



HEAR AND BELIEVE

Gospel Reflections for Lent 2024

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ACST CATHOLIC

ASH WEDNESDAY

February 14, 2024

Mt 6:1-6, 16-18



Once, not too long ago, there was a moment in Mass when I realized that I "wanted credit" for a deeper-than-usual bow during the Creed. I wanted credit for being extra reverent after Holy Communion. I wanted someone to notice my generosity towards our parish Christmas family. I wanted credit for participation in all the "holy stuff" because if no one saw me doing it, did it really count? So, boy, does today's Ash Wednesday Gospel speak to me!

As Christ says (three times!) in today's reading, "Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward." Ouch.

The question is, what should be our motivation when we pray, fast, and give alms? Am I bowing deeply out of deep love for the Father? Am I giving generously out of compassion for our struggling neighbor? Am I doing the "holy stuff" because I want to be like Christ and take him out into our hurting world?

Receiving ashes today may seem contradictory to our reading. After all, it is very public. But rather than us trying to "get credit" from others for a particular deed, the ashes are a public admission of our need for God's forgiveness as fallen sinners. We are asked to "turn away from sin and believe in the Gospel."

THURSDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

February 15, 2024

Lk 9:22-25



When I was going through some difficulties years ago, a friend told me, "Well, Jesus didn't say, 'Take up your featherbed and follow me.'" I laughed about it at the time, but the phrase stuck with me, and I use it often myself now as a reminder of just what the Gospel for today tells us: following Christ comes with a cost. Denying ourselves and taking up our cross daily—this doesn't sound warm and comfortable. But that's the point. Jesus was not promising an easy road. Today's reading starts with him matter-of-factly telling his disciples that he will suffer, be rejected, and even killed. But also raised.

Following Christ also comes with a reward, as he said, "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it." A "me first" approach will not cut it as disciples. Lent gives us another chance to get this right. Let us pray for the grace to deny ourselves and pick up that cross today, and tomorrow, and tomorrow.

FRIDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

February 16, 2024

Lt 9:14-15



Sometimes, we Catholics think we have it pretty rough when it comes to fasting. We are asked to fast on two days: Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Fasting requires adults aged 18-59 (who are healthy, not pregnant, or not otherwise compromised) to have only one "regular-sized" meal and two meals that together don't make a "regular-sized" meal. And that's it. Our "give ups" for Lent may include abstaining from certain foods as a form of self-discipline, and we abstain from meat on Fridays, practices that are distinct from fasting, but we tend to lump them all together.

So, with all this focus on fasting and abstinence, we might feel a little like we're the disciples of John who asked why they "fast much," but Jesus' disciples don't. Jesus did fast himself before his public ministry, and he taught his disciples how to fast (Mat 6:16-18), and yet during his ministry, neither he nor they fasted. So why did it seem inappropriate for the disciples to fast?

FRIDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

Jesus's words indicate that fasting is a practice associated with mourning. And no one would fast with the groom at his wedding. Jesus is the groom, the disciples his guests, and his presence meant they were to celebrate. We don't fast on Sundays because we celebrate his presence in the Eucharist!

During Lent, we fast (and abstain) as a form of penance, demonstrating our need for God's transforming grace in our lives. Let us fast well in preparation for the celebration when we are reunited with Christ.

SATURDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

February 17, 2024

Lk 5:27-32



What did Jesus see when he looked at Levi? When other people saw him, they saw a traitorous extortioner bent on taking their money and lining his own pockets with the excess. Jesus knew what Levi's occupation was and what tax collectors did and were capable of. But he saw something else. So he called him. And astonishingly, Levi left it all, got up and followed Jesus.

What did Levi see in Jesus? I like to think he saw what he could become—a person for others. He threw an elaborate banquet in Jesus' honor and invited his business associates (extortioners) and friends (sinners) along with Jesus and his disciples. Evangelization was happening! Levi invited his cohort to the table to have their lives transformed like his was.

Jesus doesn't just tell us we're sinners and then go off and dine with the holy people. Instead, he wants to sit down (in their day, lie down), elbow to elbow, and spend time with us, getting to know us and us getting to know him. Repentance is a result of a relationship with Jesus, which makes it even more important for us to introduce others to him.

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

February 18, 2024

Mk 1:12-15



What a way for Jesus to prep for his public ministry—40 days of temptation in the desert! Following his baptism, where the Spirit descended upon him like a dove, Jesus was immediately compelled by the Spirit to venture into the desert. Driven, which is a strong word. So, this was not going to be a leisurely journey but a crucial aspect of his mission.

What stands out to me is Christ's unwavering determination. Confronted by Satan's temptations, he emerged victorious. Amidst the presence of wild beasts, he persevered. Angels ministered to him, affirming his victory. This desert experience was not a mere excursion; it was a significant and triumphant undertaking for Jesus.

Jesus' public ministry was set to begin when John's was complete. So it was time. I hear the same resoluteness in Jesus' proclamation: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel." We, like those who heard his proclamation, are called to respond.

MONDAY OF THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

February 19, 2024

Mt 25:31-46



This, to me, is one of the scariest passages of Scripture in the New Testament. Final judgment. Sheep on the right—goats on the left. Come who are blessed by my father—depart from me you accursed. I know which side I want to be on, but how do I get there?

Notice that both the sheep and the goats ask essentially the same question: "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?"

And Jesus gives them both essentially the same answer: "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did (or did not do) for one of these least brothers of mine, you did (or did not do) for me."

MONDAY OF THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

The sheep were taking care of people without knowing it was Jesus they were tending to. The goats were not taking care of people (deliberately or unwillingly) without knowing it was Jesus they were neglecting.

In the end, all the "holy stuff" we do will not weigh in the balance. It all comes down to how we respond to the needs of others, knowing it is Christ in them. A sobering thought in Lent, but one we can and should reflect on in prayer. How can we take steps to pour ourselves out for others so we are invited to "come?"

TUESDAY OF THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

February 20, 2024

Mt 6:7-15



Sometimes, I catch myself "babbling" in prayer. I'm distracted, in a hurry, or just rushing through a familiar prayer to check the box. It's the prayer equivalent of a "word salad," there's a lot there, but it doesn't mean a whole lot. Maybe you can relate.

So Jesus' lesson in today's Gospel is a nice refresher course. More words will not mean we are guaranteed to be heard. In fact, Jesus says that God already knows what we need, so there's really no need for all that babble.

What he gives us then is the prayer template of all templates, the Lord's Prayer. Many books and articles have been written that dissect the prayer and unpack the meaning of every line, and you might find them helpful references in Lent (or any time). For today, I just suggest thinking of the simple richness of the prayer that encapsulates the essence of our relationship with God. It's an acknowledgment of the Father's holiness, an invitation to align our will with his, to seek his guidance in our daily lives, and to forgive as we, in our frailty, seek his pardon.

This is the opposite of "babbling" it is a conversation with our Father who loves us.

WEDNESDAY OF THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

February 21, 2024

Lk 11:29-32



Poor Jonah. Talk about being the wrong guy for the job. He didn't want to go to Ninevah; in fact, he ran the other way when God told him to go tell people in the city to repent or die. He was fine with them dying. That's not a nice thing to say, but let's face it: they were the despised ancient enemies of Israel. But Jonah found himself in Ninevah anyway with a job to do (God has a way of convincing prophets to do his will). I can just imagine him kicking the dirt and reluctantly announcing, quietly, "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown." Then they, these Ninevites, actually listened, believed, repented, and were spared. There's your sign.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is drawing a picture for his crowd of listeners. Nineveh was nobody's favorite, but they repented in sackcloth and ashes. Israel is God's chosen, but they're asking for signs. Even when they see Jesus perform miracles, drive out demons, and heal people, they still want more "proof."

In response to this reading, I think we can ask ourselves: am I seeking "I'll know it when I see it" proof? How do I respond to the profound message of Christ in comparison to those who had less revelation but responded with greater repentance? This passage encourages a deeper, more authentic faith grounded in the foundational truths of Christ's redemptive work.

FEAST OF THE CHAIR OF SAINT PETER

February 22, 2024

Mt 6:7-15



"But who do you say that I am?"

In *Bringing the Gospel of Matthew to Life*, scripture scholar George Martin wrote, "In the Greek of Matthew's gospel, you is emphatic and plural: Jesus asks his disciples, Who do you yourselves say that I am?"

The disciples had heard people wondering about the true identity of Jesus, and there was a lot of speculation. John the Baptist was one guess, although this one is a bit confusing since he was alive when Jesus started his ministry. Elijah and Jeremiah "or one of the prophets" made a little more sense. After all, even Jesus called himself a prophet. None of these are negative; they're just way off.

FEAST OF THE CHAIR OF SAINT PETER

"So when he asked them who they believed him to be, Peter spoke right up and nailed it: Christ, Son of the living God. We might think that Peter figured this one out on his own based on Jesus preaching, teaching, and healing, but Jesus tells him that nobody on earth revealed it to him but that knowledge came directly from God. Then Jesus gives him a new name and a new status. And a promise: nothing will destroy the Church Jesus built.

Who do we believe that Jesus is? How do we come to our conclusion? And how can we claim the promise of a Church that will endure every storm—even when it seems to be sinking? There is a lot to ponder.

FRIDAY OF THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

February 23, 2024

Mt 5:20-26



We've probably all suffered from a case of the "yeah, buts" at one time or another. We've been angry, "Yeah, but she deserved it." We've called someone names, "Yeah, but he had it coming." And we've perhaps known someone who had a grudge against us, "Yeah, but he started it."

These all seem like pretty minor infractions, but at the outset of today's Gospel reading, Jesus says that if we are not MORE righteous than the scribes and Pharisees (whose jobs were to interpret, teach, and enforce the Jewish laws), we "will not enter into the Kingdom of heaven." Say, what?

Anger, name-calling, and not reconciling with someone could keep us out of heaven? "You shall not kill" is a relatively easy command to obey, but "you shall not be angry?" Much more difficult.

Fortunately, we have what we need to heed Jesus' call for righteousness. Scripture, Church teachings, the sacraments (Reconciliation, anyone?), the lives of the saints, the Liturgy, the Eucharist—all help us keep on track or get back on track when we fail.

SATURDAY OF THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

February 24, 2024

Mt 5:43-48



The Father makes the sun rise on people who love him and those who don't. The Father makes the rain fall on people who do his will and those who don't care what God wants. It is not that the Father is dispassionate or distant. It is that he loves every single human being. And so he gives another day even to people who don't love him. He makes the rain fall even for people who don't think they need him at all. He gives us all a chance.

Jesus leads us to the natural conclusion. To be children of the Father, we can't dole out our love only to those who love us. This is the path of perfection, and even when we don't follow it perfectly, we can pray for the grace to keep trying. Maybe today, we can think of one person—it could be someone we dislike or who dislikes us, or just someone we find especially challenging to love—and say a short prayer for them. And then again tomorrow. And tomorrow.

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

February 25, 2024

Mk 9:2-10



Prior to today's Gospel reading, Jesus had told the disciples straight out that he would have to suffer, be rejected, be killed, and rise. And Peter, being Peter, took Jesus aside and rebuked him. Then Jesus trumped Peter's rebuke, telling him to get in line, "You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do." Ouch.

Today's reading begins six days later when Jesus grabbed Peter, James, and John and led them up a mountain by themselves. This little band was specifically chosen for this experience. Peter had just had a hit—professing Jesus as the Messiah—and immediately following, a miss with the rebuke. So, clearly, he and the others were still not fully grasping Jesus' identity as the Son of God.

So Jesus made it very clear. He was changed in appearance (we don't know exactly how), and even what he was wearing changed to blinding white. Then Elijah and Moses were there, talking with him. It was private, personal, and profound. And these three were witnesses!

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

Of course, Peter has to be the first to open his mouth. "Rabbi, it is good that we are here! Let us make three tents..." It probably seemed preferable to Peter for them to stay on the mountain rather than leave and have to face once again Jesus' prediction of his upcoming suffering and death. To put a final point on it, a voice, THE VOICE, told them exactly who Jesus was and exactly what they were to do: listen to him.

We witness the transfiguration in Lent as a reminder of Jesus' divine nature as the Son of God. But also, as we grow closer to Our Lord's passion, it reminds us that there is glorification, but it comes after the suffering. As they say, the fast comes first, then the feast. Imagine what Peter, James, and John were thinking as they went down the mountain.

MONDAY OF THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT

February 26, 2024

Lk 6:36-38



Mercy seems to be in short supply these days. There is a lot of very public unkindness and even malevolence. Mostly, we accept it as just part of the human condition today, but this culture of ill-will can invade and even affect the way we behave. We can find our hearts tightening, and we can become quite stingy with mercy ourselves.

Today's Gospel message is a call to open up our hearts in mercy, "just as your father is merciful." God is a just judge, but we are not to judge or condemn. When we show mercy, his mercy is poured out on us. When we forgive, we can taste what God must feel when we ask his forgiveness. When we give, our hearts will overflow with gratitude for what we are given.

I love the rich imagery of how God will measure out our gifts, "a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap." Such lavish love! It's a reason to start warming up a cold heart, especially in Lent.

TUESDAY OF THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT

February 27, 2024

Mt 23:1-12



When I first read today's Gospel, I shook my head and thought, you tell them, Jesus! Let these religious leaders have it for not practicing what they preach! Call them out for their showy displays of so-called piety! Go after them for demanding, not earning, my respect! Humble them right up!

But there's something that happens when I think a passage like this is all about "them" and not about "me." The Holy Spirit shows up and bops me on the back of the head, saying, "Hey, this is for you, too."

While I am not a scribe or a Pharisee, I can find myself behaving in some of the ways Jesus describes. I can be a finger-wagger if someone doesn't observe a ritual or devotion the same way I do. I catch myself wanting to get "extra credit" for a pious performance. And I can be guilty of walling myself off emotionally from people different from myself. I can be quite an "un-humble" Catholic.

Lent is a good time to examine these thoughts and behaviors and clean house in our hearts and minds. Time for us to "humble up."

WEDNESDAY OF THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT

February 28, 2024

Mt 20:17-28



Jesus' ministry turned a lot of long-held beliefs and assumptions on their heads. Love your enemies. The poor are blessed. The last is the first. But somehow, for the disciples, it's still not sinking in.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tries to walk them through it again. Their assumption was that if Jesus was the Messiah, it meant triumph, prestige, and power. And the mother of the sons of Zebedee wanted her boys in on that. So she asked Jesus to make them his right-and-left-hand-men. Even after he explained that those positions were not his to give, the other ten were upset—still thinking maybe there were positions they could jockey for.

Jesus wanted something different for his disciples. They were to stand out by NOT throwing their weight around like the Gentile authorities. Following his radical example. Walking with him to the cross. "Just so, the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."

THURSDAY OF THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT

February 29, 2024

Lk 16:19-31



What strikes me every time I read this passage of scripture is that the rich man knows Lazarus by name. The rich man, whose name we do not know, knows Lazarus' name. But knowing Lazarus by name inspired no personal connection and no action on the part of the rich man.

Lazarus lay in the doorway, so we imagine the rich man had to step over him every time he went in or out. He probably averted his eyes to avoid looking at the sores on Lazarus. The rich man ate well but never sent a plate out to Lazarus. Lazarus demanded nothing of the rich man.

Both died. One received comfort who received nothing but torment in life. One received torment whose life had been awash in comfort. The rich man, even beyond the grave, saw Lazarus as someone who should serve him, giving him water to cool his tongue and going to warn his brothers.

It's a sobering reading early in Lent, reminding us that we will be accountable for how we respond to the poor and marginalized in this life. Jesus reminds us of this often in Scripture. Like the rich man, we have the teachings of Scripture to guide us. He and his brothers chose to ignore them.

FRIDAY OF THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT

March 1, 2024
Mt 21:33-43, 45-46



Jesus knew how to speak to his audience. He knew how to work the room. When preaching the sermon on the mount, he used simple language, agricultural imagery, references to weather, seasons, cooking, and the like. He spoke then to the "crowds," which could be made up of any age or profession but certainly included laborers, craftspeople, and farmers. So he spoke their language.

In today's Gospel reading, his audience was chief priests, elders, and Pharisees—highly educated in Scripture and the law. So, Jesus used centuries-old references that they would certainly know and understand. And it cut right to the heart.

Jesus couldn't have been far into the parable before the chief priests and elders would have recognized themselves. He uses the familiar image of the vineyard from Isaiah, which represents the people of Israel. And his point is made: they have disrespected the owner and dishonored what was given to them to tend.

FRIDAY OF THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT

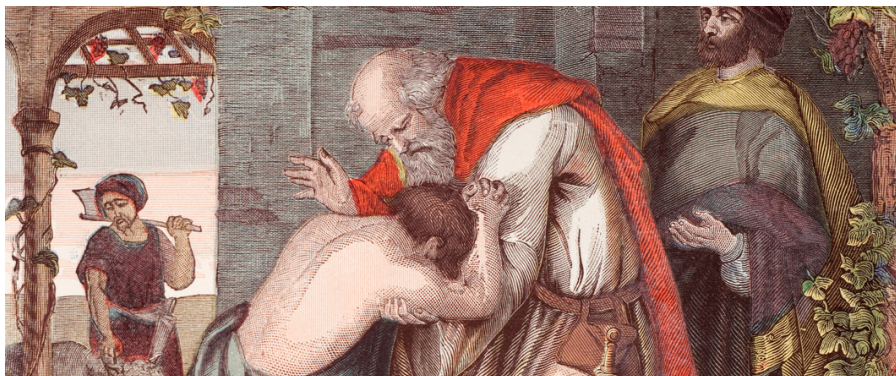
Jesus also uses a passage from Psalm 118 to make his other point: these spiritual leaders have rejected him, the stone that would become the cornerstone. Jesus' authority is very clear when he tells them that "the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit."

While today's Gospel may seem to be directed at the religious leaders of Jesus' day, there are messages here that can also challenge us. Do we hold back from God what is his? Is Jesus the cornerstone of our faith life? Jesus knows how to speak to our hearts, too.

SATURDAY OF THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT

March 2, 2024

Lk 15:1-3, 11-32



Today's Gospel kicks off with a familiar jab at Jesus: he welcomes sinners and eats with them. What they called "sinners" in Jesus' time were not people who had minor slip-ups but those who had seriously broken the laws of God. Tax collectors were considered extortioners—really unsavory characters. Their outrage that Jesus would associate with these types of people prompted his telling two parables: The Lost Coin and The Lost Son. Today, the Church invites us to meditate on the parable of the prodigal son.

The prodigal son story is really a story about a father and his two sons and his crazy, wild, passionate, fatherly love for both of them (not just the squanderer).

The younger son demands his share. The father agrees and seems pretty unemotional about it. The son just wanted out. So he left. And we know the rest. The kid spends all his money, a famine hits, and he takes work doing the unthinkable for a Jew: tending to unclean swine. When he was beyond miserable and sinking fast, he came to his senses and decided to go beg for a job from his dad.

SATURDAY OF THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT

While the younger son drafted and rehearsed the speech he planned to give to his father and walked home barefooted, we learn that the father was far from unemotional. When he saw him from a distance, he ran out to meet him. To us, this doesn't seem unusual, "he ran to his son," but well-off men of the time did NOT run. It would be considered silly and undignified to run. But he didn't care. What was in his heart went to his feet, and he ran.

Now, the older son. The stalwart son. The obedient son. He wasn't watching for his brother's return; he was busy working in the field as was expected of him. When he saw the rowdy crowd gathering for the celebration, instead of being overjoyed that his brother was home, he got mad and sulked. The father loved his oldest son enough to leave the party and beg him to have compassion for his brother. The father was loving and kind to his son, who was being, for all intents and purposes, a petulant jerk.

The story's message for Jesus' critics is the same now as it was then. God loves the prodigals, the sinners, and the tax collectors. God also loves the older sons, the devout Pharisees, and the scribes. When today's "prodigals" turn to the Father, he runs out to meet them, and the celebration begins. The Father also tenderly invites the older sons of today to the feast.

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

March 3, 2024

Jn 2:13-25



When I read today's Gospel, I am reminded of a mosaic inside The Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, one that I have referred to as "angry Jesus." I'm not alone in that description; if you Google "angry Jesus," info about the mosaic pops right up. It's actually entitled "The Christ in Majesty Mosaic," and it's quite impressive. According to the [Basilica website](#), it is one of the largest mosaics of Christ in the world, measuring over 3,600 square feet and created with over 3,000 shades of Venetian glass tile.

The look on Jesus' face in the mosaic is, at first blush, angry. But if you study it closely, the expression is one of strength, intensity, and resolve. There is no doubt of his authority.

Whether you love this mosaic or not, it and today's Gospel message show a side of Jesus that we might find disturbing. Often, I think of Jesus as a quiet, gentle, and peaceful person who liked to go to parties and loved kids. The side we see today is passionate, commanding, and powerful. And, a bit mysterious.

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

The selling of sheep, cattle, and doves was not the issue in today's reading. Since crowds of pilgrims journeyed to Jerusalem for Passover, many would have chosen to purchase their sacrificial animal there rather than to have traveled with it. The issue was that vendors and money changers were allowed inside the temple instead of the courtyard where these transactions typically occurred.

The temple was a sacred space that represented the relationship between God and man. And the secular activity of buying and selling had crept in. Jesus made his identity known with authority (and a whip). He said, no, not in my Father's house.

Today, I have to ask myself: what have I allowed to creep into the temple of my heart? I imagine Jesus—not angry but with a determined look—helping me clear out what might be keeping me from loving and serving God the way he intends. Only a clean temple will do.

MONDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT

March 4, 2024

Lk 4:24-30



Jesus knew exactly who he was. The people in Nazareth, Jesus' hometown, *thought* they knew him. People in the synagogue raved. "Wow, Jesus is an excellent speaker." "That guy, Jesus, he's amazing, right?" "Oh, yeah, Jesus? He's great, isn't he? He's Joseph's son."

Well, they said those things, but instead of basking in their approbation, Jesus said, "Amen, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his native place." They would have understood that to mean that he was aligning himself with the prophets and that he was telling them: you people do not have a good track record with prophets. Then, he very clearly illustrates his point.

Two prophets, two Gentiles, and two times prophets helped people outside their native place. Elijah was sent to a widow in Zarephath during the famine, and she and her son survived. Others did not. Elisha cleansed Naaman the Syrian of leprosy while there were Israelites who were not healed. It was a bit of a mic-drop moment. His listeners were enraged and full of bloodlust, but Jesus escaped them and put his hometown behind him.

This episode foreshadows what we know is coming. Jesus will be accepted by some and outright rejected by others. As we approach the Passion, let us pray for hearts to be opened to the message of Lent: repent and believe in the Gospel.

TUESDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT

March 5, 2024

Mt 18:21-35



Two different debts, the same plea: "Be patient with me, and I will pay you back."

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells a parable in answer to Peter's question, "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?" (In the Bible, this means, "As many as all the times?")

The first debtor owed the king what may as well have been trillions of dollars. The king was going to exact punishment on the servant, but he was moved with compassion and forgave the loan. The second debtor, a fellow servant, owed a modest amount to the one who had been forgiven. He also begged for mercy but instead was thrown in prison until the debt could be paid. Nothing like this is easy to hide, and sure enough, other servants who had been witnesses of the ordeal went to the king and reported the whole thing. And then, the unhappy ending for the unforgiving servant.

TUESDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT

Jesus' parable ends with a warning: "So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart." Not the schoolyard brand of forgiveness. Not grudgingly. No lingering resentment. No sense of obligation. It must be the real thing.

If this sounds difficult, it is! And if it sounds harsh, consider the debt that we owe to God the Father. Our debt was paid by Jesus on the cross. "Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant as I had pity on you?"

Lent provides us another opportunity to forgive anyone who has hurt us—in big or small ways. Pray today, asking God to reveal to you where you may be holding on to past injuries and show you who you need to forgive. Then, the healing can begin.

WEDNESDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT

March 6, 2024

Mt 5:17-19



"I have not come to abolish but to fulfill."

His listeners knew the Old Testament laws; maybe they didn't have all 613 of them memorized, but they knew the Ten Commandments—don't kill, don't steal, no adultery, keep the Sabbath, honor father and mother, and so on. This was the code to live by, and these boundaries were pretty easily defined.

But Jesus' teachings seemed like something entirely new. The poor are blessed. Enemies are to be loved. The first will be last. Turn the other cheek. Become like children. How do these things fulfill the very long list of Mosaic laws?

Love. Loving God and loving our neighbor fulfills not just the letter of the law but the spirit of it. If we just refrain from killing, we fulfill the letter of the law. But if we don't get angry, we fulfill the spirit of the law. If we refrain from adultery, we fulfill the letter of the law. But if we don't indulge in lustful thoughts, we fulfill its spirit. And so on.

Jesus gives us some goals to shoot for in this Gospel reading. One goal is not to break "one of the least" of these commandments or lead others down the same path. The other goal is to "obey and teach these commandments,"—which comes with a bonus: we will be called "greatest in the Kingdom of heaven."

THURSDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT

March 7, 2024

Lk 11:14-23



Amazed or absurd.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus has to give a little lesson in logic to some people in a crowd who had just witnessed him driving a demon out of a mute man. When the formerly mute man spoke, they were amazed.

And then, absurd things started popping into their minds. "By the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons, he drives out demons."

It would be like witnessing a doctor perform a miraculous medical cure and, instead of acknowledging the medical expertise and advancements, skeptically attributing it to some dark conspiracy or fraudulent activity, claiming that the doctor is using a malevolent force or deceitful means to achieve the healing.

THURSDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT

There were other Jews at the time driving out demons, so Jesus asked them by whom they were performing these exorcisms. He traps them in their own argument because they would not say that their own were driving out demons by anyone but God. Again, Jesus makes his identity and authority known—he is the stronger man who attacks and overcomes the evil one.

For us, as with Jesus' critics at the time, we must decide where our allegiance lies. We can't ride the fence on this one. What can we do in Lent today to help Jesus gather us?

FRIDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT

March 8, 2024

Mk 12:28-34



Today's Gospel reading is at once hopeful and challenging.

What I find hopeful is that there was a scribe—a scholar of scripture and teacher of the law—who approached Jesus not to criticize but to have an honest discussion with him on the subject of which law was most important. Jesus quotes from scripture that the scribe would have known intimately. The scribe was open and willing to understand—he repeated what Jesus said in his own words, showing that he was actively listening. What we can learn from this exchange is a lot.

Now to the challenge. It may just be me, but there might be a tendency to think this teaching of Jesus is a lot of pretty words, kind of a scriptural warm hug. But in fact, it is at the heart of what it means to live as a disciple. Jesus connected loving God and loving our neighbor. They are inseparable. We can't claim to love God and not our neighbor. We can't truly love our neighbor without loving God. God at the center of our lives makes it possible for us to live for others. This is the challenge.

FRIDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT

Pope Francis spoke about this passage in an Angelus, saying, "To love God is to live of him and for him, for what he is and for what he does. Our God is unmitigated giving; he is unlimited forgiveness; he is a relationship that promotes and fosters. Therefore, to love God means to invest our energies each day to be his assistants in the unmitigated service of our neighbour, in trying to forgive without limitations, and in cultivating relationships of communion and fraternity."

Sitting with this scripture today, I'll ask myself some deep questions. Do I love God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength? If not, why not? Do I love my neighbor—everyone without exception?

SATURDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT

March 8, 2024

Lk 18:9-14



It has all the elements of a good joke:" A Pharisee and a tax collector walk into the temple area."

Jokes that contrast people from two extremes use humor that exaggerates the differences, leading to absurd situations that are inherently amusing. They also provide social commentary, highlighting stereotypes, and we find humor in recognizing and questioning these observations about human behavior.

Jesus wasn't making a joke, although he did deliberately choose a respected Pharisee and a despised tax collector to make his point.

The Pharisee's prayer is blatantly self-centered. He essentially tells God how great he is already and doesn't ask him for a thing. The tax collector's prayer is clearly humble and contrite, begging for mercy. Which one am I? Do you have to ask? Of course, I'm the tax collector! Right?

If I think about this, I know in my heart that I have been the Pharisee in this story.

SATURDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT

"O God, I thank you that I'm not like the rest of the people in this grocery store line—they have no empathy, they think only of themselves, and they are just plain rude—like that person behind the counter. I pray the rosary every day, and I give to more than one needy family every Christmas."

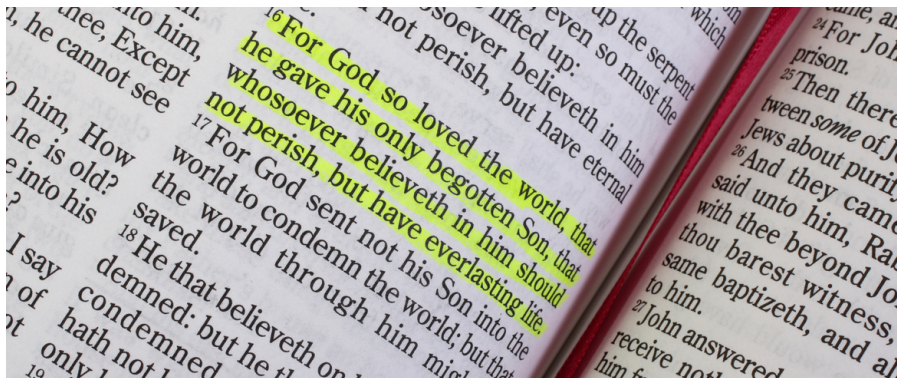
Gulp. Jesus makes it very clear who will go home justified, and it's not the Pharisee-in-me.

Lent always gives us another chance to get it right in our spiritual lives. And today, it gives us another chance to approach God as the tax collector did—well aware of our sinful nature and our need for him, asking for his mercy. "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

March 10, 2024

Jn 3:14-21



Ah, John 3:16. It is one of the most well-known Bible verses. And, like a lot of familiar passages of Scripture, it tends to render the rest of the reading inaudible. Sure, sure, we think. We've known this since birth—nothing left to learn here.

So many brilliant authors, scholars, and saints have written about this passage of Scripture. Your parish priest likely gave an excellent homily, coaxing out of these verses a bit of wisdom you can carry with you through this fourth week of Lent.

But as I write these reflections, I ask you as I ask myself today: what is Jesus saying to me, personally, in these words? An exercise I occasionally do, loosely based on the Ignatian tradition of imaginative prayer, is to include myself or others in the Scripture and see where that takes me.

"For God so loved me that he gave his only Son so that I who believe in him might not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his son into the world to condemn me, but that I might be saved through him."

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Or: "For God so loved people I find challenging that he gave his only Son...

Or: "For God so loved the humans I don't understand that he gave his only Son...

Or: "For God so loved the people who don't care about him that he gave his only Son...

As we insert ourselves and others into the scriptural narrative, we uncover the profound truth that God's love extends individually to each of us and "everyone else." This exercise prompts us to reflect His love in our interactions with others, fostering understanding, compassion, and a shared journey toward eternal life.

MONDAY OF THE FOURTH WEEK OF LENT

March 11, 2024

Jn 4:43-54



"I'll believe it when I don't see it."

We are really programmed instead to say, "I'll credit it when I can verify it," "I'll buy into it when I witness it firsthand," or "I'll be a believer when I can observe it." We doubt; we need proof.

Today's lesson in faith comes from a royal official who worked for Herod. He heard Jesus was back in Cana and walked the 20-plus miles from his home in Capernaum just to ask Jesus to come and heal his son, who had a life-threatening illness. I will take a guess that this man had already exhausted many other options, but when he heard that the man who had done a lot of "signs and wonders" was back in Galilee, well, it was worth a shot.

When the royal official asked Jesus to walk back with him to Capernaum to heal his son, Jesus didn't say, "No," instead, he told him, "You may go; your son will live." And he left! He believed, and he left!

MONDAY OF THE FOURTH WEEK OF LENT

There was no immediate proof. Twenty-some miles away, his son was either alive or dying. But he took off for home, confident that Jesus did what he said. The story gives us that wonderful moment when the official's servants met him on the road to tell him the good news that his son was alive. Then, his whole household believed that Jesus had authority over life and death, and their lives were changed forever.

If I had been in the man's shoes, would I have been so sure? If I understood Jesus' true identity, nothing but pure faith would be possible.

TUESDAY OF THE FOURTH WEEK OF LENT

March 12, 2024

Jn 5:1-16



"Do you want to be well?"

This complex reading feels very Lent-y to me. Some of the details of the story make me squirmy and uncomfortable. The temptation for me is to focus on the healing—which is, of course, remarkable in itself. But there is more to this story than that.

I'll start with Jesus.

Jesus chose this particular invalid out of everyone at the pool of Bethesda. He could have healed someone else—or all of them, really—but he chose this man. Jesus asked him if he wanted to be well and didn't get a straight answer. It didn't appear that the healing itself was a tender scene; instead, Jesus just ordered the man to pick up his mat and walk. Later, Jesus found him, reminded him that he was now well, and told him to stop sinning. And he got turned in to the Jews.

Now, the healed man.

The invalid didn't ask to be healed. He blamed others for still being ill. He didn't express gratitude for his healing. He blamed Jesus for his carrying the mat. He was personally instructed/confronted by Jesus and was unrepentant. Instead, he turned Jesus in for breaking the Sabbath, likely to save his own skin.

TUESDAY OF THE FOURTH WEEK OF LENT

And then there were the Jewish authorities.

They were very quick to call the healed man out engaging in an unlawful activity on the Sabbath. But they didn't seem to care that this man—a fellow Jew who they may have known or recognized—could suddenly walk. When the healed man blamed it on "the man who made me well," they demanded to know who he was. Once they were told, the persecution was on.

What is our takeaway here? A few thoughts.

The invalid in this story suffered from more than his physical condition. Jesus healed his body, which would have been life-changing in itself. But then Jesus went after him to tell him how to be healed entirely—spiritually—turning from sin. God's limitless love for us means he is always seeking us out to tell us how to be made whole. How do we respond?

The religious authorities also had a condition. They were so focused on the law that they were blind to the miracle.

WEDNESDAY OF THE FOURTH WEEK OF LENT

March 13, 2024

Jn 5:17-30



Today's Gospel picks up from yesterday's reading with Jesus' response to the Jewish authorities, and he starts it off with a bang: "My Father is at work until now, so I am at work." The Jews would have understood him to be talking about God and that God continues to work on the Sabbath in life (babies are born) and death (judgment). So Jesus is outright saying that he had the authority to give life—to heal—on the Sabbath. I can only imagine the religious leaders' reaction.

But Jesus goes on with several "amen, amen" statements to really drive the point home. Whatever the Father does, the Son does. He raises the dead and gives life. Whoever honors the Father honors the Son; whoever doesn't honor the Son does not honor the Father. Whoever hears the words of the Son and believes in the Father who sent him has eternal life. The son was given the power of judgment by the Father. Their work is one and the same—inseparable.

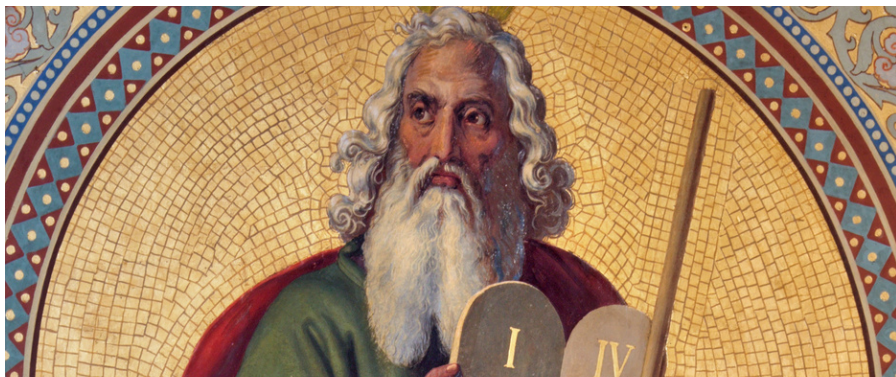
To the men who charged Jesus with breaking the Sabbath (healing) and making himself equal to God, he has just revealed his identity and his authority. He is the Second Person of the Trinity, God, who made the Sabbath.

Do we recognize Jesus as having authority over our lives? How can we hear his word and pass from death to life—daily?

THURSDAY OF THE FOURTH WEEK OF LENT

March 14, 2024

Jn 5:31-47.



There is one phrase in today's Gospel reading that takes my breath away. In the middle of addressing the Jewish authorities' charges against him, he says: "...but I say this so that you may be saved."

These Jews were particularly nasty toward Jesus, looking for reasons to arrest and kill him. He was the one they had been waiting for, but they refused him. In this reading, he calls them out. They didn't believe John the Baptist when he testified for Jesus, and they didn't believe the works he did on his mission from the Father. They studied the Scriptures extensively but didn't see Jesus in the scrolls they knew so well.

These Jewish religious authorities had power and prestige, and they liked it. They enjoyed flattery and being in their own inner circle. This could have been another reason they refused to accept Jesus, even though they read about him in the prophecies—they would have to relinquish their stranglehold on the law.

You can almost hear the anguish in his words, "For if you had believed Moses, you would have believed me, because he wrote about me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?"

Jesus knew where his path led. But then, and now, he always wants to give us another chance to be saved.

FRIDAY OF THE FOURTH WEEK OF LENT

March 15, 2024

Jn 7:1-2, 10, 25-30



Following two days of readings in which Jesus made his identity known to people who didn't accept it, we have today's Gospel, where people think they know exactly who he was and where he came from. Mass confusion and mystery abound.

First, we see Jesus going to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Tabernacles "as it were in secret," but then we hear he's speaking openly and, in fact, "crying out" in the temple area. This had people wondering: if this is the guy they are trying to kill, why is he doing that? Then, they wondered if the Jewish authorities believed Jesus was the Messiah. The heads start shaking: no, that can't be right; we know where Jesus is from, and we know the Messiah doesn't come from there. To quote Luke Skywalker in *The Last Jedi*: "Amazing. Every word of what you just said was wrong."

Jesus went over it again loudly, "You know me and also know where I am from. Yet I did not come on my own, but the one who sent me, whom you do not know, is true. I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me." And he evaded their capture.

The storm is building in these readings. Jesus was bold, commanding, and sincere, but everyone around him had their own agenda. What is ours?

SATURDAY OF THE FOURTH WEEK OF LENT

March 16, 2024

Jn 7:40-53



Today's Gospel reading feels like the headlines from today. Tensions are mounting. People are divided. Accusations fly. But there's one bit in this reading that makes me pause.

"Never before has anyone spoken like this man."

Of course, these guards were guilty of disobeying orders by not bringing Jesus in. And the Pharisees lambasted them: "Have you also been deceived?" Because to them, anyone who believed in Jesus was deceived. The guards had been surveilling Jesus for a while, so they heard him speak. They had undoubtedly heard many other teachers speak in the temple area. And they were right. This was different.

John 1:18 says, "No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father's side, has revealed him." They had never heard a person speak like Jesus because there was no other like him. The Pharisees blasted Nicodemus for suggesting that they hear Jesus out—which would have given them another opportunity to hear and believe. But their minds were made up.

We can become so accustomed to hearing Scripture that we become dulled to Jesus' teachings and promises. Let's pray for our hearts to be open to hearing his voice this Lent—and to share it with those who are closed off from him.