Feast of Faith

The First Reading

Each Sunday, we listen to three scripture readings. The first reading usually comes from the Old Testament. "The New Testament lies hidden in the Old; the Old Testament comes fully to light in the New," we read in the Introduction to the Lectionary. "Christ himself is the center and fullness of the whole of Scripture" (5). On Sundays, these readings usually have a close connection to the Gospel. In this season of Lent, for example, the Exodus account of the thirst of the Israelites in the desert is paired with the Samaritan woman's encounter with Jesus at the well. Ezekiel's vision of the Lord raising people from their graves is paired with the narrative of Christ raising Lazarus from the dead.

The readings are taken from many sources—historical books like Judges, Kings, and the Acts of the Apostles, prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel, wisdom literature like Proverbs or Ecclesiastes. But no matter its genre, the first reading always ends with the same acclamation: "The word of the Lord." The scriptures are written by human authors who wrote in widely different cultural and historical contexts, but these human authors are also divine instruments through whom God speaks to us. And so we say, "Thanks be to God."

—Corinna Laughlin, Copyright © J. S. Paluch Co.

The New Covenant

Today's first reading is an enormously important passage, not only in the history of the Jewish people, but also for us as disciples of Jesus, who see in it a foreshadowing of the Christian dispensation. The prophet announces that God has chosen to forgive the people, and that as a sign of divine forgiveness a new covenant will be established. Contrasting the new covenant with the one made with Moses on Mount Sinai, Jeremiah says that the new covenant will be written on the people's hearts rather than on tablets of stone. No longer will the community's tradition be the sole bearer of the covenant; henceforth, God will speak directly and personally to each individual, forgiving sin and calling for a return to God in faithfulness. No longer will mere outward compliance with the dictates of the Law suffice; henceforth, God asks for an obedience that springs from the depths of one's heart. Precisely that kind of obedience is highlighted in today's second reading, where the author of the Letter to the Hebrews describes Jesus as the mediator of the new covenant whose obedience has made him the source of salvation for all who, in turn, obey him.

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Readings for the Week

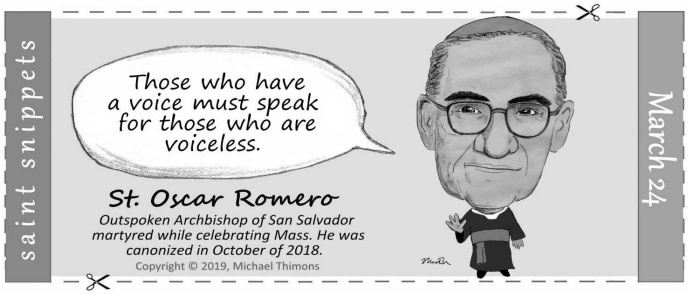
Monday:	Dn 13:1-9, 15-17, 19-30, 33-62 [41c-62]; Ps 23:1-6; Jn 8:1-11
Tuesday:	Nm 21:4-9; Ps 102:2-3, 16-21; Jn 8:21-30
Wednesday:	Dn 3:14-20, 91-92, 95; Dn 3:52-56; Jn 8:31-42
Thursday:	Is 7:10-14; 8:10; Ps 40:7-11; Heb 10:4-10; Lk 1:26-38
Friday:	Jer 20:10-13; Ps 18:2-7; Jn 10:31-42
Saturday:	Ez 37:21-28; Jer 31:10, 11-13; Jn 11:45-56
Sunday:	Mk 11:1-10 or Jn 12:12-16 (procession); Is 50:4-7; Ps 22:8-9, 17-20, 23-24; Phil 2:6-11; Mk 14:1 — 15:47 [15:1-39]

Risks

I risk being wrong if I trust too much. But I risk living in torment if I don't trust enough. —Anonymous

Saints and Special Observances

Sunday:	Fifth Sunday of Lent; Third Scrutiny
Tuesday:	St. Turibius of Mogrovejo
Thursday:	The Annunciation of the Lord
Friday:	Abstinence



Today's Readings

First Reading — I will make a new covenant; I will write my law upon their hearts (Jeremiah 31:31-34) or Ezekiel 37:12-14.

Psalm — Create a clean heart in me, O God (Psalm 51) or Psalm 130.

Second Reading — Christ learned obedience and became the source of eternal salvation (Hebrews 5:7-9) or Romans 8:8-11.

Gospel — If a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it produces much fruit (John 12:20-33) or John 11:1-45 [3-7, 17, 20-27, 33b-45].

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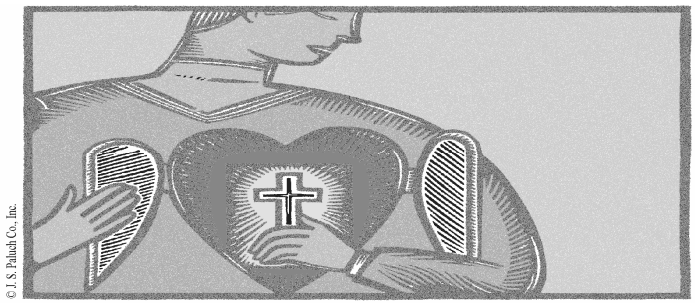

Fifth Sunday of Lent
March 21, 2021
I will place my law within them
And write it upon their hearts;
I will be their God,
And they shall be my people.
—Jeremiah 31:33

Treasures From Our Tradition

Ask senior parishioners about this fifth Sunday, and they will share memories of this Sunday years ago, when it was known as "Passion Sunday." In those days, the statues and crucifixes were draped in purple cloth, and a deeply somber atmosphere infused worship. The structure is different today for good reason. The stunning changes in the appearance of the church building drew attention away from the twofold work of Lent: reconciliation and preparing for initiation. Today, this Sunday is given to reflection on the necessity to commit, like Jesus, to the Father's will. Wherever elect are present today, the "A" reading reveals Jesus' compassion in the face of human suffering, and his desire to call us from the tombs of sin, isolation, and even death itself.

As Lent draws to a close over the next ten days, and before the beginning of the Easter Triduum on Holy Thursday, we enter an ideal time for celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation. Today's old title of "Passion Sunday" has migrated to next Sunday, also called "Palm Sunday." In many places, people prepare their own bundles of branches for next week's liturgy: pussy willow, forsythia, dogwood. If your parish schedules a procession, you may want to prepare these branches at home and bring them along.

—James Field, Copyright © J. S. Paluch Co.

Father, Forgive Them

The promise made by the LORD in the first reading is very bold. He says that all people shall know him, without having to be taught by others. He doesn't restrict the promise to only the holiest people: He says that the way people will know Him is through forgiveness of their sins. Remember, he is speaking to the Israelites, who had so many laws and commandments, they needed scribes and Pharisees to keep track of them. When they broke a commandment or law, they were isolated from the community. So the promise that God would place his law in their hearts meant they would be free to do God's will because they want to, not because they were feared punishment or rejection.

Jesus says something similar in today's gospel. He tells the disciples that his crucifixion would draw everyone to him. Now, Jesus' death showed that he took on the punishment for sins in place of us, who deserve it. In Luke's gospel he even prays for those who crucified him, asking God's forgiveness. (Lk 23:34) By dying on the cross, Jesus shows how much God loves us. By rising from the dead, he shows that we can rise from sin to a new life of faith and love.

Getting back to the first reading, we experience that promise when we bring our sins to God. When we forgive people who have hurt us, we also help them to experience that love. After all, if I can forgive someone, surely God will forgive them. We also help others to know God when we share or experience of being forgiven. Still not sure if God has forgiven you? The sacrament of Reconciliation gives us the assurance of God's forgiveness, as well as the experience. Along with the other sacraments, it helps us keep God's love in our hearts.

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FIFTH LENT

SUNDAY OF

MARCH 21, 2021

THROUGH SUFFERING

The prophet Jeremiah, in today's first reading, is looking beyond the often-messy history of Israel and Judah to a time when the people will no longer be disobedient to God, because God's law will be "written on their hearts"—that is, their natural inclinations and desires will be oriented toward God's will. The psalmist gives voice to the sorrow that Israel and Judah experienced in their separation from God "Have mercy on me, O God . . . A clean heart create for me." According to Saint Paul, the earthly Jesus, "son though he was," like his ethnic ancestors, he "learned obedience from what he suffered." The Gospel reading is part of Jesus' discourses not long before the Last Supper. Instead of a social encounter with Philip's friends who had come to see him, Jesus is grappling with his approaching death and its ultimate meaning for the world.

JEREMIAH: LOOKING BEYOND EXILE AND SUFFERING

The readings today remind us how close we are to Easter—only two weeks from now. They also remind us that the path to resurrection and Easter always includes suffering and death. The prophet Jeremiah spent his whole life proclaiming the word of God to kings who would not listen. As an old man, he saw Jerusalem defeated and the inhabitants taken into exile. Jeremiah himself suffered in being left behind, but in today's reading, he is looking beyond those sufferings to a time when the previously disobedient people would be transformed and live in harmony with God's law.

LOOKING FOR JESUS, FINDING THE CROSS

In the Gospel reading, friends of Philip come to him and ask about meeting Jesus. When Philip and Andrew take the request to Jesus, he begins a cryptic discourse on discipleship, transformation, and divine judgment. We never hear whether Philip's friends got to personally meet Jesus. Perhaps they simply blended in with the crowd.

Jesus says, "[W]hen I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself." The narrator says that Jesus' words indicate how he will die; the readers already know Jesus will be crucified. Jesus also speaks of divine judgment driving out the world's rulers and of the need to be transformed, like a seed growing into a productive plant. He warns about loving our life and losing it. Unlike Jeremiah's detailed vision, Jesus only hints at what kind of transformed life his death will bring.

What if we, like Philip's friends, want to get close to Jesus? Does that mean that the discourse on death and judgment is addressed to us? If Jesus will draw everyone to himself as he is "lifted up," does being closer to him mean joining him on his cross? (Do we want to be that close to Jesus?) Do we want to be transformed? If we say "yes," the liturgy these next two weeks can show us the only way the Church knows to get closer to Jesus: to be willing to be "lifted up" with him in his suffering—and in our own.

TODAY'S READINGS

Jeremiah 31:31–34
Psalm 51:3–4, 12–13, 14–15
Hebrews 5:7–9
John 12:20–33

Prayer of the Faithful

Let us offer our prayers and supplications to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

For our Church be so united to Christ's dying and rising that our witness will, like the grain of wheat, bear fruit for the reign of God, let us pray to the Lord.

For leaders in our world to hear God's voice and glorify God's name in actions of peacemaking, reconciliation, and international collaboration, let us pray to the Lord.

For those who suffer anguish in mind or body, that their loud cries and supplications may be heard by the One who is able to save them from death, let us pray to the Lord.

For those preparing for the Easter sacraments, especially those in our midst, as they seek to serve and follow Jesus, let us pray to the Lord.

For our church community as we work to make Jesus' presence tangible in the world around us, let us pray to the Lord.

For all those who are sick, for all who suffer from COVID-19, and for all who have died, let us pray to the Lord.

For all the prayers that we hold in the silence of our hearts; for all our intentions spoken and unspoken, let us pray to the Lord.

Loving God, you have written your law upon our hearts. May that law be so evident to others that we draw them to you by all our words and deeds. We ask for this and for all these our prayers through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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