

## Third Sunday in Lent

### *Old Testament Lesson: Exodus 17: 1-7*

You will all recall the episode of the **burning bush**, where God appeared to Moses in the form of a burning bush while Moses was attending sheep in the Midian desert. God had told Moses that he had selected **him** to return to Egypt to lead the Children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt to a land flowing with milk and honey, the land 500 years **earlier** promised to Abraham. At the time that our reading for today begins, we find that the Children of Israel have crossed the Red Sea into Midian, leaving the army of Pharaoh **drowned**, as they headed to Mt. Horeb. From a census of fighting men taken later, it may be deduced conservatively that there are over **2.5 million** people, plus flocks and herds, headed toward Mt. Horeb. It should be no surprise, then, that they could not possibly have taken with them enough **water** to supply humans and animals during this journey. So **Moses** is blamed for this situation, accusing him—and **God**—of bringing them out of Egypt solely to let them **die** of thirst in the desert. What the people do **not** appreciate is that this situation is a **test**: a test that God is administering to see whether they **really trust** Him to keep his promise of bringing them to that Promised Land. But God has a plan all ready, instructing Moses to take with him the leaders of the Children of Israel and go to the foot of Mt. Horeb, there to strike a **rock**. When he does so, a **river** of water comes out of the rock, suppling the people and animals for over the next year as they met with God at Mt. Horeb. God provided, and God kept his promise.

But something for **us** to consider: If **we** had been in that group traveling toward Mt. Horeb and found ourselves without water, would **we** have believed God?

-----

### *Epistle Lesson: Romans 5: 1-8*

St. Paul, writing to the Christians in Rome, expands on the concept that we are saved by **God's grace** through **faith**. Consequently, we not only **rejoice** in the hope of **sharing** in God's glory, but we also rejoice in our **sufferings**, trials, and tribulations. Why? Because they produce **endurance**, which produces **godly character**, which in turn produces that **faith and hope** in God's love. As we then look back at our Old Testament reading, we can now see clearly that through the trial of **lack** of water, God was trying to produce endurance, godly character, and

hope in the love that God had promised to the **Children of Israel** that would sustain them in **faith** in the years to come.

St. Paul concludes his discussion here by pointing out that Jesus died for the ungodly, while we were **still sinners**. Or perhaps more bluntly, while we were an **abomination** in his sight and completely **unloveable**. Surely, if **He** did that for **us**, we should be able to trust Him in **all** things, even in the midst of **our** trials and tribulations.

-----

### Gospel Lesson: John 4: 5-26 (27-30, 39-42)

The story of Jesus talking to the Samaritan woman at the well is familiar to many. But what is unfamiliar to almost all is **why** the Jews avoided dealings with Samaritans. We have to go back to approximately 720 B.C., when the King of **Assyria** attacked and conquered the **Northern** Kingdom, whose capital was Samaria. He captured **all** the inhabitants of the Northern Kingdom and **dispersed** them throughout his empire, which included parts of present-day Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. He then planted citizens of **his** empire, **Assyrians**, into the **Northern** Kingdom to replace the Israelites. When God allowed **lions** to attack these foreigners, the King sent an Israeli **priest** to teach the foreigners how to worship the **true** God. This they did, although they continued their worship of their own **idols**. Obviously, the citizens of the **Southern** Kingdom, the **Jews**, refused to accept these people —now called **Samaritans**—as true worshippers of God.

With this background, it can now be appreciated why, when Jesus asks the woman of Samaria for a drink of water, she responds rather **testily**. A discussion ensues, in which Jesus offers the woman **living** water that will result in **eternal life**. He then reveals that he knows a lot more about her **personal** life than she would have liked anyone to know, and in response she offers that she knows the **Messiah** would tell people all things. It is **then** that Jesus clearly identifies **himself** as that Messiah.

Although our lesson for today ends here, we have to note that this discussion brought about **faith** in the Samaritan woman, who returned to her town to bring her townspeople to hear Jesus as well. As a result, many of **these** Samaritans believed that Jesus was indeed that Savior of the world, and put **their** faith and trust in Him.

## Fourth Sunday in Lent

### **Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 42: 14-21**

Recall that Isaiah was a prophet to the Southern Kingdom, or **Judah**, from around 740 to 695 B.C., surrounding the time of the dispersion of the **Northern** Kingdom throughout Assyria. He began his ministry during the reign of King **Ahaz**, the **Southern** Kingdom's version of the **Northern** Kingdom's evil King **Ahab**. In today's reading, God charges the people of the **Southern (and Northern)** Kingdom of **being blind**, but he then states that he will **lead and guide** them, making the **rough places plain** before their feet (remember that phrase from Handel's *Messiah*?). But despite God reaching out to his messenger (referring in this case to God's **chosen** people, the Children of Israel), they **still refused** to open their eyes and ears so that they could be saved—and consequently save others, and went back to their **idols**.

---

### **Epistle Lesson: Ephesians 5: 8-14**

St. Paul observes that the Ephesians were once **spiritually blind** (in darkness), but now are able to walk in the light of **God**. But he also notes that **walking in faith** is not a single event but rather a **way of life** in which their **deeds** reflect all that is good, right, and true. He therefore admonishes the Ephesians (and **us!**) to avoid and reprove **all** the works of darkness (the desires and works of unbelievers), so that unbelievers can arise from the **dead** through one's witness, and the **light of Jesus** may shine in **their** hearts as well.

---

### **Gospel Lesson: John 9: 1-41**

The disciples (and many people today!) operate on the assumption that if someone is **sick** or has some kind of infirmity, it must be due to his/her **sin**, or maybe their **ancestors'** sin. Jesus quickly **dispenses** with that idea when he and his disciples encounter a man who has been **blind** from **birth**. When Jesus **heals** the man by making some mud, placing it on the man's eyes, and having him wash his eyes in a nearby pool, the **Pharisees** immediately insist that Jesus must be a **sinner**, since he **healed** on the **Sabbath** day (violating the Pharisee's rules). When the (formerly) blind man suggests instead that Jesus must be a **prophet of God**, the Pharisees excommunicate him. Jesus, aware of this, tracks

down the man and asks him whether he believes in the **Messiah** (*i.e.*, the Son of Man). When the man asks who this man is, so that he can believe in him, Jesus clearly **identifies Himself** as that Messiah, but then comments that He came into the world not only to **make blind eyes see** but also to **cause seeing eyes to become (spiritually) blind** (*i.e.* those who have heard the Gospel message but still refuse to believe).

---

### **Alternate Gospel Lesson: John 9: 1-7, 13-17, 34-39**

While Jesus and his disciples are moving around Jerusalem, they encounter a man who was born **blind**. To satisfy their curiosity, the disciples ask Jesus whether it was the man's or his parent's **sin** that caused him to be born blind, revealing the **supposition** that every sickness, disease, or malady is the direct result of some specific sin. In other words, there was a **cause-and-effect** relationship: if you have some problem, it is because you sinned. The same argument was presented to **Job** by his three "friends." And the image left is that of a **vindictive** god. Jesus straightens out the disciples' thinking.

But then he stops to makes some mud, puts it on the blind man's eyes, and tells him to wash it off in a nearby pool. Remember, now, that this is a **Sabbath** day. So when the man washes as instructed and regains his sight, the Pharisees are quick to pick up on that, since Jesus obviously had to do **work** to make the mud that somehow resulted in the healing of the blind man. The Jews then begin an **investigation**, first **interrogating** the man, who tells them what happened; and then calling in the man's **parents** to verify that he indeed had been born blind. When asked **how** he received his sight, the parents prudently **defer**, saying that the man is of age to speak for himself. This is because the Jews had already **agreed to excommunicate** from the synagogue anyone who acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah. It is the old story: those in **power** exclude from their company anyone who does not accept **their** beliefs. And today that can mean not just exclusion from a **church**, but denying of **tenure**, loss of **job**, and many **other** penalties.

Next, the Jews call in the healed man again, this time **prompting** him to tell a different story. When he persists in his original story, and then lectures the Jews on their **hypocrisy and unbelief**, the man gets excommunicated. But when the man encounters Jesus soon afterward, he is rewarded by having Jesus announce to him that he is seeing his **Messiah** with his new seeing eyes.

## Fifth Sunday in Lent

### Old Testament Lesson: Ezekiel 37: 1-14

Ezekiel was a member of the *priestly* family (descendants of **Aaron**, Moses' older brother), and a *prophet* of God to the citizens of the **Southern** Kingdom who had been taken into Babylonian captivity. After being displaced from their homeland for many years, it is easy to see how they would have *despaired* of ever being able to return to their homeland, of enjoying the peace and prosperity accorded to the nations that loved and served God. That deep despair could be described as *dry bones*, as the bones of those who had died and been bleached by the sun for decades.

This is the picture that God presents to Ezekiel, a *valley* filled with dry bones. God's question to Ezekiel is whether these bones can become *living* people again. God then instructs Ezekiel to command the bones to *live again*, and when Ezekiel does so, the bones assemble themselves into skeletons which then take on flesh, resulting in a large army of people. God then instructs Ezekiel to *command breath* to cause these people to come back to life, and it *happens!* God then explains what this all represents: these bones that come back to life are the whole house of **Israel**—which may refer to the **Old Testament** Children of Israel being restored to their homeland, or it may refer to *all* believers being raised from the dead to live in God's heavenly kingdom. The bottom line is that God gave life in the *beginning*, and He can bring *back* to life *anyone* any time He wants. There *is* a resurrection of the dead!

---

**Epistle Lesson: Romans 8: 1-11**

In this reading, St. Paul explains the **legal** basis for believers being declared **righteous, or innocent**. He starts out with a simple statement that whoever is in Christ, that is, **accepts** the fact that Jesus lived a righteous life and subsequently took God's just punishment for **our sins, that** person is not condemned by God. How does this work? St. Paul explains that there are two classes of people: those who **have not** accepted God's provision for our sinful condition and are therefore subject to the law of **sin**, which states that sinners receive eternal death; and those who **have** accepted God's free offer to have Christ's death be a substitution for our deserved death, and are therefore subject to the law of the **Spirit**, which gives us eternal life.

Then St. Paul tries a different approach. He again describes two classes of people: those who live according to the **flesh**, who are focused on **self** and **their own pleasure**, and who believe that they are capable of deciding what are or are **not** righteous deeds; and those who are **focused on God** and **his** will, and tune their minds to the voice of the **Spirit** who directs their thoughts, words, and deeds. St. Paul then makes clear that those who live according to the **flesh**, or worldly ways, are **hostile** to God, will not submit to God's will, and are **incapable** of pleasing God. The only end available to them is eternal **death**.

**If**, on the other hand, we listen to the **Spirit** of God, even though our body still yields to sin, **our spirit** is now alive in Christ; consequently, since that Spirit raised Christ's body from the dead, so that same Spirit will also raise **our** mortal bodies from the dead on the last day because we have in effect **exchanged** our own righteousness for Christ's righteousness, and Christ has accepted our **guilt** for his innocence.

---

**Gospel Lesson: John 11: 1-45 (46-53)**

Today's reading is the familiar story of Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead. Now, Jesus knew several days earlier that Lazarus was dying, yet he delayed coming to him to ensure that Lazarus **was** dead by the time Jesus **did** arrive. In his ensuing conversation with Mary, Lazarus' brother, Jesus elicits from her not only a confession of **faith in the resurrection** of the dead, but also a **confession** that she believes that Jesus is indeed the **Messiah**. As a follow-up to that conversation, Jesus commands the tomb to be opened. And when he prays to the Father, he points out that he delayed coming so that the people standing around him would **also** believe that he **was** the Messiah sent by the Father. Upon Jesus' command, Lazarus is **raised** from the dead, and many standing around **do** believe. But others hurry to the **Pharisees** to report Jesus' most **recent** miracle. The Pharisees are worried that Jesus will become the **leader** of the Jewish people, displacing **them** from their lucrative positions. But **Caiaphas**, the high priest, comes up with a plan: **murder** Jesus so that the people cannot follow him any longer, rather than have the **Romans** dispose the Pharisees and priests from their positions. But note **why** Caiaphas said that: even though he was **unrighteous** and a **murderer**, God spoke this prophecy **through** him that Jesus would die for **all** people, because God was honoring the **office** that he held. Thus Jesus' coming death and resurrection would make possible the resurrection to eternal life of **all** who believe that Jesus is the promised Savior.

---

**Alternate Gospel Lesson: John 11: 17-27 and 38-53**

As our story begins today, we find Jesus and his disciples on the **east** side of the Jordan River, in the area where John the Baptist had his ministry, because the Jews were again after Jesus to arrest and kill him. While there, they receive word from **Mary and Martha**, Lazarus' two sisters, that Jesus' close friend, Lazarus, is deathly ill. Implicit in the information is a request for Jesus to come and **heal** him. But Jesus defers for two days, then announces that he is going to **awaken** Lazarus. But Jesus has to clarify for the disciples that Lazarus is **already dead**, but that he is going to "**awaken**" him. Remembering Jesus' last encounter with the Jews in Jerusalem, and recognizing that Bethany is less than two miles from Jerusalem, the disciples agree to go with Jesus and die **with** him. By the time Jesus gets over the intervening mountain range to get to Bethany, Lazarus has already been dead for **four days**. But Martha expresses her **faith** in a **resurrection**, to which Jesus responds that **he** is the **resurrection and the life**.

Martha then calls Mary, who also expresses **her** faith by saying that if Jesus had been there earlier, Lazarus would **not** have died. Jesus then has the sisters lead him to the tomb and instructs them to not only have the tomb **opened** but also to continue to **believe** in him. And following a short conversation of Jesus with the Father, Jesus **commands** Lazarus to come out, which he does, resulting in many of the people in Bethany—and elsewhere—**believing** in Jesus. But this poses a serious problem for the **Jews** in Jerusalem. If the people follow Jesus instead of them, the Romans will **fire** them. The solution is provided by God himself. God honors the **office** of the high priest by putting **his** words into the mouth of Caiaphas, the high priest, that Jesus should die **for** the people. Little did he know that **that** was God's planning from the very beginning, that Jesus would die not only for the Jews but also for **all** people.

## Palm Sunday

### **Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 50: 4-9a**

In today's reading, Isaiah, one of God's prophets to the **Southern** Kingdom during the time of the **Northern** Kingdom's demise, delivers a **prophecy** of the **thoughts** of the Messiah at the time of his torture and crucifixion 700 years **later**. Those thoughts include the following:

- Jesus is able to provide **comfort** to those **needing** comfort because his Father had taught him with **similar** trials and tribulations.
- The Father awoke him every morning with new projects, and Jesus **did not rebel** against his Father's directions, even though it meant torture, disgrace, and death.

But then Jesus expresses **His faith** in the Father by stating that the Father is near him as he goes to trial, because there is no one who can declare Jesus guilty.

---

### **Epistle Lesson: Philippians 2: 5-11**

St. Paul delivers a mini sermon on **humility** by noting that Jesus, even though he was **God**, set aside his divine powers in order that he could become a true human being. But not only that, he also **humbled** himself even further by allowing himself to experience death on a cross, possibly the most degrading and painful death that one can experience. But because of Jesus' allowing himself to suffer that death **on behalf of mankind**, God the Father **exalted** him to the highest position in heaven next to Himself, so that at the name of Jesus, **every** knee should bow, whether in heaven or on earth, and **every** person should confess that Jesus the Messiah is **indeed** Lord and Savior, thereby bringing **glory** to God the **Father**.

---

**Gospel Lesson: Matthew 26: 1 - 27: 66**

This reading reports many of the events that transpired as Jesus experienced what we now call Holy Week. Some key events include the following

- Jesus predicts to his disciples that within a few days he will be **crucified**.
- The Jewish religious and secular leaders plot to **kill** Jesus.
- Jesus is **anointed** for his burial with very expensive perfume by a woman in Bethany, and Jesus has to defend her action.
- Judas negotiates the **betrayal** of Jesus with the chief priests.
- During the celebration of the Passover, Jesus identifies **Judas** as the one who would betray him.
- Jesus **institutes** the Lord's Supper.
- Jesus predicts that Peter will **deny** him.
- Jesus spends his last free hours in **prayer** in the Garden of Gethsemane.
- Judas **betrays** Jesus, who is arrested and brought for trial before the Jewish Council, during which Jesus testifies that he is **indeed** the Messiah, the Son of God. On this basis, the Jews declare Jesus guilty of **blasphemy** (claiming to be God) and announce that he is guilty of death.
- Peter denies Jesus, then leaves the Council courtyard crying in bitterness.
- Judas has remorse for betraying Jesus, but **kills** himself.
- Jesus is brought before Pilate, accused of being the **King of the Jews**, to which Jesus readily admits is **true**.
- The Jews belligerently insist that Jesus needs to be **crucified** while the murderer Barabbas should be set **free**, to which Pilate relents.
- Jesus is crucified with two robbers, who along with the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders of the Jewish people, **mock and deride** Jesus by stating that **if** he really were the Son of God, **then** he should be able to come off of the cross and save himself from death.
- From noon until 3 pm, there is **darkness** over **all** the land, at the end of which Jesus indicates that he has experienced the impact of the second death by asking why God the Father has forsaken **him**.
- Immediately after this, at the time of the evening sacrifice, Jesus yields his spirit to God the Father.

- The **curtain** of the temple, a symbol of the separation of mankind from God, is **torn in two** from top to bottom, indicating that **God** had caused the rent because Jesus' death had **appeased** God the Father for the sins of mankind.
  - This event is accompanied by a mighty **earthquake** as well as the raising from the dead of saints, who went into Jerusalem and appeared to many after Jesus' resurrection.
  - The sequence of events causes even the **Centurion** and others to exclaim that Jesus must **indeed** have been the Son of God.
  - Joseph of Arimathea procures the body of Jesus from Pilate so that it can be entombed **before** the onset of the Sabbath Day.
  - The next day the chief priests and the Pharisees implore Pilate to **seal** and guard the tomb of Jesus because they knew **exactly** what he meant when he had said earlier that if they destroyed this temple (*i.e.*, Jesus' body), he would raise it in 3 days.
- 

### **Alternate Gospel Lesson #1: Matthew 27: 11-66**

It is now the morning **after** the Passover, at which celebration Jesus has instituted the Lord's Supper. But since that supper, Judas **betrayed** Jesus, Jesus was **arrested** and brought before the Jewish Council overnight and condemned to death for admitting that he was **indeed** the promised Messiah. **Problem:** the Jews had **no** authority under the Romans to administer the death penalty. So they have to come up with a **scheme** by which the Romans would do that **for** them. So the Jews bring Jesus to Pilate, the Roman governor, accusing him of being the **King** of the Jews, hoping that that accusation would cause Pilate to think that Jesus was an **insurrectionist** to Caesar. When Pilate does ask Jesus whether he **is** the King of the Jews, he must have been surprised that he answered that **yes** he **was!** (But elsewhere it is recorded that Jesus clarifies for Pilate that his kingdom was **not** of **this** world.)

Amazingly, Pilate accepts that answer and sees through the Jews **scheme**. So now **he** has to devise a way to save Jesus. He does this by offering the Jews a **choice** for the release of a prisoner at Passover time, a custom of the Romans to

help keep peace with the Jews. He offers them a choice between Jesus and Barabbas, a known insurrectionist and **murderer**. But the Jews had already considered this possibility, and had instructed the Jewish people to demand the release of **Barabbas** and the crucifixion of **Jesus**. When Pilate **questioned** this choice, the Jewish leaders prompt the crowd to become boisterous, to the point that Pilate feared that a **riot** might develop, which would cause the Romans to question **his** ability to keep the Jews under control.

Pilate gives in, but washes his hands **ceremonially** to indicate that it was not he but **the Jews** that required Jesus' death. The Jews in turn **fully** accept the **responsibility** for Jesus' murder. Then Pilate releases Jesus into the crucifixion process, which starts out with a brutal whipping, mocking and torture by the Roman soldiers, and crucifixion. The soldiers divide up Jesus' clothes, and the Jews triumphantly **mock** Jesus repeatedly.

But after three hours, everything becomes pitch black, and after three more hours of this, Jesus cries out to the Father, asking why he has **forsaken** him, thereby indicating that Jesus has suffered the **second death—separation from God**. Shortly after that, Jesus commits his spirit to the Father, the curtain in the temple dividing the **Most Holy Place** where God dwells, from the **Holy Place** where priests make intercession, is torn from top to bottom, indicating that the sin separating man from God has been removed. In addition, there is an **earthquake**, and tombs are opened, causing the centurion in charge of the crucifixion to exclaim that Jesus truly **was** the Son of God. (Note that **after** Jesus' resurrection, bodies of the **saints** who had been in the tombs now came out and walked around Jerusalem.) But Joseph of Arimathea, the member of the Jewish Council who was a **disciple** of Jesus, asks Pilate for the body of Jesus. He then places the body in his **own** new tomb and closes it with a large stone. But the next day, the Sabbath Day, the Jews come to Pilate to request a guard be placed at the tomb to prevent anyone from stealing the body, because they remembered Jesus **predicting** his own **resurrection** after three days. Pilate tells them to place their **own** guard, which they do, and in addition, seal the tomb.

---

**Alternate Gospel Lesson #2: John 12: 20-43**

Jesus has had a very eventful series of weeks, marked by the raising of **Lazarus** from the dead with the subsequent decision by the Jewish religious leaders to **kill** Jesus because they feared for their jobs with the Romans; the **anointing** of Jesus' feet by Mary, the sister of Lazarus; and the triumphal **entry** of Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. It is at this point that our reading for today begins. Some Greeks (in other words, **Gentiles**) who had come for the Passover wanted to **see** Jesus, causing Jesus to exclaim that, like a seed when planted dies to become something greater and more fruitful, so his **dying** would result in a **fruitful** life for **many** others. Similarly, Jesus notes, whoever wants to **serve** him must be willing to **lose** his life, because by **losing** his life he will receive **greater** life.

When Jesus asks the Father to **glorify** his name, the Father responds by **speaking** from heaven. Jesus explains that this indicates that the hour is at hand when the current ruler of the world will be **deposed** as Jesus is lifted up on the cross. This prompts the crowd to start **quibbling** with Jesus, saying that the **Christ lives forever**, so how can Jesus say that the Christ must die on a cross? Frustrated by their response and their **refusal** to believe him, Jesus warns that he, as the **light of the world** (**John 1:5-6, 9-13; John 8:12; 1 John 1:5-6; Ephesians 5:8-14**), would soon no longer be with them, bringing to remembrance the words of the prophet Isaiah, who prophesied that these people **would not** believe what was revealed to them, and that they **could not** believe because they had **hardened** their hearts, like Pharaoh (**Exodus 9:7, 12**).

Interestingly, John makes a comment about the **hypocrisy** of some of the authorities who, although they believed in Jesus nevertheless would not **admit** to it because they did not want to be **excommunicated** from the synagogue, meaning that the accolades of **man** was more important to them than the accolades of **God**.