

# Journey through Lent

Fifth Sunday of Lent • March 21, 2021

## Opening Prayer

*Light a candle. Open your Bible and set it beside the lit candle. Prepare the room for prayer, even if you are alone. Quiet music can help to settle yourself and others even if it has been a hectic day.*

Leader: + In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Jesus, you are a light of revelation to the whole world.

**All: Help us to reveal you to the world.**

Leader: Jesus, you have died to self and are raised to God.

**All: Help us to die to ourselves so that one day we may also be raised to God.**

Leader: Jesus, help us to pray even if we are troubled.

**All: Amen.**

## Insights on the Readings

*Rotate around the circle, having each person read a paragraph/bullet point aloud. For each reading, begin with the bullet points and then continue on to reading the passage from a Bible.*

First Reading (Jeremiah 31:31–34)

- ▶ This is the story of Jeremiah prophesying a “new covenant” written on people’s hearts, not on stone tablets.

Second Reading (Hebrews 5:7–9)

- ▶ This reading wrestles with Jesus’ suffering and his obedience to God the Father.

Gospel Reading (John 12:20–33)

- ▶ In this reading, Jesus compares his death and resurrection to a grain of wheat that is buried and dies before producing its harvest.

# Reflections

## Lent: A Time of Renewed Covenant Commitment

Today's first reading is from the prophet Jeremiah. It is his oracle promising a new covenant to the people of Israel. What is most notable about this passage is that the promise on the part of God is made to a sinful people. No repentance is asked for. It speaks only of the generosity of God. The days are coming when this new covenant will not be written on stone tablets (as was the law of Moses and the Ten Commandments) but rather on the flesh tablets of the peoples' hearts. This is done by God so that: "No longer will they need to teach their friends and relatives how to know the Lord." Once internalized, the covenant is no longer taught but lived.

Possibly behind this view of Jeremiah of a new covenant may be the Hebrew idiom *carat berith*, meaning "to cut a covenant." Genesis chapters 15 and 17 refer to the cutting of sacrificial animals and to circumcision. Here in Jeremiah it refers to the internalizing (in one's heart) the values, teachings, and behaviors of a covenantal people. Once this is done, God will no longer remember the peoples' sins, but rather forgive them. Jeremiah challenges his original audience and all of us to both internalize our covenant commitment and to be gracious receivers of God's forgiveness. By our baptism we have a new covenantal relationship with God written upon our hearts.

## Lent: A Time of Encountering Jesus Through Other People

The Gospel reading is the conclusion of John's presentation of Jesus' public ministry, expanding its reach beyond just Jews. The story begins with some Greeks who are Gentiles. Their arrival confirms what the Pharisees complain to one another, that "the whole world has gone after him" (John 12:19). These Greeks come to the house where Jesus is staying, hoping to see him. The Gospel author's purpose was to show that Jesus' mission extended beyond the Jews to the Gentile world. Therefore it would have been logical for him to portray Gentiles (Greeks) inquiring to see Jesus.

The Greeks approach Philip (a Greek name) whom Jesus told earlier that those who see Jesus see the Father. The Greeks make a request of Philip: "Sir, we would like to see Jesus." (In the Gospel of John, "seeing" Jesus is the path to salvation). Philip goes to Andrew (another Greek name), and Andrew goes to Jesus. Even today, Jesus comes to us through others, through the lifelines we have with other members of the community. Interestingly, no mention is made that the inquiring Greeks ever met Jesus.

## Lent: A Time of Praying, Dying and Rising

Jesus responds to Philip and Andrew with a metaphor. The metaphor used to describe Jesus' own destiny, as well as ours, is the grain of wheat that must be buried in the earth and die. Otherwise it remains simply a grain of wheat. But if it dies, if it is buried in the soil, watered by time, weathered, and nurtured by the hard work of humankind and God, it produces much fruit. In the Gospel of John, "fruit" is Jesus' metaphor for life of the community of faith. Jesus thus uses the seed metaphor to show that the salvific power of his death resides in the community that is gathered as a result of it.

Jesus is talking about his own death and burial. Contrary to appearances, his death is life for all. This reading is also about our own baptisms, when we died to all else but the power of God. Jesus is talking about the process of denying our very selves and picking up our crosses daily, bearing our share of the burden of the good news so that others may have life.

## **Lent: A Time to Embrace Prayer**

Notice that Jesus begins to pray aloud: “Father save me from this hour.” It was for this hour that Jesus was born. It is the time for Jesus to embrace his destiny. We, too, are confronted daily with the hours of our lives. What was our worst or hardest hour? How did we get through it? What was the best hour? Who or what made it so great?

Jesus continues to pray with more intensity: “Father glorify your name!” In Jesus’ life and death and our lives and deaths we discover the glorification and the true honoring of God. Our lives glorify God when we willingly give ourselves for the sake of others as Jesus did. Suddenly, a voice is heard from the sky, as in Jesus’ baptism, reassuring Jesus that God is with him. The crowd hears the voice as thunder. Jesus prays aloud: “I am troubled.” The Greek could also be translated “I am quite agitated.” When Jesus is troubled, he turns to his Father and prays. He doesn’t demand that God save him from trouble. Instead, he asks that all that he does will glorify God and focus the eyes of others on God.

## **Lent: A Time to Be as Troubled and Agitated as Jesus Is**

When we struggle with dying to self, we are in good company: Jesus himself was “troubled” or “agitated” by this. We should be troubled by the same things that Jesus is troubled about: injustice, deceit, greed, violence, lack of food, affordable housing, medical care, and clean water. We should be troubled about rampant nationalism, racism, sexism. We should be troubled about human trafficking, gang initiations, drive by shootings. Being troubled as Jesus is troubled is part of our Lenten journey. We are journeying in the company of Jesus, and there are others trying to get to see Jesus through us, just as the Greeks came to Philip and Andrew to Jesus. By baptism, we have a lifeline to Jesus. This empowers us to bring others to Jesus. Who in our own lives needs to hold onto us so as to see Jesus? Who needs our service now—in a nursing home, a soup kitchen, a single mother with young children who would rejoice in a few hours off, or a teenager who needs an adult tutor or mentor? Lent is a time for all of us to help others see Jesus.

## **For Reflection**

1. In baptism, we entered a covenant relationship with God. What does this mean to you? How do you live out your baptismal promises?
2. How do we hear the voice of God? Do we pay attention to it or do we dismiss it as just thunder?
3. How do people see Jesus through our behaviors?

# Closing Prayer

Leader: Jesus, you make all things new.

**All: Allow a new springtime to bud forth in us.**

Leader: Jesus, we want to see you more clearly.

**All: Help us see you in ourselves and others.  
Amen.**

*Pray together the Our Father, then exchange a gesture of peace with all who are present.*

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