

## Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany

### **Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 40: 21-31**

Isaiah, God's messenger to the **Southern** Kingdom around the time of the demise of the **Northern** Kingdom (around 720 B.C.), asks the people of the Southern Kingdom a number of questions dealing with their knowledge and understanding of who God **really** is. The bottom line is that their God is the creator of **all** things, knows **all** of his creatures by name, is in control of **all** events that take place, and knows and understands **everything**.

Under these circumstances, Isaiah asks of the people of the Southern Kingdom, **why** do you accuse God of **not** knowing anything about your problems, that God is **ignoring** you? Isaiah then notes that God is there to **strengthen** the weak, provided that they **wait** for the Him to do it in **His** time. Consequently, the **weak** will be lifted up as on the wings of an **eagle**, and they will **not** become weary when they run, or faint when they walk.

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### **Epistle Lesson: 1 Corinthians 9: 16-27**

Perhaps remembering that at one time he was the **prime** persecutor of the Church, St. Paul describes **why** he is driven to preach the gospel and **win** to Christ as many people as possible. And in order to appeal to **any** and **every** type of person, he puts himself in whomever's **shoes** he is preaching, in order to identify with **them** and they with **him**, all for the sake of sharing the gospel **effectively**. Then St. Paul compares his mission to that of a **race**: he is intent on **winning** that race, so he **disciplines** his body in order to **strengthen** it spiritually, maintaining self control in **all** things, especially in fulfilling the **mission** that God has given him, in effect so that his **words and actions** do not reflect **negatively** on the preaching of the gospel.

Remembering that what we **say** and what we **do** is a message preached to the **world** about who we **really** are as Christians, are we **really** exercising the self control that would reflect **positively** on the gospel?

**Gospel Lesson: Mark 1: 29-39**

Continuing our story from last week, where Jesus taught in the synagogue in **Capernaum**, during the course of which the listeners realized that He spoke with **authority** (that is to say, He **knew** what He was talking about), and during which he cast out a **demon** from one of the listeners. Jesus' **fame** as a consequence spread **rapidly**, because those who wanted to **serve** God would be hindered by a demon focusing them instead on a perpetual **sin**.

As our story begins today, we find Jesus leaving the synagogue to go to the the house of Peter's **mother-in-law**, where Jesus finds her **sick** with a fever. Jesus immediately dealt with the situation by raising her from her bed, whereupon the fever left her and she was able to be a **hostess**. Somehow the news of what Jesus had been doing resulted in the residents of Capernaum bringing to Jesus **all** their sick and those oppressed by demons. Jesus' **compassion** kicks in, and he heals "**many**" (*i.e.*, an untold number) of their illnesses and demon oppression. Again, as we heard last week, Jesus did **not** let the demons speak through their hosts because (1) they **knew** that He was the Messiah, and (2) Jesus did **not** need demons to testify of who He really was.

Such a healing ministry is exhausting, and so we find Jesus heading off to a **desolate** place early the next morning to regain His **strength** for His mission through **prayer** with His Father. As a consequence, He is ready to go on to the **next** towns to **preach** and to free **more** of their demonic drives.

## Transfiguration of Our Lord

### ***Old Testament Lesson: 2 Kings 2: 1-12***

Today's reading catches us up on the event that took place just **before** last week's story about Naaman, the Commander of the Syrian Army. Now we are looking at the **departure** of Elijah, with Elisha succeeding him as God's prophet to the **Northern** Kingdom, or **Israel**.

The story begins with Elijah traveling first from Gilgal to Bethel, then to Jericho, and then across the Jordan River. Each time, Elijah tells Elisha, his **protege**, to **stay** where they are while he goes on. But Elisha refuses, sticking close to Elijah, because he knows that **today** is the day that Elijah will depart. But why the circuit? Apparently Elijah had established **discipleship** schools in each of those places, training others to be prophets like he. And again apparently all of the disciples **also** knew that this was Elijah's day of departure, presumably because the Lord had revealed it to them.

But after they had crossed to the **east** side of the Jordan River, Elijah asks Elisha to make a last **request**: what could Elijah still do for **him**? Elisha's response can only mean one thing, that he is really **on fire** for the Lord, as he asks for a **double** portion of the Spirit that filled Elijah. That, of course, was something that only **God** could do, but Elijah tells Elisha that if he sees him **depart**, then that double portion has been granted to him. Not too many minutes later, Elisha sees a fiery **chariot** drawn by fiery horses scoop Elijah up and head up to Heaven.

So did Elisha **really** get that double portion? You will have to read the lives of the two prophets in **First and Second Kings** to compare the number of each type of miracle that God performed through them.

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**Alternate Old Testament Lesson: Exodus 34:29-35**

It has been an interesting period of time for Moses. He had been meeting with **God** on the **top** of Mt. Sinai, at which time God gave to Moses and the Children of Israel the **agreement** between them and God that established them as God's **chosen** people, that agreement being the Ten Commandments. Note that this was a **conditional** agreement: **if** the Children of Israel were faithful in obeying the Ten Commandments, **then** God would be their God and they would be his people. Then God provided clarification as to **how** they were to love God and love their neighbor (do you remember those two greatest commandments?), which included laws dealing with slaves, restitution, social relationships, keeping of the Sabbath and the annual festivals, and the collection of monies for the upkeep of the Sanctuary, which God then described in detail (including construction of the ark and the tabernacle with all its furnishings). But this took place over a forty-day period, and the natives at the **foot** of the mountain were getting restless. So they had Aaron the priest make a **golden calf**, which they worshipped as the god that brought them out of Egypt, with partying more characteristic of the **heathen** than of the **godly**. Just at that time, Moses comes down with the two tablets of stone, **each** tablet containing the agreement (one copy for each party to the agreement). When Moses sees what is going on, he recognizes that the agreement that the Children of Israel had just made with God had **already** been **broken**, which Moses demonstrates by **breaking** the two tablets of stone.

When Moses returns to the top of Mt. Sinai to intercede for the Children of Israel, God commands him to make two tablets of stone **overnight** like the originals made by God himself (where did Moses get the technology to do that?), on which God wrote the Ten Commandments **again**. So when Moses comes down to the people, his face reflects the **glory** of God to which he had been exposed for the **next** set of 40 days and nights, with such intensity that all the people were **petrified**. Consequently, Moses puts a **veil** over his face whenever he was **not** talking with God, so that the people would not be **afraid**.

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**Epistle Lesson: 2 Corinthians 3: 12-13 (14-18) and 4: 1-6**

As St. Paul is discussing the preaching of the gospel and how people **respond** to that preaching, he is reminded of that incident at **Mt. Sinai** as Moses would meet with God on top of the mountain, then descend the mountain to pass God's words to the Children of Israel encamped at the foot of the mountain.

**Big problem:** Because Moses had been in the presence of God for 40 days and 40 nights, his face would **glow** with the residual **brightness** that had emanated **from** God with Moses in His presence. This apparently was as frightening to the Children of Israel as the **voice** of God speaking to them from the mountain top. To assuage their fears, Moses put a **veil** over his face to obscure the residual of God's brightness from the Children of Israel. This veil **still** obscures the Jew's minds to the **significance** of the Old Testament, and can be removed only when they return to **Jesus**.

So then St. Paul comes back to his topic, stating emphatically that when **he** preaches the gospel, he is not **hiding or obscuring** anything. Rather, if it is obscured or misunderstood, it is obscured or misunderstood by those whose minds have been **veiled** by the god of this world, or **Satan**, who doesn't want unbelievers to see the **truth** and let the light of Jesus Christ shine into the **darkness** of their lives. How can this happen? Those who are **unwilling** to accept Jesus as God Incarnate, God's Son, have **made** their choice.

And when the good news of Jesus Christ is shared today, the same is still true: people **still** make their **choices**, depending on whether they want to continue to live in **their** lifestyle, or accept the lifestyle to which **God** has called them.

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**Gospel Lesson: Mark 9: 2-9**

A lot has happened since the events of last Sunday's reading. To name just a few recent events, Jesus has reprised the **feeding** of the 5,000 by now feeding **4,000** men (plus women and children, of course), following which Jesus warns of the **leaven** of the Pharisees (indicating that they were concerned with **material** things when they should have been concerned with **spiritual** things), the healing of a **blind** man in Bethsaida, and Jesus **foretelling** his death and resurrection to His disciples. Approximately a week later, Jesus invites His inner circle (Peter, James, and John) to accompany Him in a hike up a mountain. When they reach the top, the three disciples are **overwhelmed** by Jesus suddenly becoming **brilliantly** white, and then seeing Moses and Elijah (how did the disciples know they were Moses and Elijah?) discussing with Jesus the imminent end of His ministry on earth. Peter, of course, can **always** find something to say, no matter how meaningless it is, so he offers to build three tents, one each for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, as if they are going to be on that mountain top for an **extended** period of time. **That** thought is erased when suddenly a cloud envelopes them and a **voice** comes out of the cloud, saying that Jesus is His beloved **Son**, and that they should **listen** to Him. When the disciples come to their senses, only **Jesus** is left with them. But **why** did Jesus tell the three disciples **not** to say anything about what they have just seen and heard until **after** He is risen from the dead? Because the common people would regard Him as their **military** leader (son of David) to conquer their **earthly** enemies, impairing Jesus' ministry to conquer their **spiritual** enemies.

**Ash Wednesday (Wednesday after Transfiguration Sunday)****Old Testament Lesson: Joel 2: 12-19**

**Joel** was one of God's prophets to the **Southern** Kingdom, or **Judah**, during the reign of King **Joash**. (You may recall that he was rescued from the murderous Queen Athaliah, an Israelite who planned to **eliminate** King David's line. Joash was made king when he was age **seven**, and remained **righteous** as long as the priest **Jehoiada** lived.) Joel is writing to the people of Judah who are suffering under a plague of **locusts** that is devastating the land. And **after** the locusts, Joel warns, will come the Day of the Lord with even **greater** judgment.

As this evening's reading begins, God is advising the people of Judah to **return** to Him, not just going through the **motions** of repentance, but returning to God with **fasting, weeping, and mourning**, figuratively tearing their **hearts** rather than their clothes. God reminds the people that he is **gracious and merciful, slow** to anger, **abounding** in steadfast love, and **relenting** over the punishment he had planned when the people **do** repent. So Joel tells the people of Judah to consecrate a **fast**, and assemble the entire congregation—from elders to nursing infants—to repent and **cry out** to God for mercy.

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### ***Epistle Lesson: 2 Corinthians 5: 20b - 6:10***

Toward the end of his **second** missionary trip to Asia Minor, Paul found himself in Corinth, where he initially discussed the Scriptures with the **Jews** in their synagogue. But because the Jews **opposed** him, he left the synagogue to share the Good News with the **Gentiles**, staying with a man named Titius Justus. His next door neighbor was Crispus, the **synagogue leader**, who **believed** in the Lord, with his entire family. After the Lord gave St. Paul **encouragement** one night in a vision, St. Paul **stayed** in Corinth for over a year and a half before he left to make an initial visit to **Ephesus** before returning to Antioch.

The church in Corinth had **many** growing pains, requiring St. Paul to write **two** letters to the Corinthians. In today's reading, St. Paul **urges** his readers to be **reconciled** to God because God had caused to be placed on Jesus **their** sins so that **Jesus'** righteousness might be placed on **them**. Then St. Paul **pleads** with his readers/listeners **not** to ignore the message being delivered to them, because right **now**, God was reaching out to them in order to save them **now**. St. Paul is so **serious** about their salvation that he lists all the things that he **endures** in order for that message of salvation to come to them.

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### ***Gospel Lesson: Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21***

Jesus is in the midst of his Sermon on the Mount. As we begin the reading for this evening, Jesus is addressing Christian **hypocrisy**, that is to say, **doing** "righteous" things in a way that everybody can **see** that you are doing them, thus earning others' **praises, honor and recognition**. Instead, Jesus says, if you want **God** to give you credit for doing "righteous" things, then all of these things must be done **without** others seeing or knowing that you are doing them.

Then Jesus addresses **who or what** your god **really** is. If you are trying to get lots of **money** so that you can enjoy **material wealth** and **financial security**, or if you are looking to get **power and control**, then **those** are your gods. Instead, Jesus recommends that you lay up your treasures in **heaven**. How does one do that? By devoting your life to **loving and serving** one another.



## First Sunday in Lent

### ***Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 22: 1-18***

This is perhaps one of the most ***fascinating*** stories in the Old Testament: ***why*** would God ask Abraham to take his only son Issac to ***Mt. Moriah*** (where Solomon's temple eventually would be situated) and sacrifice him there? And why did Abraham ***obey*** God? ***Why*** was he willing to kill his ***only*** son? We get a hint of what is at play when Issac asks his father where the ***lamb*** was for the sacrifice, and Abraham responds that ***God*** will provide the sacrifice. And why would ***Issac***, probably a teenager at this time, allow Abraham to ***tie*** him up so as to sacrifice him? Any guesses?

The explanation is found in the book of ***Hebrews, chapter 11***, where it is stated that Abraham ***remembered*** the promise that God had made to him, that Abraham would have offspring through his son ***Issac (Gen. 21:12)***. Abraham therefore figured that even if he sacrificed his son, God would raise him from the ***dead*** in order to keep His promise to Him. Or in advance of that, God would provide a ***substitutionary*** sacrifice. The key to the story is that both Abraham and Issac ***believed*** God; they ***trusted and obeyed God***. That is why Abraham could say to his servants that he ***and*** the boy would go a little further to worship and then come back to them; Abraham was convinced that whatever happened, he would still have his son alive at the ***end***. And that is one of the reasons why God refers to Abraham's faith as the ***basis*** for his righteousness (***Gen. 15:6***). And through a substitution provided by God, Abraham ***did*** get his son back alive, a picture of the future Jesus, God's ***only*** Son, being substituted as the lamb for ***us*** so that we might have ***life***. ***Faith is trusting and obeying God!***

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### ***Epistle Lesson: James 1: 12-18***

St. James provides a fruitful description of what it means to hold ***fast*** to God's promises in the face of ***trials*** of all sorts. First of all, he distinguishes between tempting and testing. ***Satan tempts*** us to do ***evil***, but ***God tests*** us to see whether we will ***obey*** Him when placed in certain circumstances, or to see whether we have ***learned*** a particular lesson. Thus Satan becomes a ***tool*** of

God in order to find out where our heart **really** lies. When, in tempting circumstances, we are **lured** in by our **own** desires and wanting to be in **control**, we end up sinning. But when, in those tempting circumstances, we remain steadfast in **obedience** to God, God will eventually reward us with the crown of life.

St. James' last comment is instructive in that we may **think** that our choices to satisfy **our** desires are most rewarding, but St. James says that we have **deceived** ourselves. It is **trusting and obeying God** that results in our receiving God's good and **perfect** gifts.

The **big question** for each of **us** to ponder: what gifts and blessings from God have we **forfeited** because **we** are determined to do things **our** way?

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### **Gospel Lesson: Mark 1: 9-15**

Today's reading reprises some of our earlier readings in the first chapter of **Mark**. But our **perspective** today is a bit different. After we learn that Jesus has been **baptized** by John the Baptist, and the **Holy Spirit** descends on Jesus in the form of a dove, we see that this does not result in a period of **celebration**. Instead, the Holy Spirit directs Jesus to go into the **wilderness** by himself for 40 days, **all** the while being tempted by Satan. Elsewhere in other gospels we read of just three of these temptations. But the author of Hebrews indicates that this was just the **beginning**, that Jesus was tempted in **every** way that we are, but without sinning (**Hebrews 4:15**). It must have been a grueling 40 days, so much so that **angels** had to minister to Him.

But after these 40 days are over, and Jesus learns that John the Baptist's ministry has been **terminated**, He heads into Galilee to proclaim that the Kingdom of God has **arrived** in **fulfillment** of the Old Testament prophecies, and that people now needed to **truly** repent and **believe** the good news of spiritual **redemption** through the promised Messiah.

## Second Sunday in Lent

### **Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 17: 1-7 and 15-16**

Abram was 75-years old when God called him out of his **idolatress** family in Haran to go to a land **somewhere** where He would make him a father of a great **nation**. Later, God promised Abram a **son** for an heir. After waiting for almost 10 years, Sarai decided that God needed **help** in keeping His promise, and so she offered her maid Hagar as a means of producing a son for Abram. God's characterization of that son, Ishmael, was that he and his brothers would always be at **war** with each other. Something to keep in mind when **you** decide that you know **better** than God.

Anyway, today's reading finds God meeting with Abram again, changing his name to Abraham and Sarai's name to Sarah, because God was now **expanding** His promise to Abraham to make him a father of **many** nations and many **kings**. Then God tells Abraham that He is establishing His covenant as an **everlasting covenant** to him and his **offspring**. On what was this covenant based? It is **faith!** How do we know this? If we look at **Galatians chapter 3**, St. Paul tells us that the word "offspring" in the above text is **singular**, referring to Jesus. Then St. Paul explains further that if we are **Christ's**, we are **Abraham's** offspring and heirs according to the promise that God made to Abraham.

St. Paul explains further that "**in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.**" **Gal. 3:14**. So we become Children of God and descendants of Abraham **by faith in the work of Jesus Christ**. Finally, in **Romans chapter 2**, St. Paul makes it clear that a descendant of Abraham, according to God's reckoning, is **not** one according to the **flesh** (genetics) but according to **faith**.

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### **Epistle Lesson: Romans 5: 1-11**

In this reading, St. Paul lists some of the basics of faith in Christ Jesus.

- We are **justified** (declared righteous) by faith in Jesus, by which we subsequently receive **peace** with God.
- As a consequence of being a Christian in today's world, we will experience **suffering**. But rejoice! This suffering produces

**endurance**, which produces **character**, which produces **hope**, which hope allows God's **love** to be poured into our hearts.

—We need to remember that God sent Jesus to die for us, **not** when we were already righteous, but when we were an **abomination** in God's sight. That is a clear indication of how **much** God loves us!

—Now that we are **reconciled** to God through Jesus, how much **more** does God love us!

**Bottom Line:** No matter **what** our circumstances in life, we need to remember that God really loves us **greatly**. We just need to **believe** God, *i.e.*, trust, obey, and endure.

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### **Gospel Lesson: Mark 8: 27-38**

Today's reading finds Jesus having a chit-chat with his disciples, in particular wondering who **people** thought Jesus was. As we learned a few Sunday's ago, King Herod Antipas thought that Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the **dead**. Other folks thought Jesus was **Elijah** returned to earth (**Malachi 4:5**), or some **other** prophet (**Deuteronomy 18:15**). But when Jesus asked **His disciples** whom they thought Jesus was, Peter was quick to identify Jesus as the **Messiah**, the Son of God. Again, Jesus **forbids** them to reveal that, knowing that the people in general anticipated that the **Messiah** would lead the **Jews** into primacy **over** all other nations, rather than be the redeemer **from** sin. But when Jesus explained to them that this involved his suffering and **death**, but after three days be raised from the dead, Peter objected—since he too had **not** fully appreciated that Jesus was a **spiritual**, not an **earthly**, savior. Jesus' **rebuke** of Peter slows him down for the time being.

As a consequence, Jesus called the crowd to Him to explain that to receive the **blessings** of God, they would have to give up their expectations of **self aggrandizement** and **success** in order to serve **God**. The choice was clear: either choose **earthly** reward and pleasure and **lose** one's life eternally; or give up the rewards of **this** world and serve God in humility in order to get the reward of God in **eternal** life.

God still offers us the same choice. How willing are **you** to give up your **personal** desires in order to serve the **living** God?