

MARCH

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**YEAR B
WEEKDAYS I**

Monday, March 1, 2021
(Lec. 230)

1) Daniel 9:4b-10

2) Luke 6:36-38

Gospel related: CCC 1458, 2842

MONDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: The greatest gift is given, not received.

We all love to receive gifts. We can imagine a child on Christmas morning, consumed with excitement for the presents under the tree. Even as adults, we don't always lose this feeling. Be it an unexpected card in the mail from a distant friend, or a thoughtful present on our birthday, or simply getting to spend quality time with a loved one – gifts make us feel known and appreciated.

Jesus turns our natural inclination to receive good gifts upside-down. In today's Gospel, he gives us the commands to: *Be merciful ... stop judging ... stop condemning ... forgive*. In sum, *Give and gifts will be given to you*.

Jesus is saying that our reception of good gifts is dependent on our willingness to *give* such gifts to others. We need look no further than today's first reading to see this. The prophet Daniel is praising his *great and awesome God*, not because God has shown mercy to those who deserve it, but precisely because God has forgiven those who do *not* deserve it. In Daniel's words, *But yours, O Lord, our God, are compassion and forgiveness! Yet we rebelled against you*. The gift of praise that Daniel gives predisposes him to be receptive of all that God desires to give him. God doesn't need the praise to give the gift – but when Daniel, and we, too, give something good to another, we make room within ourselves for God and his good gifts.

With this in mind, let us return to Jesus' words in today's Gospel. He teaches us that *giving* a gift away is precisely to *receive* a gift! Thus, when we refuse to give mercy and love to others, we neglect not only our neighbors, but first and foremost ourselves. For that which we measure out to others will be returned to us in the same measure.

If we are in need of receiving a gift this Lent, perhaps the answer is not to sit passively until something good comes our way. Instead, we can get up, go out, and make good on the Eucharistic gift we are given today, by giving away something of ourselves; we can offer love, forgiveness, or reconciliation where it is needed. The greatest gift, after all, is simply to give.

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Tuesday, March 2, 2021
(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: Prayer, fasting, and almsgiving are expressions of our interior conversion.

Today's readings call us to reflect on whether our outward actions reflect our internal dispositions. Do our Lenten practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving express sorrow for our sins and a desire to make things right, or are they merely empty show? Do they give glory to God or to ourselves?

In today's first reading, God uses Isaiah to convey his displeasure with the people of Israel, comparing them to Sodom and Gomorrah in a less-than-favorable light.

In today's Gospel, Jesus expresses similar frustration, in this case with the hypocrisy of the Pharisees: *For they preach but they do not practice, and All their works are performed to be seen.* Rather than seeking honor and titles, Jesus calls his disciples to be humble servants. In a reversal of fates similar to that preached in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

During Lent, we are called to reflect on our own sinful inclinations. We do not perform Lenten sacrifices, prayers, and acts of charity in order to earn God's forgiveness, but as a way of cleansing ourselves of idols and vices. Perhaps our Lenten practices can make some small reparation for the negative effects of our actions. Do we find ourselves thinking uncharitably of others? We can pray for the grace to truly desire their good, and be open to that grace leading us to pray for them directly. Does our habit of gossiping or complaining break down community in our homes and workplaces? We can fast from the need to leave no thought unspoken, and strive to listen more. Much like the penances we receive in the sacrament of reconciliation, these acts are not conditions for forgiveness, but rather expressions of our interior conversion. Our contrition compels us to make things right.

Isaiah and Jesus criticize Israel's religious leaders for performing sacrifices without first experiencing conversion. They sought God's forgiveness and the favor of the people without any intention of changing their own sinful behaviors. It takes humility to acknowledge the ways we have failed God and others. It takes humility to serve as Jesus calls us. As we approach our Lord in the Eucharist, may we offer both our sacrifices and our sins to the one who gave it all to save us.

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Wednesday, March 3, 2021
(Lec. 232)

- 1) Jeremiah 18:18-20
- 2) Matthew 20:17-28

WEDNESDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
OF LENT

(Opt. Mem.
USA: Saint Katharine Drexel,
Virgin)

Gospel related: CCC 440, 572, 6001, 605, 622, 786, 2235 CSDC 193, 379

FOCUS: *Can you drink the chalice that I am going to drink?*

Lent is a time that invites us to step back and take the long view. Through special practices and prayer, we look for ways to grow closer to God and to one another. We aim for holiness, freedom in Christ, and the opportunity with God's grace to be more and more conformed to Christ.

What does it mean for us to be conformed to Christ? Our Gospel today does not provide easy answers to this question, but it does provide answers. Growing in holiness – being sanctified – and gaining freedom in Christ includes facing pain, hardship, and suffering in our life that well may be out of our ability to control. What it doesn't include is claiming a place of honor in this world, or the next, for the sake of our own privilege and glory.

This truth is clear from the response Jesus gives to the mother of Zebedee's sons. She declares that she wishes for Jesus to *command that these two sons of mine sit, one at your right and the other at your left, in your kingdom*. Jesus replies, speaking to the sons, *Can you drink the chalice that I am going to drink?* Though the two men answer "yes," Jesus' message is that the Kingdom is not about positions of honor, but rather, positions of humility and servitude. The cup from which they will drink conforms them to Christ's purpose to serve and not be served. As his disciples they, and we, are to be servants to all.

The question then, is how will our Lenten practices and devotions strengthen our faith to be the servant of all? What will allow us to grow in holiness and freedom in Christ? The mother of Zebedee's sons asked the wrong question. We have the opportunity to ask the right ones. May the grace of God's presence in the Eucharist help us in seeking the truth, beauty, and goodness that come from God's word.

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.

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Thursday, March 4, 2021
(Lec. 233)

- 1) Jeremiah 17:5-10
- 2) Luke 16:19-31

THURSDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
OF LENT
(Opt. Mem.
Saint Casimir)

Gospel related: CCC 336, 523, 633, 952, 1021, 1859, 2382, 2424, 2831 CSDC 181, 453

FOCUS: Trust in the Lord is intimately connected to love of neighbor, especially those less fortunate.

Jeremiah's words today are quite striking: *Cursed is the man who trusts in human beings, who seeks his strength in flesh, whose heart turns away from the Lord. Why? Because he is like a barren bush in the desert, empty of life, and unable to give of himself because he has nothing within himself to give.*

The one who trusts in the Lord, however, is like a tree planted near running water. Its roots run deep, tapping into moisture and nourishment which sustain it and allow it to bear fruit.

Today's Gospel is equally blunt. The rich man was condemned to torment in the afterlife precisely because he did not provide for the needs of the beggar at his gate.

It is not that he was overtly cruel to Lazarus, but that he saw the abject and miserable state he was in and did nothing. The rich man enjoyed his riches. Trusting in his wealth led him to harden his heart against the needs of his neighbor. He had become a barren bush, empty of life, and therefore had no life – or love – to extend to another.

The Gospel message is clear: We need to be not just alert to the needs that surround us, but we need to do something about them. Looking out for our neighbor – especially those most in need – is essential to adhering to the commandment to love one another. The Church's teaching makes this obligation clear: "Everyone should look upon his neighbor (without any exception) as 'another self,' above all bearing in mind his life and the means necessary for living it with dignity" (CCC 1931).

When our hearts are turned toward God and when we trust in him, we are that vibrant tree of which Jeremiah spoke. The living water that helps us grow and sustains us allows us to bear fruit that can be life-giving food for others. Do we help the needy among us? Do we see Jesus in them? If not, let us beg these virtues of our Eucharistic Lord.

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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Friday, March 5, 2021
(Lec. 234)

FRIDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
OF LENT

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

2) Matthew 21:33-43, 45-46
Gospel related: CCC 443, 755, 756

FOCUS: *By the Lord has this been done, and it is wonderful in our eyes.*

In the first reading, the brothers of Joseph are upset because he is favored by their father, Jacob. Initially they plan to kill him, but instead they decide to be “merciful” and just sell him off as a slave for their own financial gain.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus tells a parable where the landowner’s servants and son are sent to collect what is due, but instead are killed by wayward tenants.

In these stories, both Joseph and the servants suffer for speaking the truth to the powerful and misguided. They are hated by others because of their father’s love for them. Jesus, too, was hated because of our Father’s love – his love for us. So, like Joseph in the first reading, the fate of Jesus was exchanged for pieces of silver. And like the heir to the vineyard in his parable, Christ was killed by those who wanted to claim God’s inheritance for their own.

As the prophets before him did, Jesus came to call sinners to repentance. He came as the embodiment of God’s Wisdom, to enlighten us to the truth of God’s love for us, and his promise of eternal life with him. He came without force or coercion; he came without condemnation. Christ came as Divine Love to dwell with and among us so that we could be reconciled with God. He has become the cornerstone of the Church. But so many were blind to who he was, and to his purpose.

Those who rejected him, then, could not see the Kingdom he was inaugurating. Those who reject him still cannot see the amazing things the Lord has done and continues to do. The truth, beauty, and goodness of the Catholic Church is not of our making, but it is our home, our shelter, and our salvation. With God’s help, we can lead others to her, that they may behold the cornerstone, and have all that has been hidden from them be made visible. We are loved, we are blessed, and we are redeemed. As the Scriptures tell us, *by the Lord has this been done, and it is wonderful in our eyes.*

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Saturday, March 6, 2021
(Lec. 235)

- 1) Micah 7:14-15, 18-20
- 2) Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Gospel related: CCC 545, 589, 1423, 1439, 1443, 1468, 1700, 1846, 2795, 2839

SATURDAY OF
SECOND WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: God is merciful; God is forgiving.

If today's readings were highlighted in a cartoon we might see God wielding a huge Nerf mallet over us with the word "Mercy" in big bold letters. Or if we had a photo of Las Vegas, we might see a 200-foot-high neon sign flashing the message, "God is Merciful." That's how obvious the message is today from the prophet Micah and Saint Luke. God's mercy has no bounds. It's there for the taking – we just need to seek his forgiveness for our sins.

Micah was a prophet in the time of Isaiah who did his share of warning the Israelites about the dangers of falling away from the covenant they had with the Lord, but in each of the two sections of his book, Micah also emphasizes God's mercy. Here is a quick summary of how he said that today, just in his last three verses: "Who is a God like you?" he asks, *who removes guilt ... pardons sin ... does not persist in anger ... delights in clemency ... (has) compassion on us ...* and casts our sins into the depths.

Whereas Micah is direct, Luke lets the parable of the prodigal son show us God's mercy in a more subtle way. We arrive at it in the story at the same time the younger son does. Saint John Paul II described the parable like this: "Although the word mercy does not appear, this parable nevertheless expresses the essence of the divine mercy in a particularly clear way ... as a profound drama played out between the father's love and the prodigality and sin of the son" (*Dives in Misericordia*, 30 Nov. 1980, §5).

The father's love, transformed into mercy, brings his wayward son back into the fold, and awards him the dignity due to him as his son. Saint John Paul goes on to say that the son, who receives from the father the portion of the inheritance, in a certain sense is every son and daughter of God, of every time and place (*Ibid*). That includes us. We sin and we need to repent and ask God for forgiveness. And when we return to his house, we can rest assured our Father will be there to greet us in his infinite mercy and invite us to his banquet.

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SUNDAY, MARCH 7, 2021

(Lec. 29)

- 1) Exodus 20:1-17
or 20:1-3, 7-8, 12-17
- 2) 1 Corinthians 1:22-25
- 3) John 2:13-25

Gospel related: CCC 473, 575, 583, 584, 586, 994

**THIRD SUNDAY
OF LENT**

FOCUS: We need Jesus' help to cleanse our hearts to make room for him.

Each of us longs to know and love God better. Each of us needs the grace of God in our lives. Today's readings subtly teach us something important about receiving grace and instruction from God. First, he must cleanse us. First, he must make room in our hearts so that he can fill us with his grace.

We notice in today's first reading that, before God gave the Israelites the Ten Commandments, writing his law on their hearts, he had to get them out of Egypt. He had to free them so that they could be free to love and serve him. In today's Gospel, Jesus cleanses the temple, making a *whip out of cords* and overturning tables! But then, he teaches. He prophesies his glorious resurrection.

Lent is a time for examining what obstacles to grace and instruction from God may be in our lives. Remember that God respects our free will, and so he doesn't "force" his grace upon us; we have to cooperate. And so we, in humility, ask ourselves: What do we need to "cleanse" in order to "make room" for God's abundant grace? What false idols might we rank higher than God, even unconsciously? We know that *the temple of [Jesus'] body* was destroyed and raised. Therefore, we can trust that the same God who raised Jesus from the dead can also cleanse and breathe new life into our hearts.

To the world, it may seem foolish to place God and his commandments first in our lives, above money, power, and pleasure. But Saint Paul reminds us that to unbelievers, the simple fact that we glorify Christ crucified – Jesus killed as a criminal – is foolish, at best. God, in his infinite wisdom, desired this to be the way humankind was saved, and so we proclaim with joy: Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again.

As we approach the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, let our simple prayer be: Jesus, I want to cleanse my heart to make more room for you.

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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 8, 2021

(Lec. 237)

1) 2 Kings 5:1-15ab

2) Luke 4:24-30

MONDAY OF
THIRD WEEK
OF LENT
(Opt. Mem.
Saint John of God,
Religious)

FOCUS: Remain open to the surprising ways God is at work in the world.

During the season of Lent, many throughout the world are in the midst of their final period of preparation for the reception of the sacraments of initiation at Easter. And, in fact, yesterday they would have celebrated the first of three Scrutinies – soul-searching rites that are part of this final preparation.

These rites are important because initiation is not just about formally entering the Church and the sacramental life of faith. It is also about beginning a lifelong journey of conversion, embracing a change in the way we think, a change in the way we live, a change in who we are. And change of that depth is not easy. We see that reflected in the Gospel.

To the people of Nazareth, Jesus was a carpenter, the son of Joseph and Mary – no one remarkable. Yet, here he was, claiming to be a prophet. And not just any prophet; Jesus was suggesting he was of comparable importance to the great prophets Elijah and Elisha. This claim sounded so preposterous to the people that in their rage they tried to kill Jesus; they just couldn't wrap their mind around seeing Jesus in a different way.

We are not so different from the people of Nazareth. Are there not times when we think we know best about how our own needs and prayers ought to be met and answered by God? Or we are frustrated that our problems are not just waved away, but require us to do something (like Naaman)?

Adjusting the way we think and live are indeed challenges. And these challenges exist not only for those who are approaching their baptism, but for us who are already baptized and continuing along our journey of lifelong conversion. They are also not insurmountable. God's grace is readily available. We need only ask him to help us remain open to the surprising ways that he is present in the world.

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Tuesday, March 9, 2021
(Lec. 238)

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

TUESDAY OF
THIRD WEEK
OF LENT
(Opt. Mem.
Saint Frances of Rome,
Religious)

Gospel related: CCC 982, 2227, 2843, 2845

FOCUS: Receiving the great gift of forgiveness both allows and commands that we freely share it with others.

There is a clear message in today's parable: just as we have been forgiven, so, too, must we forgive. For conversely, as Jesus says, *so will my heavenly father [not forgive] you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart.*

Forgiveness is not always easy for us – we know that, and God certainly knows that! But we are not left alone in our efforts. The grace of God is available to us in the life of the Church, and in prayer. And that grace both plants the seed for, and brings to fruition, the proper disposition for repentance and forgiveness. And that disposition is a humble and contrite heart. For how can we, to whom God has shown such kindness and mercy, not treat our brothers and sisters with the same kindness and mercy?

Perhaps we forget what it is like to be in desperate need of mercy and forgiveness. Our first reading today, the grace of God's word in Scripture, helps us remember. Azariah, one of three young men thrown into a fiery furnace, stands up and prays aloud for God's mercy. He acknowledges the desperate situation he and his community are in. They have no one to save them; no way to offer sacrifices and oblations to find God's favor. They have been brought low in every way because of their sin, and have nothing left to give – nothing left to do. So they throw themselves unreservedly before the Lord, with wholly contrite hearts and humbled spirits. They beg for deliverance through God's kindness and mercy. The story ends with God saving them.

We may not be in that literal flaming furnace, but our vulnerability to the fiery vicissitudes of life remains. We are just like Azariah, dependent and in need of God. The experience of complete humility and utter helplessness opens our hearts most unreservedly to God, and therefore to one another. Receiving the great gift of forgiveness, given so freely by God, both allows, and commands that we freely share it with others. This shared forgiveness – between us and God and one another – is the fullness of forgiveness we are called to on our Lenten journey.

Saint 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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Wednesday, March 10, 2021
(Lec. 239)

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

Gospel related: CCC 577, 592, 1967, 2053

WEDNESDAY OF
THIRD WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: When we imitate Christ and follow the commandment to love, we lead others to God.

In today's first reading, the Israelites – after 40 years in the wilderness – are about to enter the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua.

They have spent these years learning and living the commandments given by God. Moses now stresses the importance and meaning of these commandments, and encourages the people to *observe them carefully*, promising that God will reward them. *Teach them to your children and to your children's children*, Moses says, for God's law is for all generations.

By doing this, the Israelites will be a sign to other nations that they are *a wise and intelligent people*, based on their way of life. Israel is called to be a light to the nations, serving to bring others to worship the Lord as well.

Jesus' words in today's Gospel are in parallel to those of Moses. As part of his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells his disciples that he has great respect for the law. He has not *come to abolish the law or the prophets ... but to fulfill*. Growing up, he learned the laws given to Moses, and as an observant Jew, he lived them.

But Jesus is also saying that there is more to the law than how it was being taught. It is not enough, he will say later in the Sermon on the Mount, to avoid killing, we must also avoid evil or harmful thoughts, words, and actions. For that is how we love God, and one another. Jesus as the fulfillment of the law means there is no more need for sacrifices or righteous deeds done in hope of mercy. Mercy and salvation have been given to us, in the perfect sacrifice of Christ. Instead, we are to imitate him, and follow the commandment to love.

Jesus promises that by obeying these laws and teaching them to others we will *be called greatest in the Kingdom of heaven*. We also know, from experience, that living this way shines a light for others, and helps point the way to Christ.

We ask this day for the grace to live God's law as best as we can that we may, by our example, lead others to God.

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Thursday, March 11, 2021
(Lec. 240)

1) Jeremiah 7:23-28

2) Luke 11:14-23

Gospel related: CCC 385, 700

THURSDAY OF
THIRD WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: Whatever our weakness, Christ is the answer.

We can glean a similar message from both the first reading and the Gospel today, and that is the unwillingness of humanity to be open to God. In the many ways that humanity has turned away from the Lord – rebellion, being lukewarm, apathy, violent hostility – it ultimately boils down to our fallen human nature and the question of evil. Why do we choose something other than God?

Jesus confronted evil many times in the Scriptures. His authority was absolute over the demons he cast out; just a word from his lips was enough to send a demon running. For the person freed from the grip of evil, this would have been a cause for rejoicing. But some questioned Jesus' methods, and the healing power of God was reduced to a petty debate.

It sounded very similar to what the Lord spoke to Jeremiah in the first reading. It didn't matter what the Lord did or said; time after time, his chosen people *turned their backs, not their faces* to him. If heaven is supposed to be our destination, how do we overcome these attitudes? We have the same weak hearts and stiff necks as our spiritual ancestors.

There's no better season than Lent to raise these questions. How do we return to God? Thankfully, Jesus, the Son, came to us as the way to return to our Father. His perfect, divine nature obeyed God perfectly when we could not. He chose the Father's will when we so often choose our own. If we let him, Jesus can unleash the same power of God in the battles with our weaknesses. The Jesus that healed the mute and gave sight to the blind is the same Jesus that comes to us today. He comes to us in the sacraments, especially in the Eucharist. He comes to us in prayer; he comes to us through the love of others.

Whatever our weakness, Christ is the answer. Seek him in prayer and the sacraments. Turn to him with an open heart.

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Friday, March 12, 2021
(Lec. 241)

- 1) Hosea 14:2-10
- 2) Mark 12:28-34

Gospel related: CCC 129, 202, 228, 575, 2196

FRIDAY OF
THIRD WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: The greatest commandment is to love – love God first and then love your neighbor as yourself.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. [And] You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.

Jesus' response to the scribes today was crystal clear, blunt, and unambiguous. And his command was not just to love God, but to love him with one's whole being. We should see God in all that we say, in all that we do. He is to be our center, our purpose, our beginning and end. And for those times we fail? Thankfully, God is patient and merciful and continues to call us back to him.

We are also commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves; to see the image of God in every person, and to recognize their inherent dignity no matter their age, state in life, or how they might differ from us in background or belief. There is no exception clause within this commandment! It matters little how we "feel" about another; real love can never ignore their divine image or their human needs. It manifests the compassion and patience that God extends to us without fail, and should therefore, in turn, be extended to those we encounter daily.

There is no "this is really easy" clause in the commandment, either. But Hosea's words today, about God's patience and mercy, are helpful: "Return to the Lord your God," Hosea says. "Ask for forgiveness of sins." The more we recognize what within ourselves needs care and compassion (that is, our faults and our sins), and ask God for help, the easier it will be to see others with the eyes with which the Lord sees us, and to love them. God is in the person who offended us and in the person in pain. He is in the faces of those we dislike. We don't get to choose who gets our love. They are all the neighbors whom Jesus commands us to love.

Sometimes love is easy, but not always. Sometimes we have to work at it. But when we love God with our whole being, and repent and seek forgiveness when we sin, we grow in the grace to love others, too.

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Saturday, March 13, 2021
(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: Good works are evidence of God's life within us.

When we arise in the morning and prepare for the day, it's typical to look in a mirror ... and see our bleary eyes and our unkempt hair. We also see that we are in need of some cleaning up if we are to go out in public. So we might take a shower, brush our teeth, and comb our hair. We put on some presentable clothing and shoes, feeling much more confident in ourselves as we step out the door. It is good and right that we undertake this morning ritual. Personal hygiene and cleanliness are obviously important daily disciplines.

This discipline for our outward appearance is not the same as what is needed for our inner, spiritual lives. We have no need to "clean ourselves up," before we come to God. Why? First, because we actually cannot do it ourselves: *He* is the one who cleanses *us*; and second, he would see right through it anyway!

The truth of this is at the heart of the parable in today's Gospel. The Pharisee does not see his need for God's mercy because he has cleaned himself up through acts of self-righteousness. Under this self-deception, what need is there for a Savior? The Pharisee believes he has saved himself. In contrast, the tax collector knows the truth about himself – that he cannot clean himself up and make himself righteous before God. Justification is God's work, not ours.

So what do we make of the Pharisee's practices of fasting and tithing? Should we abandon these practices because we cannot save ourselves? Of course not. Prayer, fasting, and almsgiving are not means by which we save ourselves. They are means by which God is acting in us. Any act of goodness on our part is a grace from God, a sign of his divine life active within us.

This is very good news! And this is the sacramental life of the Church. The Lord does not require us to clean ourselves up to receive his mercy. Instead of looking in the mirror and trying to clean ourselves, let us look to Jesus – admitting our need for his mercy and allowing him to cleanse us through the sacraments. As we receive salvation in Christ, we then produce good fruit as evidence of God's presence within us.

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SUNDAY, MARCH 14, 2021

(Lec. 32)

1) 2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23

2) Ephesians 2:4-10

3) John 3:14-21

Gospel related: CCC 219, 444, 454, 458, 678, 679, 706, 2130 CSDC 3, 64

**FOURTH SUNDAY
OF LENT**

FOCUS: Jesus Christ as the light of the world saves us from the darkness of sin and death.

In the Star Wars movie “The Empire Strikes Back,” the young Luke Skywalker asks the Jedi Master, Yoda, if the dark side of the Force is stronger than the light, and Yoda answers, “No, no, no. Quicker. Easier. More seductive.”

Quicker, easier, more seductive. Isn't this the inherent challenge of the Christian life, struggling against the allure of the quicker, easier path. Today's first reading draws attention to this desire: *Early and often*, it says, *did the Lord, the God of their fathers, send his messengers to [his people]*, but they rejected them. Why? Because to accept the message would mean to change, to grow, to face their own wickedness. The people preferred the quicker path, the easier path. They chose their ways over God's ways.

In John's Gospel, Nicodemus has come to Jesus to ask him about the signs he is doing. What we do not hear today, but what John writes a few verses prior to this, is the time of Nicodemus' visit to Jesus. He did not come in the daytime, when anyone could see him. He came at night, under the cover of darkness. He could not step fully into the light, because he had not yet chosen God's way over that of his own religious cohorts.

Jesus says to Nicodemus: *This is the verdict, that the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil.*

The people preferred their way; they preferred darkness to light; and their behaviors and works were evil. *Quicker. Easier. More seductive.*

Evil thrives in darkness. *Everyone who does wicked things hates the light*, because light exposes those deeds. But shadows and darkness make everything unclear and hard to navigate, and God's people were never going to find their way back to God without help. And so God sent his only Son into the world – as the light of the world – not to condemn it but to save it. For only light can lead us to truth; only light can show us a path to follow; only light can dispel darkness.

In the quote above, Yoda did not say the darkness was stronger, only that it had more allure. This is analogous to the Christian life. All of us are familiar with the temptation and allure of sin. But Jesus Christ as the light of the world saves us from the darkness of sin and death. Freedom comes in knowing that the light is stronger; the yoke is lighter. The saving power of God brings love and mercy, healing and salvation, to the world.

* * *

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 15, 2021

(Lec. 244)

1) Isaiah 65:17-21

2) John 4:43-54

MONDAY OF
FOURTH WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: Our Lenten disciplines help remind us of where we are in our journey of faith.

As we move past the halfway point of our Lenten journey, we often need to hear words of encouragement to keep us focused on the real purpose of our Lenten disciplines. Today's readings are full of that life-giving encouragement.

In the Gospel, Jesus heals the son of a *royal official*: a man who was not Jewish, but who clearly had some understanding of – if not some burgeoning faith in – who Jesus was. The experience of Jesus' words alone being the catalyst for his son's recovery leads him *and his whole household* to believe.

Combined with the first reading and the psalm, this Gospel account allows us to see this healing as evidence of God's fulfillment of the promises made to Israel through the prophet Isaiah. For the God we worship is both loving and steadfast in his fidelity. The crowds around Jesus in Galilee wanted a sign, but they wanted it for the wrong reason. Despite what they had seen in Jerusalem, they were not convinced of who he was. Jesus is aware of their lack of faith. He knows what is in their hearts; they think that because he is one of them, they know who he truly is.

But faith requires more than just superficial knowledge – it requires an encounter with Jesus, and is often best experienced when the heart is open in a time of need. The father of the sick child came to Jesus in a moment of desperation – his faith was sown in that need, but nurtured in his encounter and the joy of having his request answered.

Our Lenten journey and its many disciplines are meant to remind us of where we are in our journey of faith. We, too, need to encounter Christ in a new way and not simply rely on our "knowledge" of him. It is only in that true encounter that we can know the full reality of the promises God makes to each of us through baptism: The promise of a share in his eternal life and the promise of renewal beginning in our lives today and blossoming into the fullness of life.

* * *

Tuesday, March 16, 2021
(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: Our souls receive strength and refreshment when we stay close to Jesus.

We are called to live by the rich teachings of the Church, to live Gospel values, and witness them to those we meet in our daily lives. How can we do this?

The first reading offers us a suggestion. Ezekiel visits the temple and is shown the healing water that comes from the side of the temple – water that feeds and refreshes the trees that grow alongside it. As the trees receive nourishment from the river, they provide fruit and leaves that respectively nurture and heal all who come to them.

We were baptized into the family of God through the flowing waters of baptism. But if we are to be pleasing to God and give witness to others, we must stay close to the source of our baptism, close to the waters of the Church – close to Jesus through daily prayer and study of Scripture. Staying close to Jesus – remaining rooted in our baptismal call – transforms us into the image, mind, and heart of Jesus.

As sinners, we can learn to live by Jesus' commandments to love God and others through daily prayer, listening to the words of wise followers of Jesus, prayerful study of Scripture, and frequent reception of the sacraments. As we learn to walk in Jesus' way and in the teachings of the Church, we can, in turn, bring others the fruits and healing of Jesus' acceptance, forgiveness, and challenges. Like the trees planted by the flowing waters of the temple, we can bear the fruit of love and witness that others need.

In today's Gospel, Jesus asks a man who had been ill, and sitting by the pool of Bethesda, for 38 years: *Do you want to be well?* That same question can be asked of us, as we journey through these last weeks of Lent, mindful of what needs healing in our lives. Let us resolve to stay close to the refreshing waters of our baptism and be a source of encouragement and love for others on their own path.

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Wednesday, March 17, 2021
(Lec. 246)

- 1) Isaiah 49:8-15
- 2) John 5:17-30

WEDNESDAY OF
FOURTH WEEK
OF LENT
(Opt. Mem.
Saint Patrick,
Bishop)

Gospel related: CCC 574, 589, 594, 612, 635, 679, 859, 994, 998, 1038, 1063, 1470, 2824 CSDC 259

FOCUS: We are called to be bold in living out our faith.

Lent calls us to be bold. Lent calls us to repent of our sins, to repent from whatever is blocking us from hearing and believing in God's word. If we hear and believe, then we must act upon that belief. Jesus puts it this way in the Gospel today: *The hour is coming in which all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and will come out, those who have done good deeds to the resurrection of life.*

He goes onto to say that those who do evil will experience *the resurrection of condemnation*. From all of this it is not difficult to conclude that simply sitting on the fence until Judgment Day won't cut it. If we hear and believe, then we must act – no fence-sitting allowed for any faithful follower of Jesus.

Today is the memorial of Saint Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland. While there are myths galore about Saint Patrick, what is not a myth is his zeal in bringing the message of Jesus to the very people who enslaved him as a boy.

When Patrick escaped and returned home to Britain, he could have simply forgotten about his difficult life in captivity. Instead, he became a priest and returned to evangelize the Celts. Through his zeal, the Gospel spread throughout the land. For centuries afterward, priests and religious sisters and brothers would travel the globe imitating the zeal Saint Patrick had for the Gospel.

No fence-sitting there, only bold action on the part of missionaries who heard and believed! So it must be with us. No fence-sitting. We have heard and we believe, therefore we must be bold and faithful missionary disciples carrying out good deeds until all the tombs are one day opened.

* * *

Thursday, March 18, 2021
(Lec. 247)

- 1) Exodus 32:7-14
- 2) John 5:31-47

THURSDAY OF
FOURTH WEEK
OF LENT
(Opt. Mem.
Saint Cyril of Jerusalem,
Bishop and Doctor
of the Church)

Gospel related: CCC 548, 582, 702, 719

FOCUS: Jesus' mission was to bring the kingdom of God to earth and save us from our sins.

There's an arresting statement by Jesus at the end of today's Gospel: *If you had believed Moses, you would have believed me.* To the Jews listening to him, this must have come as a shock – was perhaps even insulting. Very few figures in the history of Israel stood in the same company as Moses. The hero of the Exodus; the one who spoke to God face to face, as to a friend. To say that a Jew didn't believe Moses would have been ludicrous.

Jesus isn't picking a fight. Rather, in defending himself, he is doing two things. First, he's claiming that Scripture bears witness to who he is. That is, the one who Moses prophesied (he himself) is finally here. Second, Jesus is fishing for reluctant hearts. In testifying on his own behalf, Jesus is also advocating for others: *I say this so that you may be saved.*

Let's not forget that we can be just as stiff-necked as the Israelites, in the first reading, who turned to the golden calf. We can also be as oblivious as Jesus' interrogators were in the Gospel. We share the same fallen human nature and have our own share of weaknesses, failings, and inclinations to sin. The Israelites depended on God to get them through the Exodus. We may not need God to direct us through a desert, but we need his grace to find our way through life. We need his healing to keep walking – the kind of healing from sin that only he can give.

This is who Jesus is: One who saves and brings life. This is he who comes to us in the Eucharist. Let us prepare our hearts to receive him.

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.

* * *

FRIDAY, MARCH 19, 2021

(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

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

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

FOCUS: Joseph is a model of humble, obedient faith.

Devotion to Saint Joseph is popular in Catholic culture, and is larger perhaps than one might expect based on the limited attention he receives in Scripture. Joseph appears in the Gospels only briefly and, unlike with Mary, we do not hear about any role he may have had in the public ministry of Jesus. So what makes Joseph so important for us as Catholic Christians? The readings for the solemnity today offer us at least one response: Joseph is a model of humble, obedient faith. Like Abraham, who became the Father of many nations because of his simple and humble obedience, Joseph also simply *did as ... the Lord had commanded him*.

Joseph's obedience is plain. In Matthew's Gospel, the angel asks him to take Mary into his home and name the child Jesus, and Joseph does so. An angel warns him not to return to Nazareth but instead flee into Egypt with a newborn, and he does it. In Luke's Gospel, Joseph – who is obedient to the law – presents Jesus in the temple and Luke also writes that *each year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover (2:41)*. Every story about Joseph in these Gospels makes clear that he was a man who did what God asked.

Joseph lived simply and in apparent obscurity as a laborer from the outskirts. But this is the man whom God chose to be the human father to his only Son, and he has much to teach us. As followers of Jesus, we are not promised easy lives or status. We are asked instead to do the will of the Father in faith. God knows our faults and our imperfections – our strengths and our weaknesses. And, like Joseph, God has chosen us to be instruments of his salvation to the world. So let us ask Saint Joseph to pray for us today – that we might hear the invitation of God and have the courage to simply do as the Lord has commanded.

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Saturday, March 20, 2021
(Lec. 249)

1) Jeremiah 11:18-20

2) John 7:40-53

Gospel related: CCC 1441

SATURDAY OF
FOURTH WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: Our prejudices can blind us to the presence of God in our lives.

The Gospel today gives evidence that people are beginning to reject Jesus and his teaching. The religious leaders have decided that Jesus cannot be a prophet, or the Messiah, because he is from Galilee. They have ignored the wisdom of the Lord's teaching, and his miraculous signs, because he comes from the wrong part of the country. They believe that they know who Jesus is, because they know where he is from.

This is the problem with prejudging – with prejudice. We “write people off” or ignore their message because of their race, language, or place of origin. Even though the crowd recognized the working of God in Jesus' ministry, some religious leaders could not get past his background. Because he grew up in Nazareth in Galilee, they assumed that Jesus could not be a prophet, and certainly not the Anointed One for whom they were waiting. Their prejudice blinded them to the truth of the miracle before them.

How often do we fall into this same pattern? If we were told that someone was from a different country, nationality, or opposing political party, would that suddenly form our opinion of their character? When we form judgments based solely on one aspect of a person, it can easily lead to missing the truth of the message. God may send us a prophet whom we do not expect.

The Israelites rejected Jeremiah. In the first reading, he relates the plot that was being formed against him. This is a pattern surrounding many of the Old Testament prophets, and, of course, our Lord Jesus Christ. God sends prophets. Prophets are usually rejected. If we can ignore the voice of our prejudices, we may hear the voice of God, even from some unexpected sources.

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SUNDAY, MARCH 21, 2021

(Lec. 35)

1) Jeremiah 31:31-34

2) Hebrews 5:7-9

3) John 12:20-33

Gospel related: CCC 764, CSDC 570

**FIFTH SUNDAY
OF LENT**

FOCUS: In Christ, God's law is written on the human heart with the blood of Jesus.

In today's Gospel we encounter Jesus in Jerusalem. He knows that *the hour* is at hand, when he will drive out *the ruler of this world*, the devil.

Jesus knows he is about to die and he knows how it is going to happen, as he refers to being *lifted up*. *I will draw everyone to myself*, he says, a fitting reminder to us that he does not give his life only for the sins of a few, but so that all may be forgiven and redeemed. Jesus chooses to become that grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies that it may produce the fruit of salvation for all who believe. He tells us that if we are to serve him, then we must follow him, taking up our crosses and joining him at Calvary – that one day, we all may share in his victory.

In our baptism, we, too, are like a grain of wheat: dying to sin, that we may come alive in Christ Jesus. As the Letter to the Hebrews tells us, on the cross Jesus *became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him*. The Lord teaches us about the cost of discipleship. Jesus held nothing back in obtaining salvation for us by defeating our greatest enemies of sin, Satan, and death. We are called, likewise, to make an investment in our salvation, to be willing to work for it and suffer for it just as he did.

On the cross, Jesus fulfills the new covenant called for by Jeremiah in today's first reading. No longer will God's law be carved in stone. Instead, in Christ, God's law is written on the human heart with the blood of Jesus. *I will be their God, and they shall be my people*, Jeremiah says, prophesying a new beginning and a fresh start for God's people: *I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more*. As God is so willing to freely and frequently overlook the wrongs we have done, so are we commanded to do the same.

As our Lenten journey inches closer to the events of Palm Sunday and Holy Week, we turn our focus to Jesus as he approaches "his hour" on the lonesome road to Calvary. As Jesus *offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears* for us and for our salvation, so, too, we join our pains and sufferings with his. We bring him our fears, faults, and failings, even our lack of forgiveness, that all might be washed away by the holy water and blood that flows from his side on the cross.

* * *

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 22, 2021

(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 1151, 2731

MONDAY OF
FIFTH WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: God has given us life, and sustained us with his justice and mercy.

In today's readings, we are told the stories of two women who are accused of committing adultery. For Susanna and the woman in the Gospel, this was a death sentence. Yet, we see mercy extended to save their lives.

In the first reading, *God stirred up the holy spirit of a young boy named Daniel*. He felt his conscience telling him that he could not take part in the death of Susanna. He courageously spoke out against the injustice of the elders' false accusation. God heard the cry of innocent Susanna and acted through Daniel to work for justice.

In the Gospel, the woman at the center of the story is brought before Jesus. *He* is her judge, not the crowd or the elders. His response is to show mercy: He does not condemn the woman, instead telling her, *go and from now on do not sin any more*.

These two readings show the power of both justice and mercy. Daniel had the courage to confront the injustice in front of him. Jesus turned the prescription of the law back onto the group, and offered mercy to one who by law did not deserve it. Both of these stories exemplify the boundless justice and mercy of God: God who cares for even the least among us – who loves us even when we are most unlovable. We are shown again and again that God desires justice for us, and extends mercy even when we do not deserve it. Our worship and praise here is an expression of thanksgiving to God for this. It is also meant to transform us to notice the needs for justice and mercy in the lives of others and to respond when the Holy Spirit calls us to action.

When we see something in the news and think, "that's not right," our conscience is activated. When injustices occur, we, as Christians, are called to speak up for those on the margins. Jesus' example in the Gospel also reminds us that we are called to be forgiving and merciful when others fail. Justice and mercy are life-giving. As God has given us life, and sustained us with his justice and mercy, so we pray for the grace to extend that to others.

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Tuesday, March 23, 2021
(Lec. 252)

- 1) Numbers 21:4-9
- 2) John 8:21-30

TUESDAY OF
FIFTH WEEK
OF LENT
(Opt. Mem.
Saint Turibius of Mogrovejo,
Bishop)

Gospel related: CCC 550, 2743

FOCUS: The cross is the supreme expression of divine love that heals us and gives us new life.

It's almost exasperating to listen to debates between Jesus and the Pharisees like the one in today's Gospel. How much clearer does Jesus have to be about who he is and why he's on earth? He takes the divine name, *I AM*, to himself twice, and yet they're still asking him, *Who are you?* He reiterates what he's said before – that he has come from above to do the Father's will and share his message with the world – and we're told that *many came to believe in him* because of this. Yet his opponents refuse to understand.

Jesus associates such unbelief with sin. Our sins distort everything, including our perception of God. Haven't we all had times when we didn't hear him because we simply didn't want to – because we saw him as a taskmaster interfering with our comfort and happiness, or a disappointed, disapproving parent whom we were too ashamed to face? Any one of us can fall into the vicious cycle of offending God, distancing ourselves from him, and then struggling to believe that he's at work in our lives at all.

However, the Lord gives the Jews, and us, the key to believing in him: *When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I AM.* The cross is at the center of our faith because it's the supreme expression of divine love – love that heals us and gives us new life like the bronze serpent in our first reading. Meditating on the unconditional love with which Christ, the true image of the Father, lays down his life for us can straighten out whatever distorted mental images of the Father we may have formed. Receiving the forgiveness and grace that flow from the cross through the sacraments takes down the barriers we've put up to hearing God's voice and understanding it.

Each of us struggles to connect with God in some way, whether it's doubt, spiritual dryness, temptation, discouragement, or confusion about his will for us. Whatever the struggle, let's begin at the cross. Let's begin by allowing the Lord to love us. Let us look at him upon the cross, lifted up for salvation, and pray for the grace to be transformed in his love.

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Wednesday, March 24, 2021
(Lec. 253)

1) Daniel 3:14-20, 91-92, 95

2) John 8:31-42

Gospel related: CCC 550

WEDNESDAY OF
FIFTH WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: God saves those who are faithful.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to follow the king's command to offer sacrifice to his god. So he orders them to be thrown into a *white-hot furnace*. Rather than suffering death, however, they were seen *unfettered and unhurt, walking in the fire*. When the king learns about this, he goes to see for himself and pronounces a blessing upon their God, saying, *They disobeyed the royal command and yielded their bodies rather than serve or worship any god except their own God*.

The three men refused to sin, choosing to remain true to God. We see, as the king did, that God saves those who are faithful.

That God saves those who are faithful is a central theme in John's Gospel. John is writing around the early 90s A.D., for a community whose followers of Jesus are probably already excommunicated from Judaism. They are enduring persecution, and living in a kind of physical and spiritual exile. They benefit from Good News that offers hope that God will not abandon them.

Jesus says, *if you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free*. Faithfulness is rewarded. Sin enslaves. And, *if the Son frees you, then you will truly be free*.

The Son has freed us. Like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, he yielded his body in service to God and the truth. And through that body, we are saved. This is Good News for us as much as it was for that early Christian community. Whatever enslaves us; whatever persecution we might be enduring; whatever physical or spiritual exile in which we might find ourselves, God will enter into that fiery furnace with us and, if we are abiding with Christ, he will bring us out *unfettered and unhurt*. God saves those who are faithful.

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Thursday, March 25, 2021

(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: By cooperating with God's grace, and offering ourselves in freedom to do his will, we offer our own *fiat* to God.

On this feast of the Annunciation, we hear the dramatic beginning of the Christ event: the moment in which Mary is told that she will, by the power of the Holy Spirit, conceive and bear a son. The story begins, as most stories do, by establishing the setting and introducing the characters: Nazareth, in the region of Galilee, where God sends an angel – Gabriel – to Mary, a young woman betrothed to Joseph, who is from the House of David. The angel announces God's incredible intentions and plan for salvation, and the role Mary has in it. Mary, in loving trust and obedience, offers her *fiat*: *May it be done to me according to your word*.

God's plan of salvation did not *begin* here, though it did begin its *fulfillment* at this moment. We heard in today's reading from Isaiah, written 600 years before the time of Jesus, the prophecy that *the virgin shall be with child, and bear a son and shall name him Emmanuel, which means "God is with us."* God had long been preparing a way to dwell with his people, to bring *back* to himself those he had *made* for himself who had fallen away by sin. God had been making a way for this moment, to Mary in Nazareth, so that with her *fiat* Christ could come into the world.

Mary's *fiat* at this moment is unparalleled in importance or purity. Through her "yes" – given totally and freely by her, through God's grace – Christ came. Everything that followed – Jesus' preaching and miracles, even his death and resurrection – depended on this "yes" from Mary. When she let God's will be done, he entered human history, coming to and dwelling within a world that needed him so much.

This moment of God's entering into time is unrepeatable and unique, and looking to it, we venerate Mary for her cooperation with God and worship God for his goodness in coming to us. Yet there is more. The story of the Annunciation illuminates another story – our own, with the setting of here and now, and with each one of us and God as the characters. The God of the Universe desires to be in relationship with each one of us. He is present in this Mass. He draws us to himself every moment of our lives. He has a plan for our salvation, found in Christ Jesus with whom we are united in our baptism.

Herein lies the importance of our own stories within human history. By cooperating with God's grace, and offering ourselves in freedom to do his will, we offer our own *fiat* to God. Through his grace, and the gift of faith, he can come even more fully into our lives and into the world.

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Friday, March 26, 2021
(Lec. 255)

- 1) Jeremiah 20:10-13
- 2) John 10:31-42

Gospel related: CCC 437, 444, 548, 574, 582, 589, 591, 594, 1562

FRIDAY OF
FIFTH WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: Entrust all things to God, and lead others to him through good works.

How many of us have been in a similar position as Jeremiah in today's reading? We discover that our friends maybe weren't as much our "friends" as previously believed. We feel betrayed. And we just want to complain to God about the situation.

Jeremiah found himself in the position of being mocked and disliked, because he prophesied warnings of death, destruction, and Babylon's conquest. He sees his false friends now watching for any misstep or way they can discredit him.

But we notice how Jeremiah responds: He entrusts himself and his situation to God. With praise he proclaims, *But the Lord is with me, like a mighty champion: my persecutors will stumble, they will not triumph.*

Do we have that same faith? Do we entrust ourselves and our situations to God when we face resistance or persecution? Do we rest in the assurance that the Lord is with us?

Jesus also clearly faced persecution due to his prophetic voice. Today's Gospel centers around one of the multiple times the Jewish leaders tried to stone him. And yet, Jesus wholly entrusts himself and the situation to God. He tells those who accuse him of blasphemy that even if they do not believe he is the Son of God, they should at least believe in the good works that he performs. Do this, he says, *so that you may realize and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.* This passage ends by telling us that *many there began to believe in him.*

Today's readings challenge us to do two things: One, trust in the Lord completely – that in the end, God and his followers will be victorious. We already know that Jesus conquered death. Two, be aware that our deeds can point others to God – if we do good in Jesus' name, others will notice. They may even come to believe in Christ.

As we prepare to receive Christ in the Eucharist, let us pray that he will strengthen us on our life's journey, and help us to always trust in him, and evangelize others through the witness of our lives.

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Saturday, March 27, 2021
(Lec. 256)

- 1) Ezekiel 37:21-28
- 2) John 11:45-56

Gospel related: CCC 58, 60, 548, 596, 706, 2793

SATURDAY OF
FIFTH WEEK
OF LENT

FOCUS: Hold onto hope, and stubbornly persevere in faith.

Hope and perseverance (or fortitude) get us through times of suffering, but they are virtues that need cultivating.

The Kingdom of Judah had been conquered by Babylon in a devastating fashion: The temple in Jerusalem was burned to the ground. The heirs of the king of Judah were executed and thousands of Jews were forced into exile in Babylon. Ezekiel was among those who lived in Babylon after the exile, and he prophesied about God's initiative to cleanse Israel.

Awaiting this promise took perseverance, however. Generations came and went; centuries passed. Conquering empires took over the Promised Land and collapsed. By the time Jesus came, it had been 600 years since Ezekiel's prophecy. Some of the promises had been realized, but there was no united kingdom, no king, no peace, no universal following of God's law.

It's reasonable to think that fatigue in persevering might have settled in for some in Jesus' time. The people had already waited centuries for the messiah and had endured many false claimants. The Pharisees were concerned that Jesus' preaching and signs would bring unwanted attention from the Romans. They did not believe in Jesus, and did not believe he could be the fulfillment of the prophecies. They did not *have* hope, because they did not see hope personified (in Christ).

For hope is bestowed upon us as a theological virtue in our baptism. It is a gift, finding its origin and end in God, and in enabling us to place our trust in Christ and not in ourselves. It is a desire for the kingdom of heaven, and an eternity of happiness with Christ.

The two virtues of hope and perseverance really need to go together, and we need the constant help of grace. Hope without perseverance can make us jaded and weary of waiting. Perseverance without hope has no direction, and at some point, no reason to keep going. The bottom line is that the promises of God are worth the wait. Hold onto hope, and stubbornly persevere in faith. Seeing the fulfillment of God's promises will be worth every bit of difficulty we endure.

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SUNDAY, MARCH 28, 2021

(Lec. 37)

Procession with the Palms:

1) Mark 11:1-10 or John 12:12-16

(Lec. 38)

Mass Readings:

1) Isaiah 50:4-7

2) Philippians 2:6-11

3) Mark 14:1–15:47 or 15:1-39

Gospel related: CCC 443, 444, 473, 474, 585, 597, 603, 1009, 1328, 1335, 1339, 1403, 2605, 2701, 2849 CSDC 183

**PALM SUNDAY
OF THE PASSION
OF THE LORD**

FOCUS: May we be a sign of hope in a world that cries out for it.

This year, as we enter our holiest week, we read the account of the passion from the Gospel of Mark. In a few days, on Good Friday, we will read the account from John.

Among all the cruel and violent persons we hear about in Christ's suffering last hours, perhaps it is easy to overlook those who were kind. At Bethany, Simon the leper offers him hospitality, and a (nameless to us) woman with an alabaster jar of perfumed oil anoints Jesus. Since Jesus will soon be executed as a criminal, with the possibility of no Jewish funeral rite or burial place, this was a tender moment of deep meaning. She put herself in danger to honor him and his sacrifice.

In Jerusalem there was Simon of Cyrene who helped carry his cross, and Joseph of Arimathea who courageously asked Pilate for the body of Jesus and laid him in a new tomb. All of these people, and perhaps more whom we do not know, were glimpses of light in a day of darkness. They were peace amidst the conflict; joy amidst the sorrow; celebration in the midst of tragedy. In other words, they are a sort of allegory to the hope of Easter that was present on Good Friday.

So why talk about this contrast, this dichotomy, today on Palm Sunday? Because this day itself is one of contrasts. Our liturgy, and Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, began with palm branches and songs of joy and praise for Jesus as King. He is welcomed into the city with shouts of *Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!* He will soon leave the city walls as the lowest of the low: a scourged, half-dead wreck of a man; a criminal set to be executed. In our Mass today, we will re-present his sacrifice, uniting our sins to those of the whole world and uniting our suffering to his. And in the midst of all the horror, we will celebrate, for Christ will triumph over all of sin and death.

There is a catchy little phrase that we might hear spoken of by Catholics – “we are not an either/or people, we are a both/and people.” It generally means that we have the critical reasoning capacity, and the faith, to hold two things in tension without being confused. So, for example, Christ is both divine and human; the kingdom of God is both present and not yet fully realized; the Eucharist is both the appearance of bread and wine and truly Christ's body, blood, soul, and divinity.

And specific to our worship today, we are both an Easter people and we live in a Good Friday world. That is to say, we believe that Christ's death on the cross transformed all suffering and that by his resurrection, we have the promise of eternal life. But we live in the here and now, with all the suffering and evil still present in the world – a world in which we are called to be active witnesses to our faith. Every moment of our lives gives us a chance to be one or other of the type of persons we encountered in the passion narratives. With God's help, may we be like Simon and the woman at Bethany, Simon of Cyrene, and Joseph of Arimathea – signs of hope in a world that cries out for it.

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Monday, March 29, 2021
(Lec. 257)

- 1) Isaiah 42:1-7
- 2) John 12:1-11

Gospel related: CCC 2449 CSDC 183

MONDAY OF
HOLY WEEK

FOCUS: We are all in need of the mercy of God; may we humbly offer that mercy and kindness to others.

An old proverb gives insight into human behavior: “Our faults irritate us most when we see them in others.” How many times, for example, do we notice with judgment the behavior of others, only later to realize (or not to realize) that we do the very same things ourselves?

“A woman anoints Jesus’ feet with costly oil.” A version of this story appears in all four Gospels. Yet despite the variations in the different Gospel accounts, all four have one thing in common: There are people who are indignant at the display of affection. They complain it is too much or too costly or a waste. In today’s Gospel from John, it is Judas who says this. But we might consider whether it is reflective of us at times: indignant; ready to judge; cynical, even, toward a good act.

It is also John who sheds light on the *heart* of the one who grew indignant. He explains that Judas’ words, *Why was this oil not sold for three hundred days’ wages and given to the poor?* were said not because he actually cared about the poor, *but because he was a thief*. Judas’ judgment was not based on altruism or any moral principle; rather, his statement masks his underlying heart. He attempts to deceive others, and perhaps he deceives even himself.

Today may be a good time to ask ourselves a few questions about our own judgments – why we have them and from where they originate. Does love for Christ and our neighbor inform our viewpoint? Or do we judge others based on our own weaknesses, our own sinfulness, seeing in others what so bothers us about ourselves?

Lent has allowed us the opportunity for changing ourselves and conforming our hearts to be more like Christ. During this Holy Week, may we continue to draw closer to Christ, extending his love and mercy to others in the same way he has extended them to us. With God’s help, we may rewrite that old proverb: “God forgives our faults as we forgive them in others.”

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Tuesday, March 30, 2021
(Lec. 258)

TUESDAY OF
HOLY WEEK

- 1) Isaiah 49:1-6
- 2) John 13:21-33, 36-38

FOCUS: God's mercy and grace mean having the opportunity to get up the same number of times that we fall.

What do we believe God sees when he looks at us? At World Youth Day, 2016, Pope Francis said, "[God] believes in us even more than we believe in ourselves. He is always 'cheering us on' ... [He] is hopelessly hopeful! He believes that we can always get up."

Pope Francis was not giving a definition of grace, but he was certainly describing its potential in our lives. Our failures and our sin do not define us in God's eyes. We have choices in how we respond to temptation and how we recover from our falls. Our contrition and repentance are a hand for God to grasp, and his grace raises us first from the floor, then to our knees, and finally to our feet before him. God's mercy and grace mean having the opportunity to get up the same number of times that we fall. And he believes we can do it.

Judas and Peter both reacted to temptation. Judas sold Jesus out, and Peter denied knowing Jesus. Both of these were foretold in today's Gospel. Jesus says to Peter: *Will you lay down your life for me? ... the cock will not crow before you deny me three times.* What did Jesus see when he looked at Peter that night? The fear and cowardice Peter would display the next day? Or the future head of the Church – the Rock who would soon preach boldly in the face of the temple authorities who would threaten his life?

He saw both, and he knew the latter would arise from the ashes of the former. He believed in Peter. He didn't change his mind about leaving Peter in charge of his Church, and we see that later, Peter counters his three denials with three professions of love for Christ; (cf., John 21:15-17). He got up the same number of times that he fell.

We have God's grace and mercy to pick us up every time we fall. As we enter ever more deeply into the Paschal Mystery this week, we give thanks for our hopelessly hopeful God, and the resurrection that Christ won for himself, and those who are his friends.

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Wednesday, March 31, 2021
(Lec. 259)

- 1) Isaiah 50:4-9a
 - 2) Matthew 26:14-25
- Gospel related: CCC 610, 1339

WEDNESDAY OF
HOLY WEEK

FOCUS: Jesus knows our burdens and feels our pain.

As we have journeyed thus far in this Holy Week, we have heard the story of Mary anointing Jesus' feet with costly perfume, and of the betrayal of Jesus by Judas. We are reminded how close Judas was to the Lord: He was in the nearest circle of friendship. And in that trust, he sold his friend out. As we ponder the depth of this betrayal, we stand on the cusp of the Sacred Triduum where we will recall Jesus' further suffering and death.

What helps make these holy days the Good News that allows us to celebrate even in the darkness of these Scripture passages, is that God, who is goodness and life, enters into all of human experience. In these Gospel stories, we not only journey with Christ, we see the richness and depth of all human experience on display in his final hours. He enters into physical, emotional, and spiritual pain and gives himself over unto death. Into this darkness he brings his perfect goodness, his unending life, such that he transforms all that to which he is united. He transforms pain and death into an everlasting light that guides us along the path to righteousness and holiness.

In these holiest of days, the Church tenderly and triumphantly reminds us that Jesus, the fulfillment of all of the promises of the great prophets, knows how to *speak to the weary a word that will rouse them*. He knows because he has been weary, and because he walks with us in our weariness now.

And so, whatever betrayal or pain that we carry today we now bring to the weary, wounded, resurrected hands of Jesus. He knows our burdens and feels our pain. We are not alone – the power that created the universe is here by our side. As we receive this Eucharist, may God open our hearts to his unfailing help.

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