, 16-18, 22
- 3) Matthew 1:16, 18-21, 24a
or Luke 2:41-51a

**SAINT JOSEPH,
SPOUSE OF
THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY
- SOLEMNITY**

Gospel related: **CCC** 333, 430, 437, 452, 497, 486, 503, 517, 531, 534, 583, 1507, 1846, 2196, 2599, 2666, 2812 **CSDC** 259, 378

FOCUS: Saint Joseph, humble and holy, models for us a life well-lived, showing us a path to eternal life with the Father.

Today, we celebrate the feast day of Saint Joseph, spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary and foster father of our Lord, Jesus. Though little of Joseph is written in the Gospels, all Christians, and many non-Christians, know who he is. Churches, and male children all over the world, are given his name. Some people even think he can help sell their house by burying a statue of him in their yard. (Not sure how that idea was born!)

From the line of David, he is known to us as Head of the Holy Family. He is patron saint of fathers, workers, carpenters and social justice. Many people pray to him for a happy death, and Pope Pius IX named him Patron of the Universal Church. He is referred to as a *righteous man* in Matthew's Gospel, and as is seen as the "Protector." But even though we don't read a lot about him in the Gospels, there are profound things he models for us.

Obedience is one of the strongest lessons Joseph teaches. When the angel of the Lord told him to take Mary as his wife, despite the uncertain circumstances, he did not hesitate to obey. When an angel told him to uproot his family and take them to Egypt to keep them safe, he did not question. He obeyed. Clearly, Joseph models for us a way of embracing God's plan: with trust, (even if we cannot always refrain from questioning it).

Hand in hand with that is the strength of Joseph's faith. When the angel told Joseph that Mary's baby was the Son of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit, he believed. When Mary and Joseph found Jesus preaching in the Temple, and he said he must be about his Father's work, they trusted in the truth of it, even though the Gospel tells us they did not understand. Without a doubt, Joseph's faith was powerful and unflinching.

Joseph models humility for us as well. Scripture and Church tradition paint Joseph as a humble man. The story of the Nativity suggests that Joseph was the only one present with Mary when she gave birth. He humbly took on the role of parent to this most special child. He selflessly committed himself to Jesus and to Mary, as father, husband, teacher, worker and unwavering protector. The Gospels show that he steadfastly did whatever needed to be done, and unassumingly put his family's needs before his own.

At a time when we truly need role models in our world, Saint Joseph stands as one of our greatest heroes. There is a comfortable goodness about him that we respect and revere. There is much to learn from him about how we should live our life in Christ.

As we prepare to receive Christ in the Eucharist, as Joseph received Christ into his home, may we have the grace and virtue to live as obedient, faithful and humble servants of the Lord.

Friday, March 20, 2020

(Lec. 241)

1) Hosea 14:2-10

2) Mark 12:28-34

Gospel related: **CCC** 129, 202, 228, 575, 2196 **CSDC** 40, 112

FRIDAY OF
THIRD WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: Our task during Lent is simply to remember who we are and who God is.

Today's readings offer an opportunity to reflect on who we are and who God is. On the one hand, this seems very obvious: We are human beings and God is our Creator. On the other hand, as imperfect human beings, we often lose sight of that reality. We may know it intellectually, but we do not always live it practically.

We, today, are certainly not unique in this fault. All of salvation history has included this human problem. Look at the advice to Israel in the very first part of today's first reading, the message that Israel should present to God: *We shall say no more, "Our god," to the work of our hands.* The people of Israel often fell into the sin of idolatry, worshiping the gods of the people in the lands where they lived.

Granted, most of us don't fall down and worship Baal or any other false god from another religion; instead, we have our own false gods: money, power, control, addictions, accumulation of goods – whatever it is in our life that takes precedence over God. We, too, often think, perhaps unconsciously, that we are in control of our own lives, or that we can make ourselves into the person we want to be without accepting our natural limitations. Or that we can do it without God's grace.

As Hosea called on the Israelites, he now calls on us to recognize our own idolatry, our own ways of turning away from God and trying to be our own gods. We are exhorted to seek forgiveness from God, and to ask him to accept the gift of ourselves and the gift of our adoration and praise: from creature to Creator.

Hosea also reminds us of the truth about God: God is compassionate toward orphans and toward all people who come to him. Hosea reminds us that God loves us so much, he can't wait for us to return to him so that he can fill us with his blessings. God wants to clothe us with splendor, like the cedars; he wants to form us into his children in ways of goodness far beyond what we, as human beings, can even imagine. God, who created us out of love, has a vision for us that is far beyond what we could ever see. What we want to make of ourselves is nothing compared to what God envisions for us.

When we truly hear and understand these truths about God and about ourselves, how much easier it is to follow the most important commandments that Jesus lays out for us in the Gospel: Love of God with our entire being, and love of our neighbor as ourselves. We are capable of recognizing that our neighbor, also a child of God, has a dignity and destiny far greater than we ourselves can imagine.

As we finish up the first half of Lent and move ever closer to the celebration of Jesus' resurrection, may God give us the grace to remember our identity as his beloved creatures, and to know him as a Father who wants more for us than we can ever imagine in this life.

Saturday, March 21, 2020

(Lec. 242)

1) Hosea 6:1-6

2) Luke 18:9-14

Gospel related: **CCC** 588, 2559, 2613, 2631, 2667, 2839

SATURDAY OF

THIRD WEEK

OF LENT

FOCUS: God desires honest expression of our longing for his mercy and love.

In 2011, we began using a new translation of prayers for Mass. This included changes to the *Confiteor*, our prayer of confession at the start of Mass. With this change, there is concerted effort to renew the ancient practice of striking the breast as we pray: *through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault*. Though many people never stopped doing this ritual gesture, prominent in the Latin Mass, it seems to have fallen out of practice. Why the efforts to renew it?

Striking the breast has roots far deeper than the Latin Mass – deeper even than our particular faith or cultural milieu. For millennia, and across peoples, it has been a universal symbol of sorrow, angst, grief, mourning or regret. So when Jesus tells the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector who went to the Temple to pray, it is even more striking as to who performs this bodily action.

Tax collectors were among the notorious sinners of Jesus' time. But it is the tax collector, not the Pharisee, who admits his faults, shows remorse and begs God for mercy. It is he who strikes his breast; he who expresses – through words and gestures – his deep sorrow and regret. It is this honest and open prayer that Jesus affirms. In contrast, the Pharisee uses prayer to tell God – and all others who might hear—how especially righteous he finds himself to be. He has no sorrow or regret, but rather exalts himself and fails to love the tax collector.

In the first reading, Hosea calls us to return to the Lord, who will heal us and bind up our wounds. We hear this throughout the Lenten season: Let us return to our loving God who desires us to know and love him. We have examples to learn from: The Pharisee, who does not love and knows not what God desires, and the tax collector, who knows that God desires his love. The tax collector longs to return to the Lord, and offers himself to the mercy of God. He goes home justified, exalted in God's love.

When we pray the *Confiteor* this Lent, let us do so as the tax collector does, knowing that God desires honest expression of our longing for his mercy and love. This way, we may know God's merciful healing and be prepared to enter into the sacred mysteries of the Mass, especially the Eucharist, our offering of ourselves to God in union with Christ.

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SUNDAY, MARCH 22, 2020

(Lec. 31)

- 1) 1 Samuel 16:1b, 6-7, 10-13a
- 2) Ephesians 5:8-14
- 3) John 9:1-41

or 9:1, 6-9, 13-17, 34-38

Gospel related: CCC 575, 588, 595, 596, 1151, 1504, 2173, 2827

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

FOCUS: The Lord has given us the eyes of faith to declare, *I do believe, Lord.*

In the first reading, we are given a glimpse into the ways of God. The least of all became the first, chosen by God to be a king. From that day forward, any success David might enjoy would be proof of God's favor, giving strength to David's weakness. In choosing the unlikely one, the unanticipated one, one seemingly so small for a task so great, God shows us that nothing is impossible with his help. God sees potential where all we might see are shortcomings. God envisions more for us than we could ever imagine.

The second reading from Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians is a clarion call to this truth about God. Paul exhorts the people of Ephesus to *live as children of light*. For God desires more of us than for us to live in darkness. He sent his Son to overcome darkness with light, that we might all *arise from the dead*, and receive the light of Christ.

This glimpse into the ways of God, and the contrast between darkness and light, set the stage for today's Gospel. Rather than rejoicing that the blind man has been given the gift of sight, he is accused of sin as if he was to blame for his blindness. Many in Jesus' time considered blindness to be God's curse. A blind man was a "nobody" since he was unable to work to provide for a spouse and family, and he lived as a beggar on the streets. For Jesus to give this man sight is akin to a rebirth into society: He gives him new hope and a better life. The Lord offers the same to all who believe.

This lengthy Gospel forms the basis for the Second Scrutiny for the Elect preparing for baptism. It serves as a reminder to us that we are all born blind, and we receive our sight at baptism when we are first able to look at the world through the fresh eyes of faith. Indeed, the Lord states his purpose clearly: *I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see might see*. Thus, from the young and unexpected King David's lineage came another young and unexpected king: Jesus Christ. Through him, God has reconciled us to himself, brought us out of darkness into light, and given us the eyes of faith to declare *I do believe, Lord*.

As our Lenten journey has passed the halfway point, we pray that the Lord may continue to open our eyes to what we need to see, to heal us of our blind spots and to acknowledge the sins we overlook. May we look at each other the way God looks at each of us – with love and with mercy, because God desires more for us than we could ever imagine. And may the grace of the Eucharist transform us to lead lives *pleasing to the Lord*, producing *every kind of goodness and righteousness and truth*.

The following readings may be used on any Lenten day this week, especially in Years B and C when the Gospel of the Man Born Blind is not read on the Fourth Sunday of Lent: Mi 7:7-9/Jn 9:1-41 (243).

Monday, March 23, 2020

(Lec. 244)

1) Isaiah 65:17-21

2) John 4:43-54

MONDAY OF
FOURTH WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: Be a sign of Christ to others – pointing to God’s love for all.

In describing the New Jerusalem that God will create, Isaiah says in our first reading today: *No longer shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not round out his full lifetime.* This is a reflection on what eternal life has in store for us: No pain, no weeping, no sorrow, no death. These are signs of the perfect unity of God and his people.

In his Gospel, John uses the term “sign” when referring to Jesus healing the royal official’s son. He says this is Jesus’ second sign. (The turning of water into wine at the wedding feast was the first sign recorded.)

All of Jesus’ miracles are signs of what is to come. Jesus did not come to simply eradicate illness any more than he came to spare people embarrassment at weddings. Jesus came to heal the chasm created between us and the Father that was caused by our rebellious sinful state. So Jesus works “signs,” as John calls them. Through these signs, Jesus gives us a taste of what the New Jerusalem – eternal life – will be like. A life free from pain, free from weeping, free from sorrow, free from death.

Lent is coming to an end. We prepare to celebrate Holy Week and Easter. We are moving toward the empty tomb, signifying the future for all who believe: resurrection of the body and life everlasting.

Yet even with all God has given us, some people are still looking for a sign. Others still want their personal lightning bolt to strike so they will believe Jesus is for real, and all that he said is true. For we who believe, however, further signs from God of his love are not necessary. For we have Jesus himself – not a *sign*, but *the Son* – the Incarnation of God’s love for us. The Son who gave himself up for us, who remains with us in the Holy Spirit, and who comes to us fully present in the Eucharist. So for the sake of the world, may we who receive him today go forth and be a sign for others, pointing to the Son, and to God’s love for all people.

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Tuesday, March 24, 2020

(Lec. 245)

1) Ezekiel 47:1-9, 12

2) John 5:1-16

Gospel related: **CCC** 575, 583, 594

TUESDAY OF
FOURTH WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: The generosity of God is a blessing we can imitate in our daily lives.

Both readings today are full of blessings for humankind. They both help us see God's generosity toward us.

In the Gospel, Jesus cures a man who has been ill for decades. The man had tried for years to be healed in the waters of Bethesda, but could not move quickly enough on his own, and no one ever helped him.

The encounter takes place with Jesus seeing the man, and asking him if he wanted to be well. This man had no idea who was talking to him. He never actually asked Jesus to cure him. He never professed faith in Jesus in any respect. Still, Jesus cured him. Jesus saw a need and filled it. What a message this sends to us. Jesus is there, ready to help us, ready to provide for our needs, no questions asked, except: "Do we want things to be better?"

It was out of pure generosity that Jesus cured this man, and that generosity is something we know is a fundamental attribute of God. Today's first reading shows us a powerful vision of that generosity, as exercised through the actions of an angel.

The angel acts as Ezekiel's guide, showing him around the Temple, God's house. From within the Temple comes water – first a trickle, then a stream and eventually enough fresh water to dilute the salty sea. The water is not only beautiful, but is the source of trees and other plants. It is full of fish and other creatures. It provides fruit for food and leaves for medicine. The water flowing from the Temple provides every good thing for Ezekiel.

For Ezekiel, the blessing provided by the Temple water was, prophetically, tied closely with the political success of Israel. For us it is, perhaps, a reminder of the continuous outpouring of God's love, grace and mercy. But over and above these specific meanings is evidence of the providential love of God for his people – for all of creation.

As we continue our celebration and as we go out into our everyday lives, may today's readings help us feel blessed and cared for by God. May the generosity of God move us to thank him for all he does, and all he has provided for us. And in that gratitude, and with God's grace, may we find ways, in turn, to be generous to others.

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Wednesday, March 25, 2020

(Lec. 545)

1) Isaiah 7:10-14; 8:10

2) Hebrews 10:4-10

3) Luke 1:26-38

Gospel related: **CCC** 64, 148, 269, 273, 276, 332, 430, 437, 484, 486, 488, 490, 491, 494, 497, 505, 510, 559, 697, 706, 709, 723, 2571, 2617, 2677, 2812, 2827, 2856 **CSDC** 59

**THE ANNUNCIATION
OF THE LORD
- SOLEMNITY**

FOCUS: *Here I am, Lord; I come to do your will.*

There is an idiomatic expression in English that refers to an individual or a group as “all-in.” That person (or group) is “all-in” when he or she makes a commitment to something or someone. There is no turning back.

Today, we celebrate the feast of the Annunciation. Two lines in the Scripture we hear today suggest that Mary did not just suddenly say “yes” to God, but that she had already been saying “yes” to God during her life. She was already “all-in.”

The angel Gabriel comes to Mary, and announces, *The Lord is with you.* He does not say, “The Lord *will be* with you,” but “the Lord *is* with you.” Right now. Already.

After hearing how she would conceive and bear a son, Mary says, *Behold, I am the handmaiden of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.* She doesn’t say “I *will be* the handmaid of the Lord,” but “*I am* the handmaid of the Lord.” She is already all-in.

Her words echo what we hear in today’s psalm: *Here I am, Lord; I come to do your will.*

Today, on the Feast of the Annunciation, we celebrate the great trust that Mary exemplifies. Now, Scripture does not say that she had no fears. In fact, it appears the possibility was there, for the angel begins by telling her, *Do not be afraid.* Scripture does not say that she was without confusion; in fact, we hear her ask, *How can this be?* But despite whatever fear and confusion may have been present, she knows where she stands. *Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.* She is all-in.

So often in our own lives, when someone asks something of us, we stop to consider all the consequences of our “yes.” How much time will it take? What are the pros and cons? Is it something I have the ability to do?

Mary, however, does not do this. Instead, she accepts what is presented to her right at that moment. She acknowledges her long-standing faithfulness to God, a faithfulness born of a multitude of daily “yeses” to God and his commands, throughout her life to that point.

What we know about virtue theory confirms that it is very difficult to suddenly say “yes” to something so great, without the benefit of many smaller “yeses” beforehand. Unlike Mary, we are not sinless: We need to develop habits and virtues that continually direct us to God and to a life of obedience to him.

And it is here that returning to the refrain from today’s psalm provides a wonderful guide for our lives. *Here I am, Lord; I come to do your will,* says the psalmist, *To do your will, O my God, is my delight, and your law is within my heart!*

Perhaps as an exercise in prayer this week, we can practice these smaller “yeses” by following Mary’s example of trust. When we are faced with a moment of uncertainty: *Here I am, Lord; I come to do your will.* When we are faced with fear: *Here I am, Lord; I come to do your will.* When we are faced with the unknown, the unexpected: *Here I am, Lord; I come to do your will.* When we practice these “yeses” in small things, we accept that we are “all-in” for God; we follow Mary’s example of faithfulness and trust, and our “yes,” together with the Holy Spirit, will continue to bring Christ into the world where he is most needed.

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Thursday, March 26, 2020

(Lec. 247)

1) Exodus 32:7-14

2) John 5:31-47

Gospel related: CCC 548, 582, 702, 719

THURSDAY OF

FOURTH WEEK

OF LENT

FOCUS: In his mercy, God relents in the punishment he had threatened to inflict on his people.

One of the most remarkable but often overlooked features in Scripture is the many honest and candid dialogues that take place between humans and the Divine. One such conversation occurs in our first reading today. Moses succeeds in allaying God's wrath toward the people of Israel. The people of Israel, having just been liberated from slavery in Egypt, have responded with ingratitude and infidelity by crafting and worshipping the golden calf – and God is angry!

God describes the Israelites as a *stiff-necked* people, and he wishes to be left alone to allow his wrath to blaze up and consume them. But Moses engages the Lord in dialogue, reminding him of his covenant with Abraham, and how such an action would be perceived by the Lord's enemies.

Once again, we see God's inherent mercy coming to the fore – where justice would demand punishment, mercy grants a second chance. This theme of God's abundant mercy will come to the fore again and again throughout both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. And yes, it will accompany us as we continue our Lenten journey and seek that mercy in our own lives.

Ingratitude before the Lord, and the worship of human-made idols, is not unique to the ancient Israelites, but rather is part of the human condition. In today's Gospel, Jesus points out how the Jews of his day often acted with hypocrisy and empty words: At first they listened to John the Baptist but never acted upon his word, and then they witnessed the mighty deeds of Jesus, but reject the idea that he is sent by God.

As we continue our Lenten journey, we are challenged to reflect on our false gods, and to root out our sins of ingratitude and hypocrisy before the Lord. These false gods may not be made of molten metal, but they are equally destructive to whom we are called to be. Like the golden calf, they, too, turn us from the way God has pointed out to us. But as we reflect, we are encouraged by the knowledge of God's great mercy toward all who seek him and come before him with a repentant heart. While we may forget the Lord, he never forgets us – his mercy endures forever.

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Friday, March 27, 2020

(Lec. 248)

1) Wisdom 2:1a, 12-22

2) John 7:1-2, 10, 25-30

Gospel related: CCC 583

FRIDAY OF
FOURTH WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: Speak and live the truth, even when it's not well-received.

In the first reading, the wicked are talking about someone – they refer to him as *the just one* – who lives differently than they do. He avoids and disapproves of the impure things they indulge in, speaks of a relationship with God and *calls blest the destiny of the just*. Seeing him live such a countercultural example infuriates the wicked, so they plot against him.

In the Gospel, Jesus says that the Jews do not know *the one who sent [him.]* For God himself sent him; he is from God. We know this to mean that Jesus is the only begotten Son of the Father, but to the Jews this was blasphemy. However, the Jews could not arrest Jesus because *his hour had not yet come*.

It is not hard to see the relationship between these two readings. Wisdom seems to prefigure Christ – *the just one*, or the “righteous one” as other translations say. The description of this *just one* undergirds the Gospel narratives of Christ's passion. And it is clear that those around Jesus in the Gospel are as annoyed, wicked and out to destroy the *just one* as those in Wisdom. And yet, it is not time for the *hidden counsels of God* to be revealed.

Christ spoke the truth, in love and without apology. And though many were blinded by their wickedness, those who knew him and knew the Father were given an innocent soul's reward.

We live today in a world in which we may face hostility. Yet, through prayer, frequent reception of the sacraments and the Eucharist, we receive the strength, courage and fortitude to be examples of Christian life. We have the grace to speak the truth without apology, and to believe in Jesus Christ and the one who sent him. We have the opportunity to remove any blindness from ourselves, and cast off any wickedness.

We can take comfort in knowing that the Lord sees our efforts. With contrite hearts and repentance when we fail, through God's mercy we will receive our reward in heaven. As we continue through these last few weeks of Lent, we pray for perseverance in both our Lenten disciplines, and our lives, that we might be shining examples of Christians. This week, we can ask the Lord to show us how we can be more like *the just one* from today's first reading, joyfully living and speaking the truth even around people who may react negatively. By God's grace, our examples may lead others to the Church. After all, a joyful and authentic Catholic is the best evangelist.

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Saturday, March 28, 2020

(Lec. 249)

1) Jeremiah 11:18-20

2) John 7:40-53

Gospel related: **CCC** 574, 575, 588, 595

SATURDAY OF

FOURTH WEEK

OF LENT

FOCUS: We who are part of this great salvation story have been given the fullness of revelation in Jesus Christ.

In literature, there is a tool used by writers called “dramatic irony.” That term refers to any situation in a book, play or movie in which the audience knows more information than the person speaking. In “Romeo and Juliet,” the audience knows that Juliet is only asleep at the end, but Romeo does not. His mistake leads to tragedy, and the audience sees it take place while knowing the catastrophic depth of his error.

There’s a bit of dramatic irony in the Gospel today. The crowd surrounding Christ begins to speak about his identity. Some guess he is *the Prophet*. Other people assert that Jesus is *the Christ*. Still others in the crowd use the details of Christ’s identity to prove he’s *not* the Christ, saying, *The Christ will not come from Galilee, will he?* All of us here gathered for Mass know the answers to these questions – we know well that he is the Messiah, the Promised One. We know that, of course, he is who he says he is: Raised in Galilee, and as the Scriptures say, he *come[s] from Bethlehem*, having been born there.

So the questions of the crowd are a little painful, and perhaps even angering to those of us with the benefit of the whole picture. Were this simply an exercise in literature, we might simply pay attention to how the narrative unfolds while seeing the crowd act in ignorance.

But this is not an exercise in literature. And the dramatic irony which serves its literary purpose also indicates a much more substantial and real-life issue with eternal consequences: The fullness of goodness and truth in the divine person of Jesus Christ, fully human as well, was right in front of their eyes and they could not see it. Instead, *a division occurred in the crowd because of him. Some of them even wanted to arrest him. As Jeremiah prophesied, they were hatching plots against him, hoping to destroy both him and any reference to him: that his name will be spoken no more.*

We don’t know if members of that particular crowd came to recognize Jesus as the Christ. We do know that their plots failed, that the name of Jesus is a hallowed one, and his sacrifice and act of reconciling us to the Father is far more dramatic than any human could conceive. We who are part of this great salvation story have been given the fullness of revelation in Jesus Christ. And there is no irony in that.

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SUNDAY, MARCH 29, 2020

**FIFTH SUNDAY
OF LENT**

(Lec. 34)

1) Ezekiel 37:12-14

2) Romans 8:8-11

3) John 11:1-45

or 11:3-7, 17, 20-27, 33b-45

Gospel related: **CCC** 439, 472, 581, 627, 640, 993, 994, 1001, 2604

FOCUS: We have faith in Christ, who is the Resurrection and the Life.

Today's Gospel reading is filled with scenes of human frailties. First, in Bethany, we encounter the suffering surrounding a dying man. Lazarus is ill, and his sisters Martha and Mary are concerned about him and send a message to their friend, Jesus. The Scripture does not say that they asked Jesus to come, or that they asked him to cure their brother. Scripture tells us only that the message said, *Master, the one you love is ill.*

Second, we see threats to human safety. When Jesus announces plans to go back to Judea, where they had recently been, his disciples question his intentions, for the Jews in Judea had tried to stone him. But Jesus explained that Lazarus had died, and that they must go.

Third, we see people mourning someone they loved. We see Martha and Mary lamenting the loss of their brother, and we see Jewish people from neighboring towns who have come to comfort the two sisters. We even see Jesus, true God and true Man, filled with emotion, weeping at the loss of his friend.

Finally, we see confusion and misunderstanding. The disciples do not fully understand Christ's mission, and even Thomas' bold comment, *Let us also go to die with him*, is well-meaning, if naïve. Jesus had also waited a few days before returning. He knows that this suffering will not end in death, but will simply be used *for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it.* But Mary and Martha do not know this, and they bemoan his absence.

All of this human frailty – apparent in this story, and familiar to our own lives. But what changes all of it? Faith! Martha proclaims that she has come to believe that Jesus is *the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world.* The Apostles and others hear Jesus say that he is *the resurrection and the life, whoever believes in me even if he dies, will live.* Jesus has faith that the Father will hear him, so he calls Lazarus to *come out.* Christ raises his friend from the dead. Those who were present come to believe in him, too.

All this human suffering was turned around because of faith. Faith convinces us of Christ's victory over death. Faith in the Resurrection rests on faith in God who is God of the Living (CCC 993). Today's Gospel is not just about Lazarus' resurrection, it's about *ours.* Likewise, all our human suffering, losses and doubts are reimagined in light of our faith in Christ. This profound faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit, and Paul reminds us that the Spirit lives in us. With him, we can overcome anything, even death itself. The tomb is empty. Our hearts are full.

The following readings may be used on any day this week, especially in Years B and C when the Gospel of Lazarus is not read on the Fifth Sunday of Lent: 2 Kgs 4:18b-21, 32-37/Jn 11:1-45 (250).

Monday, March 30, 2020

(Lec. 251)

1) Daniel 13:1-9, 15-17
19-30, 33-62 or 13:41c-62

2) John 8:1-11

Gospel related: **CCC** 583

MONDAY OF
FIFTH WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: Blessed are those who hope in the Lord.

Susanna stood among them. Falsely accused by two elders – judges of the people – of betraying her husband, the threat of death was so very near to her. She had lived her whole life obedient to God’s will. And now, she has been labeled as a grave sinner. The crowd believed the lies of the men who put her in this situation. As she was being led to her execution, she desperately prayed to God for help.

The unnamed woman stood among them. She was identified as a sinner, caught in the very act of adultery. Brought by scribes and Pharisees, her own credibility was never considered. Her voice is never heard while her crime is being discussed. She was a test for Jesus and his teachings. The crowd picked up stones and prepared to make her suffer her punishment.

The two women in our readings today were accused of the same crime, though at different times in history and with different situations and outcomes. Both yearned for God’s help in their impossible plights, and both found hope in him. Daniel, moved by the Holy Spirit, questioned the two men who accused Susanna of her crime. In his challenge to them, the truth is revealed, she is saved and justice vindicates her and delivers her accusers. And then the crowd cries aloud, *blessing God who saves those who hope in him.*

In the Gospel, Jesus speaks up against the words of the scribes and the Pharisees. He questions their character and their motivation. After Jesus speaks to them, the accused go away, one by one.

In this Lenten season, we return to God, God of hope. We might feel like the women in our readings today: trapped in situations where there does not seem to be hope. We might feel deep injustice. We might feel desperate for the grace of God’s presence. Or perhaps we might recognize that God is calling us to witness to situations of injustice. Like the prophet Daniel and like Jesus, God may empower us to be a voice for the service of others. We may be asked to bring God’s hope to them.

As we gather today at this Eucharist, let us be mindful of what we hope for. Let us also be mindful of what others around us hope for right now. When we experience God’s radical hope, we are called to share it with others. A life of discipleship means to be an agent of God’s hope.

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Tuesday, March 31, 2020

(Lec. 252)

1) Numbers 21:4-9

2) John 8:21-30

Gospel related: CCC 211, 603, 652, 1693, 2812, 2824, 2825

TUESDAY OF

FIFTH WEEK

OF LENT

FOCUS: In Jesus, God heals us and gives us the gift of eternal life.

Like many of us, the Israelites in the wilderness found reason to complain to God. They are, *disgusted with this wretched food*, they tell Moses. The serpents sent by God serve as a punishment, and the people quickly repent.

This grumbling against God and Moses is a common theme in the story of the Exodus. The people forget the good God has done for them, and they complain. Then God punishes them, they are contrite and then God forgives them. This cycle repeats itself nearly a dozen times throughout the 40-year period.

In today's story, the bronze serpent Moses is commanded to make is an instrument of healing. It will remain with the people throughout their 40 years in the wilderness, and be kept in the Ark of the Covenant as a reminder of their grumbling and God's gracious forgiveness. When Solomon dedicates the Temple of Jerusalem nearly 300 years later, the serpent is still in the ark, along with a jar of manna, the presence of which was to remind them that God gave them bread from heaven as well.

God's gracious forgiveness goes well beyond the ark, the manna and the healing bronze serpent. As Jesus reveals to the people in today's Gospel, he is I AM. He is, one and the same, the God of Moses, who brought the people out of slavery. Who constantly bore the brunt of complaining and disobedience, and never ceased to offer mercy and forgiveness. He is God Incarnate, whose very presence is the ultimate reconciliation between God and his people. He is the new covenant, borne by Mary, the new ark.

And although, by Jesus' day, the first Ark of the Covenant is lost, the people would still have known the story of the bronze serpent. So as Jesus speaks of his own being lifted up as a sign that he is one with the Father and so is the source of life for believers, he is recalling the life-giving power of the serpent who I AM instructed Moses to make.

For it is in Jesus that God completely heals us and gives us the gift of eternal life. Even some in the crowd in today's passage understood the meaning of his words. And, despite the great numbers who criticize him, John tells us that *many came to believe in him*. As with their predecessors, God continued to provide a way forward for his people – if they listened and had faith.

God does the same for us. Whether we grumble or give thanks, there is a way forward. That way is through Jesus Christ, in whom we have true bread from heaven. We need only to repent when we turn from God, and give thanks for his goodness. It always awaits us – we just need to look at it, as the Israelites did the serpent. Christ is our healer, and the way, the truth and the life. *All who come to him will live forever.*

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