



The Lenten Journey to Calvary and Resurrection

A Bible Study for Faith Sharing Groups

For Liturgical Year 2014 Cycle A and RCIA any year

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Ash Wednesday

How healing will your Lent be?

March 5, 2014

Read:

Joel 2:12-18

Ps 51:3-6, 12-14, 17

2 Corinthians 5:20 – 6:2

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Reflect:

What needs to be resurrected in your life?

For Easter to be more than just a day of colored eggs, fattening chocolates and big dinners, Lent needs to be more than just 40 days of obligatory sacrifices like meatless pizza on Fridays.

To experience the joy and power of resurrection, we have to take a journey through the experience of mourning and repentance. We have to experience the powerlessness of death: the death of our selfishness, the death of our worldliness, the death of behaviors that are not Christ-like.

In today's first reading, God beckons: "Return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning." Fasting is worthwhile only if it improves our self-discipline so that we can resist sin and grow in holiness. We're hypocrites, like Jesus describes in in today's Gospel passage, if fasting produces no inner changes.

What will your journey through Lent be like this year? What daily exercises will promote greater holiness? Here's a suggestion: Identify one fault – just one for starters – and choose a daily activity or an abstinence for the duration of Lent that will help you overcome this behavior.

Tell God about this fault. He is beckoning: "Return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning."

The readings from Joel and Psalm 51 remind us that God is merciful toward those who recognize their sin-

fulness and regret it so much that they're truly motivated to change. Dealing with our need to change can feel overwhelming and shameful, but if we keep our focus on God's mercy, we feel helped, healed, and finally resurrected.

By identifying and working on just one sinful tendency (choosing one selfish behavior or one fear or one flaw or one unloving habit as our Lenten project), we can give it to Jesus, and by the end of Lent nail it to his cross

and hear him offer it to God as he cries out, "Father forgive them....!" It will die with Jesus, and we'll be resurrected to a new life, a new level of holiness with Jesus.

On Ash Wednesday, as you receive and wear your ashes, do it fully awake and aware of your need for forgiveness and your goal of overcoming a significant sin by Easter.

Why do we keep the black smudges on our foreheads all day? Not to win the admiration of others. It's a sign that we know we need to change! Otherwise, we should do as Jesus said: "When you fast, see to it that you ... wash your face" so that no one but God will know what you are doing.



My goal for Lent this year is:

1st Sunday of Lent

March 9, 2014

Read:

Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7

Ps 51:3-6, 12-13, 17

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

Reflect:

How do you deal with temptation? That's the personal challenge given to us by the Word of God on the first Sunday of Lent. And so we begin our journey with Jesus, traveling to the holiest place we can reach at this point in our lives.

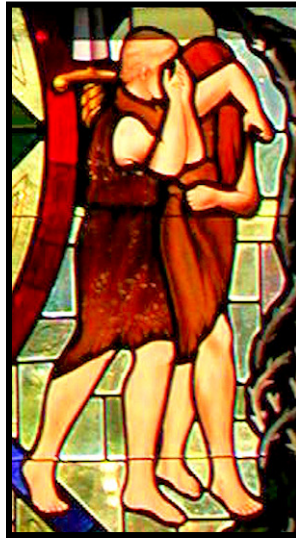
This Lent is like no other Lent. Last year, you had different needs, different areas of growth, different levels of insight and understanding. Much has happened since then, and all of it is a preparation for what the Lord is going to do in your life right now.

What victory do you need this year? What needs to be resurrected? To get there, Jesus will lead you through the cross of penance and self-denial, into his tomb, and out into God's light where his love provides healing and new life.

During Lent – and every time we make sacrifices and connect our sufferings to the Passion of Christ – we follow Jesus to the cross and to resurrection. This involves seeing our own crosses in a new light, for the Calvary Road is the only way to reach the victories that we yearn to experience.

If we want Easter to be more than just a holiday of colored eggs, chocolate bunnies and big dinners, we have to make Lent more than just 40 days of enduring an annoying, obligatory sacrifice, eating meatless pizza on Fridays, and going to an occasional extra event at church.

If we want to experience the power of resurrection, we have to experience the power of mourning and repenting from our sinfulness. In other words, we have to experience the powerlessness of death – the death of our selfishness, the death of our worldliness, the death of our behaviors that are not like Christ's.



Questions for Faith Sharing:

1. In the story from Genesis, what did Adam and Eve need to die to (let go of, put aside, or reject) in order to resist the Original Sin? Why didn't they?
2. In the reading from Romans, we hear about the abundant grace and the gift of justification that Jesus provided to each of us when he died on the cross. How does this grace and justification give us life? In other words, how does God help us to resist sin?
3. Looking at the Gospel passage, what did Jesus have to die to in the desert so that he could say no to temptation?

Question for Personal Reflection:

What can you do this week to die to self? For example, think of a good deed you can do that's the opposite of what your selfishness wants you to do. How will this spiritual exercise make it easier to resist sin?

2nd Sunday of Lent

March 16, 2014

Read:

Genesis 12:1-4a

Ps 33:4-5, 18-20, 22

2 Timothy 1:8b-10

Matthew 17:1-9



Reflect:

Atop Mount Tabor, the pure light of Christ was revealed, as seen in this Gospel reading. The Father said, "This is my beloved Son; *listen to him.*"

The transfiguration is repeated every time we listen to him and allow our faith to be enlightened more today than it was yesterday. Now it is we who are transfigured! We are transformed into our true identity. What is our true identity? It's our innermost being, which was created in the image of God and baptized into the likeness of God.

We enjoy life much more when we live according to our true identity. For example, how do you feel when you're impatient? Not so good, right? That's because God is patient (see 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 for a description of his true identity and yours), and when we are patient, we are much happier.

During Lent, by humbly examining how Christ-like we are and repenting from our sins, we let his light consume the darkness within us.

Jesus left his mountaintop experience to fulfill his calling. Following Christ, we too leave our mountaintops to do what God has gifted us to do. Although there is, as the reading from Timothy points out, hardship in living a holy life, we can be comforted by the fact that after every Calvary there is always an Easter. We can rely on "the strength that comes from God."

Listen. Can you hear what God is saying about you? It's the same words he spoke about Jesus on Mount Tabor: "This is my beloved child; listen to him/her." What are you saying as Christ's partner in ministry?

Questions for Faith Sharing:

1. As you read the passage from Genesis, how does it feel to think that others could "find a blessing in you"? How does Jesus bless others through you?
2. Timothy reminds us of our holiness. Recall a time when you were enlightened by a new understanding of the faith. How did that change your behavior?
3. In the Gospel story, because the Father was so pleased with his Son, he affirmed him publicly. How do you know when the Father is pleased with you?

Question for Personal Reflection:

What's going on in your life that you would like Jesus to transfigure?
What will you do this week to expose it to Jesus' healing light?

3rd Sunday of Lent

March 23, 2014

Read:

Exodus 17:3-7

Ps 95:1-2, 6-9

Romans 5:1-2, 5-8

John 4:5-42



Reflect:

What are you thirsty for? Thirst is what happens when we lack something vital. Water is essential for our physical survival, and our bodies signal us when it's time to drink fluids to stay healthy.

Likewise, water is necessary for our spiritual survival, albeit a different sort of water – the living water, which we first received from the baptismal water that purifies us for eternal life. This living water is a holy water that enables us to have abundant life in Christ.

The Holy Spirit is the Giver of Life. One of the biblical symbols that represents the presence of God's Spirit is life-giving water. Therefore, we can surmise that Jesus wanted to give the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Samaritan woman. Why? It would still be a while before the Holy Spirit descended upon everyone at Pentecost.

She needed the truth; the Holy Spirit is Truth, and Jesus wanted to give her whatever she needed to repent and receive salvation and then share this new life with the people around her.

We only get thirsty when we haven't had enough to drink. Spiritual thirst shows itself in many forms: addictions, loneliness, despair, frustration, self-indulgence, or any other feeling or behavior that's triggered when we lack something that we need or want.

And why would we lack anything spiritually? Because, like the woman at the well, we sometimes fail to realize that Christ is with us. We need to receive a spiritual healing.

How does God give us this healing? He pours his love into us with all sufficiency, but to drink of it, we have to listen openly, like that woman, ready to be changed by the truth.

Questions for Faith Sharing:

1. In the first reading, why did a physical thirst turn into a sin? How does this still happen today?
2. In Romans 5, grace and hope are mentioned as gifts we receive when we have been "justified by faith" (i.e., when we've repented of our sins and sought forgiveness through Jesus). How do grace and hope quench our thirsts? How do they help us resist sin?
3. The woman at the well eagerly received what Jesus said. Even though he confronted her about her sins, she drank it all in and then, without shame, excitedly told others about her encounter with the Messiah. What need was filled by the truth? What does this teach about how we can help others hear the truth?

Question for Personal Reflection:

What sin or unhealthy habit do you need to overcome so that Jesus is free to quench your thirsts? What will you do this week to hand it over to Christ?

4th Sunday of Lent

March 30, 2014

Read:

1 Samuel 16:1b,6-7,10-13a

Psalms 23:1-6

Ephesians 5:8-14

John 9:1-41



Questions for Faith Sharing:

1. In the first reading, God makes it clear that he sees what we cannot see when we're focused on external evidence. Think of a time when you looked deeper or beyond the obvious. How did that change you?
2. In Ephesians 5, we read that we have become light in the Lord. Name some of the good fruits that come from the ability to see what Jesus is doing in your life.
3. The Gospel reading illustrates that those who think they can see the truth are very often blind, and those who acknowledge their blindness become able to see clearly. Why does this happen? How has it happened to you?

Reflect:

Conversion to Christ is a process. The blind man in the Gospel reading exemplifies this journey into faith. Notice that at first he did not go to Jesus. Jesus came to him. The man responded by waiting to see what would happen and then by obeying Jesus.

Conversion begins when Jesus seeks us out and we make ourselves available to his touch. He then opens our eyes to the truth, but we don't immediately understand.

When the man's neighbors asked about his cure, he did not yet understand who Jesus was; he thought of him as just a man.

Then, the pressure of listening to the Pharisees argue about who Jesus was caused him to give it more thought. He concluded that Jesus must be a prophet, which for the Jews was a highly esteemed, holy vocation.

Next, as the Pharisees treated him more roughly and raised the possibility of expelling him from the synagogue if he claimed that Jesus was the Christ, he began to wonder whether it might be true. Their reasons for hating Jesus became the eye-openers that cured his spiritual blindness.

Finally, Jesus sought him out again, this time to minister to him in response to the mistreatment he had suffered from the Pharisees. In this act of caring, the man could see who Jesus really was.

Conversion – the purification of our spiritual vision – takes place in the fire of our sufferings as we recognize the love and concern that God has for us.

Question for Personal Reflection:

Name the areas of your life where there is confusion from a lack of understanding. Perhaps you're having a hard time seeing the good in someone. Maybe you're worried about the future. What will you do this week that will help you see it from God's perspective?

5th Sunday of Lent

April 6, 2014

Read:

Ezekiel 37:12-14

Ps 130:1-8

Romans 8:8-11

John 11:1-45



Questions for Faith Sharing:

1. We can personalize the first reading by understanding that God will open our graves (whatever is dead inside of us) and will place his Spirit of Life within us. How does the Holy Spirit help us discover healing and hope amidst our daily sufferings and dyings?
2. In the scripture from Romans, we are reminded again of the Holy Spirit within us. Since the Spirit is alive in you, what affect does this have on your Lenten journey? What is being purified, strengthened, and renewed?
3. In the Gospel, Jesus proves his power over death just before he enters Jerusalem and heads toward Calvary. How does this prove to you that your own sufferings and sacrifices will not lead to permanent disaster?

Reflect:

Lent is not about suffering and sacrifice. It's a corridor to new life.

Good Friday is not about evil and pain and death. It's the door that Jesus opens to invite us into that new life.

Yes, suffering is part of the Lenten journey (which can be experienced at any time of the year). Yes, Lent includes the sacrifices of fasting and abstinence, almsgiving and extra time in church. But these are just vehicles for the trip.

God uses our sufferings (if we let him) to help us grow in compassion, persistence, and ministry. Our sacrifices help us learn discipline (which is discipleship) so that we can purify our will and grow stronger in holiness. But the trip is not the destination.

Lent is all about reaching the resurrection: renewing our faith, entering a new life free of old sins, reconciling damaged relationships, and living in the Spirit of God more than we ever did before.

Which day is more important to your faith: Good Friday or Easter Sunday? That horrid day on Calvary was absolutely necessary for Easter, but we are living in the resurrection! Catholics are an Easter people. This means that nothing bad can ever happen to us that will not be transformed into blessings if Jesus is the Lord of our lives.

He proved himself to be the Resurrection and the Life by displaying his power over life and death. Now he wants to prove it again – to you and to all those who are watching.

Question for Personal Reflection:

What needs to be resurrected in your life? What will you do this week to accept the death of what has ended so that you can prepare for the new life that Jesus is preparing for you?

Passion Sunday

April 13, 2014

Read:

Procession: Matt. 21:1-11

Isaiah 50:4-7

Ps 22:8-9,17-20,23-24

Philippians 2:6-11

Matthew 26:14--27:66

Reflect:

The word "passion" has powerful implications. Theologically, we use it to describe the suffering love that Jesus endured for each of us when he was beaten, mocked and crucified as he willingly took onto himself the punishment and destructive forces of our sins.

The world counterfeits the word "passion" by applying it to strong feelings of romantic, even lustful, attraction.

We also use this word to refer to a strong motivation to do something that we enjoy or greatly care about, and this is why we can say that Jesus cared "passionately" about us while enduring The Passion.

The strong love that Jesus exhibited in his ministry and on Good Friday is a lesson on what it means to have "compassion" for others. We walk with them in their sufferings; we "suffer with" them. This is passionate love in its holiest form.

Read the scriptures for Passion Sunday with an eye on how they reveal Jesus' passionate love for *you*.

See yourself in the passion of the people who enthusiastically welcomed Jesus as well as in those who rejected and denied him.

Consider how much compassion Jesus must have felt for you when he subjected himself to the excruciating pains of his final hours. He did this for you despite how much you've hurt him through any lack of compassion for others. Rejoice in his passionate love for you! This will empower you to repent and grow stronger in holy love for others.



Questions for Faith Sharing:

1. Looking at the reading from Isaiah, what are some of the ways that good Christians sometimes beat on Jesus, pluck his beard, and spit on him?
2. How does your answer to #1 explain why Jesus emptied himself for you, as the reading from Philippians describes?
3. In what ways does the Passion of Jesus minister to us in our sufferings today?

Question for Personal Reflection:

Bring to mind the most painful way you are suffering compassionately with or for someone else. Connect this to what Jesus did. How does this help you feel more intimately involved with God's salvation plan? How does it make your life a modern Gospel?

Holy Thursday

Washing feet with Jesus

April 17, 2014

Read:

Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14

Ps 116:12-13, 15-18

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13:1-15



Reflect:

Why did Jesus wash the feet of his disciples? Not because they were too lazy to handle their own hygiene and as their servant he wanted to make life easy for them! Rather, he gave them (and us) a model to imitate.

Naturally, we want Jesus to make our lives easier. Isn't that the purpose behind many of our prayers? Well, surprise! We do get what we ask for, but not the way we had imagined. When we imitate Jesus, it's the way we cope with the difficulties of life that becomes easier.

Have you washed anyone's feet lately? Maybe you haven't literally soaped up a friend's smelly feet as a sign of your unconditional love, but I'm sure you have given of yourself in a foot-washing way.

To wash the feet of others is to love them even when they don't deserve your love.

To wash the feet of others is to do good to them even if they don't return the favor.

To wash the feet of others is to consider their needs as important as your own.

To wash the feet of others is to forgive them even if they don't say, "I'm sorry."

To wash the feet of others is to serve them even when the task is unpleasant.

To wash the feet of others is to let them know you care when they feel downtrodden or burdened.

To wash the feet of others is to be generous with what you have.

To wash the feet of others is to turn the cheek instead of retaliating when you're treated unfairly.

To wash the feet of others is to make adjustments in your plans so you can serve their needs.

To wash the feet of others is to serve them with humility and not with any hope of reward.

Notice the posture of Jesus. He knelt. Imagine Jesus kneeling in front of you now, lowering himself to the level of your feet and tenderly ministering to your needs. He is in fact doing this, right now, today. And he will do it again and again, as often as you need him to care about you!

He is asking you to go and do likewise: Be the hands of Jesus that wash the feet of the people around you. You are the answer to their prayers!

By serving others, we gain understanding of what Jesus did for us 2000 years ago – and we become more observant of how he's ministering to us. We meet Jesus in the dirty feet that we lower ourselves to clean.

With Jesus, I wash the feet of:

Good Friday

What did Jesus do for you?

April 18, 2014

Read:

Isaiah 52:13 -- 53:12

Ps 31:2, 6, 12-13, 15-16, 17, 25

Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9

John 18:1 -- 19:42

Reflect:

When we read today's Gospel passage, we can ask ourselves: Has Jesus done enough for me? Do I have any prayer requests that have either gone unanswered or are not being answered satisfactorily? Do I suppose it's because he doesn't care? Have I been hurt and broken-hearted without getting enough healing and hope from him? Has Jesus done too little to make me happy? Do I feel like the reason why I've been treated unfairly is because Jesus likes someone else more than me?

Let's be honest. From time to time, we all fall victim to the mistaken assumption that life doesn't go the way it "should" because of God. He's being mean or uncaring or distant. Maybe we're not always conscious of this, but it's there, under the surface, affecting our behaviors and our level of faith.

The key to getting out of this self-imposed prison is to meditate upon what Jesus did for us on the original Good Friday. Since he was willing to do that for us, is he not also willing to do everything else that's good for us?

Everything else is easy for him in comparison to the cross, which he endured for *your* sake! Take very personally what he went through: For you he suffered abuses. For you he endured ridicule and torture. For you he accepted an excruciatingly painful death.

Of course he cares about you! Of course he wants to provide for you and give to you everything that you need, from the smallest blessing to the biggest healing (which is the healing of your soul).



By attending the Good Friday services in church and by listening to the Passion of Christ while looking at the cross, we can remind ourselves – and let Jesus himself remind us – that we really do matter to him, and enormously so!

In fact, he cares about you so much that he refuses to take short-cuts and halfway measures or to settle for second best. His strategy is to fill all your needs (even the ones you're not aware of) and resolve all of your problems by implementing the best possible plan for you, even if you don't understand it for a while.

Jesus cares about all my prayer requests, including...

Easter Sunday

April 20, 2014

Read:

Acts 10:34a, 37-43

Ps 118:1-2,16-17,22-23

Col 3:1-4 or 1 Cor 5:6b-8

John 20:1-9



Reflect:

Are you ready to proclaim the Good News about how Jesus has helped you? What holds you back? Do you hesitate because you don't yet understand how the deaths in your life (the sacrifices, the lost hope, the broken relationships, etc.) have been resurrected into new life?

Such hesitation was the mental state of the disciples on the first Easter morning, as depicted in the Gospel of John.

The attitude of Peter in the reading from Acts is quite a contrast! The disciples now know their calling: They were empowered and commissioned to testify that Jesus is the Savior, and they fully embraced this vocation.

Do you understand how Jesus is turning your tragedies and other difficulties into triumphs and great blessings?

To "testify" means to share the truth based on your own experiences. Peter specifically proclaimed that everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins. Of course he did! Peter knew first-hand what it's like to need and then receive Christ's forgiveness.

We will not understand much about how our sufferings have led us to a new and blessed life until we start talking about it. The first inklings of insight awaken when we discuss it within our close, holy friendships, like Mary of Magdala did when she ran to Peter and John after discovering the empty tomb. They, in turn, told the other disciples.

It was while they were together – in community – that Jesus appeared and revealed his resurrection to

them. Later, after having lots of time to talk about it with friends, the Holy Spirit empowered them to go out and evangelize the world by sharing their experiences with anyone willing to listen.

Questions for Faith Sharing:

1. The empty tomb doesn't immediately make sense. What has been confusing to you during your faith journey? What has caused you to feel empty and frightened? Where might Jesus be in this?
2. How have your own experiences of being forgiven enabled you to feel more compassionate toward others? Does that change the way you talk to them about God and church and other spiritual or moral issues?
3. What is the biggest change that Jesus has brought into your life? What were you like before this change? How did God intervene? What were the results? This is your testimony. Practice sharing it by telling the story to your community of friends.

Question for Personal Reflection:

Name one person who could benefit from hearing about your faith experiences. What will you do to share your testimony with him or her?