

Homily for the 3rd Sunday of Lent
March 24, 2019
By Deacon Stuart Neck

“If you do not repent, all will perish as they did.” Very stern words from Christ today in our gospel and a warning not to just the audience he was speaking to, but to us as well. The message is clear, repentance is necessary from us in our spiritual relationship with God. Repentance was a very important theme in Christ’s ministry. His first words after spending forty days in the desert were, *“This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.”*¹ Over two weeks ago, we came to an Ash Wednesday service to have ashes placed on our foreheads for the beginning of Lent. Ashes typically were donned in the ancient world as a sign of repentance. A sign of regret and remorse at offending God. The ashes we donned on Ash Wednesday were a visible sign of our desire and commitment to change, to repent and seek God’s love and mercy for our sins.

When we repent, there should be a commitment not to offend again in the same way. It should cause a change within us. Conversely, to one offended, they should accept this repentance and show forgiveness. The root to all of this is love. To love someone means you

¹ Mark 1:15

demonstrate that love by the things we do for the other, and asking forgiveness is one of the things we do, and granting it as well. I once worked with a gentleman who bragged that he never said he was sorry, to *anyone*, not even his wife! When I asked him why, he stated, “Well, if I said it, I meant it. Period.” This is very sad because it is rooted in pride. We have to be careful not to follow a path like this because if we aren’t even sorry to the ones we love near us, how can we say we love God and ask for his forgiveness? We must surrender our pride and seek forgiveness out of remorse, regret, out of love. When we surrender and seek this forgiveness, our Lord is waiting for us. Our Psalm today touches on how God responds to our repentance. It states, “The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and rich in mercy.” It goes on to say, “For as the heavens are high above the earth, so strong is his mercy for those who fear him.” It’s important to understand that the fear of God spoken here is not one out of terror or trembling, but one who, “...understands the greatness and awesomeness of the Lord. They want to serve Him because of who He is and understands everything they are, is due to the wonder, love, grace, and perfection of God.”²

Why is this important? Because God loves us and has never given up on us and never will and we know that through his covenants. We see this in our first readings from last Sunday and today. Last week’s

² <https://www.stjmod.com/7-gifts-of-the-holy-spirit.html> (paraphrased).

first reading was from the Book of Genesis where we read about God's covenant with Abraham. Today's reading is similar to last week's in that we see God speaking directly to Moses and what will eventually become the beginnings of God's relationship with the people of Israel through the Mosaic covenant. There are two important points from our first reading we should take note of. First, God gives us his name. To give someone your name means you want a more personal relationship with someone. Second, God personally gets involved in the destiny of the Jewish people in Egypt. God states to Moses, "I have come down to rescue them (the Israelites) from the hands of the Egyptians and lead them out of that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey." In the Book of Deuteronomy, we learn the conditions of this covenant which state, "*Today you are making this agreement with the Lord: He is to be your God and you are to walk in his ways and observe his statutes, commandments and decrees and to hearken to his voice.*"³ It is through the moral Law we first understood what sin is in the eyes of God.⁴ We see from our second reading that we are to learn from the Israelites failures, not just in the desert, but their continual disobedience to God's moral Law. St. Paul tells us, "*These things happened to them as an example, and they*

³ Deuteronomy 26:17

⁴ Romans 7:7

have been written down as a warning to us...” Though the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, we also make a covenantal commitment to “...walk in his ways and observe his statutes, commandments and decrees and to hearken to his voice.” We have chosen to be in this covenant with God, “...to offer him a response of faith and love that no other creature can give in his stead.”⁵ Living our lives by God’s precepts and repenting are as important today as they were on Mount Horeb where the moral Law was first given. We have to learn from our predecessors not to persist in our disobedience to God and live in a life of sin, but repent and seek his love and mercy. He’s waiting for us to turn to him.

Fortunately for us, Christ left us a way for us to repent, seek forgiveness and have our sins forgiven. This we find in the sacrament of Reconciliation. When we approach our Lord for forgiveness, we must do it for the right reasons. We must seek God’s forgiveness out of love for him, not out of fear and trembling. This is called contrition. Our catechism teaches us, “Among the penitent’s acts, contrition occupies first place. Contrition is sorrow of the soul and detestation for the sin committed, together with the resolution not to sin again.”⁶ When we come to confession and open our hearts in humility to our Lord and

⁵ CCC 357

⁶ CCC 1451

seek forgiveness, we come face-to-face with the mercy of God, which our Psalm today describes where it states, *“He pardons all of your iniquities, heals all of your ills. He redeems your life from destruction, crowns you with kindness and compassion.”*⁷ Our catechism also states that when we reconcile with God sacramentally it, *“...brings about a true ‘spiritual resurrection,’ restoration of the dignity and blessing of the life of the children of God, of which the most precious is friendship with God.”*⁸

Lent is a time for us to focus on our spiritual state and how our relationship is with God. The parable of the fig tree in today’s gospel is an example for all of us to look inward and see what fruit, if any, we are bearing. The sacrament of Reconciliation allows us to prune and fertilize and allow our barren branches to bear fruit through the sacramental grace we receive. God is patient as we hear from our Psalm today. He’s waiting for us to approach him in the confessional. This Lent let us take advantage of the opportunities we have to go to the sacrament of Reconciliation in this parish. Each Thursday evening starting at 6:30pm, both priests are present to hear confession for as long as it takes. On Saturdays, it’s usually from 4pm to 5pm. We are also very fortunate to have a combined Lenten Reconciliation Service at

⁷ Psalm 103:3-4

⁸ CCC 1468

our parish on Tuesday, April 9th beginning at 6:30 pm. Take advantage of God's love and mercy in the sacrament of Reconciliation this Lenten season.

I would like to close with this passage from the book of Daniel which is called the Prayer of Azariah. It is a prayer that we have in our Liturgy of the Hours and is one of my favorites. The direct context of the prayer is during the Babylonian exile and Azariah is one of the three men to be executed by the king and he and the others are to be thrown in a fiery furnace. Azariah says this prayer as he enters the furnace, but I think it appropriately covers what we discussed about what we need to take into the confessional which is, humility, fear of the Lord, contrition, remorse, repentance and seeking God's love and mercy. I've paraphrased it, so if you would like to read further this is from the third chapter in this book and though the prayer speaks about Israel as a nation of people and their transgressions, we can personalize this into the first person to be our prayer to God:

"Blessed are you, and praiseworthy, O Lord, the God of our ancestors, and glorious forever is your name.

For you are just in all you have done; all your deeds are faultless, all your ways right, and all your judgements proper.

For we have sinned and transgressed by departing from you, and we have done every kind of evil. Your commandments we have not heeded or observed, nor have we done as you ordered us for our good.

For your name's sake, do not deliver us up forever, or make void you covenant.

Do not take away your mercy from us, for the sake of Abraham, your beloved, Isaac your servant, and Israel your holy one,

For we are reduced, O Lord, beyond any other nation, brought low everywhere in the world this day because of our sins.

But with a contrite heart and humble spirit let us be received; as though it were holocausts of rams and bullocks, or tens of thousands of fat lambs, so let our sacrifice be in your presence today and find favor before you; for those who trust in you cannot be put to shame. And now we follow you with our whole heart, we fear you and we seek your face. Do not put us to shame, but deal with us in your kindness and great mercy.”

Amen