

Songs of Salvation

In every heart there lives a song of salvation, a love song planted by our God. During our lifetime we have the opportunity to catch the beat and the rhythm of this grace filled melody over and over again. Through prayer, scripture, nature and our interactions with humanity we learn that this song is woven into every fiber of our existence and that it is uniquely our own.

In the sacred seasons of Lent and Easter we have a great opportunity to quiet our hearts so that we can listen once again to God's intimate serenade. Perhaps we will hear long remembered melodies with brand new lyric that have a special message for this moment of our lives.

Join me in celebrating the beautiful seasons of Lent and Easter as the Spirit invites us to sing from the heart.

Sister Janis Yaekel, ASC



Ash Wednesday ~ 2/22

*"For the Lord says, 'at an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you' See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation."
(2 Corinthians 6:2)*



Salvation begins today, in this instant. Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow may never arrive. Today is the time, this is the moment. Let the rest of Lent take care of itself. Concentrate on today. God is listening right now! What do I want to say? What song of mine needs to be sung? Remember that what comes from the heart doesn't have to be perfect and it doesn't have to be presented to the rest of the world. My song simply needs to be authentic, it needs to express to God the person that I am today. The honest desires of my heart are what God longs to hear.

On this Ash Wednesday as I sit in my room or ride in my car perhaps my song is like a sob, a lament for past transgressions. Maybe I will howl like the lonely wolf who wanders in the darkness searching for joy. Perhaps my tune is sad because I want God to have meaning in my life but I honestly know that I don't give Him much thought. Or perhaps today is like a much loved melody that I have sung throughout the years, I know the words well but I never grow tired of it.

God helps me create the words and sentiments that I will express today and God is also listening for my truth. I am not praying in a vacuum. God is attentive to each honest word or melody of my heart. Even the deepest groans of desires that I cannot seem to express are heard by God.

My song this day is unique. It isn't a copy of anyone else's, although there may be some similar notes in my neighbor's hymns of praise. My words are fresh, brand new to God's ears today even though I may have prayed them yesterday as well. The words may be the same, but I am different and God reads between the lines of my life.

While no one sings like me there are many Lenten travelers who have voices that harmonize nicely with mine. Singers of truth and love will always find that their words and actions are complementary. Allowing the voices of the world around me to rise up adds strength to my solitary voice and God hears the beauty.

Today sing from the heart knowing that God likes what He hears.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. What kind of song do I want to sing for God today as I begin the journey of Lent?*
- 2. What makes my song of life unique?*

Prayer: Lord, may I sing for you the truth of my life today and always. Amen.

Thursday After Ash Wednesday ~ 2/26

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves
and take up their cross daily and follow me.

For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it."
(Luke 9:23-24)



During the Christmas season I found myself clicking the remote control in an attempt to find a holiday special. On one evening the public broadcasting channel aired the Mormon Tabernacle Choir's holiday concert. The music was very fine, but I found myself fascinated with the choir itself. Standing on the stage before a huge audience were literally hundreds of singers all giving their best effort to produce songs that were pleasing to the ears of those in attendance. There were no individual stars, just row after row of people striving to bring joy to the world through their collective efforts. I marveled at their perfect timing and harmony. All these singers relinquished their status as individuals to create together a celebration of sound. They lost themselves in order to find together something powerful.

In the reading from Luke today Jesus tells us to take up our cross and to lose our lives if we would save them. Sometimes our understanding of the cross is too narrow, too restrictive. We think of it as suffering or pain, illness or perhaps physical death. We fail to realize that much of the weight of the cross is brought to bear because our faith asks us to be responsible believers and for the most part to shoulder that responsibility in an inconspicuous fashion. Mature cross bearers will certainly be found among the elite of society but more often than not they will be standing with the invisible of the world, the poor, the homeless, and the persecuted. Those who lose their life for Jesus will be the ones that let go of individual glory to roll up their sleeves for love of neighbor in the trenches of humanity.

Many of the singers in the Mormon choir would not have strong enough voices to be heard in the great auditoriums where they perform, but when each was willing to sacrifice personal glory to become a member of the choir they became part of an extraordinary performance. Christians who are willing to carry their crosses of responsibility alongside of their neighbor have the power to change the world in which they live. During this season of Lent perhaps we need to sacrifice candy or television. Perhaps we need to sacrifice our own spotlight and become one of the many people involved in the invisible work of salvation.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Do I tend to always want to lead, to be the center of attention? Where can I serve in an inconspicuous way?*
- 2. What cross of responsibility have I not been willing to pick up? Can I try to do so this Lent?*

Prayer: May the cross that I bear help to raise my neighbor up. Amen.

Friday After Ash Wednesday ~ 2/24

*"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice,
to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?"*

*Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own." (Isaiah 58:5-7)*



Years ago there was a film produced that documented the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps. One horrendous picture after another gave evidence of the cruelty of which humanity is capable. I was captivated by the grizzly pictures and even though I didn't want to watch I couldn't walk away. Throughout the film a violin played a soulful melody that I had never heard before. Since that time I have heard that piece of music on numerous occasions and always the images of the holocaust film come to mind. Forever that piece of music will echo for me a grief that is beyond grief. Once I was exposed to this atrocity I could never forget and I remain grateful that one piece of music can now remind me that we are called to engage the injustices of the world and not ignore them.

Isaiah reminds us today of the same principle. He tells us that simply to fast from certain foods or to wear sack cloth and ashes is not enough. It is not the sacrifice that God desires. Sack cloth and ashes do not open our eyes to the needs of the world. Temporarily denying oneself does not immerse us in real poverty nor does it help us to understand the belly cramping hunger of those who have nothing to eat.

Today Isaiah invites us to fast in a way that will actually change our hearts and minds. He suggests that we rub shoulders with the poor and not so much that we will change their lives but that our lives will be different. Isaiah knew that once our world is broadened, once we are forced to see what we ignored in the past then we will be not be able to go back to our old complacent lives.

I do not know the name of the piece of music from the holocaust film but each time I hear it I watch the film with my heart and I remember. I remember and I pray to never forget. During this Lenten season perhaps we need not deny ourselves anything. Perhaps we would be better served to submerge ourselves in the poverty of our local world. Let us learn the sights, the sounds, the feel and the smell of the cry of the poor and let us never forget.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Why am I afraid to get involved with the poor and marginalized around me?*
- 2. What have I learned experientially about the plight of the less fortunate? Has it made a difference in the way I live?*

Prayer: Lord, may I be open to learn the lessons of charity that You wish to offer me during this Lenten season. Amen.

Saturday After Ash Wednesday ~ 2/28

"The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to His disciples, saying, 'why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?' Jesus answered, 'those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick do; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.'" (Luke 5:30-32)



Have you ever worked alongside someone who hums frequently? I am not talking about someone who hums an actual song but someone who hums three or four notes that don't really seem to go anywhere. Over and over again in the course of the day you hear this hum. Perhaps the person isn't aware that they are humming or perhaps you notice that this happens when there isn't any other noise as if they want to fill up the sound space that is available. Whatever the reason for the person's vocal vibrations the fact remains that those who have to listen are often irritated. To the listener this is a song without purpose.

Throughout the season of Lent we will periodically hear the hum of the Pharisees and scribes. They will pipe up because they don't want people to forget them. They will be an irritant for Jesus, always seeking to create disharmony. Their sounds are not meaningful but they don't know how to be comfortable with silence. They figure that if they hum loud enough they may drown out Christ's song of love. Over and over again we will hear them in scripture humming like a mosquito who circles around in our bedroom at night. Too often the people let these Pharisees and scribes distract them from the word of God that Jesus offered. Instead of blocking out the hypocritical hum they became distracted from the message of redemption.

If we listen today we will hear those who still hum just to hear themselves hum. They do not offer a real melody only the false sense that a tune is being created. Theirs is not a heart song but simply notes which float with no direction. They are as Shakespeare says, "full of sound and fury signifying nothing." They are the leaders of countries and churches who wind themselves trying to be relevant but who lead lives which speak hypocrisy. They speak without really saying anything but somehow we listen to them anyway. They distract us from truth by creating trivial laws or by their inconsequential actions. They hum because they are uncomfortable with the people that Jesus wishes to include in His kingdom and because they don't want to hear that their boundaries need to be expanded to embrace the lepers of our society. Today listen for those who hum without reason and then drown them out with love.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Who are the big hummers in our midst today?*
- 2. Do I ever find myself humming just to hear myself hum? What am I afraid of?*

Prayer: Lord, may I not be distracted by the useless hum of the world around me. May I listen only for Your voice. Amen.

First Sunday of Lent ~ 2/26

"After Jesus was baptized, the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." (Mark 1:12-13)

When people purchase a cell phone they receive a book filled with directions that offer step-by-step procedures for operating the phone. Often buyers will get a card that has only the most important information on it. Cell phone owners can carry this card with them in case they forget how to use one of the important features. This little card can be very handy for novice cell users.



The gospel of Mark, according to scripture scholars, was the first of the four to be written and it is the shortest. Today Mark tells us about Christ's baptism and his time in the desert in two brief sentences. Like the little cell phone card we get only the essentials. Matthew, Luke and John spend a lot more time either detailing the baptism or the desert temptations. Mark gives only the basic information and seems to believe that is sufficient.

Mark's six pieces of information are: Jesus was baptized; the Spirit sent Him into the wilderness; he spent forty days there; he lived with wild beasts, and angels waited on him. These facts may be presented in bare bones fashion but Mark included all the pertinent information that the early Christian would need to remember about Christ's initiation into ministry. Mark left it to the individual to fill in the blanks.

Sometimes we get caught up in words. Words, words and more words flow from our mouths, our pens and our computers but how much do they really mean? Are they really all so important? Does every experience need to be expressed in detail, or might a few words speak more eloquently?

Like the cell phone card that gives the important facts or a song that simply repeats one line over and over again so that we remember the message perhaps we might look again at Mark's gospel and realize that the words may be few but they are power packed expressions of the Spirit. Mark writes with the sure knowledge that the Spirit will fill in the blanks as each person's need requires. Today let your heart wander through this reading today and let the Spirit unfold that which is hidden.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Besides water and food what would the angels have given to Jesus in the desert?*
- 2. What would "being with the wild beasts" mean to me today in my life?*

Prayer: Lord, help me see Your scriptures with new eyes during the Lenten season. Amen.

First Monday of Lent ~ 2/27

*"I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,
I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing,
I was sick and you visited me. Truly I tell you,
just as you did it to one of the least of these
brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me." (Mt. 25:35-36,40)*

Blindness is an affliction of the eyes. Those who are blind cannot see the world around them. They live in physical darkness. For those who have good eye sight this seems to be a terrible affliction. Indeed it is a difficult handicap to overcome, yet the blind often see in ways that we might never imagine. Blind people accept their limitation and learn to adapt by honing their other senses.



Those of us who call ourselves Christian are also handicapped, but the tragedy of our situation is that we often don't even know it. We too are blind! We are blind to the presence of Christ in the world.

He is staring us in the face day after day but we don't see him. He is there every time we watch a newscast that shows the broken bodies of people blown up by bombs. He cries out to us through the sad eyes of the victims of Hurricane Katrina waiting for a place to live. He is there in the person sitting across the room from us, but we're angry at that person right now so we choose not to see Him. He is everywhere but we are blind to His presence because, for the most part we choose to be blind.

Songs of regret have always been popular. Singers often lament that they didn't realize that the love they were searching for all their lives had been right there in front of them. They wail that they were blind until it was too late.

Our gospel tells us today that we can make a choice to be blind or not. We can keep searching for Jesus with blindfolds on or we can open up the eyes of our heart and see our neighbors for the first time. We can sit in our churches on Sunday morning with all the gold chalices on the altar and say to ourselves, "Jesus is present here in these fine things" or we can touch Him when we sit and hold the hand of the lonely old lady in the nursing home. We can search our hearts for the presence of Jesus, spending hours in meditation, and never hear him doing the dishes in the kitchen or cleaning out the garage.

Lent is about taking off the blinders. It is about learning to see with new eyes the people around us for the first time. It is about Jesus being up close and personal and if we see with eyes of love then there will be no songs of regret.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Who am I blind to in my world?*
- 2. Why do I choose not to see certain people? What do I fear?*

Prayer: Jesus, may I never stop looking for Your face in my neighbor. Amen.

First Tuesday of Lent ~ 2/28

*"For if you forgive others their trespasses,
your heavenly Father will also forgive you;
but if you do not forgive others,
neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Matthew 6:14-15)*

The singer Tony Orlando recorded several hit songs but none was more popular than "Tie A Yellow Ribbon." In this song Tony tells the true story of a man who is about to be released from prison. The man realizes that his choices have caused great pain to his wife and he understands that she may not want him to return to her upon his release. The prisoner writes his wife and tells her that if she is willing to forgive, if she is willing to take him back, she can indicate it by simply tying a yellow ribbon around the old oak tree as the sign that he can come home again. If there is no yellow ribbon then he will just stay on the bus and move out of her life. The song ends with the prisoner looking out of the window of the bus and seeing not one but a hundred yellow ribbons tied round the tree.



What made that song so hugely popular is the fact that we all long for that type of forgiveness. The song touched the core of yearning that lives in our hearts. We dream of a "hundred yellow ribbons" type of love that will embrace us in our humanity and welcome us home. The question however for today is, how many ribbons of forgiveness do we bother to extend to our neighbors?

In Tony Orlando's song we get caught up in the joy of the returning prisoner, but we should not lose sight of the woman who offers this generous reconciliation. She is lavish in her forgiveness, but she would not have had to be. She could have remained simply a victim of her husband's thoughtlessness and she could have nursed that pain into bitterness. What she did was to transform her pain into a promise of life giving love.

Our world is filled with bitter people who have never learned to forgive. We see them cheering at the execution of a prisoner. We hear them talking about a hurtful situation that took place twenty years ago as if it were yesterday and we sense that they are still seeking revenge. These are not yellow ribbon winners and today Christ wants to know if we are?

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Who has been lavish with their forgiveness in my life? Have I thanked them?*
- 2. Who needs me to move beyond my pain and offer forgiveness?*

Prayer: Jesus, it is so hard to forgive when all I can do is remember the hurt. Help me tie the yellow ribbon of reconciliation around my world. Amen.

First Wednesday of Lent ~ 2/29

*"Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk.
He cried out, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!'
The people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone,
great and small, put on sackcloth. (Jonah 3:4-5)*

Children love to draw and color in connect-the-dot books. In these books each page has a series of dots scattered all over and each dot has a number next to it. The dots by themselves don't seem to make any sense; the object for the child is to take a pencil and begin to connect the dots in such a way that upon completion there will be a picture of some familiar object. The one rule is that the lines that they draw must follow the numbers next to the dot. Dot one must be connected to dot two and two must be connected to dot three. Drawing lines at random will not release the hidden picture. In most cases the child will be able to figure out what the object is before he or she has all the dots connected. Once they have most of it drawn they can begin to imagine the rest of it even though all they see are dots.



In our reading today from the book of Jonah we find a group of sinful people, the people of Nineveh, who have connected the dots of redemption. Much to Jonah's chagrin, because he hoped they would be destroyed, this group of people listened to his prophetic words and repented. The light bulb went on in their hearts and they were able to see that Jonah was right, if they continued with their sinful ways the only outcome would be destruction. In our reading they look beyond the moment and see their future, and Jonah's words helped them to begin to connect these dots.

Sometimes we are not so good at understanding the ramifications of actions in our lives either. We live for today without concern for where tomorrow will find us. We make choices without thinking about how our actions will affect our future or the future of others. We don't see the long range pain because we are concentrating on the short range gain. Unfortunately some of us have drawn the last line of our breath before we realize what our picture has become.

Lent is a time to look back at the lines that we have already drawn in life so that we can image for ourselves what we are creating. If it is not to our liking then perhaps like the people of Nineveh we can do something about it, we can return to God with all our heart. Once we do we will find that God can take that which may look like an abomination today and create a beautiful work of art in the future.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Do I know where my life is headed? Am I at peace with that?*
- 2. What does my past tell me about what my future may look like? Can I seek God's help?*

Prayer: Lord, give me a sense of where I am and point me in Your direction. Amen.

First Thursday of Lent ~ 3/1

"Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." (Matthew 7:7-8)

Musical composers often carry melodies around inside of them for which they have no words. They can wait weeks, months or even years until they find the right words to fit the music. When the music is special the words must be too and so the search can take time. Occasionally the search for the perfect words will lead to another person, a collaborator, a person who has the gift of turning a phrase. When Richard Rogers knocked on Oscar Hammerstein's door he discovered the right words and their chemistry became musical magic.



Inside of each Christian there is a longing for fullness of life, for words to fit the melody of our hearts. Today Jesus tells us that the grace that we long for is available but we must pursue it. God wants us to want Him badly enough that we will leave our comfort zone to find Him.

The one thing that Jesus doesn't promise in this reading is that what we ask for, what we seek, will be given right away. Sometimes our knuckles will become raw and bloody knocking on one door after another before the right one is opened. At times it is important to taste our need, to feel the lack of fulfillment that encompasses our efforts so that when the door of grace is opened we will know how essential it is. In the journey to find God's blessing there are lessons such as patient endurance which can only be learned through suffering and hardship. Asking and not receiving teaches us that maybe what we want is not really what we need, that there is something more important to my welfare than instant gratification.

A composer knows that the right words for his or her melody most often come after some time of searching. They may pull from the soul one phrase at a time but when it is right, when the words fit the music they will know it inside. Asking, seeking and knocking on God's door may take time as well but we will know when we have been answered because our emptiness will be gone and our hearts will overflow with grace.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. What have I asked for from God that I am still waiting to receive?*
- 2. If I haven't received from God what I have asked for could I possibly need to change my request so that what I need may be addressed by God?*

Prayer: Lord, I know that all I need comes from You but sometimes I don't seek Your assistance or I don't know for what to ask. Help me to continue my search and may I know when You have answered me. Amen.

First Friday of Lent ~ 3/2

"When the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die." (Ezekiel 18:27-28)

Some songs just don't make sense. They don't have a meaningful message and we don't know why anyone would want to sing them. Perhaps to our ears the lyrics seem frivolous and the only purpose for the song seems to be to make people laugh. Songs like *The Flying Purple People Eater* which was made famous by Sheb Wooley in 1958 was this type of song. It was ridiculous and yet many people loved it. On the other hand some people wouldn't lower themselves to even call this music much less to sing it.



Today Ezekiel stakes out an absurd position as far as sin is concerned. Any sinner who repents shall live, shall avoid death. Ridiculous as it may seem Ezekiel tells us that God will lavish this forgiveness on anyone. There is no specific purpose for God being this generous. He just is!

The people who have avoided the sentence of death because of God's gracious embrace are giddy with relief. He or she will want to dance in the streets and nonsensical, laugh inducing melodies and words seem to be more than appropriate for this kind of joy. For the sinner the celebration is on and permission to be joyfully foolish is given.

Sticks-in-the-mud won't understand this kind of joy! They will be real uncomfortable with Ezekiel's understanding of God's generosity. They want God to want a pound of flesh because they want a pound of flesh. It will seem crazy to them to let an opportunity for vengeance to pass. Forgiving might be required but they will make the sinner earn it and of course it goes without saying that they will never forget the transgression.

When our song is always serious with precise timing we lose the joy of it and when others have fun with a verse we are uncomfortable. When sinners delight in their forgiveness we may find that we don't like that either. Perhaps today we need to ask God to help us lighten up on ourselves and others so that laughter and delight can be found. And who knows maybe we'll even discover a Purple People Eater type of melody emerging from our hearts.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Do I want my neighbor to be given lavish forgiveness from God?*
- 2. Who needs me to forgive so that they can feel giddy? What holds me back?*

Prayer: Lord of Life, help me to see that to be generous with my love. Amen.

First Saturday of Lent ~ 3/3

*"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'
But I say to you, love your enemies and
pray for those who persecute you,
so that you may be children of your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:43-45)*

Little nursery rhyme songs don't fit with Lenten themes of forgiveness and reconciliation do they? Take for example, "Row, row, row your boat gently down the stream. Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily life is but a dream." Whoever composed this particular little song surely must not have understood the difficulty with loving one's enemies. Loving an enemy is about rowing upstream isn't it? Doesn't it require strength of will that matches the stamina of the Olympic cross country skier? And I don't think merrily, merrily, merrily is what we imagine when we think of embracing a foe. I might come to love Osama Ben Laden but it is not going to be a merry experience. I might come to a point where I am able to reach out to a person who has betrayed me but to get to that point will be an uphill struggle. And above all else to love the enemy within calls for taking off my rose colored glasses and seeing myself as I am, with all my failings and that is no float in a boat!



There doesn't seem to be anything gentle or merry about what Jesus asks of us this day but we need to remember that we are really on a voyage. Although the first day or the first week or the first year of that journey of love may be extremely difficult if we continue to make choices to love the enemy it will become easier. The more I embrace my failings now the easier it will become to accept my future failings honestly. Each time I embrace a person who has betrayed me when they seek reconciliation the easier I will be able to let go of hurt and anger in the future. And the more my light of love shines out to the world the more places in the world will be illuminated and the people I touch will begin to touch others.

The real beauty of Row, row, row your boat takes place when it is sung as a round. When three or more people begin to sing the song at different times a wonderful harmony emerges. And when three or more people set into motion actions and attitudes that speak to the world love of enemy a wonderful harmonic sigh issues from the earth. And what may seem like an impossibly difficult row upstream for me as an individual takes on the feel of gentle rowing when we do it together.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Whom do I need to start loving today, my neighbor or myself?*
- 2. What is the most difficult part of loving me? My neighbor?*

Prayer: God, I want to love my enemies but it seems so difficult. Show me the way to begin and may my actions influence those around me to launch out into the waters of love. Amen.

Second Sunday of Lent ~ 3/4

“And He was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.

Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice,

‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to Him.’

Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.”

(Mark 9:2,7-8)

Words could never express what the apostles witnessed on that mountain. We can only imagine what the experience of Peter, James and John might have been like. We wonder what it would be like to witness such a sight and to hear a voice coming from a cloud. The three men were fortunate to have each other because they could verify for one another that this was not a dream. It really did happen!



The apostles like that rest of us who have encountered God are really twice blessed. We are blessed with the experience to be sure but we are also blessed with its memory. The memory of our brush with the sacred remains alive inside us and continues to feed our hunger for God.

Peter, James and John never forgot their mountain top moment, and it is recorded in our scriptures so that we do not forget it either. On this mountain top the God-human connection was made in dramatic fashion. Here the veil between heaven and earth was lifted for an instant so that we might glimpse the incredible truth of Jesus. For Peter, James and John it was a moment that they wanted to freeze in time but which will only be fully understood later on.

On the second Sunday of every Lent we revisit this dramatic moment of revelation. The church wants us to remember that Jesus is the Son of God and that He had the power, if He had wanted to use it, to walk away from the cross on Good Friday. He chose to suffer in solidarity with us instead and human life is transfigured for all time.

Today sing of Christ's transfiguration but also celebrate the transfigured life that we as Christians have received because Jesus didn't stay on that mountain. Call to mind the living memory of those moments in our own lives when Jesus dazzled with grace. Let that memory touch again the sin sick soul so that hope might rise like a phoenix from the ashes of our dreams.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Can I recall a mountaintop moment? Who was God for me in that moment?*
- 2. What words come forth from my song of salvation today?*

*Prayer: Jesus, thank you for revealing Your glory to me. May my memories of those moments of grace continue to be a source of strength for my spiritual life.
Amen.*

Second Monday of Lent ~ 3/5

"Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back." (Luke 6:37-38)

How much is enough? How much is too much? Luke might say to us that those are the wrong questions to ask. He might say, "Don't quantify or quantify your giving because God doesn't." Luke tells us that if we give to others God is going to give back to us so much more. If we forgive, if we let go of our need for vengeance and if we offer mercy then mercy shall be ours. If we give freedom to those whom we hold bound by their past transgressions then freedom will be ours as well. If our actions make it possible for our neighbor to sing a joyful song then there will be so much joy welling up inside of us that we will not be able to contain it.



There are only a couple of teeny tiny problems that must be overcome in order for this glorious scenario to unfold. We must give and forgive over and over again. Unfortunately that asks more than some of us want to offer. If I give I might be sure that God is going to give me much more in return but what He gives may not be what I want. If I forgive my neighbor I will have to let go of my hate as well and if hate has energized me for years it might be too frightening to live without it.

On a recent newscast a woman rejoiced that the man who murdered her mother would receive the death penalty and she hoped that he would pay for his crime for all eternity. As much as we may empathize with this woman's loss and understand her outrage we also need to know that she is in need of a change of heart. She needs to come to a point where she can forgive and give mercy not only because the man needs it but because in doing so she will be opened to receive God's overflowing compassion.

Nancy Sinatra once sang, "These boots are made for walking and that's just what they'll do. One of these days these boots are going to walk all over you." Jesus tells us that this cannot be our attitude. Giving and forgiving cannot happen if we are walking over our neighbor.

If today we have decided that we don't want to give and we don't want to forgive then pray for a change of heart otherwise expect to remain imprisoned in sorrow.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. What stumbling blocks must I remove from my heart so that I can receive God's Love?*
- 2. Who needs me to give or forgive today?*

Prayer: Lord, give me a generous heart and may I experience Your generous love in my life. Amen.

Second Tuesday of Lent ~ 3/6

"The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' chair; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach." (Matthew 23:3)

Sometimes the singer and the song don't match. The song may be a beautiful tribute to love and fidelity but we find out in *People* magazine that the singer has been in and out of one relationship after another. The message is great but the messenger is suspect.



There were many people in the time of Jesus who sincerely desired to be good people. They wanted to follow the law but they were confused. They noticed that the religious leaders were big on penance and penalties but seemed to exempt themselves from these practices. Their words and writings were correct but their lives didn't match up to what they proclaimed. Today Jesus points out this ambiguity so that the message of salvation will survive the jaded messengers.

In our current world there are leaders singing wonderful tunes about democracy, freedom and rule of law; yet at the same time they detain people in prison camps for years without a trial. They tie great burdens on poor nations by holding them to debts that they will never be able to pay and they brag to world powers about the benefits of democracy but don't seem to realize that many in their own countries are denied their freedoms because of their skin color, their sex or their economic status.

Sometimes even within our own church we find scribes and Pharisees, leaders who have succumbed to the lure of prestige and who enjoy the position for power's sake not for love's sake. Their message gets lost in all the pomp, and people hear their words with a cynical ear.

Jesus seems to tell us to concentrate on the message not the messenger but He also asks the people to begin to look at new possibilities, new faces of leadership. By pointing to the inadequacies of the Pharisees and scribes isn't Jesus also signaling that He offers a better style of leadership, a servant leadership?

Today is a good day to pray for people in leadership of all kinds. Pray that they might be servants of God rather than slaves of power.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. How do the actions of my leaders influence me?*
- 2. When I am in a position of leadership do my actions send the wrong message?*

Prayer: Lord, may the people that lead us be people of integrity so that their words are mirrored by their lives. Amen.

Second Wednesday of Lent ~ 3/7

"Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:26-28)

In a musical there is often a short song called a reprisal. This is actually a song that was performed earlier in the show but which the composer brings back at a certain point in the play to reemphasize the importance of the message. As the audience listens they recapture the most important elements of the early, longer rendition of the song. Today we are offered a type of reprisal of yesterday's gospel.



Matthew's gospel today finds the disciples jockeying for position. Mother may be out front orchestrating the leadership coup but the sons aren't trying to stop her. The rest of the crew is indignant over this power play, probably because they didn't think to try it themselves. Today Jesus realizes that the leadership vacuum extends right into His own inner circle. So Matthew reprises the theme of servant leadership. Jesus is not instructing the people in general now but his own disciples. Here Jesus cautions these future leaders against falling into the trap of elitism. Jesus tells them that His corporate ladder has one rung and that they are to stand below it. They are to be standing on the ground lifting their neighbors up. They cannot be above looking down because they will risk losing proper perspective. They must be the least among the people.

There is something else about this reprisal that is essential. While yesterday's reading seems to speak of leaders who are out there, to presidents and prime ministers, to bishops and other Christian leaders today's readings suggest that none of us are not off this hook. We are part of Christ's inner circle and thus we must be servants to each other as well. We cannot point a finger at someone out there unless we are willing to point out our own inadequacies.

It is easy for any of us to fall into the trap of trappings. If we are not on guard we can be lured by others into accepting places of honor and when we accept them we begin to send confusing messages to the people around us. We must decide how powerful we want our message of hope to be and then honor that message with our lives.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Does my life honor the role of servant?*
- 2. What are the temptations of power that I find I am most vulnerable to?*

Prayer: Lord, may I be a true servant of Your message of love. Help me to see beyond momentary glory to Your everlasting glory. Amen.

Second Thursday of Lent ~ 3/8

*"The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse-who can understand it?
I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways,
according to the fruit of their doings." (Jeremiah 17:9-10)*

These two verses come at the end of a reading in which Jeremiah contrasts what will be the eventual outcome of those who trust in the flesh with those who trust in the Lord. Those who trust the Lord will be like a watered tree growing strong and those who trust in human desire will be like the parched desert where nothing grows.



Today the problem is still the same; the desert looks mighty inviting. Flashy cars, huge homes, and lots of money seem to speak of the land of plenty. Two hundred pairs of shoes in the closet and all the latest fashions disguise a thirsty soul. Living life at a hundred miles per hour confuses the person because she or he thinks that they are getting somewhere; yet they are only spinning their wheels in the sand.

Madonna had a very popular hit song in the late eighties entitled *Material Girl* in which she sings, "We're living in a material world and I am a material girl." The tune was catchy and the beat inviting but in the words was a great commentary on life for those enamored by the world. Life is shallow and appearance is everything. Depth of heart is dangerous for someone who is wed to material things.

We do live in a material world, but as Christians we strive to not be a part of that world. We cannot escape its influence because its tendrils snake out into every facet of our lives, but we can see beneath the dazzle of it if we look closely. Material people don't bother to live beyond today, but the followers of Jesus see the greatest treasures are those we claim over a lifetime of faithfulness to God. We may not be flashy or flush with cash, but graced filled waters sustain the Christian searching for the genuine pearl of great price.

There is a material girl or boy inside of each of us whether or not we want to acknowledge her or him. From all sides we are assailed and if we are not on guard we will find ourselves wrapped up in it. Style will begin to mean more than substance and abiding love will lose its edge to fashionable flattery. Lent challenges us to seek living water once again so that we won't become immaterial afterthoughts lost in the desert of desires.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. If I look in my closet do I have enough or too much? Can I do something about the "too much" today?*
- 2. What hooks me into consumerism? Why?*

Prayer: Jesus, may I let go of the world so I can embrace Your glory. Amen.

Second Friday of Lent ~ 3/9

"So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. They saw him from a distance and said to one another, 'here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him.'" (Genesis 37:17-20)

There is something about an old cowboy song that grabs the heart. These rugged riders of the plains sing mournfully of their lot in life and we believe them because they, like John Wayne characters, always wear white hats. We believe them because, shucks ma'am, cowboys are always honest. Well...except those who wear black hats!



Andrew Lloyd Weber wrote a cowboy song for his wonderful musical "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat." It has all the pathos that you would expect. The singers tell the story of a young man whose life is cut short. They relate to the father just how the boy perished and end the song by offering the man some consolation because now "there's one more star in the heaven." The song is a hilarious comic piece in the musical, but the story in the song is a fabrication for it is sung by Joseph's devious brothers. The father listens and hears sincerity in their voices while the audience hears the lie. Lies and mayhem rest on top of jealousy and these cowboys from Canaan have on black hats.

Jealousy is one of those evils that just is not content living in the heart. Jealousy likes to expand into evil words or deeds. If my neighbor is offered a position I want do I make sure to point out her shortcomings to the boss? I may seem genuinely interested in the good of my company but this sincere concern is no more than a mask which hides my jealous motives. With a casual whisper I can tear apart the good name of another simply because I am not secure enough in my own right to allow another to claim some fame. My concern, my song of worry can seem so sincere that others believe my devious tale and the dreams of my innocent victim are dashed.

Most of us would never think of getting rid of someone of whom we were jealous. We likely will never set out on a campaign to detour another's life. We all however must deal with the green dragon of jealousy because it does hide inside. If we want our songs to ring true in life we need to watch this jealous monster carefully, particularly when we feel vulnerable or inadequate.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Am I aware when jealousy is the motive behind my actions?*
- 2. When am I most vulnerable to jealousy? What can I do for myself at that time?*

Prayer: Jesus, help me to be mindful of my reasons for action. May I face my dragons of jealousy and honestly name them for what they are. Amen.

Second Saturday of Lent ~ 3/10

"But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him." (Luke 15:20)

In recent history we have begun to call this the Parable of the Loving Father instead of the parable of the Prodigal Son. The emphasis indeed needs to be placed on the Father and his loving embrace of this wayward son. If we begin to look at the father's love only from the point when the boy comes home we miss an essential element of this narrative. It occurs when the father lets the young man go, when he gives him the freedom to leave. This is the moment when sacrificial love gives the son the freedom he needs to break out on his own.



If the young man's name were Daniel this moment could be captured in the old Irish folk song, "Danny Boy." The singer, who could be mother or father, tells the story of a son who has gone away. It is unclear whether the child is going to war or to prison or just getting away from the coal mines that have blackened the landscape of this country. What is clear is that this parent will remain behind even though they know the child must be allowed to go. The closing lines of the song hang in the air with the poignant promise of faithfulness as the parent sings, "But come ye back when summer's in the meadow or when the valley's hushed and white with snow. Yes, I'll be here in sunshine or shadow. Oh Danny boy, oh Danny boy I love you so."

I invite you to pray with this song today. Imagine that this is God singing to you. Listen to the words with your heart. Hear the invitation to freedom that is given and the pledge of steadfast love that is unmistakable. Allow God's voice to come through the yearning of this mother or father. When you reach the last sentence replace Danny's name with your own and let yourself feel the closeness of God.

If this isn't the song for you, then find one that does move you. Let it break open the barriers that keep you from feeling the longing and the pain of separation. Find a melody that can crack the stubborn armor of resistance that you have erected around your heart. Today believe in a way that you have never believed before that God is standing by the road watching at this very moment. Then go home, just go home.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Can I feel the need for my loving God today?*
- 2. What stops me from going home? What am I afraid of?*

Prayer: Loving Father, loving mother wrap me in Your forgiveness today. Let me know that I am safe once again in your warm embrace. Amen.

Third Sunday of Lent ~ 3/II

"He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" (John 2:15-16)



One stop shopping giants offer convenience and low prices. Enter their doors and everything that you could possibly need lies before you. No more stops at the pharmacy, the grocery store or the clothing stores. Forget the local hardware store too. Why bother going to these places when you can get your hammer and nails in the aisle next to the gardening supplies that you want to pick up. If the labor practices of some of these places aren't the best and if these giants run the local merchants out of business, well, that's too bad because it is just so easy to go to these mega stores. In a world of hectic schedules these convenient giants rule.

When Jesus went to the temple he was shocked to see that a religious shopping mall had been set up in His Father's house. Stall after stall of merchandise was available. The pilgrims liked this because they could wait till they got to the temple to purchase what they needed. They would not have to cart their sacrificial animals from home or even from a local merchant in the outlying area. Twentieth century consumers would appreciate the priestly entrepreneurs who came up with this idea. Jesus did not!

Jesus looked at the house built for His Father and found money-grabbing merchants carving up the space of prayer for their own purposes. The atmosphere of holiness had given way to a carnival atmosphere and quiet prayer was impossible. The "holy" leaders of the people had become corporate giants of commerce.

In this scene from John's gospel we get a glimpse of a side of Jesus with which we may not be too comfortable. Jesus was angry and this fury fueled His actions because convenient, one-stop shopping was not an option in God's house. The exchange of money is not a worthy practice in God's temple.

We may not feel that this kind of practice is carried on in our churches today but what about the temple of our hearts? How much do convenience and self-service crowd out the space that I make available to God? When Jesus enters my heart will He find sacred space or worldly clutter?

Questions for Reflection

- 1. How much of the world has crowded into my heart? Is there any room for Jesus?*
- 2. What might I change in my life that would mean inconvenience for me but honor for God?*

Prayer: Jesus, help me clean out my heart so there is room for Your love. Amen.

Third Monday of Lent ~ 3/12

"An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." (Matthew 1:20)



"Dream when you're feeling blue. Dream and it might come true. Things aren't all as bad as they seem. Just dream, dream, dream." These are lines from the song written by Johnny Mercer in 1945. Not surprisingly, the song was entitled, *Dream*.

If every person could have a song to represent the theme of their life Saint Joseph may have picked this one. It is in dreams that Joseph finds the answers to all his dilemmas. In the reading today from Matthew he has made a difficult decision concerning Mary, one that he thought must have been more than fair considering the circumstances. One gets the sense that he has agonized over this problem, and divorce seems the best option. Then he goes to bed, and low and behold, he is surprised by an angel with instructions for him to marry Mary. Was Joseph happy about this turn of events? Perhaps he really wanted to take Mary as his wife but maybe his pride demands that he set her aside? What went on inside Joseph we are not really sure, but we know that the dream was powerful enough to change his course of action.

Sometimes we find ourselves between a rock and a hard place in life. We need to make a decision and we want to make the right one. We want to be just, but the information that we have is incomplete or confusing. There is no clear cut choice for us to make. This account of Joseph's situation and the revelation from God may give us an insight that will help our own discernment process.

Don't stay on the fence; make a decision but wait before you follow through on it. Allow God's spirit one more opportunity to speak, one more chance to point out another direction. Be aware of feelings. If there is unease or a sense of depression it may be the Spirit's sign that we need to look at our decision again. Stepping back gives us perspective about our motives which can sometimes be hard to figure out. Allowing this extra time when we are at ease opens the door to surprises or perspectives that we haven't considered before. And if we encounter a dream that gives clear direction then we'll have a glimpse of the amazing world of St. Joseph.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Have I ever been surprised by new insights just when I thought I knew what I was going to do in a situation? How did that feel?*
- 2. Do I allow myself quiet time before I move ahead on a decision? Could I?*

Prayer: St. Joseph, help me to listen more carefully to the will of God. Teach me how to be open to the surprising movements of the Spirit. Amen.

Third Tuesday of Lent ~ 3/13

"Peter came and said to Jesus, 'Lord, if a brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'" (Matthew 18:21-22)



Most songs are written to tell a story or express a feeling about a certain experience that a person has had. Composers want to tell the world just exactly how they feel about a person or a situation. There are songs written about *Your Cheating Heart* in which the song writer tells the cheater that you may not have been caught yet but eventually your deceitful activities will be repaid when someone cheats on you. There are songs that tell the unfaithful one to *Hit the Road Jack* because I don't want to see you again. And there are even songs about regret and the desire of the offender to *Keep Working My Way Back to You*. What we don't find are songs that celebrate forgiveness that goes on and on and on. Since a song is usually written from experience that may tell us something about the difficulty of what Christ asks of us in this gospel passage today.

Forgiveness offered seven times probably took Peter to the limit of what he imagined could be possible. Jesus' reply must have shocked him. How could anyone forgive that many times! Yet Jesus didn't want to blow Peter's mind as much as He wanted to blow his heart wide open. Jesus wanted Peter to stop calculating love. Forgiving seventy times seven means that we'll never be able to keep track of how often we have forgiven. We simply keep forgiving as long as forgiveness is needed.

We may look around us and not be able to find many role models for this kind of love but every day we receive this kind of love from God. Every day God forgives and loves us more tenderly than He did the day before. Every time we fall short we are lifted up and carried the rest of the way home. Each time that we break Christ's heart He rejoices because He has another opportunity to forgive.

In Kenny Loggins' song *Celebrate Me Home* we hear the desire of a person to come home and his need for those who love him to help make that happen. Every day of our lives Christ does celebrate us home! He doesn't worry if He had to do it the day before because yesterday's gone and today is all that matters. And perhaps that is the key for us as well; if we can just forget about yesterday and celebrate the presence of my neighbor today seventy times seven will take care of itself.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Why is it difficult for me to forgive? What do I need to let go of?*
- 2. Who have shown me Christ's forgiveness in such a way that it was a true celebration?*

Prayer: Jesus, never stop celebrating me home and give me the grace to open my heart to those who are waiting for me to invite them home. Amen.

Third Wednesday of Lent ~ 3/14

*"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets;
I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.
For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter,
not one stroke of a letter will pass from the law until all is accomplished."
(Matthew 5:17-18)*



The Perfect Storm was a book written about a northeastern storm that struck on the coast of Gloucester, Massachusetts in the early 1990's. This gigantic storm arose because all the conditions converged at exactly the right time and place. The temperature and barometric pressure and all other elements were aligned to create the perfect monster storm.

Like a melody searching for just the right words the Israelite people throughout the centuries were looking for the answer to a promise, they were looking for the Messiah, the perfect One. Jesus was the answer. Through His life and death He lived to perfection the will of His Father. He was the answer to the prophet's prayers and the One who understood and lived fully the Law. Tragically His perfection was not what the people wanted.

Love is our law as well. Set aside all the human rules and regulations and love will remain as the only essential law of Christianity. Love must rule our lives. It is the perfect directive that God has given to us.

In St. John's gospel Jesus tells us "Be perfect as Your heavenly Father is perfect." The prescription for those who wish to strive for this perfection is given today by Matthew. Live the law of love.

The perfect storm that hit Massachusetts was a destructive force which took human life. Living the perfect law of God, on the other hand, is the most constructive activity in which we can engage. Living this law helps to build the city of God. Loving as Jesus loves lifts our suffering neighbor into life and creates a song of joy in our hearts.

No one will ever write the perfect song and none of us will live the law of love perfectly either. What is important is that the love song of our lives express to the world the love of Christ and that may be as close to perfection as we'll need to be.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. How do I live out the law of God's love?*
- 2. Does God's great law get lost amongst all of the human made laws of the church or are they an extension of this love?*

Prayer: Jesus, teach me to love as You love so that my life will mirror Yours. Amen.

Third Thursday of Lent ~ 3/15

*"Thus says the Lord: 'Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk only in the way that I command you, so that it may be well with you.'
Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, they walked in their own counsels, and looked backward rather than forward." (Jeremiah 7:23-24)*



Stubbornness of heart seems pretty silly when we observe it as an outsider, but to the person who has decided to jump from the frying pan into the fire this willful choice does offer a momentary sense of triumph. For the person who is willing to sacrifice a future of grace for a fleeting rush of power obstinacy will have an allure. This bullheaded attitude fits the description of the people of Jeremiah's time and unfortunately it's definitely still alive and well today.

Distance gives perspective. As we look back on the many occasions in scripture when God offered friendship and guardianship to the stiff-necked Hebrew people we can see that they make foolish choices. This hindsight is a gift that should help us learn from the mistakes of these chosen people, but does it? We are chosen people too and we fall into the same mule-headed traps as the people of Jeremiah's time. We too think that we can survive on our own. At times we too believe that the rush of emotion that comes with momentary rebellion is worth the consequences that we will face tomorrow. We too are willing to walk off the cliff rather than stay on the narrow path that God has provided because as a disobedient child might say, "I want to!"

One of Frank Sinatra's signature songs is called *My Way*. In this song a man in his later years looks back on his life with a sense of pride for he has lived the way that he wanted. He has made a few mistakes along the way but through it all he stood tall and did things his way. There is a lot to recommend the sentiment of the song because it certainly is true that we need to be our own person, but I have always felt a little uneasy about it. This man epitomizes rugged individualism, a person who will not kneel to anyone, and so I have always wondered where does God fit into his life? Would he kneel in the presence of God?

It is not noble to turn away from God's assistance. Independence is not admirable when it stubbornly refuses to accept God's counsel or a neighbor's help. If all is to be well in our lives then my way must give way to God's. Otherwise we travel on a divided highway that will lead us to a dead end.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. When have I last foolishly refused God's grace? What did I hope to gain?*
- 2. What blocks me from realizing that I am being stiff-necked at times?*

*Prayer: Jesus, may my way of being in the world always be based on Your grace.
Amen.*

Third Friday of Lent ~ 3/16

*"When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him,
'You are not far from the kingdom of God.'
After that no one dared to ask him any question." (Mark 12:34)*



A couple of years ago someone gave me Josh Groban's CD entitled *Closer*. I enjoyed listening to the first eleven songs, but a funny thing happened when I got to the twelfth song; I fell in love at first sound! There was something about *You Raise Me Up* that touched me the first time I heard it. It seeped into my soul like a long, awaited grace. It was a long time before I ever heard the thirteenth song because I kept replaying *You Raise Me Up* over and over again. The words and music were a perfect fit. Even two years later I still find myself pausing whenever this song comes on so I can just drink it in. Somehow it touches my personal need for hope and I know that I am not alone. The power of truth when set to music certainly seems to have the power to touch us deeply.

In our gospel reading Jesus fell in love at first hearing too and of all people it is a scribe who triggers the emotion. The scribes in general were not fans of Jesus but there is something different about this man. Is it what he said or how he said it that impressed Jesus? Perhaps it was the enthusiasm with which he declared that we must love our neighbor as ourselves? Maybe it was the honesty and the openness of this man that touched Jesus. Whatever it was it is very clear that Jesus was touched by what He heard from the heart of this scribe.

Throughout the gospels we find that many people touch Jesus with their words. The rich young man who obeys all the laws, the Roman centurion who has more faith than any in Israel, the Syrophenician woman who continues to plead for help even after Jesus seems to rebuff her and the good thief who professes his faith on the cross, all of them captivated Christ immediately. Like a mother who falls in love the moment she hears her baby cry for the first time Christ heard these people and connected immediately.

Josh Groban's song touched me because he sang of hope in such a way that it touched the yearning inside of me. When our prayer is honest God will fall in love with the sound of our hearts as well.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Do I ever surprise Christ with my honest prayers of longing?*
- 2. Where have I been surprised to hear God's voice? How have I responded?*

Prayer: Lord, help me to hear Your love in the voices of the world around me and may the sounds that come from my soul speak to Your great heart as well. Amen.

Third Saturday of Lent ~ 3/17

"Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'" (Luke 1:38)



Here we are in the middle of Lent and suddenly we are confronted with a reading that foretells the coming of Christmas. We've been concentrating on penance, sacrifice and dying to oneself, and today we uncover new life. Like the crocus which pops out the half frozen earth in early spring the landscape of our winter souls is greeted today with surprise and promise.

If we think this timing is odd, imagine what Mary must have felt when the angel appeared to her. Talk about bad timing! Here is a young woman with dreams for her future. She was a virgin, an unmarried maiden who would soon marry a man named Joseph. Her life had a certain order to it. Then one day her world changed. Now she was pregnant and in peril. Couldn't the angel have waited until after she married Joseph? It seems that God made this a lot more difficult than it would have needed to be. But God doesn't operate on our clock, and God's schedule is very often different from our own.

What we learn about Mary today is that she is very flexible; she can change her life on a moment's notice. She can set her own dreams aside so that God's dream for humanity can move forward. Mary made herself available to the movement of the Spirit.

During the Beatle mania in the sixties I thought that our generation was the first to go crazy over a music group. My mother pointed out that they were not the first, neither was Elvis Presley or even Frank Sinatra. The teen idol that she remembered in the 1920's and 30's was a fellow named Rudy Valle. When he sang on a college campus he wore a raccoon coat and sang through a megaphone. One of his hits began with the following lines, "My time is your time and your time is my time." He croons to his sweetheart that he is there for her.

Today I think that Mary could tell us the true meaning of this sentiment. She understood that being faithful to God meant that her time was not her own. To be true to God meant to be available at all times. We all have dreams and busy schedules but today Mary tells us that we must hold them with open hands and that we must be willing at a moment's notice to let them go. Can we?

Questions for Reflection

- 1. How much of my time is God's time? How available am I to do the will of God at the moment that God calls?*
- 2. What is God asking of me today that I don't want to make time for?*

Prayer: Lord, may my time be more and more available to You. Amen.

Fourth Sunday of Lent ~ 3/18

*"For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light,
so that their deeds may not be exposed.
But those who do what is true come to the light;
so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God." (John 3:20-21)*

We may not like them but we're stuck with mosquitoes in the summer, and invariably one will make it into the bedroom at night. If we have just settled down in our beds and the little critter starts buzzing around our ears we know that until we turn on the lights and send them to their heavenly reward we will not get any rest. Mosquitoes can do a lot of damage in the dark and so can evil.

Evil hates the light because its true nature is exposed. In the light of day it loses much of its power. Truth, on the other hand, relishes the light. Truth is the ultimate Son worshipper. Scrutinized and examined in minute detail, truth stands tall and unwavering upon inspection.

Lent is an especially bright time for truth seekers. During this season of repentance we are invited to leave the shadows so that we might encounter our hearts. During this time of preparation the sincere person will claim his or her faults and beg forgiveness. They will acknowledge that they have a dark side which is in need of light. And they will find hidden joy in the grace of reconciliation.

Gloria Estefan wrote and performed a song in the early 1990's entitled, *Coming out of the Dark*. The song was written as her response to a near fatal bus accident that she was involved in 1990. She suffered a broken back but eventually made a full recovery. In the song she expresses what it felt like to regain her health. She sings, "Coming out of the dark I finally see the Light now and it's shining on me."

Our experience this Lent is all about coming out of the dark too. As the spring sun rises over our part of the world and the brightest green grasses start to flourish we are coming into the warmth as well. Winter is passing for those of us who have responded to Christ's call of repentance. A sigh of satisfaction can be heard inside the heart of one who has left the cold confines of sin to greet the glow of grace that warms the soul. In the middle of Lent joy is bursting forth.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. What darkness have I already brought into the light of Christ this Lent?*
- 2. What part of my life is still in darkness? Can I begin to move it into the light today?*

Prayer: Jesus, give me the grace to long for Your light and the will to seek it until I find it. Amen.

Fourth Monday of Lent – 3/19

“Then Jesus said to him, ‘Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.’

The official said to him, ‘Sir, come down before my little boy dies.’

Jesus said to him, ‘Go; your son will live.’

The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started on his way.” (John 4:48-50)

When publishers decide to produce a song written by an unknown artist they take a huge risk. They must be willing to spend a great deal of money with no guarantee that they will see any return. They give the artist a contract, they pay the production crew, and they will have plenty of advertising expenses as well. And what if the song is a flop? What if the music does not click with the audience? Most music producers will admit that they take a risk when they sign a new artist. They reveal that their decisions are sometimes made simply on a hunch. They learn to listen to this intuitive voice inside because in the past it has served them well.

Today we are invited to follow our hunch about Jesus. We are called to believe without proof. We are encouraged to take a risk, to walk the high wire without a net. We are to believe without any guarantee!

Today we find a man in our gospel who comes with a request for help. His son is very sick and probably dying. He travels a long way to find Jesus because he believes that Christ can help. When he arrives Jesus sends him right back home with only the promise that his son will recover. In an extraordinary show of faith the man takes Jesus at His word and starts for home. How many of us could do that? How many of us would need some proof? How many of us wouldn't be satisfied until Jesus consented to return with us?

Desperate people do not walk out in faith. Their emotions are in a panic and they cannot touch the center of calm in their souls where trust resides. They often feel the need to make things happen; they need to control. Faith flies out the window when bad times come. In contrast, the man in our gospel today was in a desperate situation but he was not a desperate man. Like the music producer who takes a risk on the new artist this man took a risk on Jesus because in the center of his soul the calm voice of faith spoke of promise. Today perhaps we can let go of our desperate activities and maybe all that will remain will be faith. If so then we will be truly blessed.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Do I live my life in desperation or peace?*
- 2. How do I know when Jesus is answering my request? What goes on inside?*

Prayer: Jesus, help me to believe even when I am in situations that seem to be beyond belief. Help me touch the inner calm of Your presence. Amen.

Fourth Tuesday of Lent – 3/20

*“The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.
Therefore the Jews started persecuting Jesus,
because he was doing such things on the Sabbath.” (John 5:15-16)*

Practice may make perfect but if you are imperfect you will probably live longer. Just ask anyone who strives to bring light and love into the world what kind of reward they receive from the world? The world does not reward that type of perfection. Just ask Jesus!

Jesus has just done a good deed, a great deed. He has just cured a man who has been crippled for thirty-eight years but is it appreciated? No! For those whose world is threatened Jesus' actions must be condemned and if not His actions then His timing. Performing miracles on the Sabbath becomes sinful if it conflicts with the agenda of the world. Law becomes more important than truth when we worship at the altar of power and control.

It is easy to read this gospel two thousand years later and see how wrong these people were but when this same type of condemnation occurs right around us or even within us that is another story. Christ heals people and situations every day but often we do not rejoice. Instead we become angry and resentful because He works outside our narrow framework or our timeline. We make sacred cows of human laws and become frustrated when God doesn't pay any attention. We refuse to praise the healing for fear that the healer might outshine us. We forget that Christ doesn't play by our rules and that no rule is greater than the rule of love.

We need to be on guard against those who would condemn the power of Christ which is manifested in the true disciples of Jesus. We must listen carefully to discern if the voice of these authority figures rings with the authority of God or if it is just a hollow gong. And above all else we must be conscious of the judgments that we are making on other people because they may be based on our desires for power rather than the will of God.

Today listen to the songs around you. Are they in tune with God or off key?

Questions for Reflection

- 1. When have I heard a voice of authority speak that I felt did not ring true?*
- 2. Who are the miracle workers in my world that need to know that I support them?*

Prayer: Jesus, may I always praise Your activity in the world around me and help me to judge others actions' with wisdom and love. Amen.

Fourth Wednesday of Lent – 3/21

“Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.” (Isaiah 49:15)

We know that Isaiah is right about mothers. We know that for all the wonderful mothers who exist in the world there will be those who refuse to be responsible. We know that not all mothers remember to love their children. We know the tragedies that occur because mothers are careless with their love. We may not understand how a mother can abuse her child, but we do understand that it happens. Rational people all know that statistically speaking there will be some women who will fail as mothers. It is the second part of Isaiah’s statement that we cannot comprehend. We cannot really understand that God will never forget us.

God has a lot on her plate these days. She has wars to worry about and her earth is in an environmental crisis. She needs to contend with the results of evil constantly and she has to keep an eye on the expanding universe as well. Amid all these different concerns can she still keep her eye firmly fixed on my welfare? Isaiah says yes. Isaiah tells me that every breath I take is blessed by God. My words and actions are witnessed by God. She doesn’t forget the child of love that she created. God doesn’t forget me and She doesn’t forget anyone else either. This we cannot fathom.

If we could have just a glimmer more awareness of God’s presence we would be so different. We would hold conversations of consequence with our God. We would seek advice and share our dreams. We would ask profound questions and we would listen for God’s response. We would be free of worries because we would know that God cares for us all the time. We would be great neighbors because we would have learned how to be present to each other’s need.

No we don’t get Isaiah’s message but we need it desperately. Tevye who spoke to God all the time in *Fiddler on the Roof* once sang “If I Were a Rich Man” and mused about what that would be like. If we can believe Isaiah, if we can believe that God never forgets us we will be rich beyond imagining. Today pray for this type of wealth.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. How aware am I of God’s constant watchfulness?*
- 2. How might my life change if I could understand God’s love?*

Prayer: God, thank you for never forgetting me. Help me to appreciate Your presence more and more. Amen.

Fourth Thursday of Lent – 3/22

*“You refuse to come to me to have life.
I have come in my Father’s name, and you do not accept me;
if another comes in his own name, you will accept him.” (John 5:40,42-43)*

The Jewish leaders heard what they wanted to hear and saw what they wanted to see. Much of it was illusion, but they held on anyway. They pursued their study of scripture but when the fulfillment of those words stood right in front of them they could not accept Him. God’s Word they could not hear but the words of the scribes and Pharisees were worshipped.

This is a sad song that is repeated over and over again in the gospels by people who had spent their whole lives in pursuit of God. The leaders of the people have become jaded and they are unable to accept surprise. Life has become the serious search for that which will never be found, for a mediocre Messiah whose mission has been watered down so that it fits the dream of the leaders. This Messiah will fit nicely with their desire but not with God’s.

Lent is the season in which we must decide just what kind of Messiah we want. We profess that we want Jesus, the Christ, the Lamb of God, but maybe we really don’t. Maybe we are happy with a limited role for God. Maybe we want God to be who we want Him to be for then we won’t have to stretch our hearts and minds very far. Maybe we would even be willing to settle for a facsimile of God, a stand-in Savior?

Christ is here today in our world but we may not be looking for Him. He is alive in people and places that don’t conform to the role that we have given Him. He is shouting that we need to take off the blinders that we have been wearing or the blindfolds that others have forced us to wear. Jesus is in people in whom we would not expect to find Him and in situations that are messy. Jesus is in the conflict in a family and in our church. He is in prophetic women. Jesus walks out of the living scriptures that are being written in the ghettos of New York and the desert towns of Iraq. Jesus is in every song of freedom that floats to heaven. If we don’t see Him perhaps it is because we don’t want to see Him. Perhaps He is too dangerous for us to look upon. Let us not make the same mistake as the Jewish leaders. Let us take off the blinders and the blindfolds this Lent.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Where do I refuse to see Jesus? Why?*
- 2. Who are the true heralds of Good News today? Do we bother to listen to them?*

Prayer: Jesus, don’t let me look away from Your presence. Help me to see the truth of Your love even if it means that I must let go of long held beliefs. Amen.

Fourth Friday of Lent – 3/23

“Then Jesus cried out as He was teaching in the temple, “You know me, and you know where I am from? I have not come on my own. But the one who sent me is true, and you do not know Him. I know Him, because I am from Him, and He sent me.” (John 7:28-29)

How much do we really know another person? Often we judge people by their actions or their words, but we really don't know them as persons. In election years this is particularly true. We listen to candidates and we believe that we know whether they are sincere or not but then a scandal breaks and we find out the person that we thought was the perfect person is merely human like the rest of us.

Jesus understands that the people around him have made a judgment about Him. They know where he comes from, they know His background and they know what He has been preaching, and consequently they find Him all too much. What they don't know is the truth of His relationship with God which, of course, is the most important piece of information that they could want. They cannot comprehend that Jesus and the Father are one, and they miss the opportunity to know the Father by knowing the Son.

It is easy to condemn these people for not seeing the Messiah, but human nature really doesn't change. Over the course of the centuries many of us have come to the same conclusions as these Jewish people. We have not been able to see what was right in front of us because we've been looking for something else.

As we move closer to the passion and resurrection of Jesus let us be aware of how we look at the world around us. What do we see that isn't really there and what is there that we don't see? What aspect of our person is impaired enough to make it difficult to hear the truth of another person's song? Perhaps I am angry and resentful about my circumstances in life or perhaps I feel insecure. How does that affect how I see goodness of my neighbor? When we claim our woundedness we also begin to see our goodness and once we can see our goodness we are not threatened by the goodness that we see in another. Unattended these wounds will fester. Their poison eventually affects our ability to hear love's song even when it is sung by someone right in front of us.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Are there aspects of my person that need to be healed?*
- 2. How do anger and resentment affect my ability to hear God's voice in another?*

Prayer: Lord, heal me so that I am not afraid to listen to Your song which is sung in those around me. Help me to know that all of our voices can speak Your grace. Amen.

Fourth Saturday of Lent – 3/24

*“But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter.
And I did not know it was against me that they devised schemes, saying,
‘Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living,
so that his name will no longer be remembered!’” (Jeremiah 11:19)*

Some years ago I worked in a small rural parish in southwest Missouri. Because of our location we didn't have many people come by in need of financial assistance. One day, however, a man came and shared with me his story. I don't remember the details but I do remember it was a good tale. I believed in his need and spent the rest of the day scraping together enough funds to help him out. He had promised to repay me by the end of the week. I never saw him again. The next week I found out that he had been making the rounds of all the churches in the area and that others had also been taken in.

It took me awhile to get over that experience because I had never been deliberately scammed before. People may have disappointed me, but this exploitation was different; it was premeditated. I couldn't believe that someone would really be that devious or that I could be so gullible. I had lost some innocence that day and shortly after as I rode down the country road I heard Dionne Warwick sing on the radio, “I know I'll never love that way again” and I found myself nodding in agreement.

It seems that Jeremiah would understand this sentiment. He too was caught off guard by those around him. He did know that they would hate the message that he was proclaimed. In all innocence he was just trying to do the job that God had given him and he hadn't seen the consequences that lay ahead. How very disheartened he must have been.

Jeremiah and I are not alone. At some point probably most of us will experience this kind of betrayal. We will get angry and we promise that we will never let this kind of thing happen again. But if we are open to God's grace then we will not keep this promise. If we allow ourselves to claim the hurt that sits right underneath the anger then God's touch can heal us and our trust in humanity can be renewed. It may take a little time but we will be able to love that way again.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. When I have been betrayed by another have I claimed the hurt? Have I let God heal it?*
- 2. Are there people who helped me trust again? Have I thanked them?*

Prayer: Lord, like Jeremiah I sometimes am broken by betrayal. Help me to know that You want to heal my wounds so that I might love freely once again. Amen.

Fifth Sunday of Lent ~ 3/25

"When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'" (John 11:43-44)

In the old Boris Karloff movie, *The Mummy*, there is a scene very similar to the one described in this reading from John. The mummy walks forth from an Egyptian tomb with the white wrappings of death still hanging from his body. In front of him some people run away screaming and others stand frozen in horror. This monster engages in murder and mayhem throughout the movie until he is destroyed.



If we place ourselves in the group of people who stood with Mary and Martha in this particular gospel moment there is no doubt that our hearts would be pounding too. We would probably be filled with terror rather than joy. Lazarus was dead and buried and now he has come forth from the tomb. As witnesses we may at first have thought that we were observing a dead man walking. We would be wrong.

Like the images in the movie *The Mummy* often the Hollywood versions of Christ's life depict this scene in much the same way. Lazarus stands at the door of the tomb like a statue or walks slowly forth. But would that be how this man who had died and was not restored to health responds? Would he not thrash about in an effort to remove the bindings? This man is now alive not simply a mummy that walks. When Jesus says unbind him and let him go he wants Lazarus to be able to kick up his heels and dance for joy.

Resurrections are full of energy! The life force of God has returned and that which was dead is pulsing anew. Resurrections are spectacular and as such they will shout freedom to the world. We have not experienced the bodily resurrection yet but most of us have known moments in our lives when we have been raised up, when something inside that we had thought dead reappears. In this moment of wonder do we not feel a new energy gathering strength and bursting forth?

The really difficult part of the Lenten experience is still ahead, but today we get a glimpse of what awaits us on our own particular Easter. Today we know that on that day we will be born into freedom and we will not do so like a mummy. We will sing and dance with the greatest of joy.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. What do I imagine was the first thing that Lazarus did once he was unwrapped?*
- 2. What do I do when I have experienced a small resurrection in my life?*

Prayer: Jesus, raise me up and let the wrappings of this world fall away. Help me to know that the things that bind me to this earth are not life-giving. Amen.

Fifth Monday of Lent ~ 3/26

*Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground.
When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them,
'Let any one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.'"* (John 8:6-7)

Carole King composed and performed many songs in the sixties and seventies, but today one particular composition comes to mind. She wrote, "I feel the earth move under my feet. I feel the sky come tumbling down." For the adulterous woman who was caught and brought before Jesus it must have seemed as if the world was imploding around her. She was scared even if she didn't admit it. She could not avoid this confrontation. This man Jesus would judge her, and she may very well end up dead before the day was out.



While she felt her world shifting Jesus bent down and touched the earth as if to stop the quaking. Jesus bent and let the dust settle. He touched the earth and then rose to confront the elders. He touched the earth and then offered reconciliation to the woman. He took the time to ground Himself in love in that moment before He offered His Father's truth to those who would hear.

This encounter broke ground on a new way of dealing with sinners. No longer can we judge without being judged ourselves. Now we know that God believes in second chances more than perfection. Today earthly stones of destruction must be put aside so that fragile hearts can learn freedom. Today the earth trembles with the power of love not the force of failure.

This episode in Jesus' life pulls the plug on our judgments. After today we cannot condemn our neighbor without placing a judgment on ourselves as well. Today we learn that we must move beyond righteous indignation if the sinners around us are to know the forgiving love of God. Today we learn that there is no honor in throwing stones.

This change in attitude will be difficult, perhaps nearly impossible. It will shake up our world and the world of those around us, but at the same time we will be able to offer the grace of reconciliation to those who need it the most.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Are there people that are waiting for me to free them from their sin?*
- 2. Why do I need for people to be punished for their sin?*

*Prayer: Jesus, help me to throw down my stones so that my neighbor might be free to live again.
Amen.*

Fifth Tuesday of Lent ~ 3/27

"When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am He, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me; He has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to Him." (John 8:28-29)

When I make a cake from scratch I follow my mother's recipes. The cake will meet with my approval if when I take a bite it tastes just like the one that mom would have made. For those of us who ate her cakes as we grew up she becomes tangibly present once again when we bite into a cake made from her recipe. For those who didn't know my mother the cake is my cake, my recipe and they don't make a connection between the cake and my mother, the person I knew as a master baker. These people can only get a sense of my mother through my efforts. If I read the recipe incorrectly then those who eat the cake will get the wrong impression of my mother's recipe.



Jesus brought to the world the tangible presence of the Father. Those who had come to know God in their lives would have been able to discern God in Jesus. They would have recognized that Jesus embodied the essence of grace. They would hear Jesus speak and the truth would echo in their hearts because they cherished and remembered past encounters with the Holy. Experiences of pure love do not die. They remain alive in our memories and for those individuals who met Jesus those memories would resurface.

Some would not have seen the Father in the Son because they had spurned the overtures of the Father throughout their lives. They may have tasted His grace but never savored its richness, so that their memories were clouded at best. When Jesus offered to let them taste the love of the Father they refuse because they cannot make the connection between Father and Son.

To know Jesus is to know the Father. They are one. What one creates the other can create as well. What Jesus gives to the world the Father gives too! Their song of love is an experience of perfect harmony. When Jesus is lifted up upon a cross of suffering the Father suffers as well. Christ's recipe for salvation is the same as the Father's. And when we eat of Christ's banquet we taste the Father as well.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. What do I know about Jesus that I don't know about the Father?*
- 2. When have I tasted the love of Jesus? Are there other memories of God's love that this experience brings to mind?*

Prayer: God, may I always see Your presence in Jesus and Jesus' presence in the people around me. Amen.

Fifth Wednesday of Lent ~ 3/28

"The young men walked around in the midst of the flames, singing hymns to God and blessing the Lord." (Daniel 3: 24)

"I fell into a burning ring of fire. I went down, down, down and the flames went higher. And it burns, burns, burns in the ring of fire, the ring of fire." These are lines from Johnny Cash's hit *Ring of Fire*. Would the hymn that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego sang in the furnace have sounded similar? Well, the answer is both yes and no. No, they didn't physically burn in the fiery furnace that Nebuchadnezzar placed them in but, yes, they were on fire. They were on fire with the love of God. As Cash continues in his song, "Love is a burning thing and it makes a fiery ring. I fell into that burning fire and the flames went higher." Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego fell in love with their God with a passionate love. It was the fire that lit their dreams and warmed their hearts. It was a fire that consumed them just as it has consumed all the great saints. Physical fire was nothing compared to the fire within. Nebuchadnezzar could never make his furnaces hot enough to purge from these young men their zeal for God.



Recently in Ronald Rolheiser's *Forgotten Among the Lilies* he writes about passion and romance. Rolheiser says that the church needs to reclaim these two gifts. He states, "In a world in which fidelity and historical consciousness are dying and being replaced by infidelity and programmed boredom, in a world in which true romance and true sexuality are being replaced by schizophrenic sex and pornography, we need fire in the forge, passion and romance." Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego got it! These young men were romantics who believed in the impossible dream of God's love and they passionately responded to His call to discipleship.

Christians need to be the ultimate romantics, the true believers in the happy ever after. We need to be passionate in our pursuit of resurrected life. If we are consumed by the fire of the Spirit then we can sing joyfully because God has chosen us to witness His love to the world. Like *Ring of Fire* there are many songs that relate fire and love, but they cannot hold a candle to the hymns of joy that spring forth from those who are consumed by the fire of God's love.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Am I on fire with love for God? What do I do with that passion?*
- 2. If I could dream an impossible dream for the earth what would it be?
What is stopping me from pursuing it?*

Prayer: Jesus, You are the focus of my love but sometimes I get too practical about life. Help me to look beyond the known so that the possibilities that You see can become clear to me. Amen.

Fifth Thursday of Lent ~ 3/29

*"Then the Jews said to him, 'You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?'
Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I Am.'
So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple."
(John 8:57-59)*

Rock stars excite their fans with loud music, outrageous lyrics and costumes that can be rather bizarre. For some they are the coolest group that ever came along, and for others they seem to be the incarnation of Satan. Their message can be powerful or obscene, but there is something about them that has caught the fancy of a large enough group of people that they achieve star status. Oddly enough, when they are interviewed off stage one finds that they are not at all like the persona that they bring to their performance. They perform to please the crowd, but their personal life really doesn't mirror that performance.



Jesus was also a rock star but not the same type as our modern day rock-n-roll idols. During this Lenten season we find that Jesus often had the crowd in a frenzy but not in the same way as the crowds who attend a Rolling Stones concert. Jesus incited the emotions of the crowds but it was anger not happiness that He drew from them. And had the crowd had their way Jesus would have been stone cold dead on more than one occasion.

A couple of years ago during a presentation that was given for our congregation a speaker stated, "If you must choose between loyalty and integrity pick integrity because it will be prophetic." Because Jesus always chose integrity He was always prophetic in his words and actions. He was a loyal Jew, but belonging was not as important as truth. Integrity and faithfulness to the Father were one and the same for Jesus. To shade the truth in order to please the crowds would not be Jesus' way. His words were prophetic and unlike the modern rock star He was countercultural. In the eyes of the people He was dangerous.

Integrity implies that our words and actions are in harmony with our hearts. If we speak the truth of our heart and live the law of love that Jesus did then we can expect to be prophetic. We can also expect the same type of rock reaction.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. How important is integrity to me? Does it suffer sometimes because I feel the need of acceptance by a group more than I should?*
- 2. What have been some of the consequences of my prophetic choices? Has it been worth it?*

Prayer: Lord, may I always seek to be a person of integrity. May my words and actions always mirror my heart and may my heart be filled with Your Presence. Amen.

Fifth Friday of Lent ~ 3/30

*"Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord!
For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers." (Jeremiah 20:13)*

Life is to be lived in the present moment. We take what today gives us but don't hold it too tightly. Tomorrow will come with its own joys and sorrows. Today is all we really have, so cherish the joy that comes.

Jeremiah was a present moment person. We know how his life turned out and he probably knew where his ministry would eventually lead. But on this day Jeremiah rejoices and invited the people to do the same. This day the Lord has shown mercy and delivered the people.



In the middle of Lent we rejoice that Jesus has delivered us. "On a wonderful day like today I defy any cloud to appear in the sky, dare any rain drop to plop in my eye on a wonderful day like today." Although Leslie Bricusse wrote the song "A Wonderful Day Like Today" for a rather obscure 1960's musical called *The Roar of the Greasepaint, The Smell of the Crowd* the song became very popular. I think it fits Jeremiah's sentiments. Today the evildoers have lost and God has won, so this is a wonderful day! Today life is good and the struggles are forgotten. With clear eyes today we see that God has done marvelous things for us.

We too have days when we know that God has rescued us, but do we let the world know? Do we come into the office with a smile on our face and a song on our lips? Do we let the joy of God's salvation shine for the world to see? Today is not the day to hide under the bushel basket. Today if we're feeling good then let's notify our faces so that the rest of the world can see the glory of God. There may be a few that don't appreciate our high spirits, but there will be many who will catch the fire and join the chorus of freedom and joy.

Bricusse's song concludes with the following refrain, "May I take this occasion to say that the whole human race should go down on its knees, show that we're grateful for morning like these, for the world's in a wonderful way, on a wonderful day like today." In this moment, on this day can we sing along?

Questions for Reflection

- 1. What tune can I sing today? What does it reflect about my relationship with Jesus?*
- 2. What can I let go of today that will lift my spirit and bring a song to my lips?*

Prayer: Thank You Lord for this day. For all the ways in which You bless me I offer my song of joy. Help me to be aware of Your daily deliverance and may I praise You always. Amen.

Fifth Saturday of Lent ~ 3/31

"Now the Passover of the Jews was near, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves. They were looking for Jesus and were asking one another as they stood in the temple, 'What do you think? Surely he will not come to the festival, will he?'" (John 11:55-57)

In the musical comedy *Guys and Dolls* there is a scene in which a gambler named Sky Materson is about to roll the dice. He is gambling on love and as he gets ready to roll the dice he sings, *Luck, Be a Lady Tonight*.



In this scripture passage from John we find the people speculating about whether or not Jesus will show up for the Passover. Can't you almost see a couple of the guys standing around wagering on whether Jesus will appear or be a no-show? Benjamin, the goat herder shouts out that he has two denari that say Jesus won't come. Although the odds aren't good, Phanuel the owner of a camel caravan takes the bet. Everyone seems to be speculating about Jesus. Some hope he will come because they are believers; others hope he will come because they know that the Pharisees have a plan to get rid of Him. Some want Him to stay away because they hate His message, and others hope that He doesn't come because they don't want anything to happen to Him.

Unlike the story of *Guys and Dolls*, however, luck has little to do with whether Jesus will show or not. Fulfilling the mission that the Father has given is the only thing that matters for Jesus, and so He will come for Passover. While spectators may look on his decision as an unlucky choice Jesus sees that only when He comes to Jerusalem for Passover will His destiny be fulfilled.

Those who believe in Jesus know that His presence in our life is a sure bet. When we find ourselves in the vortex of confusion and chaos, Jesus will come to us. He will not leave us to stand alone. Jesus will be there because that is His mission. If pain lies ahead of us because we have remained steadfast in faith then Jesus will be right beside us. There need be no speculation on our part. He will be there because His destiny is to be with us. We can bet our lives that He will not let us down.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. What am I willing to wager on Christ's promise to be with us always?*
- 2. Do I see the good fortune of my life as luck or grace? How does grace appear in the bad luck situations of my life?*

Prayer: Lord, help me to trust that You will always be there for me even when the road seems to be filled with chaos. Help me to realize how lucky I am to have you in my corner. Amen.

Palm Sunday

*"Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,
'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!'"*
(Mark 11:9-10)



The crowd has whipped themselves into a euphoric state. Here comes the Messiah, the deliverer of the people. On this day Jesus is the Christ and so they celebrated. Here, riding on a donkey, is the one who will free them from the Romans and set them on the road to power and prosperity.

The people were clueless; they didn't understand Jesus' mission. Three years of preaching, teaching and working miracles and the people still don't comprehend Christ's view of glory. The people are still looking for the wrong Messiah.

Jesus would have understood the sentiments expressed in the hugely popular song *Send in the Clowns* which Joan Collins introduced in the late sixties. She sang, "Don't you love farce. My fault I fear. I thought that you'd want what I want. Sorry my dear. But where are the clowns? Quick send in the clowns. Don't bother they're here." Jesus knows even as He prepares to ride into Jerusalem that His grand plan for salvation is not what the people want.

Jesus and the people were on two different tracks. One is offering the kingdom and the other is looking for the kingdom but can't see the truth because it isn't what they wanted to see. What a cruel joke. Indeed, there should have been clowns standing along the roadside on that Palm Sunday.

The terrible tragedy is that the farce continues today. People still expect Jesus to win their political wars for them. They expect Him to exact revenge on the person who has hurt them. They still go to church every Sunday but on Monday betray Christ in their actions. People still paint their faces with happy expressions and run from the Savior who could give them peace. The music in their souls is a little off key, and their antics are a sad commentary on faith. The clowns really are here.

For those who are not clowning around in life today is a day to celebrate simply because we are one step closer to Good Friday. Today we move closer to the ultimate sacrifice of the Christ and the redemption of our souls. Today we worship the truly foolish actions of Jesus and sing praise because we are fools for this Christ.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. What does Jesus want for me that I don't seem to want?*
- 2. During this last week of Lent how can I embrace the absurd message of Jesus more fully?*

Prayer: Jesus, may my love for You be based in Your reality. Amen.

Monday of Holy Week

"Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." (John 12:3)

There is a barn located on the property where I live. I like to go up into the empty hay loft, stand in the middle of that open space and sing. I can sing as loud as I want and it doesn't matter if I am on key or not because there is no one around to hear me. The songs that I sing in this place are prayer songs but not because they are liturgical songs necessarily. They are prayer because I am singing to my Beloved, to my God and I know that no matter how off tune I am that an audience of One is enjoying the effort. Since the space is empty the sound reverberates all around, filling the barn and echoes the longings of my heart.



Today Mary fills the space in her house with the scent of perfume. She performs an intimate service for the Messiah. Mary is an extravagant servant. Her actions become her song of love to the man who has set her free. From the moment that Christ walked into her life she has believed and on this day she makes a public statement of her discipleship, a declaration that will be remembered for all time. Most of those who sat at table that day watched with amazement and Judas grumbled about the waste of money. Jesus however was pleased and voiced His approval.

How extravagant is our prayer and our discipleship? How often do I raise the rafters of my soul with songs of love for my Savior? How often do I give lavishly to my neighbor without being asked and without counting the cost? And when will I realize that the Christ who probably wants to hear my song the most lives in the hearts of people I rub shoulders with everyday?

My song of love does not have to be perfect, but it should be my best effort. It should fill the spaces of my heart and echo to the world around me. It doesn't have to be complicated but it should be a melody that I never forget. And the refrain must speak of the wonders of Jesus, the Lord of my life.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. How extravagant am I with the service I offer others? How stingy?*
- 2. What song expresses for me my heart felt affection for God? How often do I sing it?*

Prayer: Lord, fill my soul with songs of Your love and may my life echo those words in deeds. Amen.

Tuesday of Holy Week

"During the supper with his disciples, Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, 'Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.'" (John 13:21)

Friendships are great blessings, but they also can be very risky. When we invite another into our lives we trust that they will hold our hearts reverently. When we are betrayed the pain rivals the grief that we experience when we lose someone through death. In fact, if the friendship has been very close as in the case of a married couple the betrayal can be even worse than a death because the decision to betray has been a choice. We find ourselves wondering why, and we are suddenly set adrift on the sea of insecurity. Our hearts break; for a long time we are unable to function normally and some never recover.



Jesus knows how cruel betrayal can be. He too had special people in His life and today one of them stabs Him in the back. Today one man will bring Christ's preaching and healing to a crashing halt for a mere thirty pieces of silver. Today Satan holds power in the heart of one man and another is forced to begin His final redemptive mission.

Jesus is troubled in spirit. He is not just troubled in mind as one who is worried or uncertain. He is bone-deep troubled perhaps even doubtful of His Father's will. Jesus has loved Judas deeply and completely, providing everything that he would need for discipleship. But it wasn't enough and Christ will not force anyone to love faithfully. The great strength of Jesus today is that He doesn't let this devastation overwhelm Him to the point that He cannot complete His work.

Today Christ can sit with us in the pain that has come to us through betrayal. He knows what it is like to have an ache that cannot be dismissed. He realizes that these experiences can throw us into turmoil and that they leave us to bleed emotionally and psychologically. Today our song of lament will become His song as well. If we can allow Him to be with us in our pain then He can teach about love. He can show us how to shoulder this pain in a way that will be redemptive. The mournful sounds of our soul can eventually be transformed into the joyful music of praise if we allow Christ's healing power to work.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Have I experienced a great betrayal in my life? Have I grown from it or has the pain been allowed to control me?*
- 2. Does Christ need to sit with me in this kind of pain right now? Can I take some time today to express to Him how I am feeling?*

Prayer: I know the pain of betrayal Lord. Help me to feel Your healing presence in my broken heart. Amen.

Wednesday of Holy Week

*"The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backward. I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult or spitting."
(Isaiah 50:6)*



Why would anyone set themselves up for pain and suffering? What could possibly motivate us to willingly go through torture? Bodies and spirits are not expendable so why would anyone subject themselves to the type of degradation that Isaiah speaks of in this reading?

Those who remember the movie *Gandhi* may recall a scene in which the Indian people want to pass a line and the British troops are blockading their movement. The people very slowly move forward one at a time and the soldiers start to beat them with their gun butts. One after another the people walk up and the soldiers strike them down. Eventually the soldiers step aside and let them pass because they are unable to continue the violent response to these nonviolent protestors. Love for the dignity of each person becomes for Gandhi the reason to endure undignified and inhumane treatment. This willingness to give oneself over to persecutors may seem ridiculous but Gandhi, Isaiah and Jesus all knew that what seems absurd to the world will birth freedom. Love will become tangible in the outstretched arms of those who sacrifice for truth. Living tomorrow will never be as important for these people as living faithfully the present moment.

For the musical *A Chorus Line* Marvin Hamlisch and Edward Kleban collaborated on a song entitled, *What I Did For Love*. The composers wrote, "Kiss the day goodbye and point me toward tomorrow. We did what we had to do. Won't forget, can't regret what I did for love." The choices that Isaiah, Gandhi and Jesus made left no room for regrets. They did not second guess their decisions because when a decision is made for pure love it will be the right choice. Pain and death may be experienced but they kept their eyes on the new life that would spring from the suffering.

Today we remember those who have made the choice to suffer rather than to die spiritually. These people remind us that if we love God there will be pain but there will be no regrets.

Questions for Reflections

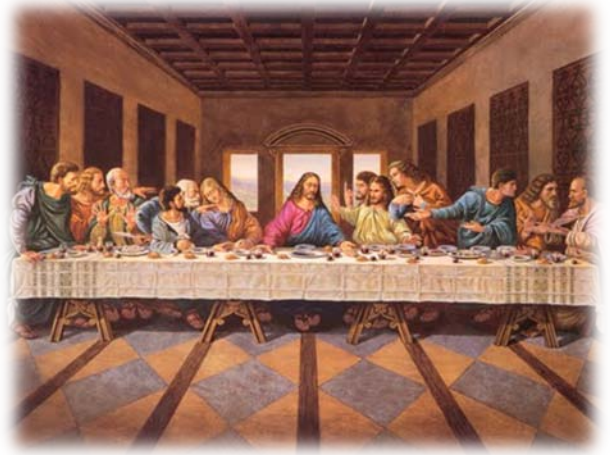
- 1. When have I endured suffering or ridicule for God, for truth? Was it worth it?*
- 2. Who are the heroines and heroes of my Christian life? Why?*

*Prayer: Lord, I do not look forward to suffering but I want to be a person of integrity.
When the time comes for me to stand for You give me the strength to handle
the pain that will accompany my choice. Amen.*

Holy Thursday

"The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'" (1 Corinthians 11:24)

In this reading from Corinthians and in today's gospel reading from John the practical world of the body meets the poetic world of grace. Today things which are so common, consumption of food and cleansing of the body, become extraordinary expressions of love. Today, in one evening with friends, Jesus turns the mundane into a magnificent manifestation of God with us.



In this first act of the Triduum Jesus sits with His disciples at table and gives the most precious of gifts, Himself. He is bold enough to turn the Passover meal up-side-down and offers a new covenant. He weaves this new expression of His love into His ever present message of service. On this night He gives example of what each of us should be for our neighbor. By bending down to do this menial task of washing feet the master leaves no room for misinterpretation of what service as a disciple will mean.

Today we remember and we relive this sacred night. We recall that Jesus washed feet of both men and women, that He gave His first Eucharistic meal to ordinary people and that this meal would change for all time human understanding of their relationship with God. In these two intimate acts, feet washing and a meal, Jesus lifts us up and makes us holy.

Today I recall Whitney Houston's *One Moment In Time* in which she sings, "Give me one moment in time when I'm more that I thought I could be and in that one moment of time I will see eternity." This night is that moment in time for those of us who believe that God wants us to know eternity. This is the night when simple acts of service become the stepping stones to paradise and a meal breaks open the shackles that have bound our hearts in darkness. On this one evening we receive all that we need for the journey of life. If we have embraced this simple call to service and if we eat this very simple meal, then our mundane and very ordinary lives become poetry in motion.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. What kind of simple service can I offer today to honor the example that Jesus has given me?*
- 2. What part of my heart needs the Eucharistic nourishment of Jesus most today?
Do I believe that this meal is the answer to my need?*

*Prayer: Lord, on this night of extraordinary love help me to embrace Your example.
May Your flesh and blood feed my weary body and soul so that my service to
my neighbor will be enthusiastically given. Amen.*

Good Friday

*“My kingdom is not from this world.
If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep
me from being handed over to the Jewish authorities.
But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.”*



Marilyn Monroe, the glamorous but troubled star of the 1950's and 60's is memorialized in a song written by Elton John entitled, *Candle In The Wind*. The closing line of the song is, "Your candle burned out long before your legend ever did." Elton John is correct. Marilyn Monroe is a bit of a legend to those who follow the lives of movie stars. Her life was tragic and her death is shrouded in mystery. She died at the age of thirty-six, and like other cultic legends such as Elvis Presley and James Dean she has not been forgotten.

Today we remember the death of Jesus. He too died young and tragically, and His followers still remember Him on the anniversary of His death every year. Yet Jesus is not just a legend for His story has not ended. His is a never-ending story. On this day when we remember His death we know that it is not the final act of a tragic play but the beginning of the world's redemption.

Worldly stars will pass away, for indeed their candles will go out. But like the birthday candle that seems to go out only to reignite itself Jesus waits in death for the spark of heaven to fire into life once again. He dies only to bring a new and better life for all. He gives up His Spirit but only so His heavenly kingdom can come down to earth.

Today as we remember the pain and suffering of Jesus' final hours let us not forget that He is not diminished by death. He is released into glory on this day and the gates of heaven begin to creak open for those of us yearning to know freedom. Jesus enters death in order to divest it of power. Jesus is no candle in the wind which flickers out when the first stiff breeze comes along.

Today we need to experience sorrow for the pain and suffering that Jesus had to endure for our sins but we must also hold firm for our salvation actually came because of this horrible moment. Today Jesus' candle gives way so that an eternal flame can burn brightly for all humanity.

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Are there times in my own life that were tragic but from which came great freedom or joy? Do I rejoice in those times now?*
- 2. What are the signs of the kingdom in my life?*

Prayer: Lord, help me to see beyond the pain and suffering. Help me to see the new world of grace that is rising in my life today. Amen.

Holy Saturday

"Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there." (John 19:41-42)

When a composer such as Richard Rogers, Cole Porter or John Lennon dies their talent for song writing dies too. No more wonderful melodies and lyrics will issue from their hearts. Their work is complete and they are silent.

Holy Saturday would seem to be a day without a song. Jesus has died, His mission completed. His followers are grieving and probably in disarray. This man Jesus, whom they had believed in with all their hearts, has been taken away from them. He has been sealed in a tomb and all their hopes have been buried with Him. Now there is nothing, only the ashes of glorious dreams.



Maybe that is the way it was meant to be. Our journey of Lent began in ashes and it would seem that it has ended in the searing flames of hatred. Jesus' song appears to have been silenced in one horrendous act of self-giving. Today perhaps it seems that it is the sounds of silence that we hear and they echo around in the empty caverns of our hearts. Today we might feel like we are lost without our Song.

Amid the ashes of our dreams is the place where memories dwell, however; and memories always bring us one step closer to the remembered one. We relive the precious moments in life when hearts sang in harmony through laughter and suffering. In memory we see again and live again.

During World War II Irving Kahal and Sammy Fain wrote a aching beautiful song called *I'll Be Seeing You*. "I'll be seeing you in all the old familiar places that this heart of mine embraces all day through... I'll find you in the mornin' sun and when the night is new. I'll be looking at the moon but I'll be seeing you."

Today can we look into our hearts and see again the Christ that has shattered our narrow vision and healed our brokenness? Maybe we can recall the moments when we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that we were loved. And just maybe sometime today we will feel a new song of joy rising from a place that looked like ashes just a memory ago.

Questions for Reflections

- 1. What do I need to remember today?*
- 2. Who are the people around me that remind me that Jesus is always rising in hearts?*

Prayer: Lord, may my memories lead me to know that You live! Amen.