

Experiences of God



Preaching Resources

CELEBRATION:
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**ROMAN
LECTIONARY**
3rd Sunday of Lent
Exod 3:1-8, 13-15
1 Cor 10:1-6, 10-12
Luke 13:1-9

**REVISED COMMON
LECTIONARY**
3rd Sunday of Lent
Isa 55:1-9
1 Cor 10:1-13
Luke 13:1-9

**ANGLICAN
LECTIONARY**
3rd Sunday of Lent
Exod 3:1-15
1 Cor 10:1-13
Luke 13:1-9

Patricia Sánchez has been contributing to *Celebration* for 30 years. She holds a master's degree in literature and religion of the Bible from a joint degree program at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary in New York.

Have you ever had a burning bush experience? Have you ever known a moment in which you were so profoundly in touch with the presence of God that your life from then on was totally transformed by that encounter? Moses' experience of God, as shared today by the author of Exodus, was such an encounter. There, at the bush that burned but was not consumed, Moses knew the awesome presence of God, and from within that ambiance of fear and fascination he began to realize his true identity and his purpose in life. Burning bush experiences are fraught with absolute truth. There is no dissembling in that moment; there is only the sheer terror but also the great thrill of realizing who God is and who I am before God. This realization is followed by a further incredible awareness that despite who I am and who I am not, despite what I have done and what I have neglected to do, God chooses to be present to me, to call me, to grace me, to call and grace others through me.

Burning bush experiences are fraught with absolute truth.

Paul's burning bush experience happened on the Damascus road, and the passionate faith in Jesus that took root in him that day is palpable in all his writings; today's second reading is no exception. Samuel and Isaiah discovered their bushes burning in the temple. Each went forth from that experience resolute in his desire to serve God and God's people as best he could despite the personal cost.

Mary's initial burning bush experience, as told by Luke, was mediated by the angel-messenger in whom she recognized the divine presence. She listened as the voice of God changed her future forever. Joseph's experience came to him in a dream that encouraged him to surrender his own sense of moral rectitude and his logic to a plan he had not made, but in which he was invited to participate in a very important way. As for their son, Jesus, perhaps his most poignant burning bush encounter took place in a garden after an intimate meal with friends. Agonizingly alone before the reality of what lay ahead for him, Jesus knew the presence of God in the depths of his suffering. Even before his death on the cross, he allowed himself to be consumed by the will of God for him.

Nearer to our time, one of Dorothy Day's burning bush experiences came with the birth of her daughter Tamar. Of that moment, she wrote, "No human creature could receive or contain so vast a flood of love and joy as I often felt after the birth of my child. With this came the need to worship, to adore" (*The Long Loneliness*, Harper and Row, New York: 1952). Even though that experience and her subsequent devotion to God and the poor cost her the loss of her lover, Day relied on the strength of that experience all her life.

For Thomas Merton, a bush burned and drew him to God at a celebration of the Eucharist he happened upon at Corpus Christi Church on 121st Street in New York. Admitting that he didn't believe or understand or even belong there, Merton said that he left the church that day and wandered leisurely down Broadway looking at what had become for him a new world. He said, "I was not yet used to the clean savor that comes with actual grace." He had a sense of God's presence and realized that "He was there for love of me; He was there in power and might, and what was I in His sight?" (*The Seven Storey Mountain*, Harcourt Brace, New York: 1948).

With those experiences to ignite our own, each of us is challenged

this Lent of 2010 to be willing to discover those burning bushes through which God is revealed to us and we are revealed to God. Mother Teresa was such a bush. In her, the self-proclaimed agnostic Malcolm Muggeridge discovered the presence of Jesus. In 1970, Muggeridge was sent by the BBC to do a documentary on Mother Teresa. He found her ministering to the poor in the streets of Calcutta (now Kolkata), India. "I will never forget that little lady as long as I live," wrote Muggeridge (*Something Beautiful for God*, HarperCollins, New York: 1971). "The face, the glow, the eyes, the love—it was all so pure and so beautiful. ... It was like being in the presence of an angel. It changed my life. I have not been the same person since." Muggeridge attributes his conversion to Catholicism to his encounter with the little nun from India whose presence still burns brightly and gathers people unto God.

Perhaps the prayers and penance of this Lent might ignite our own fire.

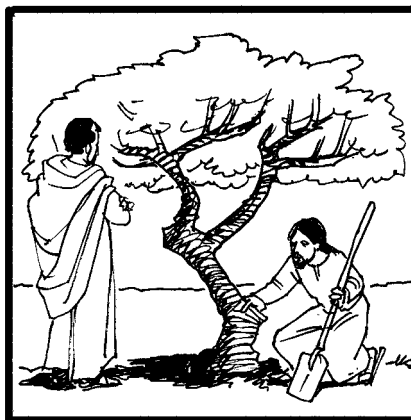
EXOD 3:1-8, 13-15

In one of the darkest hours of his spiritual journey, when he was most plagued by the corrosive forces of doubt, despair and hopelessness, Teilhard de Chardin resolved to face his struggles with a renewed explanation of the interior life. The result was what many regard as his greatest effort, *The Divine Milieu* (Collins, London: 1963). De Chardin celebrated the presence of God at the heart of the universe, in matter, in life and in every experience. This mystical communion with God can give every human being access to a new milieu in which to discover God. When that discovery is made, insisted de Chardin, "one cannot help but adore. ... That means to lose oneself in the unfathomable, to plunge into the inexhaustible, to find peace in the incorruptible, to be absorbed in defined immensity, to offer oneself to the fire ... and to give of one's deepest to that whose depth has no end." Although the author of Exodus has used different words to describe the experience

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Lent 3rd Sunday

Experiences of God



of Moses, the reality remains the same. Moses, like the great French theologian, knew that he was in the presence of God and in the divine milieu, described here as a burning bush. His passionate desire to know God prompted him to probe deeper into the mystery. Moses asked to know the name of God.

Some have suggested that Moses' question revealed a desire for a share of power or control over God. Others point to Moses' desire for a communion with God that would enable him to enter into that milieu where he would be empowered to be and do all God asked of him. This question and its answer also allowed the ancient author to reveal something of the essential nature of God.

Although the exact formula for naming God remains a matter of scholarly dispute, William Foxwell Albright's explanation seems to be the most satisfactory (as referenced in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: 1990). Rather than underscore the enigmatic character of the answer and conclude that God refused to be named or controlled by anyone, Albright suggested that the sacred tetragrammeton (the four holy consonants YHWH) are a form of the Hebrew verb *hayah*, "to be."

Without benefit of the vowels, Albright concluded that YHWH is best rendered "I am what I am" (*ehyeh asher'ehyeh*). When transposed into the third person required by the causative tense of the verb, God's name could be translated as "He causes to be whatever comes into existence." To put it more simply, "I am the being one; I am the creator of all, and to add to the wonderment of it all, I am with you!"

This "name" in verse 14 has been followed by the directive in verse 15: "So you shall tell the Israelites, 'ehieh has sent me to you.'" Theodore Vriezen has interpreted the response not as an expression of indefiniteness but of the actuality of God ("Exodus," *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. 17, 1967). "I am who I am" means "I am there, wherever it may be ... I am really there."

With that assurance to lean upon and with the experience of the burning bush to inspire and empower him, Moses went on to face the good and the not-so-good that lay ahead of him. Moses was not perfect, but he was inspired by God, and he continues to inspire all who try to draw near to God, understand God's will and live accordingly.

1 COR 10:1-6, 10-12

In the first volume of *The Life of Reason* (1905), Spanish-born American philosopher George Santayana (1863-1952) wrote, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." It seems that Paul had a similar idea in mind as he advised his Corinthian converts to learn from the mistakes that Moses and the Israelites made as they wandered through the desert to Canaan.

From what can be deduced from his letter, it appears that some of the Corinthians had begun to take for granted the gifts that God had bestowed on them. Some were even of the mind that their baptismal initiation into Christ and their participation at the Eucharist automatically guaranteed their salvation. Some scholars attribute this presumptuousness to a misunderstanding of Paul's teaching about justification



through faith. In order to correct this “once justified, always justified” error, Paul reminded his readers of their ancestors in the faith and the lessons that could be learned from their accomplishments as well as their missteps.

Paul recalled the Israelites’ passage from slavery to freedom through the Sea of Reeds and described it as a baptism into Moses, much like the believer’s baptism into Christ. Paul similarly evoked the God-given food and water of Israel’s desert trek in order to prompt a renewed gratitude in his readers for the sacramental nourishment of the bread and the word. His reference to the rock (v. 4) that followed the Israelites was not drawn from scripture but from an ancient legend. According to the rabbis, the rock that Moses struck for water became mobile and traveled with the people, satisfying their thirst as needed. That rock that provided life-giving water was the Christ, Paul insisted. Richard B. Hays (*First Corinthians*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky.: 1997) has suggested that Paul’s reference to the rock may have also been influenced by Philo of Alexandria, who regarded the rock as a metaphor: “For the flinty rock is the wisdom of God ... from which God satisfied the thirsty souls that love God” (*Leg. All.* 2.86). Since Paul had already identified Christ as the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:30), this association follows logically.

Another factor that may have influenced Paul’s thinking was the Hebrew text of Deuteronomy 32. In this chapter, the ancient author repeatedly ascribed to God the title “Rock” (vv. 4, 15, 18, 30, 31). As the Son of God who came among us, Christ embodied all the attributes of God including the stability, strength and permanence of a rock.

In addition to its metaphorical comparisons, this excerpt from Paul’s Corinthian correspondence is also remarkable in that it establishes the fact of our spiritual ancestry. Although the congregation in Corinth was predominantly gentile in origin, Paul assured them that they too had been grafted onto the vine who is

Jesus and that they were included as full participants in the covenant with God (Rom 11:17-24). Therefore Israel’s story was also their story, and like younger brothers and sisters (v. 1), they were to learn from their elder siblings so as to benefit from their experiences and not repeat the same mistakes — as are we.

LUKE 13:1-9

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, when the homeless and hungry and displaced were trying to rebuild their lives, there were some who dared to suggest that the “Big Easy” (New Orleans) was hard-hit because of the amoral lifestyle of so many of its citizens. As today’s Gospel illustrates, similar assumptions were also prevalent among the contemporaries of Jesus and Luke. When some of his listeners told him about the murdered Galileans, Jesus matched their story by mentioning the 18 people who died in Siloam when a tower fell on them. Although neither event is attested elsewhere, the Lucan Jesus referenced both disasters in order to correct certain erroneous notions concerning sin and punishment. Certainly there were others in Galilee who were more sinful than those whom Pilate was purported to have killed. Surely those who died in Siloam were no more evil than others in Jerusalem. Therefore, these deaths should not be attributed to sin. Rather, both incidents might serve as somber reminders that death comes to us

all, but repentance is possible only on this side of the grave.

Jesus’ parable about the fig tree underscores the urgency of his message. Those who cultivated figs usually expected a tree to bear fruit in three years’ time. If no figs were forthcoming, the barren tree was cut down and another was planted in its place. In Jesus’ parable, the unproductive tree was given yet another year, during which the gardener continued to tend it. Some scholars have compared the three years of waiting for the figs’ growth to Jesus’ three years of ministry. However, the more important message conveyed in the parable is the urgency of the situation. In a sense, the parable said, this is the 11th hour, and those who do not heed the call to repent *now* may find themselves in the same plight as the barren fig tree.

During Jesus’ ministry, the message of this Gospel asked his contemporaries to accept the truth he taught and to let him draw them nearer to God, grace and salvation. At its second level of development in the Lucan community of the 80s, Jesus’ message warned about being prepared to welcome the returning Jesus. This same message continues to challenge those who tend to put off a decision, thinking that there will be time for such things at a later date. Such thinking causes missed opportunities that can never be reclaimed. This Lent with its many opportunities awaits our decision to be better. What better time to do so than now?

Sermon Starters

Deacon Dick Folger

The parable of the fig tree includes a detail that will make sense to any gardener. If a tree or plant is not productive, it may benefit from having its roots stirred up and a little manure applied. In the same way, if we have stopped producing and growing morally, we may need to examine our root motives, untangle our lives from dead habits and bad influences. Prayer is a time to stir up roots. And even our past failures can be a source of growth and insight. Just as old, decaying matter and manure nourish new plant growth, our old sins and past failures contain valuable insights and motivation for personal growth. Repentance acknowledges past failures and learns from them. Virtue that flows from experience is stronger than virtue that flows from simple innocence.

Preaching to Youth

Jim Auer

KEY VERSE(S) / MAIN IDEA (Exod)

“Remove your sandals, for the place where you stand is holy ground.”
Reverence: a duty and a human need.

HOW YOUTH MIGHT APPROACH THE MAIN IDEA Will vary greatly depending upon how deeply each one has bought into and become a product of the entertainment culture.

STARTER Compare the awe afforded a piece of clothing worn by Michael Jackson to that given the consecrated host that is the body and blood of Christ. (Lead into below.)

LEADING QUESTIONS * Have you ever been in a place or with a person and felt that you were in touch with real holiness? * How would you define “holy”? What makes something or someone holy? * How do we show reverence to God? * What physical actions demonstrate reverence?

DIRECTIONS TO EXPLORE * Contemporary versions of “removing one’s sandals” as a sign of respect for a place, an event, a person. * Previous emphasis on God as a stern judge to be feared, replaced by emphasis on God’s inexhaustible love and mercy. Still, we do not approach God in a detached, blasé manner. * Reverence is a human need — one of the least recognized. * The consequences of a culture without reverence: People become objects. The practice of faith is seen as stupid. Crudeness is celebrated. Everything is mocked.

MEDIA LINKS * Michael Jackson was quite religious and never would have condoned the false emphasis described in the Starter above. * Some say that our culture has nearly lost reverence for holy events, places, actions and people, that the entertainment world is eager to get laughs from making holy things seem ridiculous and stupid. Do you agree? * Are there any TV shows, movies, computer games or songs that speak of and promote reverence toward anything?

QUOTATION “If a man loses his reverence for any part of life, he will lose his reverence for all of life” (Albert Schweitzer).

HOMILY

Fr. James Smith

Calling God Names

In ancient times, at the early stages of the human race, many gods competed for the allegiance of human beings. These gods had different sacred places, different rituals, different demands and different names.

When our God threw himself into the competition for the attention of humans like some teenager eager for love, God let himself be called “Yahweh,” which probably means “god of the mountains.” But this just made him one god among many, so when God wanted to distance himself from false gods, he knew he had to have a distinct name. When Moses asked God’s real name, God replied: “I am who I am.”

Now, God was not being coy, as if to say, “Guess who I am.” Nor was God being secretive, as if to say, “I don’t want anyone to know my real name.” God was simply answering the question as best he could. God said, “Who am I? I just am who I am.”

If I were God, I would not have stopped there, because people have a tendency to think they know God better than God does. I would have continued, “I am who I am — that’s all. I am not a god of the mountains or sea; I am not heavy or light, tall or short, here or there. To repeat, I am who I am.”

God should have listened to me. Because ever since God gave us God’s only true name, people have been giving God nicknames. We say that God is eternal and almighty and kind and forgiving. I hope God is smiling when she says, “Those are only attributes you attach to my name, but I still am who I am.”

In an attempt to understand God better, we say that God creates and judges and forgives and loves. God smiles again and says, “I don’t do anything. I simply am — and cre-

ation happens; I am — and justice happens; I am — and forgiveness happens; I am — and love happens. But I just am.”

If God gave his name today, he would have a better chance of being understood. Because modern people have a literal sense of reality. If someone bores us with their poetic description of an unforgettable sunset, we deflate them by saying, “It is what it is.” No matter how people interpret anything, modern people have been trained to reduce it to its bare essentials.

And yet. Bare facts make for a bare life. Humans cry out not for data but for meaning. “What is” is too much for us in the raw. “What is” is too complicated for us; we need to separate it into meaningful parts. “What is” constrains our imagination; we need to expand it to “what might be, what should be.” But God is not any of those interesting things. God is, was and always will be simply God.

The Jews have a great respect for God’s uniqueness. They are not allowed to make images of God. They may not even pronounce God’s name. We appreciate their zeal for the holiness of God, but we cannot live with an unnamable God.

It is fortunate that one Jew had the same problem. No matter how much Jesus adored God, he insisted on calling him “Father.” Against the rules of theology and doctrine and logic, Jesus would not back down from “Father.”

Of course, for Jesus, that is who God actually is. For us, God is father by analogy, metaphor, symbol. We arrive at that insight in prayer. God begins where words end. Deep in our hearts, we realize that God is mystery, and whatever name we give mystery is an idol. We are allowed to call God names as long as we remember that.

Lent

Letting Go of the Past



Preaching Resources

CELEBRATION:

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ROMAN LECTIONARY

4th Sunday of Lent
Jos 5:9, 10-12
2 Cor 5:17-21
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY

4th Sunday of Lent
Jos 5:9-12
2 Cor 5:16-21
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

ANGLICAN LECTIONARY

4th Sunday of Lent
Jos (4:19-24); 5:9-12
2 Cor 5:17-21
Luke 15:11-32

Patricia Sánchez has been contributing to *Celebration* for 30 years. She holds a master's degree in literature and religion of the Bible from a joint degree program at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary in New York.

So often, our focus during Lent gravitates toward the wrong that we have done. We review the laws of God and the church and we realize that there have been infractions both great and small. We evaluate our relationships with God and with one another and admit that we have not been as faithful as we are called to be. We remember the goals we set for ourselves and are painfully aware that we have fallen short. We gauge the quality of our character, the depth of our spirituality and the fervor of our prayer and find that we are in great need of growth.

While it may be tempting to engage in this practice of negative navel-gazing, the mercies of our God call us to cultivate a more positive attitude. Admitting guilt and accepting responsibility is a necessary first step, but to remain in the morass of hopelessness created by our own sinfulness is to waste an opportunity to draw ever more closely and fall ever more deeply in love with God. Each of the sacred texts for this Sunday references this process of turning a negative into a positive by surrendering a sinful past to the past.

Upon their arrival in the land of Canaan, the Israelites were instructed by God through Joshua to remember no more the reproach of Egypt. Instead of dredging up the memories of suffering and the failures of the desert days, they were to celebrate their Passover to freedom and renewed union with God. A new era was beginning for them, but the same Lord who had called them into being, called them forth from Egypt and guided them through the wilderness would never leave their side.

Paul evokes a similar outlook in today's second reading. Let go of the old ways of sin, urged Paul, and embrace new life in Christ. The great apostle was so convinced of the rebirth that comes with living in Christ that he called baptized believers "a new creation." Paul was also convinced that those who were reconciled to God had become part of an ongoing process — the experience of reconciliation would be extended to others through them. There is a sense of exhilaration that comes with being forgiven, and Paul was hopeful that this joy would be contagious.

Nowhere is this joy more poignantly expressed than in today's Gospel. The son and brother we have come to call the "prodigal" is never named. Perhaps his anonymity makes it easier for readers to see something of themselves in him. His life, by his own choice, had spiraled down until it seemed that he could fall no further. He could have remained there, at the lowest point, wallowing in self-pity and self-loathing. He may have thought that he deserved his desperate situation, and no one would have disagreed with him. But there in that pigsty he decided to let go of his sinful past and try for a new beginning. At this turning point in the Lucan parable, the evangelist tells readers, "He came to his senses." Rather than dwelling on himself and the mess he had made of his life, the son began to think of the goodness and love of his father. This thought enabled him to let go of what he had become and entrust himself to his father's mercy.

Here lies the lesson for Lenten believers. Essential to the process of reconciliation and forgiveness is a willingness to let go and leave the

The scriptures urge us to turn a negative into a positive by surrendering a sinful past to the past.

past behind. Without such baggage, the one who seeks forgiveness is able to welcome God's mercy with empty, open arms.

To bring this very special moment of homecoming to life, the 17th-century Dutch artist Rembrandt painted a larger-than-life portrait that now hangs in The Hermitage museum in Saint Petersburg, Russia. When he saw the painting on a trip to the former Soviet Union in 1986, Henri Nouwen shared his experience in *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (Doubleday, New York: 1992). "The more I gazed at the painting," wrote Nouwen, "it became, somehow, the heart of the story that God wants to tell me and the heart of the story that I want to tell God and God's people. All of the Gospel is there. All of my life is there. All of the lives of every beloved sinner are there. The painting has become a mysterious window through which I can step into the kingdom of God. It is like an open gate that allows me to enter into the presence of the God who loves me."

JOS 5:9, 10-12

Although the Hebrew scriptures and long-standing tradition represent the Israelites settling in Canaan as the result of a conquest, some archaeologists and historians have suggested that the Israelites peacefully immigrated to the land of Canaan and were gradually assimilated into the culture.

Others are of the opinion that the early or proto-Israelites were actually a composite of various indigenous Canaanite peoples who shared a common alienation from the feudal aristocracy that governed Canaan during a period of declining Egyptian influence. These Canaanite revolutionaries may have been rebellious city-dwellers and peasant farmers who attacked and took control of several Canaanite cities. This "holy war" as waged by the Israelites is clearly reflected in the book of Joshua and in the military accomplishments of its chief protagonist.

Represented in scripture as a

March 14, 2010

Lent 4th Sunday

Letting Go of the Past



figure comparable in importance to Moses, Joshua was directly commissioned by God to lead the people militarily, as well as in faithfulness to the covenant. For that reason, Joshua is portrayed in this excerpted text as presiding over Israel's first Passover celebration as a settled people in the land of Canaan. At that celebration they ate from the fruits of their own labors in their fields and among their flocks. Because they had evolved from a nomadic to a sedentary society, they were no longer dependent upon the manna God had provided in the wilderness. However, at this new stage in their development, their need for reliance on God provided an opportunity for them to cooperate more actively with God's blessings.

Scholars continue to debate what might be the "reproach" that God removed from the Israelites. Some have suggested it was the failure of the people to be circumcised while enslaved in Egypt. This seems doubtful, because the Egyptians also practiced circumcision, and the Israelites probably would not have been prevented from doing so. Nor is it known for certain when the rite acquired religious significance as a sign of their belonging to God. Others regard the reproach as the ritual

impurity acquired by living among the Egyptians. Still others argue that the reproach now removed referred to the slavery from which God delivered the Israelites.

Lenten penitents are invited to follow the example of the Israelites and leave behind the reproaches of past sins and sorrows so they can enter a new phase of their spiritual development and relationship to God. Like the Israelites, who were fed on manna as they traveled through the desert, believers in Jesus are fed on the bread of the word of God and the eucharistic bread. At every gathering around bread and word, the covenant with God is renewed and strengthened.

2 COR 5:17-21

Prior to his conversion to Jesus, Paul represented the Jewish authorities. In their name and by their authority, he devoted himself to preserving their faith and traditions. Included in Paul's efforts was a systematic attempt to put an end to what he believed to be the heresy of Christianity. For that reason, as Luke has attested in the Acts of the Apostles (8:3), "he entered house after house and dragging out men and women he handed them over for imprisonment." After his encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus road, however, Paul put his former way of life behind him. He put his faith in Jesus and his life in God's hands and moved forward. He looked back only when attempting to encourage his fellow Jews to accept Jesus as their messiah and to live their lives as he did, "in Christ."

Paul identified the Christ-event—Jesus' conception, birth, ministry, suffering, death and resurrection to glory—as the means by which God effected the reconciliation of sinners. Belief in Jesus means belief in his saving process; one participates in the process by appropriating the grace of salvation through faith. This is what Paul means by being "in Christ." Moreover, those who are incorporated into the saving action of God "in Christ" are thereby responsible for witnessing to these



graces with their lives. Paul describes this witness in terms of being “an ambassador for Christ.” Ambassadors, as Ernest Best has affirmed, have full power to speak for those they represent and can commit them to a course of action (*Second Corinthians*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky.: 1987). If believers think of themselves in this way, each represents the fruits of the forgiveness of God and each is committed to a course of action that cooperates with God’s gift of reconciliation. In all we do and say, we are to reveal the one we represent, Jesus, who will be judged by the way we live.

This great gift of reconciliation with God in Christ means that we should be willing to be reconciled with one another. What better time than this holy season of Lent to forgive and be forgiven by one another without regard for whose fault it is, without waiting for the “guilty party” to make the first move? This means we have to let go of past hurts and memories and, like a new creation, revive our relationship with a new bond of love.

Paul concludes this exhortation by insisting that Jesus achieved the reconciliation of all peoples to God by “becoming sin.” More literally translated, the term *hamartia* (v. 21) is actually “a sin sacrifice.” Although he did not *know* sin (by way of personal experience), Jesus fully embraced the contradiction and alienation of sin in order to make whole and holy those who had been enslaved by sin. For Paul, the sin-sacrifice of Jesus on the cross marked the dividing point between the old and the new orders, between the darkness and the light, between death and life.

LUKE 15:1-3, 11-32

This uniquely Lucan parable is the final and most important in a trilogy of parables about things (or in this case, a person) that were lost and then found. Contextually, the parable of the wayward son represents Jesus’ response to those who objected to him welcoming sinners and eating with them (v. 2). This habit of Jesus

was particularly repugnant to those who regarded sinners as unclean and unworthy of associating with the righteous. Eating at the same table was even more distasteful, as it signified a bond of friendship that the Pharisees and scribes did not wish to share with sinners.

Through his three parables, and especially in this last one, Jesus illustrates God’s love for the lost and the divine desire to welcome home those who have gone astray. As Herman Hendrickx has noted, no other parable portrays more poignantly the fact that God operates a lost-and-found department, and yet none of the typical vocabulary of conversion or repentance appears here (*The Third Gospel for the Third World*, Claretian Publications, Quezon City, Philippines: 2000). Luke allows the power of the story itself to communicate the message.

While most scholars support the traditional understanding of verse 17 (“coming to his senses” or “he came to himself”) as a posture of repentance on the part of the prodigal, Hendrickx suggests that this action be understood in light of Luke 15 as a whole. In the parable of the lost sheep, the Lucan Jesus redefines repentance as “acceptance of being found.” With great effort, the shepherd and the woman find their lost sheep and coin. Thus, repentance is something that is done for the believer; it is a grace that touches sinners with love and calls them home. And home, says Hendrickx,

is not just a geographical place but a place on the spiritual map to which we return when we weary of wallowing in self-loathing.

When the son does return home, the father’s actions (he runs, he kisses, he embraces, he prepares a celebration) offer graphic illustration of his words: “This son of mine was dead and has come to life again” (vv. 24, 32). When the Pharisees and scribes heard this statement, their reaction was probably not unlike that of the elder brother. Like him, they had done their best to be faithful and to live upright lives, and the graciousness bestowed upon such a profligate probably stuck in their spiritual throats. The Pharisees and scribes had worked out an unspoken system of expected merit for their good deeds; the elder son compared his actions with his brother’s and decided that “this son of yours” (v. 30) did not deserve reconciliation. Even though the father assures the disgruntled and selfish son that he is the heir of the estate (“all I have is yours,” v. 31), he is not satisfied. He refuses to yield to joy and will not share in the celebration.

Henri Nouwen has suggested that the surrender of the elder son in us is even more daunting than it is for us to find healing as the younger son. Nouwen questions: Can the elder son in me come home? How can I return when I am lost in resentment, jealousy and anger? God awaits my homecoming with open arms.

Sermon Starters

Deacon Dick Folger

The Hermitage in Saint Petersburg, Russia, is one of the great museums of the world. It houses vast collections of art amassed by the Russian czars. The museum was once their winter palace. Climbing the elegant marble stairway to the second floor, you will find the famous Rembrandt painting “The Return of the Prodigal Son.”

An aging father bends to welcome his penitent son home again. The boy, ravaged by an unforgiving world, one sandal off, buries his head in his father’s embrace.

Today’s Gospel touches our hearts on many levels. Sometimes we are the forgiving father; at other times we may be the jealous brother. Perhaps, more frequently than we would like, we may be the prodigal child, seeking the Father’s forgiveness again.

Preaching to Youth

Jim Auer

KEY VERSE(S) / MAIN IDEA The parable of forgiveness.

HOW YOUTH MIGHT APPROACH THE MAIN IDEA Because the prodigal son story is familiar, we say, “We’ve heard this before, we know how it ends. God is cool about forgiveness.”

STARTER / MEDIA LINKS * “I don’t know why I did the things I did / I don’t know why I said the things I said ... If I could turn back time / If I could find a way...” (“If I Could Turn Back Time,” by Cher). * “I’ve not always been the best man or friend for you / But your love remains true / And I don’t know why / You always seem to give me another try / So I’m going home / Back to the place where I belong ...” (“Home,” by Daughtry).

LEADING QUESTIONS * If the story were set today, where would the son go and how would he spend the money? Where would he end up? * What other adjectives besides “prodigal” (explain the meaning) describe the son? * What kind of job would the other “good” son have? * If you were the kid’s mother or father, how would you respond to his return? * Does the story mean we can do pretty much what we want because forgiveness is always easy to get? If not, what *does* it mean?

DIRECTIONS TO EXPLORE * Forgiveness does not cancel consequences or turn back time or restore the original circumstances and opportunities. * There’s always a social aspect to sin: The inheritance could and should have benefited the son’s future family; now it’s gone. If we squander the earth’s resources and society’s wealth on ourselves, what of our poor sisters and brothers or future generations? * What keeps us from seeking forgiveness (paralyzing guilt and shame, fear of being turned away)?

QUOTATIONS * “God pardons like a mother, who kisses the offense into everlasting forgiveness” (Henry Ward Beecher). * “Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future” (Paul Boese). * “God has a big eraser” (Billy Zeoli).

HOMILY

Fr. James Smith

All Is Forgiven

Ernest Hemingway wrote a story of a Spanish father who wanted to reconcile with his son, who had run away to Madrid. The father placed this ad in the paper: “Paco, all is forgiven — meet me at Hotel Montana at noon on Tuesday. Papa.” When the father went to the hotel on Tuesday, he found the hotel square filled with 800 boys named Paco waiting for their fathers.

That story is the story of many families. And 799 of those boys in Madrid were disappointed when their fathers failed to show up. But the prodigal son is a happy story, so we must rejoice!

Paco and the prodigal son represent the natural development of every child, taken to the extreme. Even those children who don’t leave home must somehow separate themselves from their parents. If they don’t, they will remain forever immature. The function of the family is to raise mature, independent adults.

That doesn’t always happen. Some parents think it is their job to control children, while some children think their parents have no right to direct their maturation. And sometimes it takes a period of separation for parent and child to appreciate each other’s rights.

The prodigal son looked for the freedom to direct his own life. But what he found was something else. He associated with people his own age who knew no more than he did, so his education was stunted. His friends wanted the same things he wanted, so he learned to fight to get his share. When he succeeded he boasted; when he failed he was envious. Finally, instead of rolling in clover he was wallowing in mud. And everyone said, “You made your bed, now lie in it.”

Each one of us is a child of God.

Some of us don’t like that term—it makes us feel infantile. That’s why we sometimes run away from God. It’s in our genes. Adam started the whole thing. He had everything he could possibly want at home; his Father created a whole paradise just for him. Adam agreed that it was nice, but he didn’t want charity. Adam wanted to earn his own way without God.

God said OK, threw him out of the garden and barred the gates with flaming swords. Adam could not go home; he had to wander east of Eden. And that is where all of us were born. Children of God with a yen to be independent, to earn our own way apart from God.

The problem is, apart from God’s direction, our honest desires get distracted. The desire for independence becomes arrogance; our need for love turns to lust; our longing for success turns to greed; our yearning for equality becomes envy. Before long we are all wallowing in the mire of guilt and neurosis. And everyone tells us, “You made your bed, now lie in it.”

Everyone except God. God says, “All is forgiven. Come home.” Like the Prodigal Son, we worry about how to explain ourselves. We make up excuses for our sins; we wonder what promises we have to make. We think that we have to become a better person before we go home.

Not so. All we have to do is go home. God is like bankruptcy: We give up all we have — and the balance is mysteriously restored. We are debt-free to start fresh again. Of course, we may want to avoid past mistakes, we may want to acquire better habits. But that comes later. First we go home. Where repentance is much easier in our Father’s house among family.



Preaching Resources

CELEBRATION:
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Worship Resource
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**ROMAN
LECTIONARY**
5th Sunday of Lent
Isa 43:16-21
Phil 3:8-14
John 8:1-11

**REVISED COMMON
LECTIONARY**
5th Sunday of Lent
Isa 43:16-21
Phil 3:4b-14
John 12:1-8

**ANGLICAN
LECTIONARY**
5th Sunday of Lent
Isa 43:16-21
Phil 3:8-14
Luke 20:9-19

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A Change of Venue

At any given moment across this vast earth of ours, someone is committing a crime. Those who are apprehended must account for their actions in a court of law, judged by a jury of their peers. Usually justice is meted out fairly and the guilty reap the consequences of their actions, while the innocent are exonerated. However, there have been instances when despite the best efforts of law enforcement and the judicial system, it has been determined that a fair trial is not possible. Sometimes defense attorneys have requested a change of venue for the trial because of undue publicity for the crime and because of people's tendency to try alleged offenders in the court of public opinion. Attorneys fear that their client cannot be judged impartially. They hope a different county or city will enable an "untainted" jury to render a more just verdict.

If we apply (albeit loosely) this same legal strategy to the spiritual life and to the judgment that every sinner rightly deserves, it becomes clear that throughout salvation history, God has provided sinners with a change of venue. Called out of sin into a place of reconciliation, believers are able to make a new start instead of remaining in their guilt, sinking into despair and hopelessness. Without their burden, forgiven sinners are graced with new hope that leads to growth and wholeness.

The prophet Deutero-Isaiah (first reading) was a companion to his people during their exile in Babylon. He clearly understood that their journey into shame and alienation had been the direct consequence of their sinfulness and infidelity to their covenant with God. Nevertheless, despite their unworthiness, God offered the displaced peoples of Judah a change of venue. From exile, God would bring them home; their chastisement would come to an end, and their journey back to their homeland would be celebrated as "something new," something so wonderful it would erase their past sufferings from their minds.

Paul, writing to his beloved Philippians (second reading), understood that his change of venue had come when he began to believe in Jesus. He described this experience as gaining Christ and being found in him. With Christ as the venue where he found new life, Paul was ready to forget his former life and strain forward to preach the Gospel until he attained the resurrection from the dead.

The unnamed woman in today's Johannine Gospel was granted a similar experience. Found with a man who was not her husband, she (she alone, and not her partner) was taken and subjected to the judgment of some scribes and Pharisees. As if to kill two birds with their stones, the woman's accusers also brought her before Jesus. Although the law permitted her execution, Jesus chose to change the venue. Jesus succeeded in dispersing those who wanted retribution according to the legal system of their day, and invited the woman into a new place of loving forgiveness and rehabilitation. Without condemning her sin or berating the sinner, Jesus challenged her to leave sin behind and to live her life anew within the parameters of God's goodness and righteousness.

Attorneys request a change of venue for a trial because of undue publicity and because of people's tendency to try alleged offenders in the court of public opinion.

God offers this same change of venue to every sinner: What better season to appropriate this grace than Lent? Then, those graced with such an experience are to extend this same opportunity to others. We cannot relegate people who offend us to a place made ugly and lonely by our resentment, anger and refusal to forgive. Lent is the season for opening our hearts and extending our hands to others. By creating a venue of healing and forgiveness for others, we allow them to grow — and we hope and pray that those we love (and those we do not love as we should) will create a similar venue for us.

ISA 43:16-21

During the Babylonian exile, the displaced Israelites were made to endure the shame of captivity and to defend themselves against the threat of cultural and religious assimilation. But life under their captors was not all bad. Indeed, as Paul D. Hanson has pointed out, those who remained at home in Judah suffered a worse plight (*Isaiah 40-66*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky: 1995). Their land lay in ruins and was exposed to wave after wave of marauders who swept through Judah in search of plunder. In exile, however, the captives had been granted considerable freedom to enter into business relationships and ply their respective trades. Despite these economic opportunities, the exiled people of Judah longed to return home. This is precisely what they were being promised by Deutero-Isaiah in this text.

This beautiful oracle of salvation begins with a divine self-identification, climaxes in a promise of deliverance and culminates in the proclamation that Israel was called into being to praise God. The ancient prophet described the homeward journey from Babylon to Judah in terms that are reminiscent of the Israelites' most pivotal change of venue: their exodus from Egypt's slavery to live freely in the land of God's own promise.

At the heart of his description is

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Lent

5th Sunday

A Change of Venue



a directive that seems surprising. Hanson calls it a glaring contradiction: All are invited to forget the events of the past and watch out for something new (vv. 18-19). Remembering the past actions of God in their lives had been integral to the worship of the Israelites. Telling and retelling their story of salvation in the presence of God was a cherished means of communion and prayerful thanksgiving. However, what may at first reading appear to be a contradiction could actually be a rhetorical technique that urged Israel not to long for the past but to be ready for the new surprise that God could bring into their lives.

At this point in their evolving relationship with God, “something new” was a restoration of their freedom to worship God “that they might announce my praise” (v. 21). While in exile, it may have seemed that other powers were calling the shots for the people of Israel. Babylon seemed to be controlling their destiny. But with their new beginning, it became clear once again that God had always been their provider. In whatever venue they found themselves, God was the constant. In celebration of this great gift of God’s abiding presence, we pray with the psalmist: “If I go

up to the heavens, you are there; if I sink to the nether world, you are present there. If I take the winds of the dawn, if I settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall guide me, your right hand hold me fast” (Ps 139:8-10). You are there and I am yours, everywhere.

PHIL 3:8-14

Before Paul came to know and believe in Jesus, he had a life that many of his contemporaries would have envied. Born of Jewish parents in Tarsus in Cilicia, he grew up with the advantage of being well-educated in his Jewish traditions as well as in Greek language, philosophy and culture. Through his father, he was able to claim Roman citizenship, and he had also achieved a certain status among his Jewish peers such that he was able to act with authority in preserving Judaism from the “taint” of the Jesus-movement (Acts 9:1-2; 22:5; 26:12). Nevertheless, when the risen Christ made his acquaintance on the Damascus road, it was as if a page had been turned, and Paul looked upon his former life as so much rubbish, lost to him forever.

This harsh assessment of his past becomes more understandable if the reader keeps in mind the struggle Paul was having with the Judaizers. These people were rigidly conservative Jewish Christians whom Paul had earlier (3:2) referred to as “dogs,” “evil workers” and those who flaunted their “mutilation” (circumcision), and he regarded them as false teachers who insisted on the necessity of coming to Christ through Moses. Their efforts to impose Jewish law, dietary rules and circumcision on gentile converts suggested that the cross of Jesus was insufficient for salvation. Paul would have none of it.

Also present in Philippi and at odds with Paul were certain Gnostic enthusiasts — Christians who believed themselves to be already perfected and justified by virtue of their baptism. In the middle of these two extremes stood Paul, who understood that perfection was an ongoing process and that the justification



won for sinners through the sacrifice of Jesus was a grace that was to be appropriated daily by faith.

In verses 11 through 14 of this text, Paul affirms the gradual process of learning to know Christ and to live accordingly in terms that recall his “race” analogy in 2:16. Like the athlete who has already begun the marathon, the baptized believer has been “grasped by Christ” (NAB says “been taken possession of by Christ,” v.12) and initiated into the process of lifelong conversion. However long or short the race, however long or short the lifespan of the believer, it is necessary at every moment to keep the goal in sight: union with the Lord forever.

Like the Israelites who were not to remember the events of the past, Paul opted to forget what lay behind and to strain forward. If Paul was among us today, he might tell us to jettison unnecessary baggage so we can travel quickly and lightly toward the prize of God’s upward calling. Paul’s example challenges us to decide what we are willing to leave behind this Lent so as to enter into the new venue God is creating for us.

JOHN 8:1-11

Powerful convictions and fierce emotions prompted the scribes and Pharisees to bring the adulterous woman to Jesus. They were convinced of her sin and were eager to use her dilemma to create one for Jesus. Nevertheless, their powerful convictions and fierce emotions were dissipated by something that must have seemed even more compelling. Jesus’ challenge to them concerning their own sinfulness (v. 7), combined with his writing on the ground, turned the tide dramatically.

For centuries, many have speculated on the precise subject of Jesus’ writing or tracing (vv. 6, 8). *Katagraphen* could be rendered as “wrote,” “traced,” “recorded” or “registered.” Saint Jerome proposed that Jesus was writing on the ground, in full view of all (v. 3), the sins of the woman’s accusers. Others have suggested that Jesus was taking a page out of Roman legal practice,

When he was alone with the woman, Jesus pardoned her and sent her off to find a new way to live and love in God’s presence. This same grace is given to all sinners who humbly acknowledge their sins before God and before the community.

in which the judge would first write down the sentence and then read it to the accused.

Raymond E. Brown preferred to look to the scriptures for clues to Jesus’ actions (*The Gospel of John*, Doubleday, New York: 1966). In the Book of Daniel (5:24), mysterious writing that appeared inexplicably on a wall interpreted the situation at hand. Did Jesus’ writing do the same thing? Or did Jesus reference his ancestor Jeremiah (17:13), who claimed, “Those who turn away from you shall be written on the earth, for they have forsaken the Lord”? Perhaps Jesus was writing down the prescription against offering malicious witness stated in Exodus 23:1.

While there is no way of knowing for certain what Jesus wrote, there is no doubt that he succeeded in calling everyone present to a change of

heart; he was offering them a change of venue. For the woman’s accusers, that change would lead them away from her and their thirst for vengeance to an inward consideration of their own culpabilities.

When he was alone with the woman, Jesus pardoned her and sent her off to find a new way to live and love in God’s presence. This same grace is given to all sinners who humbly acknowledge their sins before God and before the community. A new life awaits; all they need to do is be willing to stand in the truth and be bathed in God’s gentle mercies.

Although scholars agree that this narrative was from a pre-Johannine source and did not appear in any of the earliest known manuscripts, it was later included in the scriptural canon. Some suggest that the story had been temporarily set aside because the ease with which Jesus forgave the woman did not jibe with the strict penitential discipline that the early church leaders were trying to maintain. Others, citing the non-Johannine features in the language and the similarity to Luke in style and motif, suggest that this narrative might be better situated after Luke 21:38. But regardless of its context, this narrative draws us in and invites us to see ourselves in either the sinful woman or in the scribes and Pharisees — and to respond accordingly to the mercies of Jesus.

Sermon Starters

Deacon Dick Folger

Today’s Gospel is about the adulterous woman, but we might wonder about the unfaithful man in the story. John makes no mention of him, even though he is equally guilty with the woman. Perhaps he was a public figure, nervously standing somewhere in the crowd, fearful that he would be found out. In his desperation to save his own skin he may have even been willing to heft a righteous stone and join in her condemnation.

It seems unthinkable that a woman could be stoned for adultery, but the practice of public punishment lives on even now. This past summer, in the Republic of the Maldives, near India, 150 women were flogged for having extramarital sex. One 18-year-old fainted after receiving 100 lashes. There were also about 50 men on the list for public lashing, but many got off and many before them have escaped punishment.

Jesus, in his love and compassion, writes in the sand and forgives the woman. Then he lifts his eyes to us.

Preaching to Youth

Jim Auer

KEY VERSE(S) / MAIN IDEA (John)

No mention of the woman's partner. Complicity in sin and "dodging the bullet."

HOW YOUTH MIGHT APPROACH THE MAIN IDEA

With uneasiness.

STARTER A few years ago, a high school senior lost a basketball scholarship to a major university when he was caught selling drugs to finance abortions for two girls he had gotten pregnant. The tragedy is not the blown scholarship, but the snuffed-out and broken lives. Who is responsible? Principally the man himself, of course. But the entire picture of responsibility is a web that includes dozens, even hundreds of "accessories to the crime." Start with those who promote the idea that sex is just a game, just recreation. That includes everyone associated with lyrics, films, TV shows and video games that present sex that way. Include every peer who laughed at and applauded or admired his "street cred" as a player stud.

LEADING QUESTION What might the woman's partner have said about the outcome? "Only did what any real man would do." "She came on to me!" "It was consensual." "Wasn't my fault — we were drunk."

DIRECTIONS TO EXPLORE * Ways of being an accessory: suggesting it, putting pressure on someone to do it, laughing at it, applauding it, insisting "there's nothing wrong with it" and, in some situations, simply silence. * Other sins loaded with accessories: theft, shoplifting, violence, vandalism, bullying, cheating, drug use, racism, prejudice and greed. * Bad example to younger siblings is a type of encouragement. * Seeking forgiveness for our accessory roles. * Taking gleeful satisfaction in not getting caught magnifies the offense. * Sometimes not getting caught can be a worse outcome than getting caught. * If we "dodge a bullet" that would have had long-term, serious consequences, it may be that God has a role in our escape that we should be ready to accept.

HOMILY

Fr. James Smith

Look Ahead to the New

In the first reading, God tells us: "Remember not the things of the past. Forget all that — it's over and gone. Look ahead. I'm doing something new."

Some wise man, or maybe just someone with an unhappy childhood, said that nostalgia is a sign of decadence. He meant that if we are more interested in the past than the future, we are dying. If what happened before is more important than what will happen ahead, we're as good as dead.

Maybe a distinction is called for, between nostalgia and respect for our past. We tend to think of the past as "the good old days." That is normal and nice to a point; we are allowed to kid ourselves on a gray day. It is only when we really believe that the best of life is gone that we are in trouble.

When Adam looked over his shoulder at the Garden of Eden instead of ahead to the garden of paradise; when the Israelites hankered after the fleshpots of Egypt instead of the honey of the promised land; when we pine after a church that has served its purpose instead of longing for a church to serve God and neighbor; when we spend more time thinking of who we were instead of who we will become — then we're in trouble.

Respect for tradition, yes; love for our past, indeed. That is what brought us to where we are and made us who we are. But when we agree with Ecclesiastes that there is nothing new under the sun, then our nostalgia has become decadence. We are sealed in our past; we prevent God from doing something new in our lives.

This Gospel is everyone's favorite. Jesus forgives the person caught in a very active public sin and exposes the private sins

of her accusers. It makes us sinners feel better about sin until we read that last line: "But don't do it again!" Then we worry. Now, it is a healthful thing to feel guilt. But is unhealthy to feel guilt-ridden. So let's make a few more distinctions.

A feeling is not necessarily a fact. We can feel guilty when we are innocent and we can feel innocent when we are guilty. As St. Paul said: "I have nothing on my conscience, but that does not mean that I'm innocent." Feelings are an important part of us, but only a part of us. And because they are irrational, we have to be clear about what it is that we actually feel.

For instance, some people remember a past sin and feel guilty. But memory is not guilt. Memory is probably an electrical circuit that stores past experiences. We ought to learn from our past mistakes, but they have nothing to do with present guilt.

Nor is shame the same as guilt. Shame is embarrassment, usually about something private, often sexual, always something we feel is beneath our dignity. Shame helps us build a dignified character, but it does not make us guilty.

Remorse is not guilt. Remorse is a sense of regret, a wish that something had not happened, sadness at having caused pain, anger over having destroyed something good. Remorse is an excellent feeling, within limits. It makes us humble and patient and compassionate and a little more careful of love. But it does not make us guilty.

Guilt is that precise, present experience of willfully committing sin. There is only one antidote, and it is instantaneous. You simply say, "I'm sorry." And Jesus promptly replies, "I do not condemn you."



Preaching Resources

CELEBRATION:
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**ROMAN
LECTIONARY**
Passion/Palm Sunday
Isa 50:4-7
Phil 2:6-11
Luke 22:14-23:56

**REVISED COMMON
LECTIONARY**
Palm Sunday
of the Lord's Passion
Luke 19:28-40
Isa 50:4-9a
Phil 2:5-11
Luke 22:14-23:56

**ANGLICAN
LECTIONARY**
Palm Sunday
of the Lord's Passion
Luke 19:29-40
Isa 45:21-25 or Isa 52:13-53:12
Phil 2:5-11
Luke (22:39-71) 23:1-49 (50-56)

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Mentored by the Message

If we are fortunate enough to have mentors as we go through the journey of life, our path may take fewer detours. Our guides can help us remain on course until we reach our final destination. For believers, that journey begins and ends in God, and our mentor along the way is the living word of God, as well as the various messengers who continue to speak that word and to unwrap its mystery and its challenge.

Except for those who are very new to life or very new to the faith, the mentors that will light our way as we move through the coming week are very familiar to us. But because of the character of the word we will hear, its message will be ever new and ever compelling in its call for our attention. God's word *lives*, and that living, breathing word gathers us in once again to the mystery of God's love made palpable in the death and rising of Jesus Christ, our Brother.

*Our mentor
along the way
is the living
Word of God.*

In today's first reading, the prophet we call Deutero-Isaiah will share his desire, as God's servant, to speak a word that will rouse us. He admits that we might be weary of this weighty, sobering word; he also acknowledges that his mentoring has cost him dearly. Nevertheless, like his brother Jeremiah (Jer 20:7-9), he cannot help but speak his message and bear the brunt of his listeners' wrath if only they — we — will hear the truth and allow it to change our lives. Through all his struggles for the sake of his service, the prophet has been able to endure and persevere because "the Lord God is my help." As Deutero-Isaiah visits us yet again with his message, he encourages us to follow his lead and find our strength in God.

Paul, in his correspondence with his beloved Philippians, has quoted an early Christian hymn about the mind and the manner of Christ. Let this mind mentor you, he encourages; let the manner of Jesus guide you in all you are and all you do. Always truthful, Paul has cited a hymn that remembers that Jesus' journey spiraled dangerously downward, reaching its most profound depths on the cross. Nevertheless, Jesus' journey did not end in that seemingly bottomless pit of suffering. Rather, he was lifted up to life and glory, and his experience reaches out to mentor all who believe, all who suffer, all who will die with the hope of living again.

Luke's Gospel for today will be solemnly proclaimed in some communities, acted out in plays in others or set to music and sung in still other gatherings of believers. Through these multi-sensory proclamations of the saving word, believers can be drawn more fully into the mystery and invested more deeply in its truth. But the remembrance of Jesus' movement from the Passover-Eucharist table, to the cross at the Place of the Skull, to the rock-hewn tomb donated by Joseph of Arimathea is not merely a sentimental journey. We do not open ourselves to the word to engage in some form of sympathetic catharsis. We open ourselves to this living message of love and sacrifice and pain and dying and sin and injustice so as to be changed by it, graced by it and moved by it to ease the ongoing suffering of the body of Christ. We are called not just to weep for Jesus on the way, as did the women of Jerusalem, but to give ourselves over to those whose lives continue to

be lamentable. We are called, as was Simon of Cyrene, to help alleviate suffering by shouldering some of another person's burdens.

As Miguel A. de la Torre has explained, Christ resides among those who suffer oppression, who live in want, who have misery as their constant traveling companion (*Reading the Bible from the Margins*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, N. Y.: 2002). These least ones are Jesus in the here and now. These poor ones provide an essential salvific perspective to world history, for God chooses those who are oppressed within history and makes them the means of salvation for the rest of society just as God chose the suffering servant, the crucified Christ, to bring salvation to the world. To follow Jesus is to seek solidarity with their suffering and to work for their liberation.

ISA 50:4-7

Those who have seen the film "Braveheart" may recall the scene where it became obvious that William Wallace's chances of survival were slim to none. Having led his fellow Scots in fierce battles against their English oppressors, Wallace succeeded in regaining some of their property and freedom. In the end, however, he was betrayed by one of his own countrymen and found himself on trial for his convictions. When it was certain that he was about to die a terrible, torturous death, many of his friends and fellow soldiers begged him to recant his beliefs so he might receive some measure of mercy, or at least to be quiet so that death would be meted out more swiftly. He did neither. With his last breath, he cried out for the freedom for which he had fought his entire life.

Although the film industry has admittedly added its own embellishments in the telling of this hero's story, the movie does not contradict historical accounts of his death. Wallace willingly suffered rather than betray his convictions or his countrymen. Perhaps this contemporary graphic portrayal can help believers connect more closely with the cost

March 28, 2010

Lent

Passion/Palm Sunday

*Mentored
by the Message*



of the suffering servant's sacrifice.

In four distinct songs, the sixth-century prophet Deutero-Isaiah celebrated the heroism of the servant. The figure of the servant — held out as one who was willing to go to any lengths to preach the message of truth and justice — seemed to come to life in the prophet's own efforts and in the efforts of his contemporary, Jeremiah. Today's first reading is from the third song, where the servant is described as being equipped by God with the ability to speak a rousing word to the weary. Such persuasive speech, also called *paranesis*, is a manner of speaking intended to evoke a moral change in the listener; this moral conversion was then supposed to be translated into changed attitudes and behaviors. Rousing speech would have awakened the indifferent and hopeless. Rousing speech would have prompted the exiles to accept the prophet's conviction that their defeat had been caused by their infidelity to God, and it would have called them to move forward from that defeat to be reconciled to God.

The servant was made to suffer for his efforts on behalf of his people and for his unflinching ("face like

flint") dedication to his purpose, but he never lost sight of the fact that God remained present to him. Therefore, he opened himself daily to God's word (50:4), who breathed into him the divine spirit (42:1). Thus empowered, the servant was God's messenger who would bring light to the nations (49:6), true justice to all peoples (42:1) and peace and healing to the broken and alienated (53:5).

Obviously, we Christians share the conviction that Jesus lived and suffered and died fulfilling the servant's mission. Less obvious, but no less compelling, is the challenge for us to follow Jesus' lead in offering service to the world whatever the cost.

PHIL 2:6-11

Andrew of Crete, an eighth-century Syrian-born theologian and hymn writer, once suggested that this feast of Palm Sunday calls believers to "spread ourselves under Christ's feet, not coats or lifeless branches or shoots of trees made of matter which waste away and delight the eye for only a few brief hours. We have been clothed with Christ's grace ... so let us spread ourselves like coats under his feet." This is one way of describing the surrender of self that is authentic discipleship. Another way is offered in today's text from Philippians.

The great apostle to the gentiles calls his readers to focus their attention on the total surrender of Jesus to God's will and to follow his example. In order to do this, Paul insisted that believers must "have the mind in you which was in Christ Jesus" (2:5). Having Christ's mind means that one has cultivated an attitude, an orientation and a manner of thinking, doing and being that does not begin or end in self but begins and ends in Jesus. Then, as if to reveal the mind of Jesus, Paul quoted this hymn that celebrates his salvific journey from God to earth and back to God.

As Fred B. Craddock has explained, this pre-Pauline hymn is a rehearsal of the Christ story in three movements: preexistence, existence and post-existence (*Phi-*



lippians, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky.: 1985). In the beginning, Christ was with God prior to life on earth. This understanding appears elsewhere in the Christian scriptures (John 1:1-2; Heb 1:1-4; Col 1:15; 2 Cor 8:9).

Christ, willing to surrender this preexistent state, took on human flesh and entered fully into the human experience. In total surrender to God, Christ obeyed—he laid his will aside to become a servant/slave and to suffer the ignominy of the cross. Christ's surrender to God placed him directly in the hands of those he had come to save, and those hands gave him over to death.

With verse 9, however, the movement of the hymn shifts. Up to this point, the action of Christ has driven the dynamic: Christ relinquished equality with God, Christ emptied himself, Christ took a slave's form, Christ humbled himself even to death. However, once Christ has given himself over to death, it is God who acts: God exalts, God bestows a name above every other name. That name is "Lord." "Jesus is Lord" is thought to be one of the earliest of the creedal formulae used by gentile Christians.

However, as Craddock also has pointed out, Jesus' lordship is not confined to the human realm. Jesus is Lord over a three-tiered universe—in heaven, on earth and under the earth. There is no place in the created universe that is not blessed by the redeeming action of Christ. God's act of glorification vindicates the seeming contradiction of the cross. All has transpired as God has allowed, and Jesus has saved the world through his humble service.

Have this mind in you.

LUKE 22:14–23:56

A hospital patient dying of cancer took God to task in a poem:

"God, you need to ask my forgiveness. Your world is full of mistakes. Some cells, like weeds in a garden, are growing in wrong places in my body. And we, your children, have polluted our environment. Why did you let it happen, God? We prayed

with faith, hope and love and still we perceived no change. ... We are made sick by your world. God, you need to ask my forgiveness. Was this why you sent your Son?"

Jesus himself could have written such a poem, wanting to know the "why?" of his suffering, rejection and death. He certainly had several reasons for wanting to rail at God, yet he chose surrender rather than stubborn resistance. Was he a masochist? Was he duped? Did he simply give up and give in to the tide of hatred that had been turned upon him?

No doubt all these objections and questions occurred to the early Christian writers, yet each was willing to accept that Jesus freely surrendered to a plan he had not made, a death he did not choose. In an attempt to help other believers enter into the mind of Christ, the evangelists—this year, Luke—have told his story. It was their hope that believers could move beyond logic to understand the love that motivated Jesus. It was their desire that readers put aside their objections and allow themselves to be mentored by this great mystery.

Luke brought his own insights and concerns to the telling of Jesus' passion; he affirmed the Lord's innocence repeatedly. Only in Luke does Pilate issue a triple verdict of "innocent" upon the falsely accused Jesus (23:4, 14-16, 22). Jesus' trial before Herod, mentioned only in Luke, results in a similar declaration of innocence (23:15). In the Lucan version alone, the centurion declares, "Surely this was an innocent man"

(23:47). Even the criminal crucified with Jesus attests, "This man has done nothing wrong" (23:41). Through these declarations, Luke showed Jesus to be the suffering servant who suffered innocently and vicariously and died shamefully, but in the end was vindicated by God through his resurrection.

Another quality of the Lucan Passion narrative is that it was intended to call believers to pray the words and be drawn in by them so as to become participants in the proceedings and not mere spectators. Participation includes: being present at the Passover meal where a new covenant was made through the body and blood of Jesus; trying to stay awake in the garden to pray and support the suffering, innocent Jesus; being in the courtyard as the Sanhedrin and then Pilate debate his fate; wanting to shout out as Jesus is falsely accused and abused; accepting that Jesus' blood is upon us for the guilt we bear; watching and wanting to help but feeling powerless.

In a departure from the other synoptics, Luke specified that Simon of Cyrene carried the cross *behind* Jesus (23:26), thereby bringing to life the statement of Jesus: "Anyone who does not take up his cross and *follow* me cannot be my disciple" (14:27). Elsewhere (9:23), the Lucan Jesus had stressed that discipleship involved following him *daily*. Mentored by this message, Jesus' disciples continue to participate in the saving mystery.

Sermon Starters

Deacon Dick Folger

Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem has many historical parallels in which public acclaim precedes tragedy and violence. We remember Aug. 28, 1963, when 250,000 Americans arrived in Washington, where they heard a man named King proclaim, "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.'" Yet just months later, President John F. Kennedy was dead, and within five years Martin Luther King Jr. had also been killed.

Even as he was entering the city to shouts of "Hosanna," Jesus had less than a week to live.

Preaching to Youth

Jim Auer

KEY VERSE(S) / MAIN IDEA The Passion narrative. Showing gratitude for the greatest act of love ever done by imitating Christ's actions and seeing Christ in others.

HOW YOUTH MIGHT APPROACH THE MAIN IDEA Detached assent.

STARTER Darrin thought it would be cool to run into the path of an oncoming bus, taunt the driver and leap aside just in time. But he misjudged how fast the bus was approaching and froze in place, terrified. A bystander leaped in front of the bus and pushed Darrin to safety, but he did not escape the bus. He was horribly injured. Three times he was clinically dead. Eventually, though, he recovered. Darrin was grateful for a while, but soon grew bored with the story of what happened. "Yeah, sure, the guy was cool, yada yada yada, but I'm tired of hearing about it. Besides, I'm not positive I really needed him. I could have jumped out of the way the next instant myself."

LEADING QUESTIONS * Are people sometimes like Darrin in their response to the story of Jesus' Passion and death? * Are we — or you — at least a bit like Darrin? Do we think, "I know, Jesus died for our sins and opened the gates of heaven, but it gets boring hearing about it every year"? * If we were to ask Jesus in person, "How can I ever thank you?" what do you think he would say? * *Has he* said anything about that?

DIRECTIONS TO EXPLORE * Not getting caught up in a mob mentality, bent on wreaking injustice and harm toward others who are different in any way. * Accepting unfair, disappointing or painful situations that we cannot change and offering them for the good of others. * The power of accepted suffering (Col 1:24, 2 Cor 12:9-10). * Not seeking revenge or holding a grudge. * Coming to the aid of those who are weak or powerless. * Doing for others what they cannot do for themselves. * Loving someone afflicted with self-doubt until that person is able to love him or herself.

HOMILY

Pat Marrin

We Must Decide

Luke's account of the Passion of Jesus contains a number of poignant moments that show how what happens to Jesus forces others to make decisions. The majority of the disciples will pledge their loyalty at the Last Supper, then run away when the police corner Jesus in the garden. Peter boasts of his steadfastness, then denies Jesus when confronted. Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss. Pilate seeks to avoid condemning a man he thinks is innocent — first by sending him to Herod, who mocks and beats Jesus; by appealing to the crowd to choose him over Barabbas; and finally, to placate the Sanhedrin, by having him tortured and flogged.

Luke seems to want to exonerate the Romans of Jesus' death as the early church seeks a place in the Roman world. But in the end, the best he can do is show the pressure a cowardly Pilate was under as he gave in to the mob and handed Jesus over to be crucified, a form of punishment only Rome could inflict.

Would we have stood by Jesus in his darkest hour if it would have gotten us arrested, tortured, even killed? We know the end of the story, and so we imagine our heroic response. The disciples saw the full force of religious and civil condemnation fall on Jesus, and they pulled back and let him go down alone. Luke cites Isaiah 53:12, "He was counted among the wicked," to convey the spell cast over the scene in which good becomes evil and innocence becomes guilt in the eyes of everyone. Jesus is the messiah in one moment and a terrorist in the next. How many holy and heroic people in history have been vilified under the same fear-driven verdict used to justify Jesus' death: "Isn't it bet-

ter for one man to die than for the whole system to fall?" Think of Oscar Romero, assassinated this month 30 years ago; think of the four churchwomen, the Jesuits and their companions murdered in El Salvador. At the time, they were "communists, enemies of the people, liars and agitators" deserving of death. We honor them today, but would we have accompanied them into the darkness of hate and violence they endured in life?

Gospel formation during Holy Week, year after year, is meant to deepen our sense of discipleship, our conviction that we will not turn away when crisis comes. We will publicly declare our faith in Jesus. By entering the reading of the Passion, identifying with both its heroes and cowards, we remind ourselves of our own complicity in the denial, betrayal and flight from Jesus in his hour of need. It is the same escape we all make as we read the newspaper or watch the news in order to distance ourselves from the suffering others are enduring all around us because of injustice and poverty and wars waged in our name.

We will stand by you; we will never abandon you. We will protect you, even die for you, if necessary.

This powerful, introspective and imaginative engagement of the story of Jesus' final days and hours is a good thing. Even better is carrying our participation in its ritual reenactment into our everyday lives, where Jesus can be found everywhere in the same logic of expediency: Isn't it better for this or that innocent victim to be lost to protect the status quo?

Now it is our turn to proclaim our love for Jesus. The pressure is on, and we must decide.