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Sharing the Word: Sermons Based on Weekly Lectionary Readings, v.1

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Volume I: Advent through the Easter Season

By Rev. Leonard S. Gross

Edited by Janice G. Comfort
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Introduction

Rev. Leonard S. Gross (1924-2013) is my father. He was ordained a priest in 1973 while still working in public relations for Consolidation Coal Company. When he retired from Consol, he devoted himself to the priesthood full time, and served in the Diocese of West Virginia until he retired in 1992. Most of the sermons in this book were delivered from 1993-1999 when he was serving as a supply priest for the Northeastern Convocation of the Diocese of West Virginia. Some of them may have been based on earlier writings, but that has been lost to time.

The compilation of these sermons was a labor of love. I am not a particularly “churchy” person, but I love the rituals and traditions of the Episcopal Church. And I also love my father. He was a devout Episcopalian and a dedicated priest (as well as being a devoted husband to my mother and father to my sister and me). He spent a lot of time studying and preparing his sermons, and he knew his audience. His experience at his “day job” served him well. He was also a gifted preacher, combining well-honed public speaking skills with a beautiful speaking voice. When I read these sermons I can hear his voice. That is why I undertook this project. To share that voice with others, so that Leonard Gross can continue to spread the Word of God.

This devotional is arranged by the church calendar, and follows the Revised Common Lectionary format. The Lectionary has three liturgical years, A, B, C. The readings for each year vary somewhat, but they generally share the same theme. For each week there is a copy of the readings assigned to each year A, B, or C, followed by a sermon delivered for that occasion. Sometimes there will be a sermon for each of the three years, sometimes just one or two. Volume one begins with Advent and goes through the Easter season. Volume two begins with Pentecost and ends at Proper 29, the final week of the church calendar.
First Sunday in Advent, Year A

OLD TESTAMENT: Isaiah 2:1 – 5

PSALM: 122

NEW TESTAMENT: Romans 13:11 - 14

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

GOSPEL: Matthew 24:36 - 44

But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.
First Sunday in Advent, Year B

OLD TESTAMENT: Isaiah 64: 1 - 9

PSALM: 80: 1 - 7, 17 - 19

NEW TESTAMENT: 1 Corinthians 1: 3 - 9

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind-- just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you--so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

GOSPEL: Mark 13: 24 - 37

But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake--for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.
First Sunday in Advent, Year C

OLD TESTAMENT: Jeremiah 33: 14 - 16

PSALM: 25: 1 - 10

NEW TESTAMENT: 1 Thessalonians 3: 9 - 13

How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith. Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.


There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see “The Son of Man coming in a cloud” with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.

Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.
There’s no mystery about what day this is. It’s the first day of Advent… also the First Sunday of Advent. And the first day of the church year. Those of you who have helped to fill out a parochial report also know this is the first of four key Sundays in the church year when we count noses for a special entry in that report. What are the other key Sundays? Easter Day. The Pentecost. And Trinity Sunday.

What is Advent? It’s the church season that comes immediately before Christmas. In Western Christendom, Advent Sunday, or the First Sunday of Advent… is the Sunday nearest St. Andrew’s Day. St. Andrew’s Day is November 30, … next Tuesday. It’s unfortunate but true that because of when it is, St. Andrew’s Day is often lost in the shuffle. And that’s a pity… because St. Andrew is one of the most prominent saints of the early church. He did something that should make an impact on all of us. He brought his brother to Christ, so it would not be incorrect to say that he was the first Christian evangelist. Have any of us ever brought his brother to Christ? Andrew’s brother also turned out to be an important figure in the church… Simon Peter.

Andrew was noted for his evangelistic zeal… and he traveled widely for a man of his day. He is recognized as the patron saint of Scotland… and his influence has also been great in Greece and Russia. His ministry is the model for our Brotherhood of St. Andrew. But I digress.

Now back to Advent. Christmas Day doesn’t arrive until we’ve had the four Sundays of Advent. (However, in the Eastern Orthodox churches, Advent is a much longer season and begins in the middle of November.) In the West, of course, this is the day that the church year begins. In earlier times, Advent was kept as Lent, but with less strictness. Fasting is no longer ordered formally, but festivities are discouraged.

If we look around, we can tell when Advent begins by noting the color of the church hangings and the priest’s stole. They are purple… signifying the penitential aspects of the Advent season. Although we aren’t required to fast, we are expected to undergo a period of spiritual discipline. In other words, we are to get our act together in preparation for Christmas… and also for the Second Coming of Christ as Judge at the Last Day.

An obvious difference in the Holy Eucharist service during Advent is the fact that we omit the Gloria in Excelsis. We also leave out the alleluias at the fracture of the bread.

The purple of the church hangings and the priest’s stole worn during Advent reminds us of at least two things: 1. We are in a penitential season, although it’s not as strict as Lent. And 2. Purple is a royal color,
signifying the coming of the King... Jesus the Christ, the Messiah... as we prepare our hearts and minds for His coming... at Christmas time and also for His Second Coming at some unknown time for which we are also to prepare ourselves.

What do we do in the meantime? Jesus tells us, in Mark’s gospel, that we are able to take heed, watch, pray; for you do not know when the time will come. He also tells us that heaven and earth will pass away, but His words will not pass away.

The heavens of Jesus’ time and later times have passed away. A new heaven has taken place in people’s thought, a heaven of galaxies and immeasurable space. I speak of space that’s always immeasurable even to astronomers, and they deal in much bigger numbers than you and I do.

The old earth has passed away. It has been replaced by new costumes, the wonders of new sciences and industries, new metals and materials, new machines and gadgets. We also have countless new ideas and a new outlook on just about any subject we would bring up.

When Jesus was walking the earth, His ministry consisted of preaching, teaching, and healing. We still come to church for preaching and teaching. But what about healing? We, and the church, have given most of the responsibilities of healing to physicians and scientists. Does the world around us still recognize the church as an agent in healing? The answer to this question seems to be: There is a small amount of recognition...given reluctantly.

That’s not the way it used to be. We’re all aware that Jesus came preaching, teaching, and healing. Wherever He went, He brought life and health; deliverance from disease and demon possession; and victory over evil, terror, and death. Jesus as the Savior ministered both in the religious sense of salvation and in the sense of healing a disease.

It would be impossible to separate Jesus’ healing ministry from His message of redemption. Each is woven into one whole. The Christian picture of Jesus as the Good Physician, the Savior of the whole person, is drawn over and over in the gospels.

The Apostolic church preserved this sense of the connection between salvation and healing. The “gifts of healing” are mentioned as among the gifts of the spirit (I Cor. 12:28). St. James stresses the relationship between
forgiveness and healing and instructs the church to anoint the sick with oil “in the name of the Lord.” (James 5:13-16). Paul attributes illness at Corinth to a sinful attitude towards the Eucharist (I Cor. 11:30).

Throughout the Book of Acts it is implied that the power to heal is an apostolic gift: The success of Christianity in the ancient world was in no small part due to its preaching of the Healer-Savior.

Through the writings of the early Christians known as the fathers of the church, we can trace—by eyewitness accounts—the history of healing in the church through the first 300 years after Christ. During this time, the healing of the body was a vitally important function of the church, discharged with great success. The writings of the early church fathers contain meticulous records, prepared by highly educated men fully aware that their work would probably be exposed to intense investigation by the Roman authorities. Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Justin Martyr—and numerous others—gathered impressive evidence regarding spiritual healing in the early church.

Irenaeus—in a treatise called Against Heresies, written about 170 A.D.—dealt at length and in detail with the healings, which “occur daily, of blindness, leprosy, deafness, etc., as well as the raising of the dead: The entire church entreating that boon with much fasting and prayer...those who are in truth His disciples, receiving grace from Him, do in His name, perform miracles.”

By the fourth century, St. Augustine refers to miracles as being most unusual and apparently becoming increasingly rare. Why? Emily Gardiner Neale, and Episcopal deacon who had a most effective spiritual healing ministry until her death three or four years ago, thinks that the explanation would lie in three primary factors: 1—Controversy within the church which lessened its spiritual power; second... the conflict between science and religion, which was already underway by the fourth century; and finally, the most fundamental reason of all, a diminishment of faith.

For the most part, the church relinquished its role in healing to medicine and science. However, in recent years, it has again begun to play a role—though far less important than it once was—in the ministry of healing. Healing services are now held at an increasingly larger number of churches, and numerous healings are being reported. The Episcopal church is at the forefront of this new emphasis on spiritual healing—healing of the body, the spirit, and soul. This is an example of the church recapturing some of the healing power it once had in abundance. Wonder what the situation will be when Jesus returns. We’ll have to watch and wait. Amen.
A key sentence in today’s epistle is an admonition of Paul to the Romans: Love your neighbor as yourself. Do we understand what he is saying? It seems clear enough. Of course, it takes much effort to accomplish.

Paul tells us that love of neighbor covers all the separate requirements of the Ten Commandments, meaning those touching on our behavior toward our neighbor. Jesus addressed these requirements when He gave us the summary of the Law: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

Perhaps Jesus explained the commandment to love our neighbor as ourself best in His parable of the Good Samaritan. Remember all the acts of love and kindness that the Samaritan did for the man who fell among robbers on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho? (Luke 10:30-37). He was left half dead… and a priest and a Levite ignored him. But a foreigner, a Samaritan, had compassion on him. He bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. He set him on his own beast and took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he paid the innkeeper, telling him to take care of the robbery victim; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.

What did the Samaritan do that was so great? He loved his neighbor as himself. He loved his neighbor as himself. And the neighbor was not somebody he knew, but somebody with whom he came in contact. His neighbor was someone who had been beaten and robbed and later ignored… and left to die… by two of his own Hebrew countrymen.

What does this have to do with us? A great deal. A great deal. It teaches us how we are to treat one another. We are to love one another… and to love our neighbor as ourself. We are gathered here today at the congregational level for two basic purposes:

1—To worship God

2—To Express… to demonstrate… our love of God and our neighbor.

If we can’t do that here… we can’t do it anywhere. This is where it starts. And let’s not forget Paul’s admonition: Love your neighbor as yourself.
Did you look at your church calendar today? What does it show? For the benefit of any who might not have noticed... today is the First Sunday of Advent... the first day of the church year. How are you, the parishioners of ___ Church... and as individuals... going to observe the Advent season this year? No doubt you’ll be hearing announcements and sermons and reading articles on the subject. But that doesn’t always lead to personal involvement. Perhaps this is the year that it will. A deeper understanding of the implications of God becoming man... of the incarnation... would have greater meaning to all of us.

Lighting a candle in the advent wreath each week doesn’t really contribute anything to our piety or to our knowledge of or participation in an Advent discipline. And preparation for the coming of the Son of God should be a matter of discipline. But perhaps seeing an Advent candle and wreath will at least get our attention, and we can proceed from there.

During the Advent season we also give attention to the second advent... the second coming of Jesus... or the parousia. While this is an important matter, we should not get bogged down in a time-table. Even though Jesus taught that He does not know when He will return... that only God the Father knows... many people spend large blocks of time speculating on when it will be. Such speculation is a waste of time... and some results have been disastrous.

The second advent... or the second Coming of Jesus... or the parousia... is linked to the judgment that we all face. Jesus tells us in Matthew (16:28) that “the son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then we will repay every man for what he has done.”

In Mark... (13:24-27)... Jesus tells us: “but in those days, after the tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And they will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.”

He adds a call for watchfulness in all four gospels. In Mark (13:32) we find these words: “But of that day and of the hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father. Take heed, watch and pray, for you do not know when the time will come.”
In Luke (21:34-38)... Jesus tells us to: “take heed to yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a snare; for it will come upon all who dwell upon the face of the whole earth. But watch at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

Jesus also expresses similar thoughts in Matthew and Mark.

So... it sounds as if the second coming of Jesus should be a matter of preparation... not speculation. He has plainly told us that only God the Father knows when it will be. It we’re prepared, it won’t matter when. And if we do what we’re expected to do, we will have no fear of Judgment... whenever it comes.

Meanwhile... let’s not forget Paul’s admonition in today’s epistle: Love your neighbor as yourself.

That’s what all of us are called on to do.
Second Sunday of Advent, Year C

OLD TESTAMENT: Baruch 5:1 - 9


NEW TESTAMENT: Philippians 1: 3 - 11

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.


In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness
Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."
Now that we are observing the Second Sunday of Advent...regardless of what the weather outside is like...we need to get re-acquainted with John the Baptist. Perhaps we should call him John the Baptizer. This is a title that seems more appropriate. And he emerges as the leading character in today’s gospel lesson. For a brief period of time he is also prominent in our religious history.

If there are any mountaineers among us today...they can probably relate to John the Baptizer. Both have lived a hard life... with none, or at least few, of the comforts of home. Both have been self-reliant to a far greater degree than most others. Both would have been familiar with spending large blocks of time away from other human beings... but not necessarily away from God. Both would enjoy a certain independence that others could never hope to have. Whereas the true mountaineer would probably be most at home in the woods or along an isolated stream... John the Baptizer would probably have had little contact with others for longs periods of time as he traversed large areas of desert... or perhaps wilderness.

We don’t know much about John the Baptizer. Sometimes legend fills the voids... but we do have some reliable information concerning him. He was of priestly descent. His father was Zechariah, a priest, and his mother was Elizabeth, identified in the gospels as a cousin of Mary the mother of Jesus. John was acquainted with Essene thought and may have had an association with one or more Essene communities.

The Gospel writers tell us that John was born a few months before Jesus... and that his ministry started before the ministry of Jesus... and continued independently for a time. Mark regards the message and mission of John the Baptizer as the “beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” Many others also share this viewpoint.

What was the mission of John? First and foremost, he was to prepare the way for Jesus. And this was a role that he gladly accepted. John referred to Jesus as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” And further, “This is he of whom I said, ‘after me comes a man who ranks before me, for he was before me.’ I myself did not know him; but for this I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.”

So John went about the countryside preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He has long been viewed as the one referred to by the prophet Isaiah as “the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight: Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill
shall be brought low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth: and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Some of the religious leaders of John’s time claimed that the Jews were exempt from judgment. Why? Because they were Jews…and because of that, God would judge other nations by one standard…but the Jews by another…with the Jews being treated with favoritism because they were God’s chosen people. But John did not agree. He told them that racial privilege meant nothing…that the life you live is what counts with God…not what your bloodlines are.

There were three main thrusts to John’s message:

1—We should share with one another. We shouldn’t be content by having too much when others have too little.

2—We should serve God wherever we are…including our place of work. If we’re a tax collector, we should be a good one. Or if we’re a soldier or a teacher or a farmer or a carpenter…we should serve God on the job. We needn’t go to a foreign country or take up residence in a monastery to serve God.

3—As previously mentioned, John was certain that he was only the forerunner…the one who paved the way for Jesus. He had no illusions about being the Messiah. He knew he wasn’t…and he knew that Messiah would come later and with Him would come judgment.

All the while John was content to be No. 2. It didn’t bother him in the least to play a role secondary to Jesus. He was pleased and honored to be the forerunner to Jesus…to prepare the way for Him. After Jesus had begun His ministry…preaching and teaching and healing…John’s disciples told him (John) of these things. It was then that John sent two of his disciples to inquire of Jesus: “Are you who is to come, or shall we look for another?” Jesus’ answer: “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me.”

After the messengers of John left, Jesus spoke of him with the greatest respect. Yes, He says, John is a prophet. But he is more than a prophet. “This is he of whom it is written, ‘Behold I send my messenger before
thy face, who shall prepare thy way before thee.’ I tell you that among those born of women, none is greater than John; yet he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”

Words such as those uttered by Jesus…and from other sources…indicate that John was a man of high moral stature…yet nowhere is his character spelled out for us. Traits of John that stand out in this passage from today’s Gospel lesson are integrity and strength. He certainly was not weak or soft. In fact, John seems to have been hard as nails…a disciplined person who realized what his mission was and who did it without fear or favor. Perhaps we can learn from him...his attitude...his tenacity...his dedication...and his consecration.

As noted earlier...this is the Second Sunday of Advent. Because I’m not here very often, I don’t know what you are doing as a congregation to draw closer to God during this season of watching and waiting. But I hope you are planning additional actions as families and/or as individuals. Of course, what you do is up to you. However, I urge you to think on these things...and be creative. After all, you will be the ones to benefit. What you do should be simple and attainable...but should also require some effort on your part. Otherwise...why bother? We still have three full weeks to get ready...spiritually...for Christmas. So let’s proceed with diligence...with reverence...with discipline...and with purpose.
Third Sunday in Advent, Year B

OLD TESTAMENT: Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11

PSALM: 126

NEW TESTAMENT: 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil. May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

GOSPEL: John 1: 6-8, 19-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord," as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.
December 12, 1993

It looks as if we’re going to have Christmas again this year. Some of the signs of Christmas, some of the symbols, some of the preliminary activities that precede Christmas have already appeared. But they aren’t convincing enough to assure us that Christmas, the day that we celebrate the birth of the Babe in Bethlehem whom we worship as our Lord and Savior, will soon arrive.

No, we can’t be certain that Christmas is just around the corner until after we’ve observed the four Sundays of Advent. And, until today, we had experienced only two so far this church year. Today is the Third Sunday of Advent…so we’re making progress…but Christmas can’t possibly arrive until we’ve observed the Fourth Sunday of Advent next Sunday. Then we’ll still have to wait almost another week.

Today…John the Baptist is in the spotlight in our gospel lesson. And yet, his limitations, as well as his importance, are shown by our gospel writer John. John the Baptist…John the Baptizer…was a prophetic voice. Prophecy had been silent for 400 years…and it spoke again in John. Some people apparently gave John more importance than he deserved. There seems to have been a sect that put John the Baptist in the very highest place. The Book of Acts tells us that in Ephesus the apostle Paul encountered people who knew only of the baptism of John. And this was several years after the Resurrection of Jesus.

The gospel writer John knew that John the Baptist was an important person…and he wanted the world to know that…but he also wanted the world to know that the Baptist’s role was subordinate to that of Jesus…that John was the herald who went ahead of Jesus…to prepare the way for Jesus…and not the long-awaited Messiah. The gospel writer was careful to say that John the Baptist was not the light who came to enlighten the world but he was only a witness to the light. He shows us John denying that he was the Christ and also disclaiming to be the great prophet whom Moses had promised.

When the Jews came to John the Baptist and told him all the great things Jesus was doing, they expected him to be resentful. But he wasn’t. He rejoiced in the success of Jesus…denying that the top place was his…and declaring that he must decrease while Jesus’ importance increased.

John the Baptist had to be an unusual person. He was the herald…the messenger. And, he was quick to point out, that’s all he was. He did not want the people to fix their eyes on the herald. He wanted them to focus their attention on Jesus the Messiah, for whom he was the messenger.
A further word about John the Baptist. He seemed to delight in being the herald who pave the way for Jesus, God's anointed Son. He viewed his role as important... although he realized it was limited... and temporary. There didn't seem to be a selfish bone in his body. He was No. 2, and happy to be No. 2. He wasn't angry because he wasn't No. 1 or couldn't become No. 1. Viewed in today's terms, how many of us would be willing to remain a vice president of a company or an organization after someone else came along after us and suddenly became president? Would we be willing to pledge our eternal loyalty to the No. 1 person? I have a feeling that most of us wouldn't be ready to do this... but I'm confident that John the Baptist would be. He was a man without envy.

In speaking of his unique role, John the Baptist used a vivid illustration which every Jew would understand immediately. He spoke of Jesus as the bridegroom and himself as the friend of the bridegroom. In modern parlance, we call the friend of the bridegroom the best man. That's the role the friend of the groom plays at a wedding service. And he feels honored to perform this service. In the Old Testament, Israel is often referred to as the bride of God, and God as the bridegroom of Israel. The union between Israel and God was very close, so close that perhaps the best way to understand the relationship between the two would be in a wedding.

When Israel went after false gods, the result was being guilty of infidelity to the wedding bond. Then later, in the New Testament, Paul in particular spoke of the church as the bride of Christ. This was essentially the relationship that John the Baptist saw Jesus and the church playing. Jesus had come from God. Jesus was the Son of God. Israel was the bride, and He was Israel's bridegroom. Where did John the Baptist fit in? He had one role and one role only. He was the friend of the bridegroom. Nothing more. And yet his role was important and he did it well. Let’s not underestimate him or what he did.

Now that Christmas is almost here... only 13 more days to wait... are we making our spiritual preparations? Have we been spending time with God? Have we been reading our Bibles? Have we been trying to heal broken relationships? Have we been feeding the poor and clothing the needy? Have we been doing anything toward housing the homeless? Have we been taking a critical look at ourselves and asking God to help us to make changes where necessary? Have we been worshiping God regularly in His church? Have we prepared our hearts for the coming of Jesus?
Making spiritual preparations for Christmas is not an easy matter. There are so many distractions. But I
don’t have to tell you this. You know... but you also know you’re caught in the middle. Christmas has become
so commercial that it seems that the ringing of cash registers is a legitimate symbol of the season. On the other
hand, Christmas sales do represent a high percentage of the annual income for those employed in retailing. And
that’s a significant number of people living in this community.

What are we to do? We can’t call on Jesus to cleanse all the malls...as He cleansed the Temple. But we
can rejoice that almost 2,000 years after His birth, there are still countless symbols of Jesus’ presence around us.
Every time we see a light anywhere... it should remind us that Jesus is the light of the world. Every time a
Christmas light twinkles, it might remind us of the many times that we’ve been forgiven... healed... and
welcomed back to God. If we should feel lonely in this fast-moving season, we should realize that there is hunger
in every human heart... and that Jesus alone can satisfy that hunger.

Let’s try to see through and beyond the loud noises and bright lights at the shopping malls. If we can do
that... we can keep things in perspective. In the malls... everyone doesn’t celebrate Jesus’ birthday. On the other
hand... we should rejoice that His presence and His influence are there... almost 2,000 years after His birth.

During this Advent season a fitting prayer would be: Come Lord Jesus, fill the emptiness in our hearts
with your love... that it may become a dwelling place for you. And purify our conscience, we pray, so that our
hearts may become a place worthy of you. Amen.
On this Third Sunday of Advent we are reading from the gospel according to John... and it doesn’t take long for us to realize that something of great importance is happening. It’s of such significance that we must wonder if we have the imagination or the perception to realize what the story is that is unfolding.

The situation is stated simply... which means we have no difficulty in reading the words of John’s gospel. But it is so thought-provoking that it conjures up a series of images that flash before us so quickly that we can’t possibly keep up. What is it that is happening?

In today’s gospel lesson, John... John the Baptist... John the Baptizer... walks across the center stage. He has a very special role to play... and he isn’t in the spotlight for long. Not only is John’s role brief... it’s also simple. He is sent from God. He is a witness to testify to the light... that all might believe through him. He himself is not the light... but rather one who has come to testify to the light.

By now we realize how well John played his role. Perhaps we can appreciate better than most what it is like to be viewed as No. 2 in a culture that almost always focuses on No. 1. There has to be something different about John. His personality... his outlook... his attitude... and his actions are all geared to being No. 2... and he is happy to be second. If he is not one of a kind he certainly approaches uniqueness. Like the best man, who is the groom’s friend and whose own happiness, duty, and service are all focused on and contingent on the groom’s wishes... John the Baptizer lives... and dies... carrying out his role as No. 2.

What is Jesus’ estimate of John? “I tell you (Luke 7:28), among those born of women none is greater than John.” For generations there had been no prophets but now, Jesus affirms, one has appeared... another Elijah or Amos. Jesus also authenticates John’s message. What makes a man a prophet is “the word of god,” and it has come to John.

But John is more than a prophet. He was a great man. He had a great message. And he appeared at a great time in history. God’s redemptive message is about to enter into a new phase. John is a part of the event of which he speaks... and he shares its greatness. Now that we have focused on and called attention to John... the forerunner to Jesus the Christ... who is He... who is coming into the world? Get ready for some superlatives. Can we ever completely identify Him who is coming into the world?
First... in the beginning Jesus the Christ was with God. He was at the Creation... and played a role in it. Or, as the evangelist John tells us, all things were made through Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Who is this person to whom John is pointing? How do we identify Him? And how do we identify with Him? During this Advent season, let's step back and open up to some amazing possibilities. Just as darkness and light make up our day... we also experience them in the world around us. Even if darkness may seem to have the upper hand in the world... light... or goodness... has a way of breaking through. Goodness can never be eliminated. Goodness is invincible.

Why didn't more people react positively to the goodness of god as revealed in the life of Christ? Was it because they had expected someone entirely different? Was it that He did not look the part? That He did not seem to fit God's promises? That they resented Him? That they disliked Him? That His claims upset and irritated them?

But what about those who accepted Jesus? Perhaps we should focus on them. In Christ we can become new creatures... new people with new likes, new possibilities, new powers. Christ gives us the power to become children of God. No one else could ever hope to do that to us or for us. And isn't it amazing that so many great things have happened to people around us? And they are here... there... everywhere... for everyone to see. And now during the Advent Season... as we prepare our hearts to receive Jesus the Christ more and more into our lives... let's not underestimate the countless possibilities that could come to our aid as we advance on our journey of faith. What are the roles, and the names, and the titles for the Son of god who came into the world?

So... you see that the possibilities of encountering Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, are endless. Not just for us... but for anybody who is open to receiving Him... welcoming Him into his or her heart.
Third Sunday of Advent, Year C

OLD TESTAMENT  Zephaniah 3: 14 - 20

CANTICLE  Isaiah 12: 2 - 6

NEW TESTAMENT  Philippians 4: 4 - 7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

GOSPEL  Luke 3: 7 - 18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.
December 17, 2000  
Third Sunday of Advent  
St. Thomas a Becket, Morgantown

Last Sunday... John the Baptist... with a proper introduction by Luke... walked onto the stage in Palestine. Luke also gave us some background information: Tiberius was the reigning Caesar... Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea... and Herod Antipas was tetrarch or administrator of Galilee. They were the civil authorities in charge when John began his ministry. Luke further told us that the word of God came to John in the wilderness... and that he went through the Jordan region, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Luke immediately connected John’s preaching with the words of Isaiah the prophet as “the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord.” This is where today’s gospel lesson from Luke picks up from last Sunday’s.

Let us take a closer look at the life and ministry of John... who he was... what he did... and the importance of the role he played. We know that John was born to Elizabeth, a cousin of Jesus’ mother Mary, and Zechariah, a priest. Both of his parents were elderly, and his mother had been childless during normal child-bearing years. That made his birth and John, himself, “special.” And the fact that he would be the forerunner to Jesus Christ, the long-awaited Messiah, would only add to his stature.

What was John’s message? Repent. Many did so... especially when it was impressed upon them that the need for repentance was urgent because the wrath of God was about to be poured out upon all the unrighteous. (Matt. 3:7-10, 11b-12; Luke 3:7-9, 16b-17).

John also exhorted the people to look out for the welfare of others: “He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.” (Luke 3:10).

John had some specific instructions for tax collectors. They were to collect no more than was required (Luke 3:12). Soldiers were to be content with their army rations and not take from civilians. (Luke 3:14).

Even though they were looked down upon by many—particularly the scribes and Pharisees—the tax collectors were far from being despised social outcasts. They were influential members of the synagogues. They were often called on to exert their influence on the Roman officials. It would be a radical change for a tax collector to give up his way of life. If he no longer was motivated to accumulate wealth, what would he do to
earn a living? He may have had to perform some menial job. He would not be a good prospect for collecting unpopular taxes from a resentful people if he didn’t have an opportunity to become rich.

Do you ever see any similarity in your employment and that of a tax collector in the days of John the Baptist? He had an unpopular job. He had a great deal of power in setting the amount of taxes he could collect. He was in a good position to bribe others or to accept bribes. If he were innovative, energetic, and unscrupulous he could become rich. How much better are we than the tax collectors? Aren’t we sometimes motivated by money, power, greed, perks, position, and selfishness?

John promised that he would be followed by someone “mightier than I” … someone whose sandals he was “not worth to stoop down and untie.” (Mark 1:7; Matt. 3:11; Luke 3:16). John said further, “I baptize you with water for repentance; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

To Christians, these are obvious references to Jesus, whom John baptized at Jesus’ request. As far as John was concerned, he wasn’t worthy to baptize Jesus. He would have been pleased for Jesus to baptize him.

What was Jesus’ assessment of John? His baptism by John indicated that Jesus accepted John as divinely sent and his work as preparatory to His own. And some of John’s disciples later became disciples of Jesus. Of John, Matthew quotes Jesus as saying that “among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” (Matt. 11:11). It’s not clear what Jesus meant when He said that while John is a great person he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. Some think He meant John was the greatest prophet of the age preceding Calvary and the Resurrection… but he died before the bestowal of the Holy Spirit on the church at Pentecost. Those who have received the Holy Spirit have it as a permanent possession: Christ within you, the hope of glory… and they enjoy a more privileged status and a more intimate access to God than even the greatest of the Old Testament saints. Others think that Jesus was referring to Himself when He said “he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he (John).”

We think of John the Baptist as quite a character… but we underestimate him if we consider him a country bumpkin. As with most people who lived when John did… we don’t know much about him. He apparently spent many years in a desert setting…and he quite likely had been alone much of the time. Some think
he had at least some contact with a monastic community. It’s possible. Could he have lived in such a setting? It’s possible... but there doesn’t seem to be any evidence to prove or disprove this. John’s clothing and diet indicate he lived a simple life. His diet, in particular, might sound strange to us. Wild honey has a good taste... but locusts? They were on the approved list for the Jewish people... but I doubt if they were very popular. On the other hand, there weren’t many food choices in the desert... and if you were hungry they probably wouldn’t taste bad.

John had an important message, and he delivered it with enthusiasm and conviction. It was simply: Repent. The people responded favorably, sometimes in great numbers. He didn’t soft-pedal his message if it wasn’t well-received. It was constant. He remained faithful to God and the message he was called to preach.

John was a highly moral man... and this fact always shone through. He was truthful and courageous. He doesn’t seem to be someone you could engage in small talk. If you didn’t really want to know his feelings on a matter... you shouldn’t ask him. And didn’t John play his role as the forerunner to Jesus the way it should be played? He readily admitted that he was not the Messiah... and he always pointed toward Jesus. Most of us human beings would have difficulty doing this. Being No. 2 to Jesus was fine with John. But how many of us would be willing to be second to anyone for any length of time? Our ego would get in our way.

Isn’t it interesting that John the Baptist...the last of the Old Testament prophets... and Jesus Christ, who died and rose for us, and who was the herald of the New Age, both preached the same message? And so did Simon Peter, one of the most visible and most effective preachers of the early church. Their message: Repent.

In at least one respect, we’re similar to the people to whom John the Baptist, Jesus, and Simon Peter preached the message of repentance. Like them, we need to repent. Repenting is not a simple one-time matter. In fact, it’s complex and we need to repent frequently. First, we have to be sorry for the sins we have committed. Then we must confess our guilt to God and at the time to someone we have wronged. And, finally, we must resolve... with God’s help... to change.

So the message of John the Baptist, Jesus, and Simon Peter is not passe. It’s still not popular... but it’s not outdated. We still need to repent... often. We need to turn away from our selfishness... our hardness of heart. And now is the time to do so... as we prepare our hearts... our lives... for the coming of the King of Kings. That’s what Advent is all about: Repent and Prepare.
Fourth Sunday in Advent, Year C

OLD TESTAMENT:  Micah 5:2-4

PSALM:  80

NEW TESTAMENT:  Hebrews 10:5-10


In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.’

And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.’

And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.
Things are moving along as expected in our Advent season. We have already experienced... in the Gospel according to Luke... two profound announcements... to Zechariah and to Mary. An angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah on the right side of the altar of incense while he was serving as a priest before God in the Temple. The angel told Zachariah not to be afraid... that his prayer had been heard... and further that his wife Elizabeth will bear him a son, and you shall call his name John. This bit of good news was rather startling, because both Zechariah and Elizabeth were well advanced in years, and Elizabeth had not borne any children prior to this time.

Later God sent the angel Gabriel to a virgin named Mary who was engaged to Joseph, a carpenter who lived in Nazareth. Gabriel told Mary she had found favor with God... that she should conceive and bear a son... "and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High."

As our gospel reading opens today, Mary pays a visit to her kinswoman Elizabeth, who was in the sixth month of her pregnancy. Luke tells us that when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For, behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed be she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”

Then comes Mary’s famous response... called the Magnificat... which I’m sure all of you have heard many times. It begins this way: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior. ...”

Back in the days when Morning Prayer was read... or sung... far more often than today... the Magnificat was a very important part of the service. We heard it often... we were familiar with it. When I say we were familiar with it, I mean that we recognize the words... and we realize the importance of the message. But have we looked at it closely? Have we broken it down into sections or parts? Have we viewed it as it really is—a series of profound statements of faith... responsibility... love and devotion... by a teen-age girl who already had one major problem... and was going to face countless others? Have we realized that some of the statements attributed to Mary were going to have earthshaking consequences? In fact, some theologians say they are filled with dynamite.
And dynamite is not one of the words theologians are likely to use when referring to a Scriptural passage. However, in this case, it seems to be appropriate. They are not overstating the words of Mary.

First, the Magnificat is a song of rejoicing... Mary’s rejoicing. God has chosen her for an important assignment... a unique assignment, and she is honored. She accepts the responsibility. Her soul magnifies the Lord... and her spirit rejoices in God her Savior. But in a deeper sense Mary’s song of praise concerns her yet-to-be-born Son. She is not rejoicing for that which she herself might do... but what might occur to and through He who is to be born of her.

The Early Church viewed the Magnificat as an expression of the kind of salvation that was coming into the world in the person of Jesus Christ. How would this concept be greeted by the rich and powerful? To them His appearance... His presence... His influence... would often be explosive. Wouldn’t you say the theologians who used the term dynamite knew what they were talking about?

Albert Nobel didn’t invent dynamite until 1867... but the Magnificat contained all the ingredients needed to produce social dynamite... religious dynamite... especially after the birth of Jesus. And doesn’t the Christian gospel still have the explosive power to cause panic, fear, and chaos in the lives of those who would take advantage of the poor... the crippled... the widows and orphans... the mentally disturbed... those who are ill... and the elderly?

God has put down the mighty from their thrones... and exalted those of low degree. Such things have happened. This statement is certainly revolutionary. In fact, it has been called a social revolution. Karl Marx is looked upon as a social reformer. He viewed the working people as exploited victims of their employers. Because he didn’t trust the employers...Marx urged the working people to revolt and set up a planned economy in which the government would own all property.

The works of Marx, and the theories and practices of Marx, Friedrich Engels and other with similar inclinations have had some success over the last 150 years. They have shaped some reforms that benefited the poor and the oppressed. They have also caused and contributed to numerous problems. But the social revolution of all time began with Jesus Christ. Not only has He put down the mighty from their thrones... but he has also filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent empty away. Christianity has put an end to classes in
the list? Then you’ll hear the sound of the cash registers, and talking toys, some of which may be identified as Christmas toys. Don’t forget clothes… Christmas clothes… clothes to buy… and to wear… at Christmas time.

And what about our trips to the supermarket? Regardless of our ethnic background, aren’t we sure to find meats called appropriate to the Christmas season… turkeys, chickens, ducks, geese, hams, lamb, various cuts and roasts of beef and pork… not to mention seafood. And all the other foods that are part of the various Christmas holiday season meals. You may have noticed I didn’t mention pastries. That’s another classification in itself. Cakes, cookies, breads… plus the fruits, jams, and jellies that go with them. And candies. And beverages… hot, cold, sweet, sour, hard, soft… and perhaps some other items that don’t fit into any classification I’ve mentioned.

And entertainment. How we like to entertain and to be entertained during the Christmas season. We may go to a Christmas musical program… perhaps at church. But more than likely most people will go to movies that have little or nothing to do with Christmas or the birth of Jesus Christ.

This isn’t meant to be a complete list of secular activities during the Christmas season… and I’m not condemning them. But they certainly are distractions. The point must be made that Jesus was always concerned about human need… and human happiness. He moved in two worlds at the same time… and yet He seemed to be more of a participant in the world around Him… what we might call the secular world… than in the spiritual realm. He gave Himself so completely to the homely human contacts that the simplest parts of everyday life were made beautiful. And He was always conscious of… aware of… the spiritual realm.

Jesus was more aware of the fact that we are to be in the world and not of the world tham we are. We can’t ignore the malls. It would hardly be a matter of having them cleansed… as Jesus cleansed the Temple. They’re a part of life around us.

Countless acts of kindness also occur around us during this season. This obviously is a season for giving… and even the poor and the homeless are not forgotten. Because of the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ… our lives have been changed for the better and we have the blessed hope of eternal life… life with God. The first Christmas is very much a part of all of this. Tonight we recall that holy night as we look forward with confidence to the next chapter of our life together. Amen.
In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.
After hearing again the familiar words of the birth of Jesus from Luke’s gospel... we can’t help but be struck by its beauty... simplicity... and brevity. It seems that nobody could do it better than Luke.

As our drama concerning the birth of Jesus opens... a decree goes out from Caesar Augustus... the emperor at Rome who was then the most powerful man on earth. Under his rule, the very name of Rome meant wealth, power, and authority. Then, in a little, insignificant, village in a conquered province of the Roman Empire a baby was born... after a young couple was compelled to make a journey there. They did not attract any attention. There was no apparent reason for anyone to notice them.

Even though Jesus was born in a stable because there was no room for Joseph and Mary in an inn, this was not an event that Augustus would have heard about in Rome. And had he heard, what difference would it have made to him? What could he possibly have cared that a child was born in far-away Palestine? It happened all the time. Caesar was a famous person... and only major events were reported to him. But things are not always what they seem.

Two thousand years ago... Caesar Augustus was the most important person known in the world. Jesus was one of numerous apparently insignificant children born in an isolated part of the Roman Empire. Regardless of how great he was, Caesar is now a part of history seldom recalled in the modern-day world. But the name of the child of whom he had never heard is now spoken with love and reverence in prayers that are offered minute by minute, year after year throughout the world. The child whose birth Luke records in a brief narrative currently has more than one billion... perhaps as many as 1 ½ billion... followers in every part of the world,

John Buchan, in writing of Caesar Augustus’ funeral, said that men comforted themselves... reflecting that Augustus was a god, and that gods don’t die. But though Augustus represented the imperial power that men tried to deify in his person, that power did go down to death. Meanwhile, the one born in Palestine “was to proclaim a kingdom mightier than the Roman, and to tell of a world saved not by Man who became God, but by God who became Man.”

Something mightier than an emperor’s proclamation had happened. It is true that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus. This is one fact. But this is a greater one: God sent forth His Son. (Ga. 4:4). The great power that Augustus once had has long disappeared... and likewise his empire has fallen into ruin and decay. But the
power of Jesus has continued to live... and, in fact, it has continued to increase. It is the power of light and love... and it continues to reach into people's hearts... and to change them... make them different and new.

An Associated Press story, filed from Bethlehem... on the West Bank... earlier this month, said that if Mary and Joseph were making a trip there today, they'd probably get stopped by an Israeli army road block. If the soldiers didn't scare them off, their next obstacle would be on the other side of the checkpoint at the Palestinian town's entrance: a sprawling parking lot with a maze of traffic around it.

The Bethlehem in which Jesus was born was a hilltop village of a few thousand people. It was surrounded by olive groves and green valleys. Bethlehem today is a city of 12,000 Christians and 38,000 Muslims. It has expanded far beyond the hilltop.

The entrance to the city—Manger Square—is an asphalt parking lot filled with a thicket of tour buses and Palestinian police cars. It is lined with shops where olive wood Nativity scenes and 3d Pictures of Jesus are sold. A Muslim mosque dominates one side of the square opposite the Church of the Nativity, the birthplace of Jesus.

For all the tackiness around it and the crowds of video camera-toting tourists inside, the Fourth Century church is considered by scholars to be one of the most authentic sites in the region, according to the Associated Press.

If you and I were limited to what people around us are saying and doing at this time of year as a result of the birth of Jesus what would we learn? Obviously we would have to realize that anyone who lived in an obscure part of the world that long ago... and is still remembered at all... must be a special person. But looking around us only for impressions... what do we learn? His name has survived the centuries. It's known here... thousands of miles away. A season of each year is commonly called the Christmas season because of Him.

Looking around us, we can't ignore the fact that this is the greatest shopping season of the year. Retail shops and stores in our area... and elsewhere throughout the country... and indeed, much of the world... traditionally sell from one-third to one-half as much merchandise in the Christmas season as they do during the rest of the year.

While shopping... what sounds do we hear the longest, the loudest, and the most often? Wouldn't music... vocal and instrumental... that has no direct connection to Jesus Christ, and some that does, be high on
the very highest; but who was, of course, only a man of his own time—and that a much simpler time than ours; and so, in many ways and on many things, unfitted to be a guide for us among our complicated social and economic problems; and in some respects now obsolete; and who foolishly threw his life away in a quixotic enterprise, obviously hopeless from the start. His conclusion: That gospel will not save the world.” End of quotation.

But the Christ... and the Gospel... that John presents in today’s reading... can... does... and will... save the world.

When John uses the term “word” we may need to be reminded that in the Greek it is a designation for Christ Himself. Scripture distinguishes between the word of God written, the Scriptures, and the Word of God incarnate, or Jesus Christ in the flesh. In his prologue, John speaks of Christ as the eternal, pre-existent one who became flesh. The word existed before the world began. The word was with God, or distinct from and yet in communion with, God the Father. Through the word, God brought into being the entire created universe, both the visible and the invisible. The Word is the source of the physical, intellectual, moral, and spiritual life of mankind. God the word became flesh, or incarnate, as a true human being. This is, in essence, the same teaching as that of Paul who said in Christ the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.

The incarnation—God becoming man—is the fundamental part of the gospel. It is that act in which the Son of God, being Himself God and of the same substance with the Father, and is true God, having a divine nature and all the attributes of deity. Jesus Christ became true man, having a natural human body and exhibiting those attributes which are common to humanity. Jesus Christ was both human and divine. He was addressed by both human and divine titles, and divine as well as human attributes were ascribed to him. Jesus Christ shall subsist forever as the God-man in His resurrected body. This is who Jesus Christ was and is. This is the Jesus Christ to whom John introduces us today in his prologue.
First Sunday after Christmas, Year A

OLD TESTAMENT: Isaiah 61: 10 - 62: 3

PSALM: 147

NEW TESTAMENT: Gal. 3:23-25, 4:4-7

GOSPEL: John 1: 1 - 18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.""") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.
There are some uncertainties about today’s epistle. To whom, exactly, was it written? There is also the question of when it was written. And who were the Galatians, anyway? We know they were the personal acquaintances of Paul, among whom he had worked. If these people are those whom the Book of Acts identifies with Paul’s ministry, they were residents of the Roman province of Galatia. Some of the cities Paul visited during his first missionary journey were Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, and Lystra. Most Biblical scholars believe it was to these churches that Paul wrote. However, others believe that the people to whom Paul was writing were those living in northern Galatia, in and near another group of cities—Pessinus, Ancrya and Tavium.

This letter was prompted by the success the Judaizers had had in the infant Christian churches. I’m sure you’ve heard about the Judaizers. They were the Jewish Christians who demanded that Gentile converts to the Christian faith submit to the Jewish rite of circumcision and, further, that they respect certain ritual distinctions between pure and impure foods. In effect, they were teaching that in order to be a good Christian you first had to be a good Jew.

The Judaizers also attacked Paul personally, saying he was not a true apostle and not on the same footing as the original Twelve… to whose authority and prestige they often referred. In their eyes, Paul’s gospel was not the true gospel. Perhaps it shouldn’t be surprising that the Judaizers had a great deal of success among the new Galatian Christians, who were inexperienced in their religious life together. In fact, they were impressed by the arguments of the Judaizers and awed by their credentials. Naturally, Paul viewed these developments with alarm, realizing they posed a grave danger to the spiritual well-being of the Galatian Christians. So he wrote them… pleading with them to resist the pressures of the Judaizers… warning them of the dangers their spiritual lives faced, and expounding on the basic Christian concepts that he had taught them.

This is no doubt about what Paul is telling the Galatians in his letter to them… nor is there any doubt about where Paul stands.

Paul’s letter to the Ephesians has been called the Magna Charta of Christian liberty. Paul stands firm: Such an attempt that the Judaizers are making in trying to shackle Christian freedom with Jewish legalism is, in Paul’s view, a complete perversion of the true gospel. Theirs is a different gospel… an alien gospel… Paul says. And those who follow their false gospel are apart from Christ and His grace. Thus Paul states one of his greatest
themes in eloquent words: The free and sovereign grace of God, by which mankind is justified, is through faith alone, not by the works of the law. Christ’s death meant that the law is not a means of salvation, and in sharing his death believers also die to the law.

In today’s reading from Galatians, Paul tells us that before faith came, we were confined under the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed. That the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian. Paul also makes the point that the law is good and holy but it cannot save. The driver of a bus or van who transports the children to and from school is not the teacher of the children. He is only their custodian while they are together. The law performed such a custodial function until Christ came. The law enlightens, but does not empower. It reveals what we ought to do, but it does not give us the ability to do it.

The letter of James presents the reverse side of the coin of faith. James argues that we cannot be saved by a faith that doesn’t radically transform our life and conduct. Thus he makes plain the fact that there can be no true faith if there are no evidences to prove that faith. He does not claim that we are saved by works... but that works demonstrate the existence of genuine faith. This is consistent with Paul’s teaching that the believer is a new creation and as such will demonstrate a new kind of behavior... which will reflect the life of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now let’s turn to our gospel reading. The prologue to the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John the Evangelist is our gospel lesson today. A noted biblical commentator reminds us that “the Christ of the New Testament is a figure so magnificent that whenever its writers think of him or names him, their minds instinctively bow down in reverence and worship. And the greatness of their Christ gives them a mighty gospel—this Christ who is the express image of God’s person; in everything he does God’s representative, and himself divine; the very thought and mind and word of God to us become alive here on our earth; the mighty conqueror of sin and death and hell, meeting the full shock of their power, and trampling them beneath his feet. But often nowadays all that is whittled down into a tame affair, with little thrill in it, and with only a blunted cutting edge. Many seem to belittle the wonderful figure of the New Testament into not much more than a gracious soul who generously spent himself for others; who as a teacher on moral and religious matters, certainly takes rank among
society. Not everywhere yet, but there is still hope. When we reflect... and when we look around us... it’s obvious that Jesus Christ has elevated the common man... the poor... the down-trodden. Society in countless places no longer has classes. Jesus Christ has eliminated the barriers that formerly held down the poor and the powerless.

Another point the Magnificat makes is that He (God) has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. This has led to what Biblical translator and commentator John Barclay calls a moral revolution. He calls Christianity “the death of pride.” Why? “Because,” he says, “if a man sets his life beside that of Christ it tears the last vestige of pride from him.” Loss of pride lets a moral revolution begin. Have we experienced such a revolution? If not, are we open to a revolution? Is it a possibility that we can look forward to?
Second Sunday after Christmas, Year B

OLD TESTAMENT: Jeremiah 31: 7 - 14

PSALM: 84

NEW TESTAMENT: Ephesians 1: 3 - 6, 15 - 19a

GOSPEL: Matthew 2: 1 - 15, 19 - 23

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archilaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazarean."
The Nativity narrative continues today in our gospel lesson from Matthew. In the first chapter, Matthew begins by giving us the record of the lineage of Jesus, his account of Jesus’ birth, and an explanation of how Jesus was born by the action of the Holy Spirit.

The second chapter tells of the visit of the Wise Men, who came to pay homage to Jesus. Not unexpectedly, this disturbed Herod. He was suspicious, perhaps we could go so far as to say insanely jealous, of any rival to his power. And he had a history of eliminating all of his rivals—real and imagined. He didn’t take any chances. He murdered his wife, Mariamne, and her mother Alexandra. Later he murdered his eldest son, Antipater, and two other sons, Alexander and A sustobulus. These acts prompted the Roman Emperor, Augustus, to say it was safer to be Herod’s pig than Herod’s son.

Just before today’s lesson begins, the Wise Men, the Magi, who have followed the star, have found the Christ child. They fall down and worship Him. And, Matthew tells us, because a message from God had come to them in a dream, telling them not to go back to Herod, they returned home another way.

Herod, who had dispatched the Wise Men to search for the little child who had been born, claimed that he, too, wanted to worship the newborn baby. But, of course, his real desire was to murder Him. Herod’s reaction was hatred and hostility. He was afraid that the little child was going to interfere with his life, his place, his power, and his influence. So he wanted the child out of his way.

What was the reaction of the chief priests and scribes? The birth of the child meant nothing to them... or at least that was their attitude; their reaction was indifference. So what? They were so busy with the Temple worship and their own legal discussions that they never paid any attention to the birth of Jesus. We already know the reaction of the Wise Men... adoring worship. Their desire was to lay at the feet of Jesus the noblest gifts that they could possibly bring.

Today’s lesson begins with the flight of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus into Egypt... which started after an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him to take the child and His mother and flee to Egypt. And further... to stay there until the death of Herod.

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord again appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying “rise, take this child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child’s life are dead.”
But Joseph learned when he returned to Israel that all was not well. Herod was dead, but his son Archilaus was reigning over Judea in his place. And he was killing people by the thousands. So after Joseph received a message from God, he and his family settled in Galilee in a city called Nazareth. The city of Nazareth was not noted for anything special. In fact, it was sometimes a subject of ridicule. The gospel of John (1:43-46) tells us that Jesus decided to go to Galilee, where He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael, and said to him, “We have found him of whom Moses in the law and the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Galilee?” Philip said, “Come and see.”

Although Nazareth was small, it was not an isolated community. On the contrary, it was in the middle of things. The Mediterranean Sea was to the west... and it could be soon from the tops of the nearby hills. Ships came and went to ports throughout the then-known world.

Between the Mediterranean and the hills was a plain on which caravans traveled from Damascus to Egypt and thence to Africa. This was one of the busiest caravan routes in the world. Centuries before, Joseph the son of Jacob had been sold and taken over this route to Egypt as a slave. Three hundred years before that, Alexander the Great and his foot soldiers had traveled past Nazareth. Still centuries later, Napoleon and his troops marched along this same route. On it Jesus would see all kinds of travelers, coming and going to the ends of the earth.

So Matthew has brought Jesus to Nazareth, which became His gateway to the world. It took time, of course, but the stage was set. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Come and see.

Today's gospel lesson ends with the 23rd verse of Chapter 2, which refers to one of the names or titles by which Jesus is known: A Nazarene. Matthew says, “He went and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled. He shall be called a Nazarene.” What prophecy did Matthew have in mind? We don't know. It's a mystery.

Please remember that as Chapter 2 ends, Jesus is a small child. Chapter 3 begins with the arrival of John the Baptist, John the Baptizer, on the scene, preaching in the wilderness of Judea. Jesus is now 30 years old. What happened to Him during these silent years? He came into the world to be its Savior, but He never left Palestine except to go to Jerusalem for the Passover.
We know He grew up in a good home. His parents saw to that. And we know His mother was a devout person. He learned a trade... carpentry... from His father who probably died when He was still very young. So it would be up to Jesus as the eldest son to support His mother and younger brothers and sisters. He had an important mission to fulfill... but first He had to look out for His immediate family. His ministry would have to wait. His religious education was not neglected. Obviously His family took this matter seriously. It's no accident that He could quote the Scriptures... that He knew many of the psalms by heart. He studied them. He learned them.

Jesus knew what it was like to be a working man... to work with His hands. He also accepted responsibility. And I can't imagine His cutting corners on a job or overcharging anyone. And if someone had a complaint, I'm confident He handled it in a most compassionate way. And what if someone couldn't pay for the work He had done... don't you think they would come to a just solution to the problem? Jesus was like the man in the parable who was faithful in lesser tasks. And, because of this, He advanced to take on greater responsibilities.

We're now in one of the most popular seasons of the church year. Why is this so? The birth of a baby attracts attention. The birth of Jesus was no exception. Of course, it was more than that. It was the birth of the Savior of the world. But there are those who grow so sentimental about His birth that they won't let Him grow up. Perhaps it's because worshiping a babe in a manger doesn't make any demands on us. But we must remember this: The child grew up. As Luke tells us, after His visit to the Temple in Jerusalem that “Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man.” He later became a carpenter. He had to face life. He had to earn a living... as you and I do. He knows what life is all about. He lived it. And yet... it seems much easier to turn our thoughts to the babe in the manger... rather than to a mature Christ.

Sometimes we seek easy answers to our children’s spiritual needs. Do we teach them at home? Do they learn spiritual truths from our lips? From our lives? Do we see that they also have other learning experiences in the Christian faith? Or do we feel that an hour at church school two or three times a month is sufficient? That’s not very long. And what about us adults? Are we growing in wisdom and stature and in favor of God and man? Or are thoughts still centered on the babe in Bethlehem?
January 5, 1997  Second Sunday After Christmas  Bridgeport and Grafton

If we look at our church calendar, we find that today is the Second Sunday after Christmas Day. By now we should have advanced to a point where we are looking forward rather than backward. The birth of Jesus was a great day and, I trust, we have celebrated it in appropriate ways. But we must move on. No longer can we turn back sentimentally to the babe born in a manger and keep our thoughts focused there. Yes, like others before us through the centuries, we have had difficulty in reconciling—and understanding—what happened in Bethlehem.

A Savior… a Redeemer… Christ the Lord… a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. However impossible these words seemed to be when we first were confronted with them… by now we should be able to accept them for what they are: Eternal truths. Eternal truths. Not paradoxical statements that continue to keep us in suspense… but rather a small window, giving us a glimpse into the mind and wisdom of God. Impossible words! Incredible actions! Yes. But God often acts in ways that mankind has difficulty understanding. God’s ways are not man’s mays. His ways are much higher than ours… and His wisdom far beyond ours.

The manger, the stable… however humble, however unexpected… tell us not only that there is a God, but that He has come very near. Not only is He almighty… but His strength is sufficient for us. And further, He is with us. The eternal God has stepped down into the world… He has entered the human world… He has moved into history at a particular place and a particular time.

The Almighty… the Eternal… the all-powerful God has revealed Himself as our Redeemer… as the source and meaning of all life… in the person of a little child appearing unnoticed in an obscure village in an isolated part of the Roman Empire. He came to a lowly place… to dwell with us.

Continuing in the lowliness and simplicity in which the life of Jesus began… need we be reminded that He did most of His work with simple folk and in simple places? Our gospel lesson today (Matt. 2:13-15, 19-23) sets the stage for Jesus’ formative years in the fishing town of Nazareth in the district of Galilee. Small town… plain, every day, honest, hard-working people.

In Luke’s Nativity narrative… an angel tells the shepherds about the birth of Jesus… then suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill among men.” Then after the angel went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to
one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.”

And the shepherds went quickly... finding Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger... and then they returned, glorifying and praising God for what they had seen, as it had been told to them. The shepherds had had this great... this unique... this once-in-a-lifetime experience. How had they reacted? They had glorified and praised God. They were in awe concerning this great event which had unfolded before their very eyes. They were on the scene during this earth-shaking, awe-inspiring event. They had what might be called a mountain-top experience. They had been on a spiritual high.

Then suddenly it was over. Back to their hard and hum-drum life. Any glamour they may have sensed or imagined had vanished. Now it was back to reality. Like the shepherds, we Christians must shift our focus. No longer do we worship the Babe lying in a manger in Bethlehem. The child grew up and, Luke tells us, “He became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon Him.” Scripture is silent on most of the life of Jesus from the time of His birth until His baptism by John, about 30 years later. Soon afterward His public ministry begins... then within a period of three years or so come His crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension.

As previously noted, the shepherds have something to tell us. They realized that their happiness had its source in God. And further, they saw that this had focused in something very simple and human. They also realized that what they had beheld in Bethlehem should reach out and on to greater things. They didn’t know how... but they were convinced that it would happen. The little child in Mary’s arms should be a king. They didn’t realize that the throne of His exaltation would be a cross and His crown a crown of thorns. So here we are... in a mystical way plugged into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus... and further linked to Him by His teachings and the exemplary life that He lived.

In order to show our love for Him, to follow Him, to do what He calls us to do, we must, first of all, be responsible Christians. We do this by the way that we live... by our worship of God, by the way we treat those around us and by working, praying, and giving for the spread of His kingdom. As individuals and congregations we are ambassadors for Christ... His witnesses... in the community where we live. I don’t know if it has sunk in yet, but we—you and I—and those around us here today—and others who aren’t here but who should be—are
responsible, as individuals and as a community of faith, for the spiritual health of this congregation <of St. Barnabas.> <of St. Matthias.> Individually... we are to be Christ’s witnesses where we live... work... play... or worship... and elsewhere in the community... and to those with whom we come in contact. Collectively—as a community of faith—we are responsible not only for teaching the faith to the congregation... but also for reaching out to others around us. Together we can do what God calls us to do. He doesn’t promise that we will be successful... but He does promise His presence... His help... and His power. Not only is He there to greet us at the end of our journey... but He is also our companion on the way.

If we approach someone and give him an opportunity to follow Christ... and we get a negative response... what does this mean? It doesn’t mean that he has turned us down. It means that he has turned down Him who sent us. And that’s an entirely different matter. After all, it is God who sends us out in His Name.

So let’s be certain we focus our lives on Jesus the Christ, the Son of God who came into the world to reconcile us to God the Father... who lived among us and who died and rose in order that we may have eternal life... life with God. May we show forth in our lives what we profess through our faith in God the Father, our Creator; God the Son, our Redeemer, and God the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier. Amen.
In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.
I’m pleased to be worshiping with you today… and to greeting you on the Epiphany.

What is the Epiphany? The dictionary tells us that an epiphany is an appearance or manifestation, especially of a deity. It’s appropriate that the church celebrates the Epiphany in the coming of the Wise Men to Bethlehem to visit the Christ Child. Today is also special because we’re observing the Epiphany—which always comes on Jan. 6—on a Sunday. That doesn’t happen often. Epiphany occurs on January 6 regardless of which day of the week it is. That being the case… many churches don’t observe the Epiphany on January 6 but rather have a celebration on the following Sunday. That would be the first Sunday after Epiphany.

The first Sunday after Epiphany is also a special day. That’s when we observe… celebrate… the baptism of Jesus. So it’s an especially appropriate time for baptism in the Episcopal church.

Speaking of baptism reminds me that the Feast of the Epiphany originated in the Eastern church. And in the East it has been celebrated in honor of our Lord’s baptism (sometimes in connection with the Nativity) since the third century. The Feast of the Epiphany was introduced into the Western church in the fourth century. However, the Epiphany later lost its character as a feast of the Baptism of Christ in the Western church… but has been retained in the Eastern church down to the present day.

In the West, the Epiphany became associated with the manifestation of the appearance of Christ to the Gentiles in the person of the Magi. Although the visit of the Wise men to the Christ child was an important event… its full significance was not realized for many years. Years after Jesus was rejected by His own people, His followers turned their attention… sometimes reluctantly… to the Gentiles. They didn’t realize that Jesus and the Magi… the Wise Men… had had a most important meeting soon after His birth. Its significance certainly was not obvious at the time. But later history marks it as a watershed event. It foretold that Jesus was also to be the Messiah of the Gentiles. Isn’t it ironic that most of His own countrymen did not even recognize Him, and certainly did not accept Him?

William Barclay, the noted biblical translator and commentator, wrote that “no sooner was Jesus born than we see men grouping themselves into the same three groups which men are always to be found in regard to Jesus Christ.”
What are the attributes of the three groups of which Mr. Barclay writes? First is the attitude of King Herod… hatred and hostility. He was resentful of this little child whom he feared would interfere with his power and influence, his life and his place in the world. Do you know anyone who harbors the same resentment? How do they express it? Herod tried to deal with the situation by trying to have the Christ child killed. Of course, his efforts failed.

And, Barclay points out, there are people today who would like to destroy Christ because He interferes with their lives. Do you know anyone filled with hate, jealousy or resentment of Jesus? Many people want to do as they like, and Christ won’t let them. And some are caught in the middle: They are pulled to and fro. They may be attracted to Christ but they want to follow their own agenda. They have to make a decision. They can’t do both. Those who decide to follow Jesus must do as He commands them. Remember when Jesus asked His disciples: “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord’ and not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46-49).

He added: “Every one who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like: He is like a man building a house, who dug deep, and laid the foundation upon rock; and when a flood arose, the stream broke against that house, and could not shake it, because it had been well built. But he who does not do them is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation; against which the stream broke, and immediately it fell, and the ruin of that house was great.”

So if we are followers of Jesus Christ, we must build our lives upon the pure foundation of Christ Himself. When things go well we may feel we are sufficient to ourselves, but when the flood comes—when life becomes difficult—we need the stabilizing power that only loyalty to Christ gives us. It will get us through the temptation and other trying times we face. The same goes for relationships between individuals. Such relationships will not hold up if they are shallow or selfish. They need to be undergirded by deeper loyalties and love which only God can provide.

The second reaction to Jesus that Barclay mentioned is the one the chief priests and scribe had: Complete indifference. They were so wrapped up in the Temple ritual and discussions of the Law that they never gave any thought to Jesus. He didn’t mean anything to them. There are countless people today who have the same attitude.
They’re so busy with their own activities that they never even think of Jesus. They probably wouldn’t have any
time for Him anyway. He doesn’t mean anything to them.

The third reaction to Jesus that Barclay wrote about was that of the Wise Men. What was it? Adoring
worship. Adoring worship. And isn’t it interesting that they laid at Jesus’ feet the noblest of gifts? And each one
of them matched some characteristic of Jesus and His work. We all remember what the gifts were: Gold,
frankincense, and myrrh. But do we realize what they represent?

Gold is the king of metals and a gift fit for a king. Jesus was “the Man born to be King.” But He was
different. He was to rule over hearts from a cross, not a throne. And He was to reign by love, not by force.

Frankincense is the gift for a priest. The sweet smell of frankincense was used in the Temple worship and
at the Temple sacrifices. The function of a priest is to open the way to God for mankind. The priest is to build a
bridge between mankind and God. Jesus did this… making it possible for us to enter the presence of God. He
was a bridge-builder.

Myrrh is the gift for one who is to die. It was used to embalm the bodies of the dead. Jesus came into the
world to die—for mankind. But first He lived for us.

The gifts of the Wise Men at the cradle of Christ foretold that He was to be the true King, the perfect
High Priest and later the supreme Savior of mankind. These are lofty expectations… but Jesus fulfilled them
all… and more. Oh that we could recognize Him in His many roles and give Him the glory and the honor and the
praise that He deserves! Amen.
OLD TESTAMENT: Genesis 1:1 - 5

PSALM: 29

NEW TESTAMENT: Acts 19:1 - 7

GOSPEL: Mark 1:4 - 11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."
The church calendar tells us that today is the First Sunday after the Epiphany. And further, that this is the
day when we celebrate the baptism of our Lord. Of course, the Epiphany must precede today’s observance. It is
celebrated on a fixed date, January 6th, and that was last Thursday. What is the Epiphany? For an answer, let’s
turn again to our church calendar, which refers to the Epiphany as the Manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ to
the Gentiles. Manifestation. What is manifestation? I’m afraid it’s not a word we use in our everyday
conversations. Some possible words or terms which might be useful in explaining or describing a manifestation
would be: to reveal, or to display, or to show plainly, or to make known. That’s what the Epiphany should do:
Reveal, or show plainly, our Lord Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. And our gospel lesson for the Epiphany is taken
from the Second Chapter of Matthew, which tells of the visit of the wise men to the baby Jesus. They were
Gentiles who had observed a new and brilliant star that announced the birth of Jesus and led them to His presence.
Their adoration of the Christ Child was a token of later submission of the Gentile world to the Jewish Messiah.

Today’s gospel lesson is taken from Mark, and it tells of Jesus’ submission to the baptism of John the
Baptist or John the Baptizer. But first, let’s turn to Matthew’s account of Jesus’ baptism. Our Lord came to John,
telling him of his desire to be baptized. To say that John was surprised would be an understatement. He was
amazed. After all, John offered baptism for the repentance of sins. And Jesus, unique among mankind, didn’t
need to confess His sins and repent. He was sinless. Jesus can be described as human in every way, as we are,
but without sinning.

So why did Jesus present Himself for John’s baptism? And why did John baptize Him? In order that
Jesus could identify fully, completely with the people… with us. It was as if He were saying: “I am truly one of
you.” Jesus is not someone far away who doesn’t care about us. Rather He is one who identifies with each one of
us. And He came in person in order to do so. Do we feel hunger and thirst? He did. Do we experience suffering
and pain? He did. Are we misunderstood? He was. Do people take advantage of us? They took advantage of
Him, too.

When we call on Him, we can rest assured that we are not asking Jesus to comfort us for something He
doesn’t identify with. Or, as the Letter to the Hebrews (4:15) tells us, “For we have not a high priest who is
unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet is without sin.” This explains why Jesus not only submitted to the baptism of John… but insisted on receiving it.

Now let’s return to Mark’s account of John’s baptism of Jesus. Mark tells us that John’s baptism was the symbol of repentance. And, in order to prepare for the coming rule of God, the act of repentance was a necessary first step. As John pointed out, repentance is a complete change. It calls for a “new mind.” It calls for an about-face or a complete turn, a turn of will in a new direction.

Repentance is more than penitence. It’s more than remorse. It’s not saying I’m sorry. It’s not simply admitting I have made mistakes. It’s far more than any of these. Genuine repentance is a radical change in our moral and spiritual living. It calls for a complete breakdown of pride… of self-assurance… of prestige that comes from success, and of self-will. Our will must be turned over to God in order that we might go in a new direction. We must move away from struggle for power… from prestige… and from advantage.

For Jesus, his baptism meant at least four things: Decision, identification, approval, and equipment.

First, decision. Jesus had stayed in Nazareth after He grew up. He had been a responsible person, looking out for His family and earning a living as a carpenter. By this time, His earthly father Joseph had probably been dead for several years. Jesus now realized that His time had come to go forth and to do the job to which His Heavenly Father was calling Him. Apparently He had been waiting for a sign to show Him when He was to start His new career. John’s ministry provided that sign. And Jesus answered God’s summons, God’s challenge. The time had come.

Next: A moment of identification. Jesus didn’t need to repent from sin. But people were turning back to God. And he was determined to be identified with this movement. He didn’t do this for His sake… but for the sake of others. This began as His baptism.

Third, Jesus’ baptism was the moment of his approval. As Mark tells us, God’s voice came to Jesus from heaven, telling Him: “Thou art my beloved son; with Thee I am well pleased. This was a personal experience… and Jesus received the word directly from God. At His baptism, Jesus submitted His decision to God for His approval. He presented Himself… and God gave his whole-hearted approval.
And fourth... this was the moment of equipment. The dove is a symbol of gentleness. Jesus is equipped to conquer the hearts of God’s people... but not by force. He will do it by love. He is getting prepared for the days ahead. His temptations in the wilderness will soon come. Then later it will be said that greater love has not man than this: That a man lay down His live for His friends.

This is an ideal time in the church year... when we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus... that we give some thought to our own baptism... the promises we made... or were made on our behalf by our parents and godparents... which, at our Confirmation, we agreed to live up to. See Page 302 in the Prayer Book. Now let’s stand and renew the Baptismal Covenant beginning on Page 304.
First Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C

OLD TESTAMENT: Isaiah 43:1 - 7

PSALM: 29

NEW TESTAMENT: Acts 8: 14 - 17

GOSPEL: Luke 3: 15 - 17, 21 - 22

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."
Before we get involved in the liturgy... perhaps we should determine where we are as far as the church year is concerned. Our church calendar tells us that today is the first Sunday after the Epiphany and... more specifically... the day we celebrate the baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Some further checking will reveal to us that the church celebrates the Epiphany on January 6th. That was Friday... two days ago. What is the Epiphany? The general meaning of the word is... an appearance or manifestation, especially of a deity. Perhaps we should concentrate on the word appearance rather than manifestation. The term manifestation is rapidly disappearing from our vocabularies because hardly anyone uses it anymore. So... of the Epiphany that was celebrated on January 6... perhaps the best way to identify it is to say it’s the anniversary of the coming of the Wise Men to the Christ Child. Not only did the wise men behold the light of the star... they also beheld the Christ Child. Or we could say the Christ child was made manifest.

Moving on from there... we find that our church calendar shows eight Sundays after the Epiphany. Today we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus. On succeeding Sundays we will be concerned with:

1—Jesus’ first miracle, turning water into wine.
2—The return of Jesus to Galilee after His wilderness temptation and His first rejection at Nazareth.
3—Jesus’ telling the worshipers at the synagogue in Nazareth that the Scripture—meaning the prophecy which Isaiah had written about the Messiah—had been fulfilled in their hearing.
4—Jesus’ calling of the first of His disciples.
5—The Sermon on the Mount: The Beatitudes and other teachings by Jesus.
6—Jesus’ law of love: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.
7—The parable of the two houses: The person who hears the words of Jesus and does them and the one who hears and does not do them. The first has laid a foundation upon rock... the latter has not and will suffer the consequences.
8—The Last Sunday After the Epiphany calls attention to the Transfiguration of Jesus.

So... you can readily see... we have a great deal of ground to cover before Lent. And, of course, the first Sunday in Lent comes the week after the Last Sunday in Epiphany. If you haven’t peeked ahead at your church calendar... the first Sunday in Lent is March 5. So Easter is going to be late this year.
Now... back to today, when we celebrate the baptism of Jesus. This is also one of the preferred days to have baptisms in the Episcopal Church. In Luke’s version of the baptism of Jesus, the presence of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove could be seen by the entire multitude. In Matthew and Mark, it was Jesus Himself—and not the crowd—who was conscious of the descent of the Spirit. The evangelist John does not record the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist... although it is implied. According to Mark, Christ came to hear John the Baptist and, like others, received baptism at his hands. The vision of the opened heavens and the divine voice are viewed as signs of our Lord’s Messiahship.

Why was Jesus baptized? After all, He was without sin. Reasoning varies, but some feel that even though He was sinless until that time, there was still the possibility of a subtle sin. Some feel he was baptized to indicate that He was completely ready for the task before Him. As a son of Israel, Jesus’ baptism could also be looked upon as showing the Israelites’ need for repentance.

After His baptism, Jesus immediately underwent His wilderness experiences—temptations—and then plunged into His public ministry. In a similar way, we hope and trust that adults who are baptized in our day will immediately get to work on the matter of living out their baptismal vows... living them out in the marketplace... the plant, the mill, the school, the hospital, the office, the store, the farm, or other place of employment. Those baptized as infants are expected to accept their Christian responsibilities at confirmation.

To say that the church has not had universal agreement on the need for baptism... or when it should be administered... is an understatement. The gospel writer John tells us (3:5) that Christ announced the necessity of a spiritual regeneration “of water and the Spirit” in His conversation with Nicodemus. It has commonly been held that Jesus instituted the Sacrament of Holy Baptism either at some unspecified time before His passion or after His resurrection, when He gave His disciples the command to baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. (Matt. 28:20).

The two necessary parts of Christian baptism—water and the Trinitarian formula—are both contained in the New Testament (John 3:5 and Matt. 28:19).
The rites of baptism were developed in the early church. Duties of the candidates and the method of administering it were outlined. Baptism was administered by triple immersion or affusion. Both of these methods are commonly used in baptism today. In the Episcopal church, we usually baptize by affusion—in which water is poured over the head of the candidate. However, baptism by immersion is also valid.

In the early church, baptism was normally conferred by the Bishop and was closely associated with Confirmation and the Eucharist. In our church nowadays, the bishop, if he is on hand, participates in the baptismal rite but the priest actually administers baptism. By a tradition as old as the third century, and virtually universal until the Reformation, children born to Christian parents have been baptized in infancy. In the sixteenth century, various groups on the European continent who rejected infant baptism and re-instituted the baptism of believers were called Anabaptists. I might add that the Anabaptists were widely persecuted by both Protestants and Roman Catholics. In fact, the number of Anabaptists put to death for their beliefs probably ran into the tens of thousands. I hope and pray that those days are behind us.

Calling attention to the baptism of Jesus, as today’s gospel lesson from Luke does, should remind us of our own baptism. When and where were you baptized? Who said the words over you and symbolically poured the water over your head… baptizing you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit?

Remember… because you are baptized you are permitted to do certain things. You have also promised to do certain things. Your driver’s license indicates that you have the ability… and the approval of the state… to drive an automobile. Your Baptismal Certificate tells everyone who can read that you are a Christian… that you have renounced Satan and the evil powers of the world. And further that you have accepted Jesus Christ as your Savior and the Lord of your life. You have also made certain promises which are found in the Baptismal Covenant.

Holy Baptism is the sacrament by which God adopts us as His children, and makes us members of Christ’s Body, the Church, and inheritors of the kingdom of God. The outward and visible sign in baptism is water, in which a person is baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Today… because we have no baptism here, I call on each of you to join with me in renewing our baptismal vows.

Page 304.
Luke tells us just before John baptizes Jesus that the people were in expectation. Why? It was because of John. Who is he? That was a basic question. And what is his role? John assures that people that he is not the Christ... but rather a humble man now on the scene who will be followed by someone far mightier than he... whose sandals he (John) is not worthy to untie. Then comes the kicker. The King... the Messiah... is to follow and with Him will come judgment. And that was the picture John painted... the message he preached. And he did his job with great effectiveness.

In fact, there was an unprecedented turning to God during John’s ministry. People flocked to him to receive the baptism of repentance. Jesus was very much aware of this movement towards God. He saw John’s emergence as God’s calling Him to action. And the first thing He did was to identify Himself with the people in their search for God.

Jesus’ baptism followed. It was no routine event. At that moment God the Father spoke to Him... and He became conscious of its significance. As the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form, God’s voice from heaven said to Him, “Thou art my beloved Son; with Thee I am well pleased.” The first part of this saying, “Thou art my beloved Son,” comes from Psalm 2, Verse 7, which has always been accepted as a description of the Messianic King. “With Thee I am well pleased” is from a description of the servant of the Lord in Isaiah (42:1), whose portrait culminates in the suffering servant of Isaiah (53).

So it was at His baptism that Jesus first realized that He was the Messiah, God’s Anointed King... and second that this involved not glory and power but suffering and death. Jesus had sought God’s approval, which He received. He also learned what His destiny would be: the Cross.

As previously noted... today we call attention to the Baptism of Jesus. And our church calendar is helpful. Today is also the First Sunday after Epiphany. Epiphany is a perfectly good word but not one that we use in our everyday conversations. The dictionary defines epiphany as an appearance, or manifestation, especially of a deity. That’s a help, but not much.

When we speak of the Epiphany, we refer to the wise men from the East who followed a star which led them to the baby Jesus. And when they saw Him, they... Gentile pagans... fell down and worshiped Him. This is an event the church celebrates on January 6th, which was last Tuesday. The Wise Men’s search for God
happened once and for all time. And yet, that was only the beginning... as countless others, through the centuries, continue their search their quest, their thirst... for God. And they are not disappointed.

It has been suggested that Epiphany is when the presence of God bursts upon us in a single event... then resounds again and again... that Epiphany is always all around us... all at once and then moment by moment.

Perhaps we can benefit from a few thoughts from the evangelist John. He speaks of the living Word of God... God becoming man... who came into the world and whose life was the light of mankind. John says the Light of Christ... the light of His life... shines in the darkness. How does this happen? In a variety of ways... but essentially through us.

I like to think that each time the light of Christ shines through one of His servants... when he or she does something pleasing in His sight... that another light is lit... another light shines in the darkness. And when entire congregations... other groups of Christians, and individuals, too... when they demonstrate the love of God in specific acts of kindness glorifying God... that the lights explode all over the place. Thousands and thousands of lights! A countless number of epiphanies!

Why do I visualize such an array of lights? Jesus Himself tells us in His Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:14), “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be seen. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

So Jesus passes His light on to us, His followers. And if we let our lights shine before those around us... they will be seen by others. They will have impact. They will touch off a series of epiphanies... thousands and thousands of lights that will bring glory to God and reassure us we are doing what God is calling us to do. We will be glorifying God... and He will undoubtedly be pleased.
The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."
Two weeks ago our gospel lesson from John was the prologue which contained the opening remarks of his effort to explain the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentile Christians. By the time that John was reflecting on the life and ministry of Jesus and collecting his thought... around 100 A.D in Ephesus... there had been some noteworthy changes in the identity of the Christian congregations. At first, they were predominately Jewish. But not any more. Now... approximately 70 years after the crucifixion of Jesus... Christians were predominately Gentile. Christianity hadn't changed... but the terms, locations and situations in which it found expression had to change. The Greeks... the Hellenists... were great thinkers. The Greek word “logos” can be used to describe Christianity. It means two things, word and reason. The Jews were entirely familiar with the all-powerful word of God. It had great meaning for them. To them wisdom was the creative word of God. Wisdom and reason are quite alike... and the Greeks were familiar with the thought of reason. Not only that, but they were greatly impressed with the order of the world: night followed day with regularity and dependability. The stars and the planets continued to move on a recognizable course. Nature had its own natural laws.

What produces this order? The Greeks were quick to agree that the logos, the mind of God is responsible for this great order of the world. The Greeks were also convinced that the logos gives mankind the power to think, to reason, and to know. So... the logos, the mind of God, dwelling in us, makes us a thinking person, a rational being. This prompted John to pursue the situation further. He noted that all their lives they had been impressed with the great controlling and guiding mind of God. It was easy for John to advance the concept that the mind of God had come to earth in the person of Jesus. Look at Him, listen to Him, John said, and you will see... know... understand... what the mind and thoughts of God are like. In other words, John presented Jesus as nothing less than God acting in the form of man. John further declared that Jesus is reality come to earth. The Greek word for real is closely related to another word that means true or the truth.

So... it would be appropriate... and true... and correct...to say that Jesus is the real light. Jesus is the real bread, Jesus is the real vine...Jesus is the real judgment. Or we could say He is the true light, the true bread, the true vine, and the true judgment. Everything that Jesus did was not only an act in time. It was more. Everything He did also gives us insight... permits us to see into reality. Not only are the miracles Jesus did wonderful... but they also give us a look into the reality which is of God.
In the other three gospels Jesus expresses compassion for the leper He healed... He offers sympathy to Jairus because his daughter had died... He is sorry for the father of the epileptic boy He heals. But to John... although these are acts of compassion... they are far more than that. They are acts that demonstrate the glory of God.

After the miracle at the wedding feast at Cana in Galilee, John said, “this, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested His glory.” The raising of Lazarus was for the glory of God. The blind man’s blindness existed to allow a demonstration of the works of God... the reality of God breaking into time and into human affairs. Without doubt the gospel according to John did much to explain the Christian faith to the Hellenist world in a way that they could understand. John’s gospel also did much to fight the heresies and false teachings that had arisen in the church.

With the knowledge of the great lengths to which John had gone to explain the gospel in terms which the Greek world would understand... isn’t it interesting that in our lesson today he gets deeply involved in imagery embedded in Jewish thought for centuries?

I’m referring to the words “the Lamb of God,” which John the Baptist, John the Baptizer, used to refer to Jesus. John the gospel writer, wants to make sure that the Christian world understands the pre-eminence of Jesus... that John the Baptizer was the one who paved the way for Jesus but was secondary to Him in every way. Fortunately, the John the Baptizer was in full agreement. He was No. 2 and comfortable in that role. John’s gospel points that out several times. Why? Because there were those who claimed a higher station... a more important position... for John the Baptizer. Some even considered him greater than Jesus... and a cult developed around the person of the baptist.

What was on John the Baptizer’s mind when he called Jesus the Lamb of God? It may have been the Passover Feast as it was not far away. Remember the Old Testament account of how the blood of the slain lamb had protected the houses of the Israelites on the night they left Egypt? Some have suggested that John may have seen flocks of lambs being driven to Jerusalem to be sacrificed at the Passover Feast. The apostle Paul also thought of Jesus as the Passover Lamb. As the son of a priest, John the Baptist would have been familiar with the Temple and its sacrifices. Even when people were starving, a lamb was sacrificed each morning and each evening
in the Temple for the sins of the people. John could be saying that Jesus is the only sacrifice that can deliver mankind from its sin.

Two of the great prophets... Isaiah and Jeremiah... had the vision of one who by his sufferings and his sacrifice—lovingly borne—would redeem his people.

John the Baptist said he didn’t know Jesus... even though he was a relative. He probably didn’t know what Jesus was before he baptized him... or what Jesus’ role was to be. But all that changed at the time John baptized Jesus. What happened then made it clear to John the Baptist that Jesus was the Son of God. John saw beyond a doubt that Jesus was the Son of God... and with his great witness he prepared the way for the public life and ministry of Jesus. John pointed beyond himself... and Jesus moved into the role to which He had been called and for which the world had been waiting.
Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.
Today’s gospel lesson from Luke gives us a series of insights into Jesus’ life… and further… it shows us what He was communicating to those with whom He came into contact. In Luke’s account, Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptizer is closely followed by His wilderness temptations… and His return to His home town of Nazareth.

And when the Sabbath came, where do we find Jesus? In the synagogue. He went there, as was His custom. In other words, He attended worship services regularly. With all the things that were happening in His life… the distractions… the spiritual crises… did Jesus withdraw from his spiritual upbringing? No. He returned to them… in the synagogue. Few people in His day could worship often in the temple. It was in Jerusalem, too far away for most people to go to worship except on special occasions… holy days.

The synagogues were the real centers of religious life in Palestine, and every town of any size had one. In fact, the law required every community with 10 Jewish families to have a synagogue. The Temple was designed for animal sacrifice… but the synagogue was not. It was for worship and teaching.

Synagogue services were divided into three parts:

1—Worship, at which time prayer was offered.
2—Reading of the Scriptures. Passages were read by seven people from the congregation. The ancient Hebrew was translated (by the Targumist) into Aramaic or Greek. The Law was translated one verse at a time. The prophets three verses at a time.
3—Then came the teaching. Because there was no professional ministry, the president of the congregation would invite any distinguished person present to speak. Then would follow discussion and talk. This explains how Jesus had an opportunity to read and to teach in the synagogue at Nazareth.

See any similarities to our services of Morning Prayer or Evening Prayer? Some smaller congregations might have difficulty in providing seven lectors or lay readers for such a service. And could we always have a respected teacher or preacher available? Not to mention a translator. But… up to a point, the service in the synagogue… at which Jesus read and spoke… would be similar to one of ours when Holy Eucharist was not scheduled. However, it wasn’t long until Jesus was barred from teaching in the synagogues because He had become controversial.
How important was the synagogue in the religious life of the Jewish people? Extremely. Extremely. In his work, *The Nature of the Early Church*, Ernest F. Scott wrote: “The rise of the synagogue may be compared, in its historical significance, with the invention of printing, though in some ways it marked an even greater revolution. (By the synagogue, God's) worship was made independent of everything that was sensuous and external. He was the righteous God, and desired that men should serve Him by moral obedience. They were to meet before Him to meditate on His will, as it was revealed in His holy law.”

So we recognize the synagogue as the center of religious life in Palestine... and that Jesus attended regularly. Or, as Luke tells us, “as was His custom.” Only one other time does this phrase appear in the Gospels (also in Luke) (22:39) near the end of Jesus’ earthly life when He “went, as was His custom, to the Mount of Olives.” Both times the custom that Luke calls attention to pertained to prayer.

To Jesus... prayer was public or corporate, as well as private. It was instinctive, and it was habitual. He prayed privately at a variety of times and places... and He prayed publicly... when God’s people came together to worship. He set the example. We are to go and do likewise.

Can you imagine the expressions on the faces of the worshipers when Jesus read this from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah?: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”

I have the feeling that hearing those words that Jesus got all the worshipers’ attention. The clincher must have been when He said: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Can’t you hear the sighs? The ooh’s and the ahh’s?

Did they hear Him correctly? Has the Messiah come? And with Him the era of the Lord’s favor? And has the kingdom of God come near?

One of the first points that Jesus makes concerning his ministry was that He is bringing good news to the poor... and setting free those who are oppressed.
Jesus Himself... His statement... is all that the people have to go on. It sounds as if He might be a miracle worker who has not yet produced any tangible evidence or possibly someone who is offering these people false hope. They would have to wait and see.

All the power that Jesus has is the power of love. It was also His only weapon. He didn’t have an army of helpers. In fact, at that time He didn’t have any helpers at all. And yet it wasn’t long until some wonderful things began to happen. Not only did the poor have good news preached to them... but they also began to feel like they were somebody... and that Jesus Himself was their champion. These developments did much for their self-confidence and their self-esteem.

Another major promise that Jesus made in fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah was in proclaiming the recovery of sight to the blind. While He healed... physically... several blind people... He didn’t wish to limit His influence... to draw people to Him only to help them physically. He was really more interested in making an impact on their lives through their minds and souls... and, as He said, “to set them free.” And, of course, He opened the eyes of many who were not physically blind.

An incident recorded in the gospel of John tells of Jesus’ healing of a blind man. The man was later cast out of the synagogue as a direct result of this. Afterward, Jesus told him, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind.” Some Pharisees heard these comments and they asked Jesus if they were also blind. Jesus’ answer to them: “If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your guilt remains.”

So Jesus physically opened the eyes of some. And to others he opened their eyes to wonder and majesty... and also to the nearness of God. He helped them to see... to experience... some of the light of God’s presence in ordinary places and ordinary people. This has continued through the centuries. He is still opening the eyes of those who follow Him... who put their trust in Him.
Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."
The beginning of Jesus’ Galilean ministry comes shortly after His baptism by John the Baptist… John the Baptist. The first chapter of Mark, part of which we are studying today, covers John’s baptism of Jesus, Jesus’ wilderness temptation, the beginning of His Galilean ministry, and the calling of Peter and Andrew and James and John. Even after all these happenings we’re still only half-way through Chapter 1!

This is the way Mark starts off today’s gospel lesson: “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.”

Jesus came... preaching. He chose oral communication as His way to tell people about the kingdom of God… of attracting them. He preached the message and His followers received it and preached it to others… down through the centuries. Jesus entrusted His message to the common folk… and they did not let Him down.

As George A. Buttrick noted, “Jesus could have written books. Instead, ‘Jesus came preaching.’ He trusted His most precious sayings to the blemished reputation and precarious memory of His friends.” This makes Jesus’ message far more personal. When He was preaching, He was close enough to many of his hearers to look them in the eye, to touch them. The same can be said of His teaching, too. As long as He was proclaiming the gospel… telling the people that the Kingdom of God is at hand… it would be impossible to say when He was preaching… or He was teaching. Where does one end and the other begin? I’m sure I couldn’t make such a distinction… and I seriously doubt if you could, either. There’s another special aspect of Jesus’ preaching and teaching. When He uttered it, He lived it. When He said it, He lived it. God was in the midst of those to whom and with whom Jesus talked. He didn’t really tell people how they should live… but He lived among them… and showed them how to live. And He shows us how to live... how we should live. We should live like Jesus did. He set the example.

And how has Jesus’ gospel message come to us through the centuries? By proclamation—preaching and teaching—and by living it out. That’s the way Jesus began His ministry… and that’s the way His followers have passed it on. In more recent history, the invention of printing has given us additional ways of proclaiming the gospel. Printing resulted in the written word of God… the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments. In addition, countless religious books, tracts, articles, statements of faith, sermons, and other manuscripts have been helpful in...
proclaiming the gospel. Later would come radio, television, videocassettes, records and tapes... but verbal proclamation to those nearby is still very much a part of the Christian message today.

As Mark tells us, Jesus had barely begun proclaiming the good news... that the kingdom of God was at hand... when He called His first four disciples. Why did He call four fishermen? Did He see something “special” in them? Could He trust them with such an important message? Would they hear it, believe it, and pass it on? What kind of character did they have? Would they persist in doing what He called them to do? Or would they become discouraged and forget their message... their mission... their responsibilities? On reflection, we must agree that Jesus had picked common, ordinary men to share and proclaim His message. Also that even though they had no special qualifications, they were equal to the tasks that lay ahead.

I trust that we are encouraged by Jesus’ disciples—Peter and Andrew and James and John—whom He called in today’s lesson. They did their part. They and the others Jesus called turned the world upside down. Now it’s our turn. We don’t have world-wide responsibilities... but we’re the ones... you and I... who are representing Christ <in Buckhannon> <in Elkins> and surrounding communities. We’re His witnesses, His ambassadors. It is our responsibility to proclaim... by word and by deed... the good news of Jesus the Christ. By what authority do we proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ? The Great Commission. The Great Commission. It’s found in the 28th Chapter of Matthew’s gospel.

Here are His words as Jesus gave the Great Commission to the eleven (28:18-20): “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”

These words that Jesus spoke to the 11 have inspired His followers throughout the ages. And many have taken them seriously. Otherwise there wouldn’t be a billion-plus Christians in the world today.

Why should we buy into the Great Commission? In gratitude for all that God has done for us. We are responsible Christians; aren’t we? At our baptism we renounced Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that revel against God. We renounced the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. We renounced all sinful desires that draw us from the love of God. We turned to Jesus Christ and accepted
Him as our Savior. We promised to put our whole trust in His grace and love. And we promised to follow and obey Him as our Lord. How do we live up to our baptismal promises? We begin... and it is only a beginning... by worshiping God regularly in His church because, in the words of St. Paul, we have become new creatures... new persons... no longer are we self-centered; we are God-centered.

When He becomes the center of our lives we have a desire... and a need... to know God better. What does He want us to do? What is His will for us? We ask Him. We listen to Him. We offer ourselves to Him and His service. We look around us and see what other people need. There is a correlation between our relationship with God and our relationships with our families, friends, fellow Christians, and neighbors because we are all children of God.

Remember how Jesus summarized the Ten Commandments? Thou shalt love the Lord Thy God with all thy heart, and with all they soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it. Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the Prophets.

Living a life that is pleasing to God means the giving up of our lives... the best of what we have to offer... to God and His people. In other words, our love of God and neighbor should predicate all that we do... at home, at work, at play, at church. So... occasional worship... occasional prayer... occasional Bible study... occasional good deeds... don’t really accomplish what God is calling us to do. He expects greater things. He has high expectations of us. Offering the minimum doesn’t get the job done. After all, God is our Lord, our Savior, and the author of our salvation. In gratitude... in thanksgiving... we should be offering the best of our skills, our gifts, our talents, and our other resources... including money... for the spread of His kingdom.

If we don’t know... specifically... what God is calling us to do, we need to keep calling on Him... to keep offering ourselves to His service... to keep listening to Him. And we also need to keep listening to what His people... other members of this congregation... our clergy... are hearing... are sensing... and are doing. Sometimes God speaks to us through others. His call to us may not be as direct and as clear as Jesus’ call of Peter and Andrew and James and John in today’s gospel lesson. That doesn’t mean we should quit inquiring or quit listening. If that’s the case, we should intensify our efforts to ask God and His servants what we should be doing.
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A

OLD TESTAMENT: Micah 6:1-8

PSALM: 15

NEW TESTAMENT: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

GOSPEL: Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.
It's that time again. Our gospel lesson from Matthew contains his version of the Beatitudes, sometimes called “the blessed.” And for a good reason. Each one of them begins with the word “blessed.”

What are the Beatitudes or the blessed all about? They are a literary form. And each one is a declaration of praise for an individual or group considered to be a good example of high moral character and piety. As a consequence, all such people could reasonably expect an appropriate reward from God.

Most of the beatitudes in the Bible are expressions of joy and hope... but some of them make references to sorrow. We find beatitudes in the Old Testament, the Apocrypha, and the New Testament. Most of them begin with “happy” or “blessed”... followed by the person or group being singled out. Frequently another clause gives the reasons for this special state of being.

Some of the easiest beatitudes to find in the Old Testament come from the Psalms. For instance, Psalm 1 tells us: Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked, nor lingered in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seats of the scornful!

And Psalm 41 says: Happy are they who consider the poor and needy! The Lord will deliver them in the time of trouble.

The Beatitudes in the New Testament appear most frequently in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. But we also find them seven times in Revelation, three times in Paul’s letter to the Romans, and once in the gospel according to John.

Let’s move on. The beatitudes with which we are most familiar appear in Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount. There are four in Luke’s version and eight in today’s gospel lesson from Matthew.

1. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Or O the blessedness of the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

   Because they are not afflicted with pride... and they feel their spiritual need. They look to God for help, and he cares for them.

2. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

   Such people don’t try to run from or ignore pain and suffering. Rather, they face it... work through it, learn from it. Some even take on the pain of their neighbors. This can be a Godsend for both.
3. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

They are humble and reverent. They are not pushy, aggressive, or demanding. Their reward is a gift of God. They would never try to seize it by force.

4. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Some hungers, when fulfilled, lead to a search for a higher attainment, a higher good. On the other hand, some whose hunger and thirst are attained... find nothing further to strive for. What they experience is emptiness. But what about those who hunger and thirst for Christ? They find joy.

5. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Shakespeare had a good understanding of this beatitude:

"The quality of mercy is not strained,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath; it is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown."

(Merchant of Venice, Act IV, Scene 1)

If we are willing to admit our sins, how can we deliver strong condemnations to others? We need to realize that God deals with us as we deal with others.

6. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Who are the pure in heart? A good answer might be those with rightness of mind and purity of motive. The word “pure” appears 28 times in the New Testament and 10 times it is translated as “clean.”

James Reid in *The Key to the Kingdom: Studies on the Beatitudes* wrote that to the impure man life is like a stained glass window seen from the outside, but the pure man sees it from the inside—from a true and single motive. When do the pure in heart see God? Perhaps it’s when they experience or sense Him in the world about them, to which others are blind.

7. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

How many peacemakers do we know? They may best be identified as those who can establish right relationships between man and man. Remember that peace between man and man or between countries is more than the absence of war. Those who can bring about either are doing a God-like work. After all, God wants us to
live in peace and harmony with Him and the people throughout the world. Peacemakers are in harmony with God… and He is pleased to call them His children.

8. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Persecution of Christians today is not unknown. However, most of us may be more familiar with situations where Christians—or their religion—are ignored, rather than hated.

This should make us wonder if we are taking our Christianity for granted and not living up to the demands it should be putting on us. All the Christians who died for their faith did not do so in past centuries. But most of us have little or no personal knowledge of such sacrifices in today’s world.

Jesus tells us to rejoice if we are persecuted for righteousness' sake. He reminds us that the prophets whom we revere were also persecuted. He implies that they are a joyous company. And they are still noted for their courage.

Undergoing persecution is a terrible experience, but Jesus assures us that the rewards are great.
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C

OLD TESTAMENT: Jeremiah 1:4 - 10

PSALM:  71

NEW TESTAMENT: 1 Corinthians 13:1 - 13

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.
How many of you were born in a small town? After you had been gone for a number of years, what kind of a reception did you get when you returned? Did some people speak well of you? Were any of you confronted by an old-time resident who reminded you that you weren’t cut out to succeed at such and such an occupation? Was it suggested that you didn’t have what it takes? Or that your skills and other qualifications couldn’t possibly translate into a successful career... where you had gone?

It doesn’t seem to matter how well you’ve done. Even if you are now the president of the company... the principal of the school... even the superintendent of schools... the manager of the television station, the editor of the newspaper... the chief surgeon at the hospital...the circuit judge... the president of the bank. Don’t be surprised if people from your hometown... particularly if it’s a small and insignificant community... seem to have difficulty in recognizing and acknowledging any success you have had... regardless of how significant it may have been. Of course, some will always remember you favorably. But many won’t.

In a similar vein... if you started out at the bottom of the totem pole at the plant, the office, the mine, or the mill... and you may now run the place... perhaps even own it... this doesn’t impress some people. They remember when you first started. What an insignificant job you had. And they won’t let you forget this. In fact, as far as they are concerned you might as well be doing that same entry-level job you were doing 40 years ago.

Or you may be several years younger than a brother or sister who attended the local schools. Why is it that you are still looked upon as So and So’s little brother or baby sister... even though you’re 60 years old and have had your share of accomplishments since your grade school days. Why won’t people in your old hometown let you succeed in life? Why won’t they let you grow up? Why won’t they recognize you for who you are today... or what you are today rather than 40 years ago?

Jesus experienced a similar situation. He was also right when He said no prophet is acceptable in his own country. Who said: “You can’t go home again?”

There’s a familiar ring to today’s gospel lesson. Today’s passage from Luke immediately follows last Sunday’s lesson. Jesus has just read from the prophet Isaiah in the worship service in the synagogue at Nazareth, His old home town.
These are the words He read: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

And He closed the book, Luke tells us, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." This is one of those times when you could probably have heard a pin drip.

As today’s lesson begins, Luke tells us, all spoke well of Jesus, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth; and they said, "Is not this Joseph’s son?" The words "Is not this Joseph’s son" probably aren’t meant to be complimentary. More likely what is meant is "if these words are coming from the mouth of Joseph’s son how can they amount to anything?"

A similar passage in Mark will give us some additional insight. Mark tells us that many who heard Jesus were astonished, saying “Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him? What mighty works are wrought by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us? And they took offense at him.”

Isn’t this interesting? Some of the people in Nazareth seem to have it all figured out. They knew Jesus. They knew His family. That’s all they needed to know. It wasn’t possible in their view, that He had anything worthwhile to say to them. Remember who He is. He is only a carpenter. What does He know about God? About religion? About how to live? What a bunch of snobs they were. They wouldn’t know a prophet if he spent a lifetime in their presence. Their minds were closed... their hearts were hardened. Their view was: Jesus had no special qualifications... so forget about Him. Or, as Mark said, they took offense at Him.

People have been taking offense at Him ever since. For a variety of reasons. Some may still take offense at Him because of His humble birth. Others try to get around the fact that He asks us to seek the truth... as He did. Some resented Jesus in His days on earth because He wasn’t their kind of person. Has human nature changed? Jesus was a strong advocate of the poor, the helpless, the powerless... and people resented Him because of this. They still do. Some despised Jesus because He exposed them for what they were. And their lives were so rotten, so corrupt, that they couldn’t withstand scrutiny. Isn’t that still true?
But perhaps the one aspect of Jesus' message to the people in His home town of Galilee that infuriated them most was the fact that they weren't as exclusive... as highly favored... as they thought. Yes, the Jews were God's chosen people. But they also had some responsibilities to God... and to others. God didn't give His unconditional approval to them regardless of how they lived... how they acted... what they did.

As Jesus pointed out... there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah... when there was a great famine. And Elijah was sent to none of them... but only to a Gentile woman in the land of Sidon.

Jesus also noted that there were many lepers in Israel at the time of the prophet Elisha. Not one of them was cleansed. Only Naaman the Syrian was cleansed... and he had to first undergo a humiliating experience.

That did it. Only two examples were necessary for Jesus to make His point: God is God. He will come to whomever He wishes. He will heal those persons He wants to heal. And He will not blindly favor one nation or one group over another. There are other peoples on the earth who might be as important to God as we are.

I hope that we don't feel superior to others... because we still have a great deal to learn about the nature of God. Not only do we need to know more about God... we need to know Him better.

The examples Jesus gave to the congregation at Nazareth are good ones... but they merely scratch the surface. We must let today's gospel reading be a lesson for us, too. God's interests take precedence over ours. He is in the driver's seat.
Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A

OLD TESTAMENT: Isaiah 58 1 - 9a (9b - 12)
Psalm: 112
NEW TESTAMENT: 1 Corinthians 2 1 - 12 (13 - 16)
GOSPEL: Matthew 5 13 - 20

"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot. "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."
Optimism is a major characteristic of the Christian religion. The Christian hope of eternal life... life with God... is closely linked to this optimism. The glad tidings of redemption are central to our Christian hope... and our belief in a Savior. Such glad tidings can be translated as Gospel... or, in Old English, Godspel. But perhaps we’d recognize it best as good news... the good news of Jesus Christ as the redeemer of the world.

Of course, there are other bits of good news in the New Testament. After all, we’re optimistic, and it’s good to find and recognize acts and facts and happenings that fit into the gospel message. There is only one Easter Day, when we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But it is followed by 51 Sundays which could aptly be referred to as “Little Easters.” In a similar way... there are countless bits of good news brought to our attention in our reading throughout the entire church year. All of these items of good news are helpful to us as we advance on our Christian journey. They’re good for our morale. They encourage us on our spiritual journey.

For the last several months we have been literally bombarded with good news. It follows a pattern. The angel Gabriel appears before the Virgin Mary, telling her that she is going to bear a son... an exceptional son... and that she is to call Him Jesus. The angel tells her that the baby she bears will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever. And of his kingdom there will be no end.

The news... the good news... that the angel had announced to Mary came to pass with the birth of Jesus... proclaimed in these words: I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

In our church year... soon after we celebrate the birth of Jesus our attention is called to His baptism by John. There is a great revelation associated with Jesus’ baptism. We had already learned Jesus’ identity as the Son of God... but it was reinforced at His baptism some 30 years later when, the gospels tell us, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on Him in bodily form, as a dove, and a voice came from heaven: “Thou art my beloved Son; with Thee I am well pleased.”

In the Eastern church, the baptism of Jesus has been closely associated with the Epiphany season since the third century. One of the main features of Epiphany in the East is the solemn blessing of the baptismal water. Also in the East, the baptism of Jesus continues to be celebrated at times in connection with His nativity. In the
West, the baptism of Jesus became associated with the manifestation or the showing of Christ to the Gentiles in the person of the Magi. Further secondary associations during the Epiphany are the miracle at the Cana wedding feast and the finding of the child Jesus in the Temple.

However, our gospel lessons during the Epiphany aren’t limited to any particular part of the life and ministry of Jesus. For instance, they include the calling of His disciples, the Transfiguration of Jesus, and the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew’s version of the Sermon on the Mount started last Sunday in our gospel lesson and continues today,

In today’s gospel lesson, Jesus tells us what one who believes in Him is like. What are we like? We are the salt of the earth. I am the salt of the earth. You are the salt of the earth. He is the salt of the earth. She is the salt of the earth. We are the salt of the earth! Isn’t this great news?

The Savior of the world calls us the salt of the earth. Who are we to dispute Him? The Anointed One of God… who was without sin… and died for the sins of the whole world… calls us the salt of the earth. Of course, in our passage from Matthew… Jesus is referring to His disciples who were with Him at the time. But what He told them applies to us just as surely as it referred to them. We are also His disciples… and, like them, we need to be at work in the world around us. We have some responsibilities.

So we are the salt of the earth. Why? Because Jesus said so. How? In what ways are we the salt of the earth? Salt gives zest to food. Christians add joy to many things… to the lives of those around them… to worship… to community living… to every organization to which we belong. It doesn’t take a great deal of salt… or saltiness… to make noteworthy additions to the character of our living. Good, solid Christian lives add immeasurably to the quality of life in a community. These additions are far out of proportion to the numbers of Christians involved.

Salt and Christians share at least one other attribute. It doesn’t take a great number of wrongs to corrupt society. Greed, lust and apathy can lead to decadence. That’s where Christians come in. It’s often up to us to provide what’s lacking… whether it’s a spark, or spice, or leadership, or direction, or energy, or diversion, or alternates. A pinch of salt is effective out of all proportion to its amount. So is the influence of Christian men and women. I’ll give one example… and from it you can recognize numerous others. How about Jesus’ disciples?
They shook up the world... these plain, ordinary men on a mission, who gave all they had to witness to Jesus. Their followers today number more than a billion. From humble beginnings...

Someone once said that a Christian will redeem the world... or the world robs him of his Christianity. Are we adding our pinch of salt... our saltiness... to the causes, the needs, the institutions of our community? Or have we lost our saltiness? Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men."

Perhaps we should test our salt level from time to time. Are we still salty? Or have we lost our saltiness?

In today's gospel lesson Jesus also told His disciples... and that includes us... that you are the light of the world. Can you imagine! The light of the world! In the first chapter of the gospel according to John the evangelist refers to Jesus as the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. John says further that John the Baptist was sent by God to bear witness to the light, that all might believe in Him. Of Jesus, the evangelist said, the true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. There are other references to Jesus as the light of the world, but this one is probably best for our purposes.

The amazing thing in today's gospel lesson from Matthew is that Jesus... who has been identified as the light of the world... tells His disciples that they are the light of the world. By extension... we, His modern day disciples... are also the light of the world. Why? Because Jesus has power to shine in us. How can this be? Jesus shining in us reveals God to others. Others see God... Godly acts... in us. Jesus came to shed light... that the world would not perish in darkness. Jesus' disciples... starting with His closest associates and extending to us... are to reveal the true nature of God-centered man. We are the light of the world. We are to show man in the image of God. This puts the Christian in a bit of a dilemma. We are not to toot our own horn... but we are to let our light shine before men that they may see our good works and give glory to our Father who is in heaven. In other words, we are to reflect the light of Christ. Our faith should be evident. Others should be able to see it shining forth... through the world's darkness. The light comes from God... it belongs to God... and it should shine for His glory. It's up to us to make this happen. We're disciples of Jesus Christ... God's people. We're the salt of the earth. We're the light of the world. Jesus Himself said so.
Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B

OLD TESTAMENT: Isaiah 40:21 - 31

PSALM: 147

NEW TESTAMENT: 1 Corinthians 9: 16 - 23

GOSPEL: Mark 1: 29 - 39

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.
If someone asked you what time the service starts at Church of the Transfiguration, what would your answer be? Would you tell him or her that the service starts at Transfiguration Church... as soon as the worship ends? That would be about 10 a.m. each Sunday. It continues until the next time the congregation gathers here for worship. Is this the way you perceive worship of God and service to His people? Certainly this is the way that Jesus viewed worship and service. Take a look at today's gospel lesson. Mark tells us that immediately after Jesus and Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John left the synagogue... left the house of worship... they went to Simon Peter’s house, where his mother-in-law was ill with a fever. Jesus started home from church, carrying the truth that had been proclaimed in the house of worship into the community. As soon as worship had ended, His service began. First stop was the home of Peter. The first beneficiary of Jesus’ service to others after church that day was Peter’s mother-in-law. He took her by the hand and healed her. Service to others must be contagious... for Mark tells us that as soon as Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law she got up from her bed and served them. So... what has happened here? Jesus takes the power of God, which was proclaimed and felt and experienced in worship... to the service of human need. And He didn’t waste any time in doing so. He didn’t leave the truth in the sanctuary; he put it to work.

When our worship ends, what happens to us? Do we immediately forget the spiritual truths we have learned? Do we leave them in the church building? Do we file them away for possible future use? Or do we put them to use for the benefit of others? I have found that this is an excellent time to visit someone who is ill... or a shut-in. Do it while our enthusiasm is high. Do it while we’re still aware of God’s presence in our lives.

Later in today’s gospel lesson Mark tells us that on the same day... at sundown... or, in other words, after the Sabbath had ended, when business burdens might again be borne, those sick with various diseases were brought to Jesus for healing. And He didn’t disappoint them. This passage shows not only the power of Jesus... but also His compassion. The good news of Jesus’ healing of Peter’s mother-in-law spread fast... and Jesus responded immediately to the needs of the others who were ill. He provided them with hope... with recovery, with wholeness, with salvation. All these aspects of human life are closely linked.

The people learned first-hand that Jesus can heal and save. We know this, too. But are we passing on this message? Are we proclaiming the fact that God through Christ can heal and save? This news is too good to leave
here in the sanctuary. We must pass it on. We must tell others. If we don’t, who will? We sometimes need to be reminded that Jesus came preaching, teaching, and healing. We don’t seem to have any problem relating to His preaching and teaching… but healing? Yes. And let’s not minimize this aspect of His ministry. Wherever he went, Jesus brought life and health, deliverance from disease and demon possession, victory over evil, terror, and death. Today’s lesson refers only to the tip of the iceberg. As the Messiah, Jesus brought health and salvation. As the Savior, He ministered both in the religious sense of salvation and in the sense of healing a disease.

It would be impossible to separate Jesus’ healing ministry from His message of redemption. Each is woven into one whole. The Christian picture of Jesus as the Good Physician, the Savior of the whole person, is drawn over and over in the Gospels.

Mark tells us that after healing a large number of people of a variety of ills that Jesus rose early and went to a lonely place. Why did He do this? To pray, which was always a high priority of His, the renewal of life by prayer. He was as active in prayer as He had been in healing. Here He opened Himself to God… He also went to a lonely place for renewal. He had withdrawn from the intrusions of the world to spend time with God… and to prepare Himself for the equally demanding days ahead.

So should we. We need to get away from the pressures of daily life to spend time with God… to seek His will for our lives… and the empowerment to carry it out. Plus strength and courage. We need them, too. As well as healing of our body, of our spirit, and our soul. Withdrawal to a quiet place is helpful… a first step… to conversation with God… to ask His direction… to seek His power in our lives… and to call on Him for renewal of our strength… and our courage. Amen.
Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.
My text this morning is taken from the 24th verse of the 43rd chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.

“But you have burdened me with your sins, you have wearied me with your iniquities.”

It has often been said that there’s nothing new under the sun. In fact, these very same words have been used so often that we view the statement as a cliche. But that doesn’t mean it isn’t true.

In the Old Testament, God devoted much time and effort to revealing Himself and to letting the Israelites know what He expected of them. This happened time after time. For example, in the 15th verse of the 43rd Chapter of Isaiah, God says through His prophet (Isaiah), “I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King.” Later, in the same chapter, God was pointing out many of the things that He had done for Israel... in order that Israel might declare His praise. But does He get praise? No, the Israelites don’t praise Him. They don’t worship Him. Worse yet, they worship other gods. God says that He made a path to the sea... and quashed the enemy and yet you do not declare my praise.

“But you have burdened me with your sins, you have wearied me with your iniquities.”

Through Isaiah, God called attention to the Israelites’ sinfulness. Are we any less sinful than the Israelites of Isaiah’s time—the eighth century before Christ? Probably not... even though since that time God gave His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, the Living Word of God, as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. Despite Christ’s death on the cross, sin—or separation from God—is still one of the major ills of mankind. We need constant forgiveness, for our sins are many and varied.

“But you have burdened me with your sins, you have wearied me with your iniquities.”

Of Christ, the gospel of St. John has this to say (in the 10th and 11th verses of the first chapter): “He was in the world and the world was made through Him, yet the world knew Him not. He came to His own home, and His own people received Him not.”

So, looking around us and looking back, it would appear that man hasn’t changed much... whether we’re speaking of the Israelites of the eighth century before Christ, Christians during the period in which the gospel of St. John was written, or modern Christians.

If God were speaking through Isaiah today, He no doubt would say that we still have a propensity for sinning. No... there’s nothing new under the sun.

“But you have burdened me with your sins, you have wearied me with your iniquities.”
I’m sure most of us, if we have held our job… or run a business… for a number of years would have confidence in what we are doing. In fact, we may feel that we do it so well that nobody could take our place…and, of course, nobody can do this job as well as I can.

In today’s gospel lesson from Luke, Peter and his associates had fished all night and caught nothing. They had brought their boats to shore and were washing their nets. Then along comes Jesus. He climbed aboard Peter’s boat and asked him to put out a little from the land. He then sat down and taught the people from the boat. Up to that point, probably none of what Jesus said or did was unpredictable… perhaps not even unexpected.

Then Jesus told Peter to put out into the deep and let down the nets for a catch. Can you imagine? Here was Jesus, who may never have fished a day in His life. And He was telling Peter, a veteran commercial fisherman, what to do. In fact, He was even telling him how to do it.

I have a feeling if someone would come up to us and tell us what to do that we probably would resent it. And we’d probably let him know our feelings… in no uncertain terms. Peter had a reputation for being a rough man… he was also known to be impetuous. When pressed, he would usually express his opinion in rather strong language. He obviously knew a great deal about fishing… what to expect, where to find the fish, etc. After all, that had been his occupation for many years… from boyhood.

Doesn’t Peter’s reaction surprise you? Doesn’t he have seemed to have restrained himself quite well? He responded to Jesus’ request this way: Master, we have toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.

Then they needed help to handle all the fish. What a wonderful problem Peter and his associates had! Not only were Peter and James and John astonished at the number of fish they had caught… but they were also scared. Peter wanted Jesus to depart from him! Peter suddenly became aware that there was more to Jesus than they had realized. He was someone special. Perhaps Peter had the insight to envision Jesus for who He was… what He was. He certainly saw [himself] for who he was… a poor miserable sinner. “Depart from me, said Peter, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”

But Jesus did not leave Peter; did He? He saw in him some good qualities that would be useful in spreading His gospel message. And, Luke tells us, Peter and James and John left everything and followed Him.
Later... Jesus refused to give up on Peter after He had denied him not once... not twice... but three times. Nor did Jesus condemn Peter... or His other disciples... for abandoning Him at the crucifixion. And isn’t it amazing that after His resurrection, Jesus made it a point to have a personal chat with Peter. He wanted to make certain that Peter knew He had forgiven Him for denying Him when the chips were down.

The evangelist John, in writing about a post-resurrection appearance Jesus made to the remaining 11, tells of a verbal exchange between Jesus and Peter. After they were reunited with their Master, Jesus said to him: “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” It’s not certain what He meant... whether he loved Him more than the other disciples... or does he love Him more than the other disciples love Him, or does he love Him more than his boats, his nets and his fishes. Peter said: “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs.” A second time He said to Peter: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to Him: “Yes, Lord, you know I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time, Simon, son of John, do you love me? Peter was grieved that He had said to him a third time, do you love me? And he said to Him, “Lord you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him: “Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.”

Isn’t it wonderful that Jesus never said a word of reproach to any of the disciples at the Sea of Tiberius! He asked them how the fishing was going. He didn’t scold them... He didn’t berate them... or criticize them for deserting Him. That isn’t His way. And it is significant that Jesus dealt in threes in restoring Peter. A three-fold question: Do you love me more than these? Do you love me? Do you love me? Actually, it’s virtually the same question asked three times. And Jesus gives Peter a similar assignment or commission three times. “Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.”

Yes, there’s symbolism... and more... in this three-fold question and in the answers and commissions. After all, Peter did deny Jesus three times. This conversation obviously was important to Peter. He must have begun to feel at home again in Jesus’ presence. But then came the words: Follow me. They clinched it. They were the same words spoken to him when he was called to discipleship. They were spoken to him again at Peter’s crisis of faith and confession at Caesarea Philippi.
So... Jesus has called Peter again. To what has He called him... or re-called him? To service... to look out for the flock of Christ. We are also called. But we are not called to privilege... although we should be honored to be followers of Jesus Christ. It’s far more important to serve Him. And how do we do that? By serving His people... those around us. Individual service is good and it’s helpful... and we must not underestimate it. But organized service... when we combine our skills, gifts and talents... and put them into a concerted effort... are far more effective. It’s amazing what we can do under such circumstances.

After having met Jesus do you think Peter would be content to remain a fisherman in a little village? He would need something more challenging. And his call provided it.

Reflecting on today’s gospel lesson: Jesus made quite a catch. Or perhaps we should say He had a great recruiting day. He landed Peter and James and John. They were the ones He took with Him at especially critical times. They were special to Him. They were the only ones permitted to go into the house of Jairus, when Jairus’ little daughter was lying dead. They were His only companions on the Mount of Transfiguration. And Peter and John especially are among the greatest of the early saints of the Church.
Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A

OLD TESTAMENT: Deuteronomy 30:15-20

PSALM: 119

NEW TESTAMENT: 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

GOSPEL: Matthew 5:21-37

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not murder”; and “whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.” But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, “You fool”, you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

“You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

“It was also said, “Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.” But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.” But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be “Yes, Yes” or “No, No”; anything more than this comes from the evil one.
If we should be limited to one word when asked what is behind today’s gospel lesson, the word we are looking for is “authority.” Before proceeding, let’s spend a few moments on this matter of authority because it is very important and also because it is at the heart of the Christian gospel.

In our country there is an obvious separation of church and state. This means that religious or ecclesiastical authority is separated from secular or civil or legal authority. The latter are concerned with enforcing obedience to the laws and regulations of the state. On the other hand, religious or ecclesiastical authority involves mainly the power to influence belief or conduct. In this regard, the Christian religion claims to know truths beyond a conscience guided by reason alone. Or, stated another way, Christianity professes to be based partly on revelation. We Christians profess to know certain truths above and beyond mankind’s natural capacities. How do we know these truths? They have been revealed directly or indirectly by God.

Remember when Jesus asked His disciples who people said He was? (Matt. 16). And they said, some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. Jesus said to them, but who do you say that I am? Simon Peter replied, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” So faith and blood... humanity or human means... didn’t give Peter this information. It came from a divine source... from God. It was a revelation to Peter... a divine revelation. And, of course, other believers have experienced numerous other revelations... and we also continue to experience them today.

Speaking further on the matter of authority... let’s not forget that Jesus has been speaking with an authority no one before Him had ever done... or dared to do. And those who heard Him were amazed. Mark tells us the people were astonished at His teaching... for He taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. Matthew concludes his account of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in similar words: And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at His teaching for He taught them as one who had authority and not as their Scribes (Matt. 7:28-29).

That development did not sit well with many of the Jewish people who listened to Jesus... especially the religious leaders. To them the Jewish law was holy and divine. We probably couldn’t exaggerate the reverence
the Jews gave to the law. "Only Moses’ decrees," said Philo, "are everlasting, unchangeable and unshakable, as signed by nature herself with her seal."

Bearing in mind what the Jews thought of the Law, it was difficult for them to stand by silently when Jesus six times quotes the law, contradicts it, and substitutes a teaching of His own. He didn’t quote God, or the Scriptures, or a famous rabbi, or one of the prophets. He claimed the right... the authority... to point out the inadequacies of the world’s most sacred writings and to correct them out of His own wisdom.

His actions were unique. No one had ever heard of anything like this before. Jesus claimed no personal authority at all. His only claim was that He spoke what God had told Him. Was Jesus unique? Or was He mad? Down through the centuries, mankind has had to take a stand. And we Christians have said with conviction and enthusiasm that He is who He said He is... the Son of God.

Questioning Jesus’ authority seemed to dissipate somewhat after His mission of teaching and preaching was established. Some of the teachings in today’s gospel lesson would have been considered far out. Jesus proceeds to give six cases in which the law of His kingdom fulfills... actually supersedes... the Mosaic Law. The first case involves murder, strife, and contempt. Jesus says that under His law angry temper is judged as harshly as murder or other “extreme” offenses.

The ancient law said: “You shall not kill” (Exodus 20:13), but Jesus says that even anger against a brother is forbidden. It is not good enough to not strike someone. We are not even to wish to strike him, or her. We are not to have strong feelings against anyone in our hearts. Our attitude is as important as what we do. Anger against our brother... whether it rises up and falls down or if it builds up with resentment over time... is condemned. So are words of insult.

Except for righteous indignation... anger and contempt are to be treated as murder. All killing isn’t done with guns or knives. Sneers and looks and words and indifference are also weapons. It would be impossible to maintain a right relationship with God if we were angry with our brother or sister. Hearts filled with grudges would not be able to worship a God who knows our innermost thoughts. It would be a travesty to try to worship during a trying period. Our daily life is always open to the scrutiny of God. We should know better and try to avoid such a contradiction.
Jewish law restricted the term adultery to sexual relations with the wife or the betrothed of a Jew. But the new law that Jesus advances seems to indicate that illicit sexual relations with any woman is adultery... and that the man is looked upon as the one directly responsible for the sin. When Jesus spoke of a man who looked upon a woman lustfully as already committing adultery in his heart, He was speaking of one who looked at a woman with the deliberate intent of lusting after her. The man who is condemned is the one who deliberately uses his eyes to awaken his lust. Deliberately stimulating desire for forbidden things was—and continues to be—a sin.

However, Jesus’ words concerning the plucking out of an eye or the cutting off of an offending member are not to be taken literally. What He is saying is that anything that helps to seduce us to sin should be rooted out of our lives. We should look carefully at our habits and our associations in our effort to purify our thoughts and to turn from wicked influences. And, of course, there are some pleasures that could lead to our ruin.

Turning away from forbidden thoughts and desires has long been a problem for Christians. The famous father of Christian monasticism, St. Anthony of Egypt, tried to live a hermit’s life in the desert... thinking only about God. He ate little... he slept little... he tortured his body... and he prayed much. He lived in the desert for 35 years, and these years became a non-stop battle, without respite, with his temptations. He tells us this in his biography: “First of all the devil tried to lead him away from discipline whispering to him the remembrance of his wealth, cares for his sister, claims of kindred, love of money, love of glory, the various pleasures of the table, and the other relaxations of life, and, at last, the difficulty of virtue and the labor of it... The one would suggest foul thoughts, and the other, as one who seemed to blush, fortify his body with prayers, faith and fasting. The devil one night even took upon him the shape of a woman, and imitated all her acts simply to beguile Antony.” The struggle went on for 35 years.

Noted biblical translator and commentator William Barclay says there are only two ways to defeat forbidden thoughts. “The first way is by Christian action. The best way to defeat such thoughts,” according to Barclay, “is to do something, to fill life so full with Christian labor and Christian service that there is no time for these thoughts to enter in; to think so much of others that in the end we entirely forget ourselves; to rid ourselves of a diseased and morbid introspection by concentrating not on ourselves, but on other people. The real cure for evil thoughts is good action.”
“The second way,” says Barclay, “is to fill the mind with good thoughts.” There is a famous scene in Barrie’s *Peter Pan*. Peter is in the children’s bedroom; they have seen him fly; and they wish to fly too. They have tried it from the floor and they have tried it from the beds and the result is failure. “How do you do it?” John asked. And Peter answered: “You just think lovely, wonderful thoughts and they lift you up in the air.”

“The only way to defeat evil thoughts,” Barclay concludes, “is to begin to think of something else. If any man is harassed by thought of the forbidden and unclean things, he will certainly never defeat the evil things by withdrawing from life and saying, I will not think of these things. He can do so only by plunging into Christian action and Christian thought. He will never do it by trying to save his own life; he can do it only by flinging his life away for others.”
Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C

OLD TESTAMENT: Jeremiah 17:5 - 10

PSALM: 1

NEW TESTAMENT: 1 Corinthians 15:12 - 20


He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them. Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."

"Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled."

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh."

"Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets."

"But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation."

"Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry."

"Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep."

"Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets."
Today’s gospel lesson from Luke begins with a list of Christ’s promises of coming blessings... commonly called the Beatitudes. Sometimes they are referred to as “the blessed” because they begin with the words “blessed are.” In Luke we find these words: Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you and revile you, and cast out your name as evil on account of the son of man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.

In Matthew, there are eight or nine blessings... depending on how you count them. They are of a spiritual nature and are applicable to all. They make up the bulk of Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes, or Blesseds, which we have just heard from Luke are from Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain. They are four in number, and they are followed by four woes. Woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you that are full now, for you shall hunger. Woe to you that laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. Woe to you, when all men speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.

Please note that all four of the blessings in Luke, which Jesus spoke to the disciples, related to external conditions. Blessed are you poor, for your is the kingdom of God. These certainly are encouraging words. In the new order, which Jesus is advocating, the poor will have a special place. Jesus knows the poor. He grew up among them. And He himself was poor. He knew by first-hand experience how difficult it was... and is... to earn a living. And I wouldn’t be surprised that many of His customers in the carpentry shop were unable to pay. Did he take them to court? Hardly. He undoubtedly had compassion on them because this is His nature. And He saw in them a strength of character, a resolve that elevated them in His estimation.

The poor have long attracted God’s attention. Didn’t He single out a small band of poor people and grant them special favors? Didn’t He look out for them, care for them, after He told them they would be His people and He would be their God? There are numerous Scriptural references for God’s interest in and love of the poor— especially in the prophets, the Psalms and the wisdom literature. However, we also know that God’s people didn’t always obey His commandments. They frequently strayed from Him and His commandments. And at times the hearts of the rich in particular were turned against the poor. In their selfishness and arrogance they had
nothing for the poor—no help for them, no time for them. Jesus never condemned the rich for being rich... but He was quick to call their attention to their responsibilities and to the needs of the less fortunate.

A number of our Christian saints have shown that some of the richest spiritual blessings might be won through poverty... voluntary poverty. The first vow that some of them took was the vow of poverty. The first two names that come to mind are St. Francis of Assisi and Sister Clare, founder of the Poor Clares. But don’t forget their associates and those who came after them and were also obedient to the vow of poverty.

The philosopher William James was sensitive to spiritual realities in a materialistic age. This is what he had to say on the subject in 1903: “Poverty indeed is the strenuous life—without brass bands or uniforms or hysteric popular applause...; and one wonders whether a revival of the belief that poverty is a worthy religious vocation may not be... the spiritual reform which our time stands most in need of.” And if we needed this spiritual reform in 1903... how much more we could benefit from it today.

I’m not suggesting that we go out and sell all our possessions and embrace poverty. What I am saying is that St. Francis and Sister Clare—and countless others—did chart such a course... and their lives were enriched by their poverty... and that the Christian church was renewed by what they did. Further... the timing couldn’t have been more appropriate... because in many ways it was losing its power, influence, and effectiveness.

Jesus’ next point in today’s lesson is: Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Then come the words: Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh. More of the new order creeps through. The standards continue to be reversed. As noted Biblical translator and commentator William Barclay said, “they (the Beatitudes) take the accepted standards and turn them upside down. The people whom Jesus called happy the world would call wretched; and the people Jesus called wretched the world would call happy. Just imagine anyone saying, ‘Happy are the poor, and woe to the rich!’ To talk like that is to put an end to the world’s values altogether.”

And isn’t that what Jesus does? And doesn’t He call on us to do likewise? He does not stop at describing the rewards which the goodness of God would finally give to the poor... He warns the rich... after first proclaiming the rewards which the goodness of God would finally give to the poor.

When we think of Jesus’ dealings with the rich, the case of the rich young ruler comes to mind. You remember the story. This young man came up to Jesus and asked what he had to do to inherit eternal life (Mark
10:17-22). Jesus told him: “You know the commandments: do not kill, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.”

The young man seemed to think these requirements weren’t too difficult because, as he said, he had observed them from his youth. And Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said to him: “You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come, follow me.” Mark tells us that after hearing this statement his countenance fell… for he had great possessions. So… in order for him to become a follower of Jesus… he would have to undergo a major attitude adjustment. He had not stopped to count the cost; had he? He had some romantic intellectual interest in Jesus’ gospel message. And, viewed from afar, he thought this might be for him. But considered in the light of his family fortune, he was unwilling to pay the price. Not only was he unwilling to give up the lifestyle to which he was accustomed… but he was not willing to change his focus. All his life he had been the center of attention. My life. My possessions. Do not do this, do not do that. If he had been willing to follow Jesus, he would have had to put God first… rather than remain self-centered. Beyond that, he would have to live for God, to serve God’s people, to love his neighbor as himself. No longer could he continue not killing, not committing adultery, not stealing, not bearing false witness, and not defrauding others. No more of this not doing… he would have to do something. He would have to love God and his neighbor… and to do what God wanted him to do… not what he wanted to do. He was not willing to make such a radical change in his lifestyle. He wanted to remain self-centered… not God-centered. Jesus was not telling the rich young ruler that he and all other rich people should sell their possessions and give to the poor. His message was to this one individual… because his entire focus was on his possessions. There wasn’t room in his life for God.

As Jesus was telling us in today’s gospel lesson in his “woes to” the rich, those who are full now, those who laugh now… they may already have received their reward. They may think they already have all they need. They don’t feel that they need God or His gifts. They have so many visible possessions that they see no need for the invisible. They’re no longer eager to receive the gifts of God. In other words: They don’t think they have a problem. And they certainly don’t recognize it.
Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C

OLD TESTAMENT:  Genesis 45:3 - 11, 15

PSALM:  37: 1 - 11, 39 - 40

NEW TESTAMENT:  1 Corinthians 15: 35 - 38, 42 - 50


"But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."
Let’s take a few moments for review. Last Sunday, in our gospel lesson from Luke, our attention was on Christ’s promise of coming blessings… the Beatitudes… also called “the blessed” because they begin with the words, “Blessed are.”

I don’t plan to dwell on these “blessed” or “woes to you.” You heard a great deal about them last Sunday. But if you weren’t here then, you’ll soon realize what the gospel lesson was about. In either case, you have been confronted with statements of Jesus that are at the heart of the gospel. Hearing them again will… I trust… prepare you to consider the words of Jesus in today’s gospel lesson. They are about the law of love… and we will need to meditate on them… not for an hour or a week, or a month, or a year… but for the rest of our lives. I’m also sure they will continue to be brought to our attention from time to time. Rather than address all the thoughts in today’s gospel lesson… let’s look at two of them: No. 1 – Love your enemies. No. 2 – Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Love your enemies. How can we love our enemies? There are three types of love in the Greek.

First—Eros or erotic love is the love of a man for a woman or vice versa.

Second—Filial love is the love we have for members of our family… those near and dear to us.

And Third—Agape love or benevolent love is the love we have for others… those who are not our wives or husbands… not our brothers and sisters… and not other members of our families.

Which of these forms of love is Jesus calling on us to have for our enemies? Obviously erotic love is not appropriate. Nor is filial love. So… the love we are called on to have for our enemies is agape. Agape love is desiring the highest good… the very best… for another person. We can’t possibly love our enemies as we love those nearest and dearest to us. Noted biblical translator and commentator William Barclay says that “to do so would be unnatural, impossible and even wrong.” But in agape love we will deliberately go out of our way to be kind to another person…to express our love for him or her.

Loving members of our families is natural. It is a matter of the heart. But agape love is not a matter of the heart. It is a matter of the will. It’s something that by the grace of God we may will ourselves to do. And it is through God’s love and grace that we can express such benevolent love.
In being kind to others… wishing the very best for them… we may be dealing with people we don’t like. That’s just the point. We want the best of what God has to offer for them… regardless of how they treat us. Perhaps we don’t like them. If so, we will need to depend on the grace of God to will the best for them. People sometimes treat God shamefully. Do you think that even God could like them? Or like their treatment of Him? He couldn’t possibly like everything he sees in His imperfect children… and He obviously doesn’t like the way we treat Him at times. But… He gives us His unconditional love. He keeps His promises to us… regardless of what we do. We can depend on Him. Can he depend on us? Not always. We frequently let him down.

Now let’s turn to the Golden Rule: As you wish that men would do to you, do so to them. In other words, do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Similar statements have come from other traditions. The Stoics had this as a basic rule: What you do not wish to be done to yourself, do not do to any other. From Hillel, the great Jewish rabbi: What is hateful to thee, do not do to another. Philo, the great Jew of Alexandria said: What you hate to suffer, do not do to anyone else.

Did you notice the differences in the rules? All of them are negative except the Golden Rule taught by Jesus. The others called for “not” doing something. But Jesus’ teaching was positive. It calls on us to do something… to do unto others as we would have them do to us.

If we are to live by the Golden Rule, we’re called on to do something too… to treat others as we would like to be treated… without regard to who they are or who we are. And we are not to let our perceived self-importance or our economic status come between us and God.
Feast Day of St. Matthias

OLD TESTAMENT: Philippians 3:13-21

NEW TESTAMENT: Acts 1:15-26

PSALM: 15

GOSPEL: John 15:1,6-16

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.

PRAYER

O Almighty God, who in the place of Judas chose your faithful servant Matthias to be numbered among the Twelve: Grant that your Church, being delivered from false apostles, may always be ordered and guided by faithful and true pastors; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.
February 22, 1998  
Feast Day of St. Matthias  
St. Matthias, Grafton

This is a special day. Can you see or feel anything special? The fact that the altar hangings and the vestments are red tells us something. Such use of red is restricted. It is used on the day of Pentecost... which this is not. It is also prominent at ordinations... but there aren’t any ordinations here today. Red is also the color of choice on feast days of saints of the church who were martyred... who died for their faith. The color red symbolizes the blood of the martyrs... as well as the fire associated with the Holy Spirit. What I am telling you in a roundabout way is that we are here today celebrating the Feast Day of our Patron Saint, St. Matthias.

Who is St. Matthias? Unfortunately, the Bible doesn’t give us much information about Matthias. Today’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles tells us that Peter called a gathering of Christian believers to replace Judas, whose defection and death had reduced the number of apostles from 12 to 11. One of the requirements for this new apostle was that he have accompanied Jesus and the twelve from Jesus’ baptism by John until His ascension. He was to be, along with the remaining 11, a witness to the resurrection of Jesus.

After prayer... two men were proposed... Joseph called Barsabbas and also known as Justus... and Matthias. Concerning this meeting, the Book of Acts tells us: “And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the 11 apostles.” The Bible tells us nothing further about Matthias. What happened to him?

As one of the earliest followers of Jesus, Matthias may have been prominent among the 70. He often accompanied the 12 and may have been a follower of John the Baptist. He was present in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost and almost certainly took part in the expansion of early Christianity. There is reason to believe that Matthias left Jerusalem to minister to some of the diaspora of Israel. There were colonies of Jews and other Hebrews in most population centers in the Middle East. So it is not difficult to accept the tradition of his apostleship in regions of Armenia... and beyond.

According to the book The Martyrdom of St. Matthias, by E.A. Wallace Budge, Matthias was sent to Damascus and died at Phalean, a city in Judea. Other sources mention Jerusalem as the place of his ministry and burial. That tradition says he was stoned to death there by the Jews.
Where was Matthias buried? We aren't certain, but his relics... bones... or bones believed to be his... are buried at two sites: In Trier, Germany, and in Rome. And they may be seen in these places today.

A book titled *The Search for the Twelve Apostles*, by Dr. William Steuart McBirnie, contains a great deal of information about St. Matthias and the other 11. Of course, it deals mostly with traditions and legends, but it does give us some insight into what happened to Matthias and the others. The Bible doesn't tell us much about most of them... but it does name them and tell us of their character, their time with Jesus, and their ministry.

What ties this congregation to St. Matthias? St. Matthias Church, Grafton, has a unique place in the ministry of the Episcopal churches in the Diocese of West Virginia. It is our only church whose patron saint is Matthias... and its life, ministry, and witness have been at work in this community... and the Diocese... since 1879. On September 25th of that year (1879) a mission was organized during a meeting at the Opera House. The new congregation rented a hall over a store at Main and Latrobe Streets for $100 a year. The congregations was first called Trinity Mission and it was later known as Church of the Good Shepherd. Still later, when this current place of worship was built, its name was changed to St. Matthias Church. The fact that St. Matthias Church of Philadelphia gave $325 toward completion of the building may have had something to do with the name change.

In today's gospel lesson from John, Jesus tells us, "This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father."

Two of our Old Testament patriarchs, Abraham and Moses, have been called friends of God. Isn't it amazing that we, too, can be friends of God if we do what He tells us to do. Isn't this a wonderful development! Not only can we have a close personal relationship with Him, but we can be His friend... and he ours.

How can we become a friend of God... a friend of Jesus? By doing what He commands us to do. By loving one another as He has loved us. This is not an easy task. We must work at it. We must put the interests of others ahead of ours. We must treat others as we would wish to be treated.
Our patron saint, Matthias, was a friend of Jesus. He was with Him from the time of His baptism until His ascension. He was a close personal friend who spent the best years of his life with Jesus and His other close associates. Perhaps Matthias did nothing of great significance during these years. But he obviously did countless little routine things to advance the ministry of Jesus. After all, he was His friend. And their love of God and for each other were central to the life and ministry of Jesus.

We would do well to emulate the life of Matthias. No task too small... too routine... too boring to have meaning in the grand scheme of things. And love of God and neighbor is at the heart of it all. Jesus said that no one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. Which is exactly what He did. We can’t say for certain... but St. Matthias probably laid down his life for those to whom he ministered.

We probably won’t be called on to do that... but we are called on to love one another... as Christ loves us... and to keep His commandments. Amen.
"Yes, Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." (Matt. 15:21-28).

Suppose, for a moment, that your situation is like that of the woman who has just uttered these words. You are in familiar surroundings. Jesus and His disciples are passing by. Jesus’ reputation for compassion has preceded Him. You have a need: Your daughter is ill. You bring your problem directly to Jesus. You ask Him to heal her. On the surface, it seems like a simple request. But it certainly isn’t.

You are a Gentile... and Jesus is a Jew. This presents a problem. Jews and Gentiles usually ignore each other. Actually, the situation here is even worse than that. Why? Because you are of Canaanite stock, and the Canaanites have been sworn enemies of the Jews for centuries. Their hatred for each other is well-documented.

Because He is a Jew, Jesus feels that He has been called to minister only to His own people. Yet He is on foreign soil. You might go so far as to say He is on enemy soil. This is the first time in His life... actually the only time in His life... that He ever goes outside of Jewish territory. Even so, He’s only a short distance from modern Israel.

Both the Canaanite woman and Jesus face dilemmas. In the end, her mother’s love and her great faith triumph. They overcome centuries of prejudice. She humbles herself before Jesus, and He casts aside hundreds of years of tradition that looked upon Canaanites as inferior people. He responds affirmatively to the need of this Gentile woman, who has an abundance of motherly love and a faith that has grown upon contact with Jesus.

"O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Each of you must have known at least one woman of great faith. I know I have. One especially devout woman was in the congregation that I last served. She wasn’t feeling well, so she finally went to her doctor. She had cancer of the pancreas and it was too late for surgery. Her doctor didn’t really want to talk about how long she had to live, but from a medical standpoint it appeared that she had only a few weeks... possibly a few months... to live. But, as I said earlier, she had a strong faith. She was also looking forward to the birth of her first great-grandchild.

She was in the hospital for a while... then in hospice. The she came home where some very dear friends took care of her. From time to time she would have to go to the doctor’s office for examinations and
treatment or to the hospice for several days at a time. When death seemed a few heart beats away, I anointed her at least twice. Other ministers at the hospice also anointed her at least two more times. Meanwhile, she kept on fighting to live and for the opportunity to see her great grandchild.

Later... I remember seeing her in the grocery store... only a few days before she died. She was pushing her great-granddaughter in a cart. By that time, the little girl, whose imminent arrival had figured prominently in her prayers and fight for life, was several months old. Had I not known that she was terminally ill, I would have thought she was in good health. I might add that she was in excellent spiritual health.

She amazed her doctors. They could offer no explanation... so they didn’t try. Medically, it seemed impossible for her to be alive. But she and many of her Christian friends were not the least bit surprised. Their prayers were still being answered daily. I didn’t tell you how long it was from the time of her diagnosis until her death. It was 19 months. Of course, her great faith figured prominently in that miracle. “O, woman, great is your faith!” would be a fitting tribute to her.

Returning to the Gentile woman in tonight’s lesson... please note that her heart is filled with love. When she meets Jesus, she looks upon Him as a wonder worker. She calls Him Son of David, which at that time was a popular title...a political title. So, at first, she looked upon Him in terms of earthly power. When Jesus required her to look at Him... she saw something that could not be expressed in human terms. Jesus awakened this in her before granting her request. He wanted her to see that her prayer to a great man must be turned into a prayer to the living God. She ended up on her knees... calling Jesus Lord. Her faith had grown by leaps and bounds when confronted with Christ.

She began with a request... and ended in prayer. First, she adored His majesty. Then she stated her own need. So should we. Yes, that’s the way we should approach God.

The Gentile woman certainly was persistent; wasn’t she? She never gave up hope. And, for her, Jesus was her only hope. In reality, she had a passionate hope. She had a sense of need... and she was not to be discouraged. Even the negative comments of Jesus’ disciples would not deter her. Hers is the type of prayer that deserves an answer... and gets an affirmative response.
We’ve been concentrating on the meeting of Jesus and the Canaanite woman. She had a need... and she was not in the least bit discouraged by what others said... or by the centuries of enmity between her people and the Jews... or by Jesus’ plan of ministering only to His own people... or the unlikely possibility, or so it seemed, that Jesus would respond to her need and heal her daughter.

It should also be pointed out that the faith of this Gentile woman was far greater than that of the people of the house of Israel in Jesus’ home town. In an earlier chapter (13:54-58), Matthew tells us Jesus had taught in the synagogue... and the people were astonished at His wisdom. But things went downhill from that point on. The people asked such questions as: Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? Are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us?

Matthew tells us further that they took offense at him. It was then that Jesus made his famous comment: “A prophet is not without honor except in his own country and in his own house.” How does Matthew conclude this chapter? “And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief.” [Repeat.]

So these incidents can be looked upon as a fore-shadowing of things to come. The Jews are filled with unbelief. But the Canaanite woman has a great faith. Soon we’ll see that other Gentiles do, too. And it’s really not long until the apostles shift their attention... their efforts... their energy... in preaching and teaching from the Jews to the Gentiles.

As previously noted, tonight’s lesson also tells us about Jesus’ only trip outside Jewish territory. He has deliberately done this. Later the apostles will build on this with energy, enthusiasm, and conviction. Otherwise... how would the good news of Jesus Christ have circled the globe? How else would the love of God and the teachings of Jesus, the obscure prophet in an isolated part of the world, attract more than a billion believers today in all parts of a world known more for its wars, its technologies and its ill-treatment of others than for its love of God and respect for human dignity?

And just think, the Gentile woman in tonight’s lesson may be more important than we had imagined. “O, woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you desire.” She has given us a classical model of what faith is all about. Not only did she have faith in abundance... but she also had love... she was persistent... and, throughout the entire confrontation with Jesus, she was cheerful. Oh, that we would go and do likewise.
In many ways, the Lenten series of services at St. Paul's remind us of what went on in the lives of the people in the early church. Holy Scripture tells us that our spiritual forefathers “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” Services were informal as the people gathered to worship God and to respond to what He was calling them to do.

We still gather for the same reasons that early Christians did... apostolic teaching, fellowship, the Holy Eucharist, and the prayers. And we are still concerned with discerning the will of God and in doing what He is calling us to do. However, our worship services have undergone some changes over the centuries. They are more formal. Instead of worshiping in the homes of members, we have built meeting places... some of which are quite elaborate. They’re a far cry from the places where the early Christians worshiped. We have placed an altar in the middle of our sanctuaries. And on the same level... or possibly on a higher level physically... we have placed the pulpit, which is several feet higher than the area where the congregation sits.

Symbolically... the pulpit becomes the place where the Word of God was proclaimed... by preaching and teaching. Not that proclamation was limited to the pulpit. Some of the best teaching, in particular, came from elsewhere. What does all this have to do with us here tonight? We who proclaim the Gospel from the pulpit have some misgivings. We have no way of knowing if you in the congregation... have received the message. Nor do we know for certain that you have made an affirmative response. However, preaching applies to the preacher just as surely as it applies to the congregation. It’s not something that comes down from on high to the congregation by way of the preacher that the congregation must respond to. No. The preacher has to be emotionally involved in responding to the Gospel proclamation. What happens as a result of preaching? It’s difficult to say. But usually the preacher doesn’t know. It’s a holy mystery. Perhaps it’s better that way.

However, we do know what should be happening out there... in the world around us... in the lives of the members of the congregation... and the preacher. All of us should be doing what the Gospel lesson tells us... individually and collectively... to do.

In tonight’s lesson from John, Jesus is telling us... God is telling us... that if we love Him, we are to feed His lambs and sheep and to tend His sheep. Never mind that it was Simon Peter who received the direct order from Jesus. It is meant for us... you and me... just as surely as it applied to Peter.
It’s probably obvious to all of us that Peter loved Jesus. In tonight’s lesson, Jesus asked Peter… not once… not twice… but three times… if he loved Him. This was Jesus’ way of letting Peter affirm his love for Him… three times… so that these affirmations would cancel out Peter’s triple denial of Him. Our lesson from John indicates that Jesus has forgiven Peter… and it’s obvious to those who matter most… the other disciples.

What did love for Jesus bring Peter? First, it brought him a job to do… and later a cross. Jesus told Peter if you love me, then give your life to shepherding the sheep and lambs of my flock. And that’s how we are to demonstrate our love for Jesus… by loving others… by looking out for their interests… by teaching them and otherwise giving up our selves to the service of others. How do we do this? By denying ourselves… by leading disciplined lives… by saying no to selfishness… and by sharing ourselves, our time, our gifts, skills, and talents… and our money… with others. We are to say no to a life of greed… no to a life of ease and comfort… and yes to Jesus… yes to protecting, providing for, assisting, and otherwise looking out for the needs of others… and especially the helpless, the vulnerable.

Service to others should be uppermost in our hearts and minds. This can only happen when we make a conscious and conscientious effort to do so. As Jesus says, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit. It’s the same with us. Unless we die to self and live for others, we really haven’t done anything of much importance to God.

In this regard, Jesus says further: Any one who loves his life loses it. But if any one serves Him… and serving His people is an important part of serving Him… what happens to that person? Something wonderful! Or as Jesus puts it, the Father will honor him… or her.

Serving others is basic to the Christian life… and the season of Lent offers us opportunities to concentrate on such service. We don’t have to be concerned about shedding a bad habit… although that’s a possibility… but it’s more positive, more fruitful, more helpful… to do something… for someone else… for others.

An acorn, if it only lies on the ground, is of no use to anyone. But, like a grain of wheat, when it dies it bears much fruit. It can produce a huge oak tree. The oak tree can be of great value and use. By producing shade… by giving off oxygen, by providing children with a place to climb and from which to swing… by offering
food to deer, squirrels, turkeys, wild boar, and other animals… and by producing lumber and sawdust for man’s use.

How do we die to self and live for others? By devoting time and effort to help the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the ill, the lonely… those who need counseling, those who are looking for direction. We can do these things as a part of an organized effort… or work as an individual. The needs of our fellow human beings are sometimes overwhelming. We can’t always meet them. But we can try… we can do our part… and, with God’s help, we can make a difference in the lives of those around us. And we need not wait to be called on. It’s appropriate that we show our interest by volunteering. What better time than during the Lenten season?

Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone.

But if it dies, it bears much fruit.

Are these messages being proclaimed from the pulpit at St. Paul’s? Are they being received? Are they being acted on? It would be interesting… perhaps even revealing… to hear some of the ways members of this community of faith are living out the Gospel? How are we feeding God’s lambs and sheep? How are we tending His flock? How are we dying to self? How are we living for others?
Ash Wednesday

OLD TESTAMENT:  Joel 2:1 - 2, 12 - 17

PSALM:  103

NEW TESTAMENT:  2 Corinthians 5:20b - 6:10

GOSPEL:  Matthew 6:1 - 6, 16 - 21

"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven."

"So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

"And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."
It has fallen to my lot to help you get off on the right foot in your Lenten discipline. Since the fourth century, the branch of God's holy catholic church to which we belong has been observing 40 days of penitence and fasting for this season. The number of days in Lent is related to the prescribed fast of candidates for baptism. And the number of days of fasting was suggested by the 40-day fasts of Jesus, of Moses, and of Elijah.

We have come together tonight to begin our preparation for what could be a great spiritual adventure of 40 days. However, what we do, how we live, how we relate to others during Lent can have far broader implications. It's up to you... to us.

We know what the symbols of the beginning of this season of the Church Year are. We know about the history of Lent... how and why it began, and what is expected of us as responsible Christians.

But if Lent is to have deep meaning... if it is to produce life-changing results in our lives, much depends on us individually. It's easy to go through the motions of Lent... without anything of significance happening. And nothing of importance will happen to any of us unless we are open to change... willing to have a confrontation with God. How much are we willing to change? How far are we willing to go in offering ourselves... our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto God... as the priest says on our behalf in the Holy Eucharist: "humbly beseeching God that we, and all others who shall be partakers of this Holy Communion, may worthily receive the most precious Body and Blood of Thy Son Jesus Christ, be filled with Thy grace and heavenly benediction, that He may dwell in us, and we in Him."

That's what we should always be striving for... a closer, more intimate relationship with God... continuing in that mystical union with Him... in order that more and more of God may dwell in us... that He may control our lives.

In Matthew's gospel lesson tonight... Jesus addresses three good things that could be done with wrong motives. I refer to almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. As far as the Jew of Jesus' day was concerned, almsgiving was the most sacred of all religious duties. In fact, they used the same word for almsgiving as they did for righteousness. To give was to be righteous. Or if one was righteous, he or she gave. A rabbinic saying tells us that "greater is he who gives alms than he who offers all sacrifices." So almsgiving stood first in the grouping of good works. The highest in the rabbis' teaching was in agreement with Jesus' teaching.
We attain the ideal in giving when the recipient doesn't know from whom it comes and the giver doesn't know to whom he gives. It isn't always possible, but isn't it a wonderful concept! We could get so wrapped up in giving... in its various forms... that we would be practicing true unadulterated Christianity... the real thing.

It's not surprising that Jesus speaks out against conspicuous giving, mentioning the hypocrites who do such things. The Greek word from which hypocrite comes means “actor.” Such people put on an act of giving in order to glorify themselves.

Jesus had this to say about how not to pray: Don't pray like the hypocrites who stand in the synagogues and at busy street corners... so they can be seen by men. How, then, should we pray? Jesus tells us that we are to pray in secret... in private. Why? Because God, who sees in secret, will reward us... as He rewards those who give alms... in secret. Jesus also speaks out against those who disfigure their faces... like the hypocrites... to call attention to the fact that they are fasting. We are not to do showy things during our fasting so as to call attention to ourselves or our special brand of piety. Again... we're to let God know what we are doing and why we are doing it. This is to be between us and God... and not a way of drawing the attention of other people to us.

What we do to give meaning to our Lenten discipline, of course, depends on our individual needs and interests. Some possible starters: Daily prayer at specific times; searching self-examination before Holy Eucharist, followed by thanksgiving afterward; taking part in a Bible study, if you know of one, and, if not, helping to start one. Some of you may want to fast... substituting prayer for eating... for one day a week... but not endangering your health.

It is important that at this time... now... here tonight on Ash Wednesday... we admit our common mortality. Nor can we forget that all of us are sinners... albeit redeemed by God who has compassion for us.

Thanks be to God... we return to Him and receive a new opportunity to be energized... to reaffirm our resolve and desire for conversion, which really is a lifetime process. While fasting, praying and giving of our selves and our gifts, skills, and talents, we prepare ourselves to accompany Jesus throughout His final days on earth... and look forward to the glory of His Resurrection which we will share with Him.

After spending some time considering three of the strong pillars of the faith... almsgiving, prayer, and fasting... perhaps we could all benefit from adopting one of the three for further action during the six weeks of
Lent that begin today. I suggest that each of us puts his or her faith to work on almsgiving, or prayer, or fasting during the next six weeks, relaxing our efforts on Sundays. This will give us an opportunity to focus our attention on one subject... to use our time creatively, whether it's a matter of talking with God or working with His people. Let's be innovative, using the gifts that God has given us and the skills that we have developed over our lifetime. Above all, let's avoid the pitfalls that Jesus warned us against.

I leave it up to you to pick your own situation to work on. I won't be calling you up each morning to see how you are doing. In any event... if any of you would like to talk about what you plan to do, I would be happy to work with you. If you choose almsgiving remember: He who gives alms in secret is greater than Moses. Don't let the left hand know what the right hand is doing. Whatever we do... we can't outgive Jesus. He gave all He had... even His own life.

If you choose prayer... remember you are to pray in secret...so God can reward you in secret. If you choose fasting... be sure not to endanger your health... and not to disfigure yourself. Whatever you do...when it comes to fasting... should give honor to God. There's something special about keeping God informed about what we're doing... our motives. Doing so gives us incentive... gives meaning to what we're doing.
First Sunday in Lent, Year A

OLD TESTAMENT: Genesis 2:15 - 17, 3: 1 - 7

PSALM: 32

NEW TESTAMENT: Romans 5:12 - 19

GOSPEL: Matthew 4:1 - 11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you," and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."

Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.
It seems strange to look out into the congregation this morning and see so few familiar faces. This is not to imply that there’s anything wrong with the congregation or its members. You are not strange. But it’s very obvious that there have been some personnel changes since I was here the last time. Some of the people who used to be here no longer are. But, fortunately, I see some new faces here today. We should expect that because it’s been about 15 years since I stood before you the last time. I didn’t expect to be preaching and celebrating the Eucharist anywhere this morning... the first Sunday in Lent. After all, I am officially retired and I no longer have a congregation to call my own. I’m pleased that we are worshipping together on this special day.

Now I don’t want to sound bossy or legalistic... but the Church does expect us to do certain things during Lent. As the Prayer Book tells us, the Church calls on us to observe a holy Lent by self-examination and repentance. How do we do this? By prayer, fasting, and self-denial, and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word.

By emphasizing the positive, we can do something worthwhile... something constructive... during Lent, rather than give up a bad habit for six weeks and then embrace it again. Exactly how one carries out his or her Lenten discipline is left up to us, individually. But the opportunities are unlimited.

As our gospel reading from Matthew begins today... Jesus is at a crossroads in His life. He is about to embark upon a new career. He is facing a tremendous crisis. He is alone in the wilderness shortly after His baptism. He could hardly be more alone anyplace in Palestine... or the entire world, for that matter... than where He is.

Jesus is undoubtedly hungry after his long fast. Should it surprise us that it is then that the tempter... Satan... the Devil... the Evil One... by whatever name you want to call him... approached Jesus with a series of temptations? No doubt about it, Jesus was really tempted. To tempt means to entice someone to do wrong... to seduce someone to sin... or to try to persuade someone to do the wrong thing or take a wrong turn.

This is how Satan tempted Jesus:

1—To work miracles for an immediate need. In other words, to use His powers selfishly for His own use.
2—To give a convincing sign. That could only lead to a demand for still more and more dramatic signs.
3—To exercise political power. But first, Jesus would have to worship the devil.
Thank God, Jesus resisted all these temptations... one by one. However, He did not resist them once for all time. No. He still had to face other temptations along the way. For instance, He was tempted again when Peter tried to dissuade Him from taking the way of the cross. “Get behind me, Satan,” Jesus said to Peter. He addresses Peter as Satan because he tempts Jesus. Peter is not thinking God’s thoughts. Quite the opposite, in fact. Jesus’ words to Peter on that occasion (Matt. 16:23) are very similar to those He speaks to Satan in today’s gospel lesson.

But by the end of that day, Jesus would tell His disciples (Luke 22:28), “You are those who have continued with me in my trials...” Those words sounded wonderful to the disciples and I’m sure they did much to encourage them and to build up their confidence.

Another temptation that Jesus later faced... and resisted admirably... was in the Garden of Gethsemane. The tempter sought to have Him avoid the cross. This occurred in those agonizing moments on the night that He was betrayed and later seized and taken before the authorities.

Luke tells us of Jesus’ agony in these words (22:39-46): “And He came out, and went, as was His custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed Him. And when He came to the place He said to them, ‘Pray that you may not enter into temptation.’ And He withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, and knelt down and prayed, ‘Father, if thou are willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.’”

Again... please notice that this temptation of Jesus was very real. It was a most agonizing time for Him. How did Jesus approach this crisis situation? First, with prayer to God the Father. To Him, that was a necessary first step.

When we’re facing a crisis, what should we do first? Pray? Yes, by all means. However, most people seem to be motivated to pray at such a time. That’s not necessarily a bad thing but that’s the only time some people pray... when they have a problem... when they are in great trouble. That’s why those who pray regularly live more abundant... more useful... more meaningful lives. That’s why they are better able to deal with crises. In fact, those who pray regularly—praying at the same time each day is a good habit—often find that what appears to be a crisis looming on the horizon... doesn’t materialize. And that is a wonderful feeling. Of course,
when that happens... we’re not to quit praying. And... another point that needs to be made: We’re never all prayed up. Not even if we might seem to be all prayed out.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews tells us (4:15) that Jesus is able to sympathize with our weaknesses because He is one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. The temptations that He faced... and overcame... were just as real as any of those that you and I have to deal with today. His temptations were not less difficult for Him because of His divinity.

Although Jesus was tempted... God was not the tempter. Nor did God try to induce Abraham to sin when our spiritual forefather almost sacrificed his only son, Isaac. It’s not God’s nature to make anyone a wrongdoer. And God doesn’t tempt us, either. The Greek word (peirazein) that is translated “to tempt” in English also has another meaning: To test. God doesn’t tempt those He wishes to use. He didn’t tempt Abraham. He didn’t tempt Jesus. But He did test both of them. Both passed the test. And both were better persons by virtue of having been tested... by passing the test. Such testing helped them to grow spiritually and to be of greater use to God.

We also need to undergo a series of testing along our spiritual journey so we can develop Christian character... so we can do more and greater things for God. We don’t reach a plateau and stop. We’re either moving forward or backward. We don’t stand still.

Another point should be made here. Some people seem to think it’s a sin to be tempted. That is not the case. As the old hymn tells us: Yield not to temptation, for yielding is sin. Yielding to temptation is sinful. Being tempted isn’t.

Summing up. Jesus was tempted as we are... yet without sin. God didn’t tempt Jesus. He tested Him. He doesn’t tempt us either. That’s not His way. But He does test us in order that we can mature... advance... grow... and be of greater service to Him. Let us pray that we can pass His tests. Amen.
First Sunday of Lent, Year C

OLD TESTAMENT: Deuteronomy 26:1 - 11

PSALM: 91

NEW TESTAMENT: Romans 10:8b - 13


Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, "One does not live by bread alone."

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you," and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." Jesus answered him, "It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.
Do any of you yearn for the good old days? If so, when were they? During your teens? When you were even younger? Or perhaps when you had to walk three miles each day to school? When some think of the good old days they may harken back to the early church. Do you realize that in the early church... the period of fasting in preparation for Easter was... as a rule... only two or three days? The fast was short... but severe. Things were that way for the first three centuries. And I have a feeling that the people then... with their simpler lifestyle... may have had fewer temptations. But this is not to say that they weren’t tempted... or that their temptations were any less real than those we face today. I’m sure that Lenten observances offered their own individual sets of challenges... but they didn’t last nearly as long as they do today.

A Lenten observance of 40 days apparently began in the fourth century. However, the days were counted differently by different churches until much later. The custom of 40 days in Lent may have been related to the prescribed fast of candidates for baptism... and the number of days apparently was suggested by the 40-day fasts of Jesus, of Moses, and of Elijah.

In the East... the Eastern church... the Lenten fast was observed over a seven-week period. However, all Sundays and all Saturdays except Holy Saturday were exempted. This meant that there were only 36 days of fasting. In the Western church... they fasted for six weeks.... excluding Sundays. This also means a 36-day season of fasting.

In Jerusalem they did things differently. They fasted for five days a week for eight weeks. Later... the Lenten observance in the Latin church was increased to 40 days. This was done by adding the four days from Ash Wednesday to the First Sunday in Lent. This dates back to the seventh century... so you see it’s very well established now. And there doesn’t seem to be any reason to change the length of the Lenten observance. But let’s be clear about the Lenten fasts of the first several centuries. Whether they were for two or three days... or for 36 days... or 40 days... they were very strict. Very Strict. Only one meal was allowed daily. It was taken toward evening... and flesh meat and fish were absolutely forbidden. So were eggs and dairy products in most places.
That’s how things were in the old days... when fasting was strict and demanding. However, these practices have been gradually relaxed since the ninth century. The eating of fish was allowed throughout the Middle Ages... and from the fifteenth century consumption of dairy products has been generally permitted.

In modern times... the Lenten fast has been greatly modified. It is less austere... but it is a matter that we can benefit from. It is now observed as a time of penance by abstaining from festivities, by almsgiving and by devoting additional time to religious exercises.

What should Lent be to us? This question leads to another: What could Lent be for us? I suggest that it calls for a six-week period of spiritual renewal and simple living... with a day of relaxation from this discipline on each Sunday. The more diligently we involve ourselves in the penitential aspect of this season the more beautiful and the more meaningful Easter will be for us. To accomplish this... to be motivated to do this... are we willing to view Lent as Pope Gregory I did? In the year 604 he described Lent as “the spiritual tithing of the year.” The spiritual tithing of the year.” Do we view Lent that way? Are we willing to look upon it that way?

I offer some possibilities for the Lenten season.

Under Prayer

1—Pray daily (meaning morning and/or evening).

2—Say the Daily Morning and/or Evening offices in the Prayer Book.

3—Make prayerful, searching, self-examinations before Holy Eucharist and give thanks afterward.

4—As a minimum... make my Communion each Sunday in Lent.

5—Be reconciled to God as a penitent. See Page 447 in the Prayer Book.

6—Attend a Bible study if you know of one. If not, do your own.

Under Fasting and Abstinence

1—Omit meat from your diet one or two days a week.

2—If you feel called to do so, and your health can cope with it, take only liquids one day a week.

3—If you do fast, fast with special intention for someone or a specific situation.

4—Give up certain foods, entertainment, pleasures, and use the time for prayer, devotional reading, meditation, etc.
Under Self-Denial, Giving

1—Give _____ number of hours of volunteer work at _____.

2—Write, visit, or help one or more individuals or groups each week.

3—Review your paycheck, checkbook, and other receipts to assess the generosity of your weekly offering to the Lord and the stewardship of your possessions.

4—If you’re not already doing so… consider the tithing of your income, your time, and your skills and talents. We don’t all have the same amount of income…but all of us do have the same amount of time. In case anyone has forgotten, each one of us has 168 hours a week.

I could go on… but I think I’ve given you sufficient suggestions to prepare for a holy Lent. What you do is up to you and what you’re willing to do for God…and the spread of His kingdom. The more seriously we take our baptism vows, the more meaningful Lent will be for us. Our model is Jesus Christ…and I call your attention to the temptations He faced…and triumphed over… during His 40 days in the wilderness after His baptism.

Let us pray. O Lord God, keep us always mindful of the life, death and Resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Make the thought of His love powerful to win us from evil. As He toiled and sorrowed and suffered for us—in fighting against sin—so may we endure constantly and labor diligently, as his soldiers and servants, looking ever to Him and counting it all joy to be partakers with Him in His conflict, His cross, and His victory; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.
Second Sunday in Lent, Year A

OLD TESTAMENT: Genesis 12: 1 - 4a

PSALM: 121

NEW TESTAMENT: Romans 4: 1 - 5, 13 - 17

GOSPEL: John 3: 1 - 17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.
Today we’re going to take another look at a special person... Nicodemus... and a sometimes-misunderstood term... new birth. John introduces us to Nicodemus, who is not mentioned in the three other gospels. Nicodemus is an important person, a Pharisee and a member of the ruling body of the Jews, the Sanhedrin. He is also a seeker after truth. He approaches Jesus because the signs indicate to him that God is present in the life and works of Jesus. Despite his religious background and high standing in the community, Nicodemus seems to have maintained an open mind about Jesus and His teachings. He senses something far more important than his associates have been willing to admit. He wants to be fair... and such an attitude leads him to Jesus. To Him... Jesus and His claims and beliefs... as well as His teachings... are not matters to be dismissed lightly. Far from it. They need to be investigated with care. And Nicodemus didn’t rely on others... he did his investigating first-hand.

John’s gospel tells us up front that Nicodemus came by night, which seems to say that he was a cautious person. Should this surprise us? After all, he was a religious leader to whom others looked for guidance. Was it fair to him, or to them, or to God, that he should take the word of others—most of whom were admittedly prejudiced against Jesus—when it came to deciding where Jesus fit into the religious spectrum? No Nicodemus needed to meet Jesus, personally, to talk to Him, and to find out for himself the answers to several important questions.

Nicodemus paid his respects to Jesus when he said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” Then Jesus said, “Unless one is born anew... or from above... or from God... he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Then Jesus continued: If one is born anew... if we are to have a new birth... if we are to experience a religious birth... a conversion... we must become a new creature... entirely new. This new creature must be built up in a new way. We can’t possibly change what we are... regardless of how strong our will is. Nicodemus wasn’t questioning the desirability of a radical fundamental change. He was questioning the possibility of such a change.

Now the idea of rebirth was not something new. The Jews of Jesus’ time were very familiar with it. When a person of another faith became a Jew, he was accepted into Judaism by prayer, and sacrifice, and
baptism... and he was regarded as re-born. A proselyte who embraces Judaism, said the rabbis, is like a new-born child. He has undergone such a radical change that he is now a different person. The Greeks also knew about re-birth. All the mystery religions were founded on the story of a suffering and dying and rising god. The initiate had a long period of preparation, and his aim was to become one with the god, sharing his sufferings, triumphs, and divine life. Some people were said to attain re-birth at midnight... when day dies... and the new day begins.

We Episcopalians should be familiar with being re-born or experiencing re-birth. In our Baptismal Service... in the thanksgiving over water... Page 306 in the Prayer Book... the celebrant prays: We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in His death. By it we share in His resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit. Therefore in joyful obedience to your Son, we bring into his fellowship those who come to him in faith, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

So... being re-born... being born anew... being born again... is not something that happens to certain Christians. It happens to all of us. It’s basic to becoming a Christian. That’s when we become a new creature... a new creation of God. Some are inclined to brag about being a born-again Christian. So be it. However, it would be appropriate to ask them: What other kind of Christian is there?

Now... let’s take a further look at Nicodemus... at his fairness... and at his character. In the seventh chapter of John’s gospel we meet Nicodemus again (45-52) on the last day of the Passover feast. Previously, the Pharisees heard the crowd muttering about Jesus and the chief priest sent officers to arrest Jesus. Jesus stood up and said, “If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, ‘out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’”

Upon hearing these words, some of the people said, “This is really the prophet.” Others said, “This is the Christ.” But still others disagreed. Some wanted to arrest Jesus, but no one laid hands on him. The officers went back to the scribes and Pharisees who wanted to know why they had not brought Jesus. The officers answered, “No man ever spoke like this man!” The Pharisees answered them, “Are you led astray? Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in Him?” It was at this time that Nicodemus spoke up on Jesus’ behalf. He
asked: "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" The replied, "Are you from Galilee too? Search and you will see that no prophet is to rise from Galilee."

So here was Nicodemus, a shy older man speaking out to protest the shoddy treatment and lack of consideration the Pharisees and members of the Sanhedrin gave Jesus. Nicodemus, the shy one who came to Jesus by night, was a minority voice of one. But he did speak up. He was trying to get a fair shake for Jesus, but he was quickly and loudly over-ruled.

John also tells us, in the nineteenth chapter of his gospel, that Nicodemus assisted Joseph of Arimathea with the burial of Jesus. Joseph claimed the body of Jesus and he and Nicodemus took it away. Nicodemus had brought a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes... a very expensive gift... and they put the body of Jesus in linen cloths and added the spices.

So with their own hands these two men who had secretly believed in Jesus reverently prepared his body for burial. Both were naturally timid and cautious. So that fact that even frail and stumbling men like Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus would show their love and respect for Jesus should be an encouragement for us. We often lack the courage to express our convictions. Cardinal John Henry Newman once said it is no great matter that we obey the Master in the ninety and nine cases where to do so is easy. The real test for us lies in the hundredth case, where it is hard. With the help of Jesus we can do what for us alone would be impossible... as the examples of Joseph and Nicodemus clearly show.

Remember Paul’s thorn in the flesh? In his Second Letter to the Corinthians (12:7-9) God tells Paul that “my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Paul responds that “I will all the more gladly boast of my weakness, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” Paul’s weakness provided an opening for God to assert His power. There are countless other examples when faith in God overcame weaknesses, handicaps, and a variety of human defects. All such difficulties can bring us to the point where we are open to God’s Spirit. When that happens, all kinds of good things can happen. When we’re weak... and we turn to God... our weakness... and God’s strength... can do miraculous things.
Why a night visit? Why a night visit? Would Nicodemus be likely to visit Jesus, an itinerant preacher and teacher in daylight? No. After all, Nicodemus was one of 31 members of the Sanhedrin, the supreme council and highest court of justice in Jerusalem. Usually dominated by members of the priestly aristocracy, it also included laymen, such as scribes and Pharisees.

Nicodemus was also a teacher. And, not unexpectedly, he was a rich man. Two more reasons why he was not likely to visit Jesus in the daytime. Want another reason he was not likely to go to Jesus? He was a Pharisee. The Pharisees called themselves “the separated ones” and looked upon themselves as being set apart from others in the Jewish community. Nicodemus and his close associates had taken a pledge before three witnesses that they would spend their entire life observing all the details of the scribal law.

Isn’t it amazing that Nicodemus went to Jesus at all? He represented “the establishment” in religious matters and Jesus had no credentials... no standing... at all.

Let’s return to the Law for a moment. To the Jews of that day, the Law (or the first five books of the Old Testament) was the most sacred thing in the world. They believed it to be the perfect Word of God. So...to them it meant that the Law contained everything that mankind needed for living a good life. Nothing was to be added to the Law nor subtracted from it. The Law was made up of broad noble principles, and each member was to work them out for himself. All well and good. However, this was not good enough for Jews of later generations. But that’s another story for another time.

The fact remains: Nicodemus, who had dedicated his life to observing all the details of the scribal law, had paid Jesus a visit.

Why did Nicodemus visit Jesus? He wanted to see for himself what Jesus was about. The signs that Jesus did attracted his attention. He was favorably impressed by what Jesus was doing, an attitude not shared by his associates. So he went alone to see Jesus.

When Jesus told him unless one is born anew... again... from above... he cannot see the kingdom of God, Nicodemus didn’t understand. He took a literal... physical... attitude forward Jesus’ statement.

“Truly, truly,” said Jesus, “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to
you ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know
whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit.”

Nicodemus didn’t understand that being born from above... anew... again is a supernatural act that
involves the impartation of divine life. But we understand this, don’t we? We know what it is to be born anew...
again... from above. We know what spiritual birth is all about. Yes, we know this. We understand this. But
sometimes we need to be reminded of the promises we made at our baptism. A good time to remember this is
during Lent. This is Lent... and we are called to take a good hard look at ourselves. We should be looking at our
lives each time we stand before a mirror. Perhaps we’re too used to doing that. How about going further and
putting our lives under a microscope?

At our baptism... in addition to expressing our belief in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy
Spirit... we promised, with God’s help, to continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of
bread and in the prayers. We also promised to persevere in resisting evil... and when we sin, to repent and return
to the Lord. Also with God’s help... we promised to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in
Christ... to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourself.

We’re familiar with Paul’s statement in his Second Letter to the Corinthians that if anyone is in Christ, he
is a new creation (or new creature); the old one has passed away, behold, the new has come. (2 Cor. 5:17).

Paul also tells us in Second Corinthians (5:14-15) that the love of Christ controls us because we are
convinced that one has does for all; therefore all have died. And Christ died for all, that those who live might live
no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

Whether we look into a mirror or through a microscope during the remaining days of Lent... how do we
see ourselves?

Are we a “new creation,” a “new creature”... or do we revert back to our old ways?
Do we persevere in resisting evil and when we sin, do we repent and return to the Lord?
How are we doing in proclaiming the Good News in Christ...by word and by example?
Are we seeking and serving God in all persons?
Are we loving our neighbors as ourselves?
And, finally, does the love of Christ control us?
Today’s gospel lesson from Mark gives us insight into some very basic differences in the thinking of Jesus and His disciples... on what Jesus' role is to be... what He should be doing. We need to remember that today’s passage immediately follows Peter’s great affirmation that Jesus is the Christ... the Messiah... the anointed one of God... followed by Jesus’ insistence that they tell no one.

Let’s see if we can imagine some of the images of Messiah that may have come to the minds of the disciples: An earthly king, perhaps in the mold of David, who would lead the people into another era of greatness. Someone who would assert a powerful influence on the people with an emphasis on earthly power, human power, and military power. Someone who would return the Israelites to favor with God. There had been this separation for many generations. People felt that God had deserted them... abandoned them. Perhaps some of the disciples had felt this, too. The Jewish people had given up hope that God would raise up a king as great as David. So they were expecting Him to intervene in history... and do by supernatural means what natural means could not do.

Whatever their own personal thoughts on the matter... the disciples weren’t ready for the Messiah that God was providing. They couldn’t believe what they were hearing... what Jesus was saying: That He should suffer many things. That He should be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes. That He should be killed and rise again after three days. No wonder Peter protested so vigorously. This went against all his dreams and expectations. He wants Jesus to say it isn’t so. But Jesus doesn’t do that. He tells it like it is. He doesn’t try to talk anyone into doing something... or making sacrifices... that He Himself isn’t willing to make. Have you noticed this is what other great leaders are like?

George Washington was always up front, alongside his troops, in the line of fire... when he was leading a battle. This was a constant worry to his friends.

Garibaldi, the Italian patriot who united Italy, used these words in appealing to recruits: “I offer neither pay, nor provisions; I offer hunger, thirst, forced marches, battles, and death. Let him who loves his country in his heart, and not with his lips only, follow me. ... Soldiers, all our efforts against superior forces have been unavailing. I have nothing to offer you but hunger and death; but I call on all who love their country to join with me.”

Did Jesus’ disciples disappear after He told them what was going to happen to Him? No. They were still with Him… at least physically. They may not have been too enthusiastic about staying after hearing these words. But stay they did. At least, they didn’t flee.

Then Jesus fired the other barrel, to His disciples... and to the multitude: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?”

What does all this mean to us? Most of us aren’t in any danger of being persecuted, beaten, or killed because we are a Christian… because we are a follower of Jesus Christ. But at the time Jesus uttered these words, that was a possibility. And there have been times in later years when danger was a Christian’s constant companion.

Our lives aren’t on the line, but we do have some responsibilities as Christians. We are, as Jesus puts it, to deny ourselves. In other words, we should lead disciplined lives. We should say no to selfishness... and share ourselves, our time, our gifts and talents, and our money with others. We are to say no to a life of greed, of ease and comfort... and yes to Jesus... yes to protecting, providing for, assisting, and otherwise looking out for the needs of others... especially the helpless, the vulnerable. Service to others should be uppermost in our hearts and minds. This can only happen when we make a conscious and conscientious effort to do so. As Jesus says, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit. It’s the same with us. Unless we die to self and live for others, we really haven’t done anything of much importance to God.

In this regard, Jesus says further: Any one who loves his life loses it. But if any one serves Him... and serving His people is an important part of serving Him... what happens to that person? Something wonderful! Or, as Jesus puts it, the Father will honor him... or her. The season of Lent offers us great opportunities to serve others. We don’t have to be thinking about shedding a bad habit... although that is not a bad idea... but it’s more positive... more fruitful... more helpful... to do something... for someone else... for others.
An acorn, if it only lies on the ground, is of no use to anyone. When it dies, it bears much fruit. It can produce a huge oak tree and be of great use and value. By producing shade... by giving off oxygen... by providing children with a place to climb... by offering food to squirrels and turkeys and other animals... and by producing lumber and sawdust for man’s use.

If such common things as a grain of wheat or an acorn can be of use to mankind... and to animals... how much more use can we be. We can devote time and effort to the poor... the ill... the lonely... those who need counseling... those who lack direction. We can do these things as a part of an organized effort... or work as an individual. The needs of our fellow human beings are sometimes overwhelming. We can’t always meet them. But we can try... we can do our part... and, with God’s help, we can make a difference in the lives of those around us. And we needn’t wait to be called on. It’s appropriate that we show our interest by volunteering. What better time than during the Lenten season?

Touching on another aspect of what Jesus is talking about in this morning’s Gospel lesson... if service to others really is important to us... we should be concerned with earning a living... not amassing a fortune or trying to acquire all the physical comforts and other luxuries we can. If we say yes to the commands of Christ, we must say no to all courses of action based on self-seeking and self-will.

If we use our time, our gifts and talents for the benefit of others... they will grow into something greater. Or, as Jesus says. They will bear much fruit. And further... by giving up our selves we will gain eternal life. Remember what He said of Himself: Greater love has no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends. That’s what He did. And we’re called on to give up our lives... not on a cross but for the service of others.

If we live a life of service to others... we make good use of our gifts and talents... we expend them... and the result is something greater. But those who refuse to use their skills, gifts, and talents will, in the end, lose them. And who will miss these people... who haven’t contributed anything of value? They’ve squandered what they have... and they’ve done it at their own peril.

God gave us life to spend... not to save... not to keep. If our life is to count for something worthwhile, we should wear it out... or burn it out... but we should not let it rust out. Amen.
Second Sunday in Lent, Year B

OLD TESTAMENT:  Genesis 17:1 - 7, 15 - 16

PSALM:  22

NEW TESTAMENT:  Romans 4:13 - 25

GOSPEL:  Mark 8:31 - 38

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."
From the very beginning of today’s gospel lesson from Mark, we must realize that what Jesus is telling His disciples about the Messiah is contrary to the common conception of what the Messiah will be like.

What were the Jewish people expecting in the Messiah? They felt he would be a swashbuckling military and political leader. He would lead his people, who had long been under the rule of the Romans, against this despised people who controlled so much of their lives... and to whom they had to pay taxes... and other forms of tribute. The Messiah, whom many Jews expected to throw off the Roman yoke, would be embodied in a vigorous leader modeled after the charismatic personage of their hero of previous centuries, King David. They were thinking big. They were expecting a military and political type of king... not a spiritual personage.

Imagine how disappointed Jesus’ disciples must have been when He told them that the Son of man must suffer many things... that He would be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes... that He would be killed... and that after three days He would rise again. Jesus was not talking about military victories... He was talking about suffering... and death. A suffering servant... not a great conquering hero of the Jewish nation.

There’s quite a difference in these two types. No wonder Peter protested so violently. He was not ready to accept such a Messiah. In fact, it was impossible as far as Peter was concerned.

What about Jesus? He didn’t want to die. He realizes He had powers that He could use for conquest. He rebuked Peter because this disciple was putting into words the very temptations that Jesus would have to deal with. Or, if you will, He was fighting again the very temptations He had faced in the wilderness. Satan was tempting Him again to fall down and worship Him... to do His own thing rather than to do God’s will for Him. And Peter, though well-meaning, was not doing Jesus any favors.

How often have well-meaning friends tried to shelter us from life? How often have they encouraged us to take the easy way or to play it safe? How often have they tried to “protect” us from life? Or from what we feel deep down is the “right” way or the “right” decision or the “right” action for us? We don’t want, or need, someone else’s version of what’s right for us. We need to consider the pros and cons... and then come to our own conclusions. It is often a good friend... or a close relative... who really wants what’s best for us, or what he views as best for us, who in reality is the tempter... or who represents the tempter’s point of view. We must not let even the voice of love silence the voice of God in our lives. That’s what Peter was trying to do for Jesus... but Jesus
realized this and refused to yield. He saw what He was called to do... and embarked on His mission... regardless of the cost.

Can’t you visualize Jesus when He called to Him the multitude with His disciples, and made His pitch to them? “If any man would come after me, let Him deny him and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.”

No rose garden. No pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. No pension. Jesus believed in leveling with His recruits. And no one could say He tried to talk them into anything. But He did challenge them! What about you? How do you view these words of Jesus? Aren’t they challenging? Have you ever felt that you were on a great adventure? Following Jesus isn’t easy. But it certainly can be interesting... and rewarding. Adding Christianity to life makes it worthwhile. It gives zest... it gives meaning.

And as Jesus told His disciples in the incident in today’s gospel lesson He tells us here today: The Christian life is not for the faint-hearted. It’s certainly not for everybody. Like all great leaders, Jesus didn’t try to bribe anyone... or offer an easy way. But He certainly did challenge them... and He still challenges us today. When Jesus made His pitch to those who might be willing to follow Him... what they decided to do was their decision alone. Jesus didn’t try to bribe them... and He certainly didn’t downplay the dangers that they might be facing. What did Jesus say about life? Whosever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.

What happens when you have a talent—or a skill—and you develop it, and use it? It becomes something greater or better. But if you don’t use it, what happens? Don’t you lose it? It’s the same way with life. There are countless examples in history in which people threw away their lives—gave them up for others—and as a result, they gained eternal life.

God gives us life to use. If we’re concerned most with ease, comfort, security, and profit, we’re losing our life. It’s not productive. It’s of no benefit to us or to anyone else. Such people are losing life all the time. But if we devote time and effort to others... to their needs... if we forget about our own health, our own time, our own wealth, our own comfort in trying to do something for Jesus—and those for whom He died—we keep on winning life.
OLD TESTAMENT: Isaiah 55:1 - 9

PSALM: 63

NEW TESTAMENT: 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.

Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play." We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.


At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them--do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."
Today’s gospel lesson (Luke 13:1-9) calls attention to two disasters about which we have very little information. First, some of those present told Jesus of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with the blood of their sacrifices. And second, the fall of the tower of Siloam.

Galileans had a reputation for being hot-headed so they would be good prospects for getting into trouble with the Roman authorities. About this time, Pilate decided that Jerusalem needed a bigger and better water supply. This apparently was a worthwhile project and he proposed to finance it with money from the Temple treasury. They thought it should come from some other source. I don’t know what they expected... perhaps a government grant.

Biblical translator and commentator William Barclay tells of a time when mobs assembled in Jerusalem... and Pilate ordered his soldiers to mingle with them... to wear cloaks over their battle dress so they would not seem to be soldiers. And they were to carry cudgels but no swords. On command, the soldiers were to accost the mobs and disperse the protesters. They apparently got carried away... over-reacted... and killed several people. It’s quite likely that Galileans were among the victims of this violence. We don’t have any background information on the 18 persons who died when the tower of Siloam fell. It has been suggested that they may have been forced to work on Pilate’s aqueducts which were very unpopular with the Jews. It may have been supposed that the tower had fallen on the various victims because of the work they had agreed to do... that this calamity came about because suffering followed sin. We don’t know why the matter of calamities and repentance came up. However, we do know that many of the Jews of that time believed that calamities resulted in sin. But how could those in the act of preparing animals for sacrifice be looked upon as sinners? The incident of the mingling of the blood of some Galileans with the blood of the animals they were sacrificing... apparently took place in the Temple in Jerusalem while the men were slaughtering the animals for sacrifices. The Romans may have done this blood-mingling because the men were considered insurrectionists. Josephus doesn’t mention this incident... but he does write of other comparable acts of violence against the Jews in Jerusalem.

Now back to the belief that suffering was a consequence of sin. William Barclay notes that “the Jews rigidly connected sin and suffering. Eilphaz had long ago said to Job, ‘Who that was innocent ever perished?’
(Job 4:7). This was a cruel and a heart-breaking doctrine, as Job knew well. And Jesus utterly denied it in the case of an individual. As we all know very well, it is the greatest saints who have to suffer most."

Of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices... Jesus asked “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered thus? I tell you: No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.” Jesus asks if the 18 people killed when the tower of Siloam fell were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem. And His answer is again no. He then repeats this admonition: “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

Why was Jesus zeroing in on the matter of repentance? He was trying to get Israel back on track... back to its mission of making God known to the world. The leaders were continuing to seek an earthly kingdom... and rejecting the Kingdom of God. If they didn’t change their course, they were going to suffer the consequences. If they didn’t repent, Jesus said, they would perish... like those who died when the tower fell... like those who were killed in the Temple.

On another occasion Jesus foretold the destruction of Jerusalem (Luke 21:21). He knew what was going to happen if the Jews of His day continued to plot and fight against the Roman authorities... if they continued with their political ambitions. Sooner or later the Romans would lose their patience with them and destroy them. The Jewish nation would soon be obliterated. And, as we know, that’s exactly what happened... and only some 35 years later.

So Jesus tells us that individual sin and suffering are not connected. But the same cannot be said about national sin... and suffering. The nation that chooses the wrong ways... carries out politics that cause suffering... cannot escape the consequences. And rightfully so. An individual has no such responsibility. In fact, he or she may object strenuously to what is being done but can’t possibly stop it. He is trapped in a situation he did not make and over which he has no control. But this is not the case of a nation. It must bear the responsibility for its acts. And a nation’s rebellion against God could be disastrous.

Jesus’ comments should cause us to do some serious thinking. Are we seeking an earthly kingdom or a spiritual kingdom? How much of our life, time, and resources do we spend on spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Are we constantly demonstrating a love of God and neighbor... day in and day out? Or do other things get in the way?
In today’s reading from his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul did something that was common in Early Church preaching and teaching. He used illustrations from the Old Testament. Such a linkage comes to life… making us a part of what went on during the years the children of Israel wandered about in the wilderness. It’s part of our heritage. That’s the good news. There’s some bad news, too. Some of the things that Paul calls to the attention of his readers are terrible… evil. Nevertheless they happened to our spiritual ancestors. We can’t deny that they did because they are a part of our heritage, too. Paul calls them warnings for us… that we are not to desire evil as they did. We’ll come back to this. But first, let’s look at some of the thoughts in this passage in the order that Paul brings them up.

He finds similarities between baptism and the Holy Eucharist as we know them in incidents involving the wandering Israelites. Even though he writes to a predominantly Gentile congregation, Paul describes the Israelites as our fathers. And he’s right. Why? Because Gentile Christians belong to the “Israel of God.” They are our spiritual fathers. This is an excellent figure of speech. The symbolism is good and it gives us an important link to the people of our spiritual past.

However, I’m afraid the average Episcopalian in the pew may not have grasped this… in which case he or she has missed out on what could be a meaningful aspect of our faith… one that ties us to the distant past… to the children of Israel. This is one of the teachings that was brought to the attention of converts in the early Church. Somewhere along the line it has lost the emphasis it once enjoyed… and we’re the poorer for it.

Paul says our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. The pillar of cloud symbolized the guidance of God… and seeing Moses and the others under the cloud could convey to us a symbol of baptism… even of baptism into Moses. God is a participant. So is Moses and so are the Israelites. Clouds contain water… moisture… but the Red Sea didn’t at the time to which Paul referred. So the mental picture of the analogy to baptism is not literally true.

Exodus (14:21-23) tells us that “Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. And the people of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went in after them into the midst of the sea, all of Pharaoh’s horses, his chariots,
and his horsemen.” Even if water is not in their path as the Israelites crossed the Red Sea… it’s still important to Christians and our spiritual ancestors. They didn’t get wet because of God’s intervention… but they were surrounded by water.

At our baptismal service… in the Thanksgiving over Water… the celebrant prays these words: “We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water. Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Through it you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise. In it your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us, through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life.”

In the Thanksgiving over Water… the Celebrant reminds us at each baptism… that in it… the symbolic water… we are buried with Christ in His death. By it we share in His resurrection. And through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit. Then in the Blessing of the water used in baptism, the celebrant prays that God will sanctify this water, by the power of His Holy Spirit, that those who here are cleansed from sin and born again may continue forever in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Savior. So water and symbolism figure prominently in our Sacrament of Baptism.

Paul’s real point of connection is found in the act of grace on the part of God. As the Israelites were under the cloud so Christians in their baptism had gone under the water (Romans 6:3). Paul puts the same connection between the pillar of cloud and Red Sea experience as between baptism and Christ. God had accomplished His salvation through Moses in the Old Testament and through Jesus in the New.

Of course, receiving the sacraments will not, of itself, save anyone. As Paul pointed out, all the Israelites had these benefits, but what happened to them? Most of them were destroyed. And despite the fact that the Corinthians of Paul’s day also had the sacraments, they also faced possible destruction. Even the strongest of them were in danger from the heathen influences around them.

Now back to some of the actions of the children of Israel… and the warnings to us. They yielded to idolatry and sexual immorality. They tested God with their behavior. And grumbling and murmuring seemed almost to be the theme song of the Israelites in the desert. They did not handle their temptations well. They’re
probably better known for yielding to temptation rather than resisting temptation... and large numbers of Israelites were destroyed.

And this is Paul’s warning to the Corinthians: Temptation is inevitable. But when the time of temptation, of testing, or of trial comes... we don’t have to yield. The grace of God to overcome it is immediately available to His people. We can’t overcome such difficulty on our own. We need the help of God.

Our temptations aren’t unique, Paul tells us. No temptation has overtaken you, he says, that is not common to man. God is faithful and He will not let you be tempted beyond your strength... but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

In order to grow spiritually, we need to be tempted... tested... and through the grace of God to resist. I have a feeling that more often than not we need the grace... the power of God... to work through a situation. That’s probably more realistic than avoiding many temptations. Concerning temptations...being tempted...some people seem to think that it’s sinful to be tempted. That’s not true. Sin occurs when we yield to temptation, not when we’re tempted. Or, as the old hymn says: “Yield not to temptations for yielding is sin.”
Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year A

OLD TESTAMENT: 1 Samuel 16:1 - 13

PSALM: 23

NEW TESTAMENT: Ephesians 5: 8 - 14

GOSPEL: John 9: 1 - 41

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."
So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see," your sin remains.
I have a question today for the children: What day is this? I don’t mean Sunday... or March 17... or the Fourth Sunday in Lent. It’s a day we honor a famous saint. There’s a famous cathedral in New York named for him. Also a great parade in New York... as well as elsewhere. Saint Patrick. It’s not St. Patrick’s Day because I am wearing a green shirt. I’m wearing a green shirt because it’s St. Patrick’s Day.

I was reading about St. Patrick the other day and these words stuck with me: “The historical Patrick is so much more attractive than the Patrick of legend, who expelled snakes from Ireland or ‘explained’ the Trinity by reference to the shamrock, or accomplished single-handed immense missionary tasks of conversion which actually took many evangelists and several generations to accomplish.” Was Patrick bigger than life? Bigger than legend? Some seem to think so.

Now... turning from St. Patrick to our gospel reading from John... There’s a statement... usually made in jest... that goes like this: No good deed will go unpunished. Today’s gospel lesson from John will not prove the truth of that statement... but it does seem to bear it out. Jesus did a good thing. He healed a man who had been blind since birth. But because He healed on a Sabbath, and for other reasons, He was severely criticized by the Pharisees. This is the only miraculous healing in the gospels in which the person who is healed is said to have been afflicted since birth. And it led to a series of confrontations, pitting the neighbors of the man who was healed against him, his parents against the Pharisees, and the Pharisees against Jesus. There may even be some other conflicts. So a good deed really did lead to a passel of trouble.

It was prevalent in Jewish thinking at the time of Jesus to link suffering and sin. They assumed that wherever there was suffering there was sin. “This man is blind, the disciples said. “Is his blindness due to his own sin, or to the sin of his parents?” Neither of them sinned, said Jesus, but this happened in order that the works of God could be made manifest...or so there could be a demonstration of what God can do. And Jesus did not disappoint.

I’m sure you’ve wondered how this man could have sinned before his birth. So have I. And I have a feeling that we don’t think that he did. However, Jewish religious leaders did have a theology of pre-natal sin. Noted Scottish translator and interpreter William Barclay says some rabbis used a quotation in Genesis (4:7) as the basis for their thinking. The verse to which they appeal says: “The Lord sad to Cain, why are you angry, and
why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.” These verses follow the incident when Cain and Abel made their offerings to God. Abel’s offering was acceptable but Cain’s was not. And the Jews took the phrase “sin is couching at the door” to mean that sin awaits man at the door of the womb as soon as he is born.

Also, there’s a statement involving the sins of the fathers being transmitted to their children that’s found in the Ten Commandments in Exodus (20:5 and 34:7) and in Numbers (14:18): “For I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.”

In today’s incident, we need to give credit to the man who was healed… because he was a very strong and a very believable witness. He was called on to answer questions about his healing after his parents bowed out. They let it be known that he was of age because they feared being put out of the synagogue. Being cut off from God and also from fellow worshipers would have been a very harsh penalty to pay for telling the truth about their son’s healing. No matter how much he was brow-beaten, he still spoke up courageously, he was not flustered, and he stuck to his story throughout the ordeal. The first time around, the healed man told how Jesus had healed him. The Pharisees countered that this man, Jesus, is not from God because he doesn’t keep the Sabbath. What does the healed man say about Jesus? He is a prophet.

The second time the Pharisees questioned the healed man, he said, “Whether he is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I know, that though I was blind, now I see.” A perfect squelch…an elegant rebuttal to a group of people trying to tear down his case. And don’t forget the courage that this man showed during a very tense series of confrontations by those who were trying to discredit Jesus…but any means that they could come up with.

The point should be made that Jesus honored the man He healed by standing up for him after he was kicked out of the synagogue. Not only that m but He made a personal visit to him and gave him a better understanding of who he really was. The formerly blind man was not familiar with the title the Son of man…but Jesus explained it to him. He then had no difficulty at all in believing in Jesus. In fact, he moved from recognition to acceptance, to belief, and finally, to worship.
We should admire the simple—yet strong—faith of the formerly blind man after Jesus healed him. He was off to a good start on his journey of faith. He had encountered the Son of the Living God. We don’t know what happened in his life after his healing but we would hope that he progressed and continued to be a faithful witness to the love and power of the Living God. We would also expect his concept of God to grow over the years.

We know that Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. But we also know that as we grow in the love of God and service to His people that our concept of Him, our understanding of Him, also grow. Our faith deepens, becomes more mature, and we’re not the same person, the same creation, that we were when we first believed. Or, if we are, there’s something radically wrong with the life we have been living.
Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year B

OLD TESTAMENT: Numbers 21: 4 - 9

PSALM 107: 1 - 3, 17 - 22

NEW TESTAMENT: Ephesians 2: 1 - 10

GOSPEL: John 3: 14 - 21

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."
To say we’ve all heard a great deal about the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 would be an understatement. Now let’s see if we can find some aspects of this story that deserve further attention. For instance… there are several unimportant people who played key roles in this drama that unfolded on the hillside where Jesus sat down with His disciples. First, there is Philip, who is not an outstanding disciple. Nor is he innovative or adventurous. He would not be a person who would stand out in a crowd.

Nevertheless, it was to Philip that Jesus turned when this multitude of hungry people suddenly appeared before them. Why? Could it be that Jesus singled out this particular disciple in order to build up Philip’s confidence… or to show him… to teach him… or to give him a greater understanding of who Jesus was… and to inspire Philip to do greater deeds or perform more important services? We don’t know. But we do know that this miraculous feeding of the 5,000… with Philip’s participation… most certainly had a tremendous impact on one of the least known of Jesus’ disciples.

Philip seems to have taken an honest, traditional, matter-of-fact approach to the situation. He had no bold, imaginative plan for feeding this hungry mob. He saw the numbers… and he estimated how much it would cost to provide something for them to eat. Philip was forthright. He wasn’t overly pessimistic. He didn’t say, for instance, that because of the isolated location and the large number of people it may have been impossible to buy enough food for everyone. Nor did he complain that they didn’t have enough money to buy the needed food… which obviously was the case. But Jesus did consult him. And to Philip’s amazement, he was involved in feeding this hungry crowd. Little would he have dreamed that he was to be present at such an important event on that day.

Also… who would have thought that a young boy would have been a central figure in the feeding of the five thousand? But he was. What was this youngster doing there, anyway? Did his parents know where he was? Did he have their approval?

Knowing how persistent some children are, we shouldn’t be surprised that he was there. I can imagine that he convinced his parents that he was grown-up enough to make the trip. He even provided his own food. That would show his maturity, wouldn’t it? He just had to see Jesus. Little did he know what was going to happen. This boy became famous in his own right. He was one of the principals around which the miracle was
built. If he hadn't been there with his bread and fishes... this great event would never have happened... or at least not in the way that it did. He may have been an insignificant young nobody... but not anymore. He has become important.

Can you imagine what a story this young fellow had to tell his friends and his parents? He wouldn’t have to embellish it at all. His parents may have been unwilling to believe all of his fantastic story. But, on the other hand, there were thousands of people out there and some of them may have seen him give the loaves and fishes to Jesus and His disciples. So... another unimportant person was a necessary participant in this unique event.

Now we have the involvement of two unimportant people... the disciple Philip and the boy with the loaves and fishes. Nor was the disciple Andrew a very important person in everyday life. But today he was important, too. He was the one who saw the boy with the bread and fishes and brought him to Jesus. So what he did was vital to the miracle in today’s gospel lesson. So Andrew had done a good thing. But that’s not unusual. He was noted for that... being helpful. Andrew is also remembered for bringing someone else to Jesus. Who was that? His brother... Simon Peter... that’s who. Can any of us make that claim?

A fourth seemingly unimportant person in the miraculous feeding of the multitude was the mother of the boy with the loves and the fishes. Who made the lunch for her little boy? It must have been his mother. Who else would have performed this task? She wouldn’t think of letting her son go on such a trip without looking out for him. He was going to be gone for several hours. He would have a good appetite. Don’t all boys? So he would need food. And she wasn’t going to slight her son. She would see to that. Mothers are the unsung heroes of a thousand dramas... and they would be the last to say so. But they do so many useful things... and they seldom receive the credit they should. On that great day she played a vital role in the food chain. It went from her to her son. To Jesus, and then to the hungry 5,000. Not to mention the disciples, who picked up the leftovers for their later use. Nothing was wasted. And everybody who took part in this miraculous event was an important link to something greater than himself or herself. Jesus saw to that. That’s the way He was. That’s the way He is. That’s the way He treats us. We could say He makes us feel important. That’s true but not all of the story. He makes us important because we are important to Him... regardless of how ordinary... how nondescript... how common... how unimportant we are to others.
Today’s gospel lesson concerning Jesus’ feeding of the 5,000 was a miracle. But it wasn’t the only miracle that occurred that day. Jesus performed other miracles. He took these unimportant people... and He made them important. Philip. The boy with the loaves and the fishes. Andrew, who brought the boy to Jesus. And the boy’s mother, who probably prepared the boy’s lunch.

Jesus takes the common... the ordinary... the unimportant... and transforms them. He makes them important. In His presence... with His help... they are lifted up. He elevates them... raises them up. He makes them something they had never been before... something better. If Jesus can work miracles with such insignificant people as these... He can work miracles with other similar people... like us. In His hands... through His influence... in His presence... we can do things which we are incapable of doing. Ordinary people doing extraordinary things. When we surrender our wills, our abilities—and even our shortcomings—to Jesus, it’s amazing what He can do for us... with us... even though He doesn’t always have a great deal with which to work. Amen.
Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable:

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me!’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.

When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."’ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’"
Perhaps we could have a contest this morning. I welcome your suggestions on what to call the story in today’s gospel lesson from Luke (15:11-32). This is not an easy assignment: Giving a name to what has been called the greatest short story in the world. Some of the names given to this story are: The Prodigal Son. The Prodigal Sons. The Story of the Loving Father. And the Story of the Good Father. There may be other names for this penetrating parable… this true-to-life story that is so simple… yet at the same time complex. It has several aspects… and they all have meaning. And we must remember that it is to be understood on two levels… on a human level and on a spiritual level.

Now let’s take a look at what Jesus was saying. A farm owner’s youngest son decided he didn’t want to wait for his father to die to receive his inheritance. Legally… he was on solid ground. Under Jewish law, the eldest son… his older brother… was entitled to two-thirds of the father’s estate. And the other third was to go to the young man who demanded his share immediately. Normally, estates were divided upon the death of the father. And usually if an estate were divided earlier it was because the father wished to retire from actively managing the properties. This father didn’t seem inclined to retire… but he went along with the younger son’s request. A less understanding father might have balked. The son wants to test his wings. The story doesn’t say so, but he may have been filled with idealism and optimism and confidence in his abilities. He may have envisioned himself as someone who was going to make his mark in the world. And what freedom he would have! Suddenly he had his own life. He had his own money. For the first time in his life he was his own man. He didn’t have to answer to anyone… or so it seemed. This indulgent life was certainly different from the life to which he had been accustomed. And he apparently didn’t deprive himself of any of life’s pleasures.

Then suddenly… things started going downhill. His money was running out. No matter how much he skimmed… he couldn’t make ends meet. Not even any money for food. When the money ran out… and a famine came… he did something he would never have considered… he prevailed on a pig farmer to help him… so he could keep body and soul together. He obviously knew that good Jews didn’t have anything to do with swine farmers or swine… and they didn’t eat pork. He hadn’t gone that far yet. But Jesus tells us the younger son would gladly have eaten the pods of the carob tree… which no human being would eat unless he was near starvation. It had to be a low-ranking food if it was fed to swine… for they were considered the lowest of the low.
Then the young man came to his senses. There’s a Jewish proverb that speaks to his situation. It goes something like this: When a son who has left home has to walk barefooted because of poverty, he remembers how well he has been treated in his father’s house. What does the young son decide to do? He’s going to go to his father and tell him: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired hands.”

But that isn’t going to happen; is it? He has confessed to being a child of God… although a disobedient one. He can never be slave. God loves him… and give him certain rights… and responsibilities. He has his own mind… and his own soul… and, we might add, his own blood type and his own fingerprints. While God looks out for him… looks over him… he has certain responsibilities to his Heavenly Father, as we do.

Meanwhile, the son came to his senses and went to his father. Would it surprise us to learn that his father had been expecting him? He sensed his presence… and saw him at a distance. He had compassion on him… he ran and embraced him and kissed him. The son blurted out the words: “Father I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But he didn’t have time to complete his other well-prepared and often-rehearsed remarks: “Treat me as one of your hired hands.”

The father gave him a royal welcome. The best robe is reserved for the most distinguished guest. The ring meant the son was still heir. Shoes were also a symbol of sonship. Sons wore shoes. Only slaves went barefoot. So… after the son had received the robe… the ring… and the shoes, what came next? The fatted calf. Kill it… and let us eat and be merry… for this my son was dead, and is alive again. He was lost… and is found.

Is the elder son happy that his brother has returned? Not at all. He is incensed. And he refuses to go into his presence… even after his father entreats him to do so. “Lo , these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of your came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf.” Then the father said to the elder son: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.”

Can’t we all relate to this story? True… we may not have sunk to the depths that this young prodigal did. But we have certainly been estranged from God. And we are always welcomed back when we come to our
senses... when we realize the error of our ways. When we are contrite... sorry for our sins... and repent... God is always there... when we’re still a long way off... waiting for us... the penitents. God anticipates us... sees us... runs out to meet us... as Paul wrote in Romans (5:8), “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

If God is willing... even eager... to forgive us, why are we so slow to make the move? One reason is that we sometimes doubt that we can be forgiven. Not only that, but we’re sometimes unable or unwilling to forgive ourselves. We need to both confront ourselves... and forgive others. And, if we’re truly penitent, we must realize that if Christ were here, in the flesh, He would forgive a penitent. If that’s true... and it is... the penitent must be willing to forgive himself or herself.

Now let’s talk about the elder brother. Some have described him as the prodigal who stayed home... hence the naming of this story the Parable of the Prodigal Sons. Yes, he stayed home and he served his father. But his heart wasn’t in it and he wasn’t happy about it... even though he was the major heir. He looked inwardly at himself and what was there? Self-pity, pride, jealousy, and hatred of his brother. He stayed home, but he envied his younger brother who was out enjoying the bright lights. As someone once wrote: The younger son was prodigal in body, but at least part of his heart was home. He was quick to condemn his younger brother, whom he identified to his father in words we might translate “this worthless son of your.” But the father... quickly changed the emphasis. “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.” So we quickly move from the elder son’s selfishness to the father’s selflessness. The elder son kept the letter of the law... but broke its spirit. He did not love God with all his heart... and he did not love his brother.

Can we rejoice with the father because his prodigal son has come home? Can we rejoice that the lost has been found? If we’ve been around while he was gone... we have had a long time to build up resentment against him. Let us pray that we would welcome the penitent as God does.

Now back to the question I asked you previously: What do you think we should call this story that Jesus told in today’s Gospel lesson? Please give me your suggestions at the coffee hour. Two further questions:

1—Have you ever been a prodigal?
2—Are you willing to forgive a prodigal?
Before proceeding, I am going to read the 10 verses from Luke’s gospel that precede today’s reading (15:11-32). See if you can find a connection. <Read the verses>

These three parables do have a connection. All of them involve something or someone who is lost... the lost sheep... the lost coin... the lost son. Jesus addressed these three parables to the scribes and Pharisees. They had objected to His eating with tax collectors and sinners. By sinners they meant those who didn’t keep the Law. Commonly called the People of the Land, they were outcasts as far as the Pharisees were concerned. They did not entrust money to them. Took no testimony from them, trusted them with no secrets, wouldn’t let them be guardians of orphans, or go with them on a journey. Nor would they permit them to marry their daughters. Jesus’ point was that the scribes and Pharisees should be glad He was trying to bring these people back into the fold... and that they should rejoice. But they favored destruction of the unfortunates Jesus was trying to save.

First, the lost sheep. In Jesus’ day many of the flocks were owned not by individuals, but by villages. Each shepherd was responsible for each and every sheep... so they took the well-being of each animal very seriously. Losing one occasionally was not acceptable. And risking one’s life to protect, to find, or to recover a sheep was part of a lonely and vulnerable shepherd’s life. If the body of a sheep were found, the shepherd had to bring home the fleece to show evidence of how it had died.

Now the lost coin. It would not be difficult to lose a coin in a peasant’s house in Palestine. They were very dark, lit only by a small circular window. The floor was dirt and covered with dried reeds and rushes. The coin to which Jesus refers was worth more than a day’s wages for a working man. If the woman didn’t find it, the family may not eat that day. Or if it were part of a married woman’s headdress... which would include nine other coins... it would be to her like losing her wedding ring.

Both of these parables refer to the same truth: There is joy in heaven when one lost soul is brought back. If the angels rejoice over the conversion of one lost person, so should all believers. But the Pharisees didn’t rejoice. They weren’t happy. And these very words... by implication... condemned them.

Now let’s talk about the lost son. He is sometimes called the prodigal son. Some refer to this as the Parable of the Lost Sons... plural. To others, it’s the Parable of the Loving Father. That’s my choice. He really is the hero of the parable. We all know the story; don’t we? The younger son’s demand that he receive his
inheritance in advance was somewhat unusual but not unheard of. In Jesus’ day... this young man’s share of the family estate would be one-third. The older brother... the first-born son... always inherited the most. He would receive two-thirds.

The younger son may have had high ideals... great expectations... when he left home. But a multitude of problems developed. His dreams never materialized. And he ran out of money. Then came a famine. He was overwhelmed. His job was to feed the pigs... a task that a Jew was not supposed to do because of what the Law said: “Cursed is he who feeds swine.” Even so, he would have eaten the pods of the carob tree that the swine ate. But he was not permitted to do so. His fate: He would soon starve to death. But he came to himself. He realized how foolish he had been. He saw that compared to his situation now... things looked much better at his former home. He wouldn’t have much to offer, but they wouldn’t let him starve to death.

Then came his resolve: “I will arise and go to my father and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.’” He started home... and while he was still some distance away, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But the father was so happy to have his lost son back that he had the servants bring the best robe, which was a sign of honor, and put it on him. They were also told to put a ring on his hand, a sign of authority. And to put shoes on his feet. They were a sign of sonship. The children in a family wore shoes... but slaves didn’t have any. Then came the big celebration. The son who was dead... is alive again. He was lost... and is found. Quite a joyous occasion for everyone! Not quite.

What about the older son? He is sometimes identified as the prodigal who stayed home. Can we have empathy for him? He has none of the glamour of his younger brother who’s been there... and done that... and also is back in good standing with his father. But the older son is livid. He is filled with resentment, jealously, and envy. He makes some serious charges against his father... and that son of yours who devoured your living with harlots... and for whom you killed the fatted calf. In response, the father said: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.” But his words fell on deaf ears.
What do we have here... in the two brothers, both of whom would qualify as prodigal? What words would we use to describe the elder brother? His heart is filled with envy, jealousy, rage, and resentment. He is self-righteous and self-pitying. He is self-centered. We can’t find any love of God or neighbor in his demeanor. He may even be his own God. He represents the scribes and the Pharisees and, in the parable, he is extremely unpopular. But not in society... even in our society... where he has many descendants. We can sometimes find him at work even in the church, in the community... on a variety of committees... even in leadership roles. The young prodigal represents the publicans and sinners. He has already come under judgment... paying a heavy price. He was dead, but is now alive. He was lost, but now is found. He has confessed and has been forgiven. He is the channel of God’s grace, and God’s love surrounds him.

Bringing the three parables together, we find that in the parable of the lost sheep, a man, the shepherd, is the chief actor. In the story of the lost coin, a woman plays the leading role. The sheep is lost outside the fold. The coin is lost in the house. The sheep is lost through foolishness... the coin because the woman who owned it was guilty of carelessness. The son got lost deliberately, turning his back on his father.

What about the father in the parable? You’ve already had some hints about him. He is God. His role is to seek and to save. When the son came to his senses... decided to return to his father and throw himself on his mercy... the father... God... met the repentant son long before he reached the house. I fact, he was already out there waiting for him... anticipating his arrival. As our parable tells us... He is quick to forgive. And when we turn to Him, He meets us where we are. Actually... He does even more than that. He seeks us out... but doesn’t force Himself on us. He goes in search of us... like the prodigal who came to himself and headed homeward. But it’s up to the older son to turn outward... accept the love of his father, who stands ready and willing to forgive.

What do these parables mean to us? Do any of them apply to us? To you... or me? Is there anyone here today who can’t relate to the prodigal son who left home? We need to include daughters, too. What about the prodigal who stayed home? Son or daughter, there’s some of him in us, too. Isn’t it amazing that the love of God... incarnate in Jesus Christ, the Son of God... came into the world to seek and to save those who are lost? All the wayward who come to themselves find God waiting to receive them. Him or her, even you and me, and there is great joy in heaven... a welcome that might even rival that which the returning prodigal received.
OLD TESTAMENT: Ezekiel 37:1 - 14

PSALM: 130

NEW TESTAMENT: Romans 8:6 - 11

GOSPEL: John 11:1 - 45

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."
When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.
Today’s Gospel lesson from John will have greater meaning for us after we have reviewed the funeral customs of that day...along with Jewish thinking about life after death. Because of the hot, dry climate, burial followed as soon as possible after a person’s death. We should not be surprised that from time to time someone was mistakenly buried alive. How would the people have been able to tell for certain whether someone was in a coma or dead? Remember...they didn’t have any stethoscopes in those days.

At one time, a funeral in Palestine was very costly because nobody wished to be outdone by his neighbor. That's not unlike burial in the U.S. today, is it? Fine spices and herbs were used to anoint the body, and it was often wrapped in expensive robes. Frequently a person’s valuables were buried with him. Such extravagance came to an end, thanks to the example of a famous rabbi (Gamaliel the Second) who demanded to be buried in the simplest linen robe obtainable. He started a trend. From his time, the body was wrapped in a simple linen dress... appropriately called a traveling dress.

These days... people seem to avoid funerals when they can. But in Jesus’ day, as many people as possible attended the funerals. People joined the procession on its way. It was led by a woman because it was held that since woman by her first sin brought death into the world, she should lead the mourners to the tomb. Speeches were sometimes made at the tomb, and no one was to speak disrespectfully of the dead. That hasn’t changed.

As long as the body was in a house... the eating of meat and drinking of wine were not permitted. And no food was to be prepared in the house or eaten in the presence of the dead. A meal was served as soon as mourners returned from the tomb. It was prepared by friends of the family and consisted of bread, hard-boiled eggs, and lentils. The round eggs and the lentils symbolized life which was always rolling to death.

Deep mourning lasted for seven days, of which the first three were days of weeping. The soul was said to hover over the body for three days in the hope of reunion with the body, but at the first sign of decomposition, it was said to depart finally. During the first seven days no one was to anoint himself, to put on shoes, to do any business, to study, or to wash. The week of heavy mourning was followed by 30 days of lighter mourning.

Now... Let’s look at the situation involving Jesus and his friend Lazarus of Bethany. His sisters, Mary and Martha, had sent word to Jesus that he whom you love... meaning Lazarus... is ill. But rather than depart at once, Jesus said, “This illness is not unto death; it is for the glory of God, so that the son of God may be glorified...
by means of it.” So Jesus stayed two days longer in the place where He was. Then He told the disciples, “Let us go into Judea again.” That didn’t go over well with them because only recently the Jews there had threatened to stone Him and His disciples. At this time Thomas, the twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go that we may die with him.”

When Jesus told the disciples that Lazarus had fallen asleep, they said he will recover. Then Jesus told them plainly: “Lazarus is dead; and for your sake I was glad I was not there, so that you may believe.” When Jesus arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days. Why did Jesus wait so long? Why didn’t He rush to the side of His friend? Such a move may have played into the hands of those who wanted Him dead. Or did He want to be certain… doubly certain… that Lazarus was truly dead? Being in the tomb for four days would seem to leave no doubt in anyone’s mind that Lazarus was dead. The magnitude of this miracle would be obvious. What a revelation of the glory of God! It also brought honor to Jesus… accomplishing this miraculous raising of the dead Lazarus… after he had been buried for four days.

Martha was really worried that after four days there would be an odor. Jesus told her: “Did I not tell you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God? Take away the stone.” Please note that the people who were there played a part… a small part… in this major miracle. If Jesus could raise Lazarus from the dead, He could undoubtedly have moved away the stone. But He didn’t. He let some of those gathered there do it. They took part in this miraculous event.

Did you catch the words of Jesus just before He shouted: “Lazarus, come out!!”

John tells us He lifted up His eyes and said, “Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. I knew that thou hearest me always, but I have said this on account of the people standing by, that they may believe that thou didst send me.” So Jesus is thanking God the Father for hearing Him. How would He have heard Jesus? There’s no mention of Jesus praying beforehand. But remember… there was a period of two days between the time Jesus heard about Lazarus’ condition and when He went to Bethany. I have a feeling Jesus spent much of that time in prayer to His father. We all know of His prayer habits… that He prayed frequently… that He prayed fervently… that He prayed early… and He prayed late. And He prayed before making any important decisions… being sure that anything He did would be the will of the Father. So… when He spoke with such confidence… such faith…
He must have known what His Father's will was. How would He know His Father’s will? Through constant prayer. That’s the same way we seek the Father’s will, isn’t it?

The death of Lazarus and his raising by Jesus had a series of effects. There were many Jews at the house of Lazarus and at the grave. Some were impressed when Jesus wept. “See how he loved him,” they said. But others said, “Could he who opened the eyes of the blind man not have kept this man from dying?” And so it was that some who witnessed this great miracle may have missed its point.

The Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead and in punishment in the next world for wrongs done while they were living. They also believed in angels and in Divine Providence. The Sadducees rejected belief in retribution in an after-life. They did not believe in the resurrection of the body. They also rejected the existence of angels and spirits. So the raising of Lazarus didn’t mean much to the Sadducees...but it meant a great deal to the Pharisees.

Being the inquisitive people that we are: Wouldn’t it be interesting to know about Lazarus’ after-death experiences? We don’t know what they were... and speculation would mean nothing and probably be 100% wrong. Nobody recorded what he saw and/or heard... and nobody recorded his thoughts after Jesus raised him. I’m sure we’d like to have heard what his thoughts were... but on the other hand we need to stay focused on the why. Why did Jesus raise Lazarus? That the son of God may be gloried by means of it. And it speaks for itself.

On reflection... isn’t it ironic what Thomas had to say about going back to where the Jews had threatened to stone Jesus and His disciples?

Let us also go, that we may die with Him. Let us also go, that we may die with Him. Of course, that didn’t happen. Thomas didn’t volunteer to die with Him at the cross. Nor did Peter, who disappeared like a scared rabbit. They all forsook Him and fled. But that’s another story... and no doubt we’ll be hearing more about that before our Lenten observance is over.
Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year B

OLD TESTAMENT: Jeremiah 31:31 - 34

PSALM: 51

NEW TESTAMENT: Hebrews 5:5 - 10

GOSPEL: John 12:20 - 33

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say--"Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.
Are you surprised that there were Greeks among those worshiping in Jerusalem at Passover time? And why was John the only gospel writer to call attention to this particular incident?

We must not forget that John wrote the fourth gospel to present Christianity in a way that the Greeks could understand. John was obviously aware of this particular episode and wove it into his gospel story.

It is not known if these Greeks were proselytes or just people who wanted to know more about Jesus and His followers and who happened to be Greeks. The Greeks had long had a reputation for being wanderers and for wanting to learn about new things. In fact, there's an Egyptian statue still standing far up the Nile River on which a Greek tourist had scratched his name several centuries ago. Many Greeks were more than wanderers... they were seekers after truth. So we would probably expect some of them to visit the Temple and to enter the Court of the Gentiles, which was as far as non-Jews could go. It's possible that some of them had been present when Jesus drove the money-changers from the Temple court. And, if they had been there at that time they would probably have wanted to know more about Jesus. Those mentioned in today's gospel lesson wanted to see Jesus. They were Greeks, and Philip didn't know what to do. He led the Greek delegation to Jesus. And Jesus never turned away anyone who was seeking after truth.

What would you do if a delegation came to you with the message that they want to see Jesus? Could you demonstrate Christ-likeness in your demeanor... in your life? Or would you refer them to someone else... like Philip did? Or would you take them to a devout Christian whose life exemplifies the life of Jesus?

The chronology of the events in today's gospel lesson is such that it makes you wonder about the timing. Does Jesus look at these Greeks and see them as the forerunners of peoples of many tribes, nations, and ethnic backgrounds who will become His followers? Perhaps He does... for He immediately goes into a long discourse... His last public one.

When Jesus said: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified," it probably didn't surprise anyone. After all, things have been building up, heading toward a crisis. Now the crisis has arrived. And it's a biggie.

When Jesus mention Son of Man... the ears of those around Him perked up. When He said the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified, they saw visions of the golden age... when life would be great and sweet
and they would be masters of the world around them. They realized by then that the golden age could never come to them by human means and human power. So they were waiting for God to intervene in history. He was going to send His champion to bring in the golden age... to establish a world empire for the Jews. To the Jews, the Son of Man would be an undefeatable conqueror sent by God Himself. So when Jesus says the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified, they thought the call had come, that the might of heaven was on the march, and victory would soon be theirs. They had long looked forward to the day when the conqueror would put the kingdoms of the earth under His feet.

But when Jesus said glorified, He meant crucified. He didn’t mean conquest by the armies of God. He meant the conquest of the cross. He replaced their dream of conquest with a vision of the cross, and instrument of shame. Quite a difference. The Jews did not understand what Jesus was saying. And they refused to try.

John tells us that when Jesus asked God to glorify His name that a voice came from heaven saying, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” This might recall the voice at the Transfiguration of Jesus which said, “This is my beloved son; listen to him.” (Mark 9:7). It now says, “I have glorified it and I will glorify it again.” Thus past and present are united, the Father and Son are one. Previously God glorified His name through the works of the Son. Now He will do so through the death and resurrection of the Son and the mighty works which will follow in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The voice, Jesus told the crowd, has come for your sake, not mine. And further... when I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all men to myself. This lifting up indicated how He was to die... by crucifixion. This is how He is to be glorified. Amen.
The first part of our gospel lesson today contains the parable of the wicked tenants. By way of background, we need to realize that Jesus had been teaching the people in the Temple in Jerusalem and preaching the gospel. The chief priests and the scribes and the Pharisees came up to Him and asked Him a loaded two-part question... but He was equal to the task. The question: By what authority do you do these things, or who is it that gave you this authority?

Jesus answered them with a question: Was the baptism of John from heaven or from men? After discussing this matter the Jewish leaders realized they could not give a satisfactory answer. If they said from heaven, they knew that Jesus would ask them why they didn’t believe the prophets. And if they said from men, they were likely to be stoned because the people believed that John the Baptizer was a prophet. It was then that Jesus told the parable of the wicked tenants... and there was no doubt about its meaning.

The vineyard represents the nation of Israel, and the tenants are the rulers of Israel who are entrusted with governing the country. The messengers are the prophets. They suffered a variety of fates. Some were ignored or disregarded. Others were persecuted. And still others were killed. The beloved Son is Jesus Christ. The murder of the heir is the crucifixion of the Son of God. The destruction of the wicked servants and their dispossession are two parts of God’s plan of history. And the new tenants... who are they? The Gentiles... and probably more specifically the apostles because of their leadership roles.

At the time Jesus was walking the earth... the leaders of Israel were also disappointing God. The Jewish nation... the Jewish people... had had a long and sometimes stormy relationship with God... whose name was so sacred... so holy... they wouldn’t even mention the name God... calling Him Jehovah or Yahweh. It was necessary for God to reveal Himself and His plan for mankind in order to bring people to love Him, to obey Him, and to follow Him. This did not come about easily or quickly because there was a great gulf between God and mankind. In fact, God was almost completely hidden from those whom He had created. Ignorance, spiritual blindness, prejudice, and a host of other restrictions kept them apart. However, the nature of God became clearer because of great spiritual insight, historical events, and the experience of ordinary yet perceptive individuals who broke through a series of barriers. It was the Hebrews—their nation and their religious community—that played the leading role in God’s design for communicating Himself to the world that He created.
The origin of the Hebrew people is lost, but they were nomads who wandered through the valleys and deserts from the Tigris and Euphrates to the Nile. Not unexpectedly, they had a primitive kind of nature religion that centered on animal worship. So did other groups. However, the Hebrews came in contact with the people of Mesopotamia, who had a highly developed civilization and a more mature religion. Later a series of events had a profound effect on the Hebrew people who were drawn closer to the reality of God. Their experiences as slaves in Egypt prepared them for this revelation in and around Mt. Sinai. The trials and hardships that they experienced in the desert in their Exodus from Egypt were interpreted by the spiritual genius of Moses. So... under Moses’ leadership the people of Israel entered into a special relationship with Jehovah... Yahweh... God.

Through Moses, God gave them a new code of morality. He gave them commandments and laws so they could live together...in harmony with each other and with God. Because Jehovah was a moral God...He required that His people live lives that reflected moral goodness. Great emphasis was placed on respect for God and obedience to Him and caring for each other, especially the weak and the poor.

After the Israelites took over the land of the Canaanites, the land that God had promised them or the Promised Land, they ceased to wander and settled down in an agricultural society. But soon they strayed from their high moral standard, their responsibilities to the poor, the fatherless, and the stranger. They disobeyed God and allowed the religious practices of the heathens, who worshiped Baal and other evil deities, to creep into their worship. It was then that God raised up a series of extraordinary men, the prophets, to bring His judgment on the Israelites.

Amos was the most important early prophet in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Saul and David had previously united the scattered tribes into one kingdom. Solomon had built the Temple, but when he died, the kingdom was divided. Amos emphasized God’s justice and righteousness and denounced the corruption and vice of the rulers and other leading citizens. But the leaders of Israel did not listen to Amos and the other prophets—so their prophecies were fulfilled (in 722 B.C.) when the King of Assyria destroyed Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and sent most of the inhabitants into exile.

Isaiah was a major prophet in the Southern Kingdom. At Isaiah’s behest, the Jews trusted in God to save Jerusalem which was under siege by the Assyrians. The city was spared so Isaiah pushed the idea that if God
could control such a strong nation as Assyria He must be the Lord of the entire earth. By the time the Babylonians invaded Palestine in the Sixth Century B.C., and besieged Jerusalem, the people wouldn’t listen to the prophet Jeremiah, who preached the same trust I God that Isaiah had demanded. But the Israelites scorned him and humiliated him. Under Nebuchadnezzar the army of Babylon took the city and destroyed it. And the inhabitants... including Jeremiah... were exiled to Babylon by the thousands.

Of course, there were other prophets... and other crises... but by the time of Christ...most Jews had given up on the prophets... and were looking for deliverance not in another world but in this world... under the leadership of a Messiah (Anointed One, or Christ.) who had been foretold by the prophets. They expected him to be of the royal lineage of David. Many thought of him as a military leader. Of course, Jesus didn’t fit the description of their long awaited Messiah... and they rejected Him. When the religious leaders heard Jesus’ parable of the wicked tenants, they took offense. And for good reason. Though the language was veiled... the truths were apparent. No wonder they said “God forbid” when Jesus said they no longer were God’s favored people. They had turned away from God... and a new people, the Gentiles, had found favor with God.

Now... how have we Gentiles been doing in our relationship with God in the last two thousand years or so? Have we lived up to our responsibilities? Have we been doing the things we should be doing? During Lent would be a good time to ask ourselves—individually and collectively—do we love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and our entire mind? Do we love our neighbor as our self? Do we need to be reminded why the children of Israel lost their special status? Was it not because they had turned from God? Was it not because they had failed to look out for the poor, the widowed, and the orphans. The crippled, and the homeless? Was it not because they had not shown thankfulness to God for all that He had done for them? Was it not because they had not offered the best of their skills, gives, and talents to God for the spread of His kingdom and for the benefit of his people?

I could go on... but I think you get the picture. We have neglected the same high religious principles that led to the down fall of the children of Israel. Are we in danger of losing our special relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob... and especially with God’s only son Jesus Christ? Saying “God forbid” will not be adequate. We frequently need a new heart and a new spirit... we often need a turnaround... a new commitment.
One of the many images found throughout the Old Testament depicts Israel as God’s vineyard. The prophet Isaiah is one who employs this word picture (5:1-7). He uses a parable to show God’s care for Israel, which is met with ingratitude and disobedience. Even though God cares for the vineyard (Israel), all He ever receives in return is wild grapes.

In Jesus’ parable in today’s gospel lesson, the tenants of the vineyard—the Temple priests and their associates—treat the owner of the vineyard (God) even worse. They refuse to give Him any grapes at all. It’s interesting to note that there are documents among the Dead Sea Scrolls that also depict the Temple as corrupt. In Jesus’ parable, the owner (God) has been patient. He doesn’t expect immediate results. He gives the tenants one opportunity after another to produce fruit. God sends a number of prophets. What happens to them? Most of them have been rejected, imprisoned or insulted. Some have even been killed. Then God sends one last messenger... His Son... with the hope they would respect Him. But they cast him out of the vineyard and kill him. This parable was directed against the Jews as a nation because they rejected Christ as their Messiah. Jesus warns them of the dire consequences of their decision. It would result in the nation of Israel coming under harsh judgment... and the Gentiles would be offered the kingdom Israel had rejected.

Within 40 years, the wicked tenants would be removed... and Jesus’ prediction would become a reality. There no longer was a Temple for the priests to serve. Revelation was no longer restricted to one nation. All who believed as Abraham did could be counted as His children.

So... the parable that Jesus told in today’s gospel lesson led to our becoming the people of God. And this came about irrespective of our ancestry. We are now the legitimate tenants of God’s vineyard. We are now called on to give to God the fruit that the vineyard is producing. We now worship the God who made the Covenant with Israel... the one who went the prophets... the one who sent Jesus, His only Son. We know that He is patient with His tenants. But He does call on us to be accountable for all our actions. How is our stewardship holding up? Are we... individually and collectively... doing things that are pleasing in His sight? Are our hearts filled with love of God and neighbor?

In today’s parable Jesus asks His audience... the chief priests, scribes, and elders... who are in the Temple, where He was teaching... about Scriptural passages that backed up what He had been telling them. Have
you ever read, He asked, of the stone, which the builders rejected, that by the marvelous purpose of God became the headstone of the corner? This passage is found in the 118th Psalm, which says: “The same stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord’s doing and it is marvelous in our eyes.”

How could the nation of Israel continue to be the builders if the design of their workmanship had been deliberately over-ruled and set aside? Didn’t their old Messianic prophecy indicate that God would call other builders to work on His Temple? “Woe to them who stumbled, as they had done, at that rejected stone!” Jesus exclaimed. Even so, Jesus told them, there is still time to avoid the annihilation of those on whom the stone would fall. Yes... rejecting Jesus in His humanity and humiliation would lead to pain and loss. But it would be far worse to continue to reject Him when He comes in His glory. This would be their utter rejection from the presence of the Lord. To sit on the seat of Judgment and condemn Jesus would be ruin to them and their nation. But even worse they would be condemned by Him... and the loss of their favored people status would follow.

The priests and scribes who listened to the parable that Jesus told them did not seem to realize that the Son whom the owner of the vineyard sent was Jesus. They saw their role as the keepers of Yahweh’s flame. They were well-versed in looking back in their history and telling and re-telling the great things that God had done. But they couldn’t understand that God was still active in the history of Israel. Even then... God was well along in the matter of doing His greatest act. They only understood half of what the parable was saying... the first half. They were blinded to the second point. They had failed to realize that the God they worshiped was continually doing new things.

Where are we in this saga? During Lent we continually confess in prayer that we also have rejected Jesus. How? By failing to be God’s messengers of forgiveness and hope in the world. We find ourselves alongside the tenants who consistently rejected God’s overtures of Grace.

Lent again reminds us how far God will go to overcome alienation and fear, brokenness and despair. At the cross... rejection turns to reconciliation. Death gives way to life. We are tied to this holy mystery through the waters of baptism. We are now invited to walk the final steps to the cross with Christ... with the glory of resurrection our blessed hope. Isn’t this wonderful?
Palm Sunday, Year C

OLD TESTAMENT: Isaiah 50:4 - 9a

PSALM: 31

NEW TESTAMENT: Philippians 2:5 - 11


When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!" Then they began to ask one another, which one of them it could be who would do this.

A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

"You are those who have stood by me in my trials; and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

"Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." And he said to him, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!" Jesus said, "I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me."
He said to them, "When I sent you out without a purse, bag, or sandals, did you lack anything?" They said, "No, not a thing." He said to them, "But now, the one who has a purse must take it, and likewise a bag. And the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one. For I tell you, this scripture must be fulfilled in me, "And he was counted among the lawless'; and indeed what is written about me is being fulfilled."

They said, "Lord, look, here are two swords." He replied, "It is enough."

He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. When he reached the place, he said to them, "Pray that you may not come into the time of trial." Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground. When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, and he said to them, "Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial."

While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; but Jesus said to him, "Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?" When those who were around him saw what was coming, they asked, "Lord, should we strike with the sword?" Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said, "No more of this!" And he touched his ear and healed him. Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple police, and the elders who had come for him, "Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit? When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness!"

Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance. When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, "This man also was with him." But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him." A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, "You also are one of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not!" Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, "Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean." But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about!" At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

Now the men who were holding Jesus began to mock him and beat him; they also blindfolded him and kept asking him, "Prophesy! Who is it that struck you?" They kept heaping many other insults on him. When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people, both chief priests and scribes, gathered together, and they brought him to their council. They said, "If you are the Messiah, tell us." He replied, "If I tell you, you will not
believe; and if I question you, you will not answer. But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God." All of them asked, "Are you, then, the Son of God?" He said to them, "You say that I am." Then they said, "What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips!"

Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. They began to accuse him, saying, "We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king." Then Pilate asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" He answered, "You say so." Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no basis for an accusation against this man." But they were insistent and said, "He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place."

When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign. He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.

Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. I will therefore have him flogged and release him."

Then they all shouted out together, "Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!" (This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; but they kept shouting, "Crucify, crucify him!" A third time he said to them, "Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him." But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.

As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. But Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are surely coming when they will say, "Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.' Then they
will begin to say to the mountains, "Fall on us'; and to the hills, "Cover us.' For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last. When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, "Certainly this man was innocent." And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council, had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimethea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning. The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments.

On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment.
“Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming. Hosannah in the highest.” I’m sure you recognize these shouts... these words. They rang out as Jesus made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. But oh how the people on that day misunderstood what was happening before their very eyes. They gave Jesus a conqueror’s welcome. But they really had no insight into the kind of conqueror He wanted to be. He was interested in their hearts... not earthly power over them.

Do you realize that the same shouts the crowd raised to Jesus were identical to the shouts that welcomed the bloody killer Jehu when he was anointed king? The people spread their garments on the ground before Jehu. These shouts were also reminiscent of the welcome Simon Maccabaeus received when he entered the city in triumph some 150 years previously. Maccabaeus had destroyed Israel’s enemies in battle... and predictably he was given a military hero’s welcome.

But Jesus did not enter Jerusalem as a military hero. Quite the opposite. What was happening here? A saying of the prophet Zechariah will give us the answer... which seemed to elude the happy throng on that day. Hear the words of Zechariah:

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion. Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem. Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, and riding on an ass and upon a colt the foal of an ass.”

This tells us that the king is coming in peace. Forget all that hoopla about paying homage to a conqueror. Jesus is here... not as a conquering military hero... but as an agent of peace. In Palestine, when a king went to war, he rode a horse. When he came in peace, he rode on an ass. Jesus came meek and lowly. He came in peace and he exemplified peace. The people greeted Him as the son of David... but they didn’t understand who He was. An irony about the shout... hosanna... or save now... is that it was not reserved for conquering heroes. It was also the regular greeting pilgrims received when they reached the Temple on the occasion of great feasts. We must also understand that when the people in today’s processional Gospel lesson shouted Hosannah, it was not a cry of praise to Jesus... even though it seems to be. No... it wasn’t that. Those who were shouting were calling on God to break in and save His people... now that the Messiah had come.

Remember how Jesus had come. He wasn’t riding a horse as a conquering hero would have done... as the kind of Messiah the people were expecting. No. He was riding on a donkey. He was coming in peace. Does
this remind you of how Jesus came into the world? He wasn’t born in a palace. This was a surprise, too. His entrance into the world was also in an inauspicious, humble, manner. He was born in a humble place... a manger.

The fact that Jesus appeared in public on such an occasion as today’s processional Gospel reading tells us is amazing. His appearance showed His tremendous courage. Take a look at His situation. He was going out to face a huge crowd of people. He was going to tell them that all their ideas about Him... all their thinking about the Messiah... were wrong. And these were people filled with nationalism...patriotism... who might be in an ugly mood. If you or I would show up at all... in Jerusalem... under such circumstances... we would probably sneak into town... use the back streets and alleys. We would keep out of sight of the authorities. After all, they had their minds set on destroying Him.

But that was not the approach that Jesus took. He met the situation head-on. The manner in which He entered Jerusalem called everybody’s attention to Him as He rode into town on a donkey. Every eye was focused on Him. What great courage He showed!

Less than a week later... the shout of “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” had changed to “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!” However, it wasn’t the same crowd calling for Jesus’ crucifixion. The people involved in the arrest of Jesus were being very secretive. The disciples had fled and must have spread this news. But they had no way of knowing that the Sanhedrin was going to violate its own rules and stage an illegal trial at night. There could have been very few of Jesus’ supporters in the crowd that called for the release of Barabbas. Of course, the crowd knew that the custom was to free a prisoner at the Passover. It also contained a large number of Barabbas’ supporters. And when they saw the possibility of Jesus being released, they turned into an angry mob. That move played into the hands of the chief priests: They could placate the mob and at the same time be assured that Jesus would be crucified. So they stirred up the mob to demand the release of Barabbas.

Pilate knew that the high priests had handed Jesus over to him out of malice... but he took the easy way out. He yielded to the mob’s cries... and the high priests’ wishes... and released Barabbas. So... the crucifixion of Jesus was imminent... just a simple matter to be carried out in an orderly manner by the Romans, who were noted for their efficiency.
Lawlessness triumphed over law on that day. War won over peace. And love lost out to violence and hate.

After acting out the Passion Gospel here today… we readily see that there is so much action… that there is so much drama… that there are so many important developments that we can’t possibly listen to… understand… and reflect on all of them during this very small block of time we have together.

We know what happened. We know when it happened. And we know the significance of these events. But in order to gain a better understanding of the happenings of Holy week… in order to re-experience them, even vicariously, we need to be present at and to take part in the last scenes of Christ’s life on earth. So I encourage you to attend services on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday. We need to recognize the presence of Christ in our lives as part of the community of faith as we come to understand that He is truly risen. This is the mystery of faith. It is the mystery that we celebrate in this most holy season. As we prepare to celebrate the Resurrection of Our Lord this mystery is magnetically drawing us to the center of what we are and what we do. That’s why it’s so vital that we celebrate it… experience it… together before the throne of grace.

Maundy Thursday is a distinctive occasion… particularly the evening. How can we forget the humility of Jesus… the Savior of the world… when He washed the feet of His disciples? Or His command: Mandaum novum… a new commandment? A new commandment I give you: that you love one another as I have loved you. And the Last Supper… also on Maundy Thursday… when Jesus instituted the Holy Eucharist.

How can we ever forget… or ignore… Good Friday? Jesus’ Seven Last Words from the Cross should be indelibly linked to us. And the three hours of agonizing pain and suffering that He endured on the cross. Isn’t our response to them critical to our faith? Our spiritual well-being?

We also need some quiet time with God… to prepare our hearts for next Sunday… in which we celebrate… and participate in… the Resurrection of Jesus Christ… which is, to a Christian, the most significant event in history.

Let us go from here today and begin our preparation… reverently and thoughtfully… for that great day.

Greater love has no man than this: that a man lay down his life for his friends.
Palm Sunday, Year B

PSALM: 118

GOSPEL: Mark 11:1-11

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately." They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields.

Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,
"Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.
April 5, 1998  Palm Sunday  Bridgeport

It’s not difficult to see the close connection between Luke’s version of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem and the Messianic prediction of Zechariah (9:9): “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem; behold, thy King cometh unto thee; he is just, and having salvation. Lowly and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass.”

The early Church was quickly convinced that Jesus had fulfilled this scriptural prophecy... and a number of others. Things had begun to fall into place. Luke tells us that when the colt was brought to Jesus, His disciples threw their garments on the colt and set Jesus upon it. As He rode along, the entire multitude began to rejoice and praise God: “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” John tells us that the great crowd also carried branches of palm trees when they went out to meet Jesus. This is significant because the prophet Isaiah views a palm tree as a symbol of the rulers of Israel. (9:13; 19:15).

This was a day of triumph for Jesus... and His disciples... and numerous others who joined in or watched what was happening. What a great occasion! Or was it? Problems began to crop up. Jesus was hailed as the Messiah. Now He will be expected to lead a rebellion against the Roman forces who have been oppressing the Jewish people. If He’s the Messiah, they expect Him to be a modern version of that charismatic leader... that legendary warrior... King David. But Jesus came not as a warrior. And He rejected the use of power—military and political. He came in peace. He came humbly.

Before the people could sort out things... whatever their feelings were... these other events began to unfold in quick order: Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus with a kiss. Jesus was arrested and taken to the high priest’s house. His trusted friend Peter denied knowing Him. Pilate decided Jesus had committed no crime and sent Him to Herod. He was taken back to Pilate who would have released Him. But the people demanded that the insurrectionist and murderer Barabbas be released... and that Jesus be crucified. So... along with two criminals, He was put to death in a terrible, agonizing way. Then came His hurried burial.

All these events happened so swiftly... in a matter of days... that even those closest to Jesus did not know how to analyze or interpret them. To say that they were confused and perplexed would certainly be true. But it would also be an understatement.

What about those who had heard and seen Him and wanted to know more? What were they to think?
A man whom we shall call Yosef had come to Jerusalem with some fellow Pharisees. Because of the large crowds, sometimes it was difficult for them to rent a room in which to celebrate the Passover. They would be competing with perhaps 100,000 others for such space... but they were successful. And it was not difficult for them to meet the minimum requirements of 10 people to share the Passover meal at any given location.

The leader of the group had already obtained the room and had ordered a lamb of sufficient size for Yosef and his fellow Pharisees. The entire animal had to be eaten, so its size was determined by the number in the group.

Observance of the Passover eve proper consisted of two parts: First, the ritual slaughter of the sheep and goats at the Temple with the sacrificial sprinkling of the blood against that altar. It was followed by the domestic meal and its role of fellowship and historical commemoration. Only one priest was normally on duty at the Temple. But at Passover all 24 divisions were in attendance.

The dressed animals, with legs un-broken and head attached to the carcass, each wrapped in its own skin, were returned to the worshipers. Each company or family then went back to its own house or room. The animal was put on a sit and roasted in a portable clay oven. Things were in readiness for the Passover observance, which Exodus calls on the Jews to observe “for ever.” (Ex. 12:23). The Passover commemorates the slaying of the first-born Egyptians and the Lord’s sparing... or passing over... the first-born children of the Israelites. The accompanying Feast of the Unleavened Bread emphasizes the Exodus itself.

Now let’s return to Yosef... and his friends. They had been studying the Scriptures... and the Law... all their adult lives. The Pharisees were noted for their zealous and exhaustive interpretation of the oral law... which seemed to cover all contingencies. By the time of Jesus, the Pharisees’ major role seemed to be that of compiling and enforcing a mass of rules and regulations. Many of them seemed petty as far as the average person was concerned. The Pharisees had been in constant conflict with the Sadducees for centuries.

The beginnings of Phariseeism dates back to the prophet Ezra (in the Fifth Century B.C.)... and beyond. Historical Phariseeism became important during the Babylonian Exile. The people no longer had the Temple and its priesthood. They had to be content with the dream of the restoration and the reality of the Book of the Law, which they had taken with them. During those years the Law became the center of the Jewish religion and the model for community living. And it remained ever afterward as the soul of the nation. When the Temple was
restored by Ezra and his successors, it again became the focus of national life. The priesthood made a comeback, but it had to share its authority with a relatively new body of experts on the Law. A conflict developed between Torah and Temple... priests versus a new class of lay lawyers, non-priestly doctors of the Law. They owed no allegiance to the Temple hierarchy and were able to resist its rules and actions.

Our friend, Yosef, who had been hearing and seeing Jesus during His ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing, was greatly impressed by His life and His teachings. He was beginning to believe in Him. He wasn’t thoroughly convinced. He had a problem. How do you discard five centuries of tradition? How do you accept the fulfillment of Scripture, even if it seems to be happening before your eyes... if your own religious leaders and teachers deny it? How do you make the break, knowing you will probably lose the friendship of your family and your neighbors?

And the fate of this just man Jesus was another concern of Yosef. He seems to be who His countless followers say He is. He may not be proclaiming His Messiahship... but neither does He deny it. What will happen to His teachings? What will happen to His followers? Is what I have seen and heard really true?, Yosef wonders. Or has it been a dream? Or a vision?

Today’s lessons run the gamut... from great joy... ecstasy... to painful suffering... agony. From what would appear to be a spiritual high to a spiritual low. But is that what is happening? Is all lost? No. All was not lost... is not lost. God was there.

Now let us turn our focus to the Crucifixion of Jesus. Not only is it an historical event... but it has become a personal experience for all Christians of all times.

All of us who have been baptized... all Baptized Christians... were baptized into Jesus’ death. In the water of baptism we were buried with Christ in His death.

So the Crucifixion of Jesus... painful and humiliating and terrible though it was... it was not... it is not... the end. God was there.

God was there... in more ways than one. He suffered, died, and was buried. He arose. And He will come again in great glory. This is our blessed hope. It’s something for us to ponder during Holy Week. It gives us something worthwhile upon which to reflect. It gives us something to live for... and something to look forward to.
Maundy Thursday

OLD TESTAMENT: Exodus 12:1 - 4, (5 - 10), 11 - 14

PSALM: 116

NEW TESTAMENT: 1 Corinthians 11:23 - 26

GOSPEL: John 13:1 - 17, 31b - 35

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord--and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come. I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."
Our Maundy Thursday worship service is closely identified with the Last Supper which Jesus and His disciples shared and also with Jesus’ supreme act of humility in washing the feet of His disciples. There’s much more of significance attached to those events… but let’s wait for them to unfold.

Even though Jesus’ disciples participated fully in the Last Supper, which later became known as the Lord’s Supper, it is Paul who gives us the greatest insight into its meaning. Paul tied together the understanding of what the disciples were doing when they ate the bread and drank from the cup. Paul realized that in the night in which Jesus was betrayed that He instituted the New Covenant. And Jesus identified the bread and the wine at this meal with His own Body and Blood. Prophetically Jesus’ life was already being sacrificed for the redemption of His disciples and the countless others who would become His disciples in the future. The body He offered was broken and the blood He shed was on behalf of all humanity.

Believers were called on to continue this act as their way of remembering Jesus and His sacrifice for them. Actually they were already doing this in Paul’s time, but he was making it clear. And, as Paul told the Corinthians in tonight’s epistle, as often as they would commemorate this meal it would be a witness to the world. Paul said further that Jesus Christ would indeed come again, but in this shared meal the disciples were proclaiming the effects of His sacrifice, until He did come again. The bread and the cup were vehicles of Christ’s divine life… and those who shared them needed to be aware of that divine truth.

Jesus’ betrayal came when He had come to observe the Passover. His death on the cross took place when the Pascal lambs were killed… hence He has been referred to as the Lamb of God or the Pascal Lamb. And the Holy Eucharist which He instituted on Maundy Thursday sprang from the Passover observance. The meal of the first Passover stands for God’s protection. Later Passovers made the point that God is our Liberator.

There is another Gospel lesson that may be read at our Maundy Thursday service. It’s taken from the 13th Chapter of John, and it tells of Jesus’ washing the feet of His disciples at the Last Supper.

John tells us that Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, rose from His supper, laid aside His garments, and girded himself with a towel. Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples’ feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.
It was then that Peter objected. When Jesus explained that if He didn’t wash their feet, they would have no part in Him… Peter wanted Jesus to wash all of him. But Jesus explained that would be unnecessary… that only their feet needed washing… and further that they should wash one another’s feet.

So Jesus performed the task of a slave for His own disciples. Symbolically they were receiving the redemption that Christ’s humiliation of the cross will win. The Son of God washing the feet of His disciples! At first this was too much humility for Peter… but he was to learn that they were, in a similar way, to be servants (or slaves) to each other.

To John foot washing was more than an act of humility. It was, to him, a sign of the entirely selfless love of Jesus Himself that took Him to the humiliation of the cross. Many commentators also believe John considered the foot washing to be symbolic of the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist, by which Christians are cleansed of the defilement of sin and nurtured in a communion of love with their Lord and with each other.

Foot washing was an act of hospitality in the Middle East… performed when a guest entered a house. The early Church practiced foot washing because of Jesus’ example of humble service. Ambrose of Milan called foot washing part of the mystery of baptism because Christ tells us that through it we participate in Him. The foot washing ritual connects us with the forgiveness and life Christ gives us through His cross.

Perhaps we should mention the symbols and ceremonies… external expressions of inward worship… on this night… Maundy Thursday… the night on which Jesus Christ instituted the Holy Eucharist and washed His disciples’ feet.

When we enter our place of worship… the focal point… in the center of the sanctuary… is the altar with its cross and candles and flowers. It is another Calvary in our celebration of the mysteries of Christ’s Death and Passion. The candles signify His presence… the Light of the World. The flowers on festal occasions reach us that Jesus endured the bitter suffering of the cross that we might attain the land of “everlasting spring and never­withering flowers.” If incense is offered, it symbolizes the “sweet savor of Christ’s sacrifice ascending before God and of prayer.”

The Passion of Christ is set forth in these holy mysteries, and the priests officiate in His name. The vestments in which they minister represent those with which Christ was clothed at His Passion:
The amice represents the veil with which the Jews clothed our Lord's face and struck Him.

The alb represents the white garment in which Herod vested Jesus in mockery.

The girdle, maniple, and stole stand for the cords with which Jesus was bound at various stages of His suffering.

The chasuble, or outer vestment, symbolizes the seamless purple robe of scorn in which Pilate clothed Jesus when he told the Jews to "Behold your King."

Of course, the five colors of the Church Year have special meaning:

White—purity and holiness. It is used in the feasts of our Lord and the Blessed Virgin and saints who were not martyrs.

Red—blood and fire... feasts of martyrs and on Pentecost.

Purple—mourning and penitence, used in Lent and Advent.

Black—deeper mourning, especially on Good Friday.

Green—the color with which God has roved the earth... "that it may bring forth food for the use of men."

It's used on the other occasions.

As the church seasons (or days) change, the altar frontals, the chasuble, stole and maniple, when worn, change colors.

As we receive the Body and Blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ we are reminded that we do it in remembrance of Him. We celebrate the memorial of our redemption... proclaim Jesus' Resurrection and Ascension, and await His coming in glory. As an early Christian prayer tells us: We proclaim your death, Lord. We sing to You, O Christ, for your glorious resurrection. We have been judged worthy to approach this mystical, ineffable banquet. Let us share, joyfully, in the spiritual gifts before us.
First, I want to commend you for being here tonight. By so doing, you are demonstrating to those around you... believer and non-believer... that you take your Christian faith seriously. What about other believers who aren’t here... or at other Maundy Thursday services elsewhere? Unless each one has some serious health problem or some other valid excuse, we must conclude that attending... and more importantly participating in... Maundy Thursday services is not important to them... that it does not have a high priority in their lives.

What is so special about Maundy Thursday? Why is it so important to Christians? On Maundy Thursday we commemorate... we celebrate... our Lord’s institution of the Holy Eucharist on that day. Don’t tell me that isn’t important! The Church has officially recognized the significance of the Last Supper... and the institution of the Holy Eucharist... since the Fourth Century. So we’re certainly not breaking any new ground. It’s been part of our history... our tradition... our heritage... since 393 A.D.

Another event which links us closely with the last days of Jesus on earth... Holy Week... is the ceremony of the washing of the feet, in which Jesus demonstrates His humility by washing His disciples’ feet. The Scriptural passage from which it comes (John 13:1-15) is listed as an optional reading for tonight. Although not usually read at Maundy Thursday services, I’ll read it tonight. <Read John 13:1-15.>

The Prayer Book rubrics (directions) tell us that, when observed, the ceremony of the washing of feet follows the Gospel and homily. This is not a traditional aspect of the Maundy Thursday services in the Episcopal churches I have attended... although I have attended such a service in an Episcopal Church. Most of us are aware that the Pope traditionally washes the feet of someone, usually a person of humble status, on Maundy Thursday. How do we know this? Because a photo of the Pope washing the feet of a poor person appears on the front page of many newspapers throughout the world.

We are also aware that there are foot washings in a variety of cathedrals throughout the world. But did you know that there is also a service designed especially for use in Roman Catholic parishes? It’s quite similar to the service we would follow, but the directions are spelled out more fully than in our service.

There’s also a connection between the first Maundy Thursday foot-washing and the new commandment that Jesus gave us, found in the same chapter of John’s Gospel (13:34) which tells of Jesus humbling Himself by washing the feet of His disciples. The first antiphon (a song, hymn, or prayer sung or chanted in alternate parts)
of the ceremony for the washing of the feet is Mandatum Nova: A New Commandment I give you. The complete verse says: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.”

A major point I wish to emphasize tonight is the traditional nature of what happened at the Last Supper. Jesus presided on what we now call Maundy Thursday the night before his Crucifixion on Good Friday. It isn’t obvious… but we need to be aware that until the Last Supper, or the institution of the Holy Eucharist, believers had already been in a covenant relationship with God. This relationship was instituted by God… and a body of people responded in faith. More specifically we refer to this arrangement, which is similar to a contract agreement, as the Old Covenant. It was given to the Hebrew people by God Almighty. God promised that they would be His people to bring all the nations of the world to Him.

God put some demands on the Hebrew people. They were required to be faithful, to love justice, to do mercy, and to walk humbly with their God. God’s will is shown in the Ten Commandments, the most important of the working relationships God had with His people. In succeeding years, additional covenants covering other binding agreements with God were extended to later generations and ratified by them. But they all came in Old Testament times.

Until Maundy Thursday… God and His chosen people were under the Old Covenant. But at that time we were entering into a new relationship with God. It was sealed with Jesus’ blood on the cross the next day. This new relationship… the New Covenant… was given by Jesus Christ, the Messiah, to the Apostles; and through them, to all who believe in Him.

What did Jesus promise in the New Covenant? He promised to bring us into the Kingdom of God and to give us fullness of life. What commandments did Christ teach us? The summary of the Law: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and the great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. And, don’t forget, Jesus also gave us a new commandment: That we should love one another as He has loved us.

Our Prayer Book Service of Holy Communion tells us that on the night He was handed over to suffering and death, our Lord Jesus took bread; and when He had given thanks to our Heavenly Father, He broke it, and gave it to His disciples, and said: “Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you. Do this for the
remembrance of me.” And “After supper He took the cup of wine; and when He had given thanks, He gave it to them and said: “Drink this, all of you; this is my blood of the New Covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink it, do this for the remembrance of me.”

Then, following our Prayer Book service, we proclaim the mystery of faith: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. Why did I repeat the words of the Eucharistic Prayer that we hear every Sunday? As a reminder... a reminder of their importance... and also a reminder of a mighty act of God. In a brief span of time, the God of history moved from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. That is why we are here tonight... to take part... through the Spirit of God... in that transition. Jesus was going through the agony of death on the cross... for us. And the Spirit of God connects us to his life, death, and resurrection. Jesus, the innocent sinless Son of God, experienced this horrible death and its excruciating pain for our sins... the sins of men, women, and children for all time, that we could become God’s redeemed people.

So this was not an impersonal matter by an impersonal God. It was real... it was painful... it is also something that we experience. We were baptized into the death of Jesus. And more. We can’t explain it precisely, but in some mysterious way we are tied to Jesus’ life, death, and Resurrection. We can’t deny this personal involvement. It’s part of our life...our spiritual life. It’s part of our heritage. It’s part of our future. In fact, our very future depends on this association with Christ.

In thanksgiving for all that He has done for us, we should be thanking God every day. Actually...we should be doing much more than that. We should be thanking Him many times a day and live a life worthy of what He has called us to do.

I have a feeling that Jesus did more for us... as a group and individually... than any of us... or all of us... will ever be able to do for Him. Of course, we can’t repay Him. But we can continue to thank Him throughout our waking hours... and in our sleep... in gratitude for what He has done for us.
Good Friday Meditations on the Last Seven Words of Jesus Christ on the Cross

The First Word

Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.—Luke 23:34.

“Father, forgive them ...” is, first and foremost, a prayer for healing—an unexpected miracle. It is a holy death cry. It does not depict the manner of men. Remember that in the days that Christ was walking the earth executions were public spectacles. Crucifixion was the most horrible and the most degrading death. It was designed not only to kill, but also to humiliate.

Roman citizens weren’t crucified. Such a special torture was reserved for slaves and alien criminals—and the scum. Jesus was numbered among the lowest of the low, with a thief on either side. His words, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do,” shook up the centurion. Crucifixions were nothing new to him. He’d witnessed lots of them. But the words that he heard from the Cross were entirely unexpected.

The soldier could understand duty. He was more than a witness at previous crucifixions and at the Crucifixion of Jesus. He was a participant. He could have understood a curse from the cross—a cry for mercy or for the pleasant relief of death. That would be human. But that a man in the torture of a crucifixion could forget Himself and pray for them—this was not the manner of men.

And as he watched Jesus breathe out His last deep sigh, the soldier said: “Truly this was the Son of God.” (Matthew 27:54). There’s a tendency to read our own thought into the soldier’s statement. Actually, it may have been only superstition, or a soldier’s admiration for courage. But something in the dignity of Christ’s dying impressed him. He sensed that this was no ordinary dying, not merely another man paying the price for another cause. There was something beyond man in this Man; God speaking, telling us something about Himself, something more divine than any miracle.

Christ’s own disciples could never grasp the wonder of the cross. Forty years later, Peter wrote his thought about the cross. His deepest impression—and the one that lingered the longest—was the memory that when Jesus was reviled, He reviled not again but bore the sin of it in His body.

Even Paul admits that he could never fathom the depth of the Cross. If men had been loveable, worthy, understanding and concerned, the prayer of Jesus might be explained in some way. But that Christ could forgive
His enemies, pray for and die for His enemies—this was not the way men reacted. J.B. Phillips translates St. Paul as saying “it is a rare thing for one man to give his life for another, even if the latter be a good man, though there have been a few who have had the courage to do it. Yet the proof of God’s amazing love is this: that it was while we were sinners that Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8, Phillips). Why should Jesus act like that? Judged by all human standards, there was no reason why He should.

St. Paul saw the Cross as a new dimension in love. It was more than reciprocated kindness, fondness for a friend, good will to good people. It was higher than human beings, holier than the law, the linking of two words that had been considered incompatible—“love” and “enemy.” An enemy is one whose evil you resist, for whom you feel contempt. But from the cross we learn a new relationship...the blending of words that previously hadn’t been put together.

The prayer of Jesus is not “Father, understand them”; it’s “Father, forgive them.” He asks for more than a negative kind of pity. He asks that they be forgiven. And when we come to that level, we are talking about something beyond mere understanding. What is needed is to bring something new out of the cruelty and the wrong...something that will take the evil that has happened and make something new and good out of it. That’s what Jesus did.

The father of the prodigal son, when he returned, said: ‘This my son was dead, and is alive again.’ He didn’t say ‘I understand the foolishness of the young man and I feel sorry for him.’ He didn’t seek only to understand a wrong, but also to welcome a rebirth. This is forgiveness; to keep pressing for the new man, the new life, which can come out of the old. This is what Jesus prayed for—not that the cross by some sort of magic could be erased but that out of the cross might come a new hope and a new life for those who would want to share in this reconciliation. “Father forgive them; for they know not what they do.”

The Second Word

“Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” Luke 23:43

Those are the words that Jesus spoke from the Cross to the penitent thief. They were in response to the thief’s request. He had said to our Lord, “Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingly power.”
Here is a man, a thief, who is about to pay the price for what had probably been a life of crime and violence. And he was to pay with his life. Chances are that he hadn’t even seen Jesus until they were led out together to die.

We can assume that this penitent thief’s entire career had been godless and wicked. Yet in the last hours of his life... by a single change of heart... he leaves the hell in which he has been bound and enters Paradise, which up to then he hadn’t even heard of.

Our Lord’s reply assured the thief that it’s never too late to turn to Him in repentance and faith. Down to the end of the end, down to the last breath, the possibility of paradise is there for all who will repent and believe. Some may complain of all they have missed in not coming to their senses sooner. And they have a point. But they certainly can’t complain that they were excluded because they came late. The second word from the Cross assures us that with Jesus Christ there is never a “too late.”

Wasn’t Jesus being generous with the thief? Yes. Isn’t he generous with us? Yes. His attitude toward the penitent thief certainly is not inconsistent with his teachings. Another good example is found in the Parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16). I’m sure you recall the story. Jesus compared the kingdom of heaven to a householder who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing to pay them a denarius a day, he sent them into the vineyard. Later (about the third hour) he saw others standing in the market place. He told them to go to work in the vineyard and he would pay them what was right. He went out at the sixth hour and the ninth hour and made the same offer. He even went again at the eleventh hour and told them to go into the vineyard, too. All well and good. But when it came time to pay the workers there were some problems. The householder told his steward to call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last. Each of those who came at the eleventh hour received a denarius. They grumbled at the householder. They said that the last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat. But he replied to one of them: “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you, and go; I choose to give to this last as I gave to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?” Then Jesus added: So the first will be last, and the last first.
This parable had a limited application when Jesus first spoke it. But it contains truth that goes to the heart of the Christian religion. Jesus could have been telling his disciples that they had the great privilege of coming into the church and its fellowship very early, at the beginning. They are not to claim any special honor or a special place because they were Christians before the others were. Everyone is equally precious to God, regardless of when he or she came into His service.

In our time, there are people who think that because they have been members for a long time that the church practically belongs to them, and they can dictate policy. Such people often resent new converts or an infusion of new blood, or different ways, or different approaches. In the Christian church, seniority doesn’t necessarily mean honor.

Again… Jesus’ words to the penitent thief remind us that if we come to him at the eleventh hour, it’s not too late. Or if we came to him 75 years ago, it’s not significant. The first shall be last, and the last first. “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingly power.” “Today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Jesus’ words to the penitent thief also tell us some other things. They provide an illustration of the way in which God’s greatness exceeds our hopes and expectations. All the thief asked was that Jesus remember him. He didn’t ask for anything special, just something general… even vague. He didn’t ask for a special place of honor in this kingdom which was yet to come. This would be in contrast with two of Christ’s disciples; wouldn’t it? James and John, the sons of Zebedee wanted special places of honor. Their mother spoke to Jesus about them. This thief didn’t even ask to be let off from any penalty he might have to pay for the life he had lived or the crime he had committed. No, he didn’t even suggest any plea bargaining.

Nor was he trying, as is sometimes suggested, to evade whatever destiny justice would assign him in another world. His simple request was that he might not be forgotten in that other world. And that this man next to him in death, who, events had convinced him, would be the lord of that other world, would not forget these hours of pain when his crucified companion had recognized even in his dying something of his glory. Sir, remember me.

His was a very modest request. But what a response! “Today thou shalt be with me in paradise.” Not, “I’ll remember you,” which is about all anybody could have expected… but an answer that in every possible way was far more than anyone could have imagined. Not “I’ll remember you, as you have asked,” but “Today you
will be with me.” Not only will I remember you but I’ll take you with me. Not to some vague and uncertain
spot... but to that place of unclouded joy and undimmed hope which God has prepared for those who love Him.

Now how can that thief on the cross claim a place in Paradise? It’s only in penitence and faith. But what
a great faith; even though it’s only the first step in faith, it’s sufficient to the need. He knows, as we have since
learned, that there is no place to turn in suffering, or in absurdity and despair, in futility and hopelessness, except
to the cross... the Crucified One. “I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me.”

To be with Jesus Christ, whenever and wherever it takes place, is to be in Paradise. Paradise doesn’t refer
so much to where it is or when it is... but rather to what it is. To be with Christ in paradise is not so much a
promise for the future but a possibility for the present. There is no heaven, no paradise possible in another world
for those who have not begun—however imperfectly—their experience of it here on earth. The dying thief did not
begin his experience of paradise after he had reached physical death. He began it at the moment he recognized in
his dying companion the Lord and Master of his life. And when his spirit left his body for that other world, it was
to go on in greater realization of something that had already... for a brief time... been begun here.

Those who live victoriously, though they wait in great hope and expectation for the final triumph of
God’s grace, live even more in present experience of what that grace in Christ can do in their lives here and now.
“Today you will be with me in Paradise” is no idle promise for an indefinite future but a simple statement of what
Christ can and will do here and now if we put our trust in him and open our lives to his presence and his power.

And that, of course, is the tragedy and the glory of the penitent thief. His tragedy is that is introduction to
Paradise came so late. If only he had met our Lord two or three years earlier, what hell he might have been
spared, from what defeats he would have been delivered, from what fears he would have been saved, what
mistakes he would have avoided. And his glory is that he found Him in time, not only to win eternity, but to gain
strength of spirit and faith even in the agony of his cross.

His tragedy and his glory are not unlike yours and mine. And Good Friday is the opportunity to turn
tragedy into glory. For what is our tragedy but our failure to grasp what Christ can do for our lives here and now?
And what is our glory but to discover with him how to live in heaven even while we are still on earth?

“Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingly power.”

“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”
The Third Word

“Woman behold your son! ... Behold your mother!” John 19:26-27

Mary, the mother of Jesus, was standing before the cross after Jesus had been put up. And standing alongside her was her nephew, John, who was also the closest friend of Jesus.

To her, Jesus said, “Woman, behold your son!” and to him, “Behold your mother!” From that hour, the Scriptures tell us, John took Mary into his own home. It may be that he persuaded her then to leave Golgotha and return to Jerusalem, and that John did so to spare her the ordeal of witnessing the end of the Crucifixion. But we don’t know.

However, we do know that John felt Jesus had committed to him a sacred trust. He was to be a son to Mary and she was to be a mother to him. Tradition says that they shared one home for 12 years, until Mary died, and that John would not leave Jerusalem—even to preach the gospel—as long as she lived.

Why did Jesus request that Mary’s nephew, John, take care of her? Why didn’t He ask one of her own sons, one of His own brothers, to do so? The answer may be in a terse comment in the Bible—“...neither did his brethren believe in him” (John 7:5). “A prophet,” Jesus had said, “is not without honor, save in his own country, and in his own house.” (Matthew 13:57). And He spoke from first-hand knowledge and experience.

“He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:37), Jesus said. So He turned over the care of His mother to one who was in complete sympathy with Him and His mission. And even though a few days later His brothers were among the disciples and one of them, James, became the leader of the church in Jerusalem, Mary continued to share the home of Jesus’ beloved disciple, John.

What is the chief lesson to be learned from the third word from the cross? Mostly we think of the cross in terms of forgiveness and reconciliation and newly found sources of moral power. And rightly so.

But let us also remember that the test of a noble life is that it does not, in its devotion to what is noble, neglect the responsibility that is near at hand. Here is the human touch, so characteristic of Jesus. And it’s practical, as well as human. Even while he was in the very act of redeeming the world, Jesus was considerate of His mother. He made a loving provision for her for the rest of her life. Jesus didn’t make the mistake that some
of us do. Sometimes our work for humanity is known abroad but nothing of it is known at home. When that’s the case, there’s something radically... tragically... wrong.

How many people have you known whom you would call devout? How often have you seen them... in their devotion to God... or in the name of devotion to God... run out of time for members of their own family?

Jesus never had this problem. He had the time. He had the same amount of time as those around Him... as we do... but He had his priorities in order. Nothing could interfere when the time came to provide for His mother. And He did it with love and tenderness. How many of us... if we knew that death was imminent... and time short... would turn our thoughts to others? Wouldn’t we be more likely to think about ourselves?

Besides Jesus’ mother, there were three other women at the cross. Do you think for a moment that He was not aware of their presence? All of them loved Jesus enough to risk their lives to be with Him in His last hours. They demonstrated that perfect love casts out fear.

A second woman at the cross was Mary, the wife of Clopas, and little is known about her. Then there was Mary of Magdala, from whom Jesus had cast out seven demons. His love had rescued her, and... unlike many people then and now... she could not forget what He had done for her.

It might be surprising to us that Salome was there. She was the sister of Jesus’ mother and the wife of Zebedee. She was also the mother of John, to whom Jesus had entrusted his mother, and James. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were sometimes known as “the sons of thunder.” Now... does the story start to unravel?
It was she... Salome... who had come to Jesus to ask Him to give her sons the top spots in the Kingdom. (Matthew 20:20). And Jesus had given her a stern rebuff.

True, Jesus had rebuked her in love. And her presence at the cross demonstrated that her love shone through the rebuke. She received the criticism...with a loving attitude. It didn’t interfere with her devotion to Jesus.

It might appear that Jesus rebuked His mother at the wedding feast at Cana of Galilee. When they needed wine and Mary approached Jesus, He asked her, “O woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come.” The form of address was not harsh...but the words might seem to be. But they could also be reassuring. And Mary had confidence in Jesus.
And there was the occasion in Galilee when His disciples came to Him and said that His mother and His brothers are outside, asking for you. And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who sat about him, he said “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother.” (Mark 3:31-35.)

This incident could suggest that family ties were not important to Jesus. But that is not the case. He realized that the ties of the family will only remain really sacred as long as they are looked upon in the light of ties that are more sacred still—the ties of the spiritual kingdom of God… where God is Father and all are bound together to Him and to one another as His children. The claims of our heavenly Father may sometimes be expressed through those who have claims upon us here on earth… but they must not be usurped by them. What Jesus tried to make people see was that the man who would be a good son to his father here… must first be a good son to his Father in Heaven.

There’s great drama in Christ’s parting from His mother. Both of them were aware of the demands of His Father’s business. There was little time for talk. But what was said in those brief moments was full of tenderness… and love. “And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home.”

The Fourth Word

“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34)

There’s a mystery behind that cry… one that we cannot penetrate. It could be that it came about in this way. Jesus had taken this life of ours upon Himself. He had done our work and faced our temptations and borne our trials. He had suffered all that life could bring. He had known the failure of friends, the hatred of foes, and the malice of enemies. He had known the sharpest pains that life could suffer. Up to this moment, however, Jesus had never known the consequence of sin. If there’s one thing sin does, it separates us from God. It puts a barrier like an unscalable wall between us and God. That was a human experience—possibly the only one—through which Jesus had never passed… because He was without sin.

It may be that at this moment that experience came upon him—not because he had sinned, but because in order to be identified completely with our humanity he had to go through it. In this terrible, grim, bleak moment Jesus really and truly identified himself with the sin of man. Here we have the divine paradox—Jesus knew what
it was to be a sinner. And this experience must have been doubly agonizing for Jesus, because he had never
known what it was to be separated by this barrier from God.

That is why He can understand our situation so well. That is why we need never fear to go to Him when
sin cuts us off from God. Because he has gone through it, He can help others who are going through it. There is
no depth of human experience beyond his reach.

For all the world, though, it looks as though at the decisive moment Jesus Christ’s faith failed. And if that
is true, then our last hope has vanished with these words. For if at the point of agony and suffering our blessed
Lord himself was not able to keep His faith and His trust unbroken, what hope can there be for ours? If climbing
Calvary was more than His faith could take, what must become of ours when we climb our lesser Calvaries?

Whether He got his answer or not, here at least is someone who has shared the experience of our... yours
and mine... human situation down to its very bottom. We can admire and worship the man who in the agony of
crucifixion says, “Father forgive the; for they know not what they do.” But we must worship and admire from a
distance because we know that nothing in us is capable of that selfless reaction to suffering. But the man in pain
who cries out, “My God, why hast thou forsaken me?” is heart of our hearts and mind of our minds. He has
entered the darkest mystery of human life, the mystery of defeated goodness and victorious evil, the mystery of
human abandonment. Standing by His cross, we recognize Him as one who has shared the tragedy and
uncertainty of human life to the last full measure.

Does not the fact that Jesus Christ, better than anyone else, knew what loneliness and desertion and
despair are only deepen the tragedy? For if He knew them so well, why did He not show us the answer to them?
Experiencing our human loneliness and perplexity so keenly, He should have been able to provide us with the
solution for them. Life involves us, heaven knows, in enough situations when we ask why, never finding the
answer. But to discover Jesus Christ sharing our place of darkness and uncertainty, unable to find an answer to
His why, is almost the final tragedy.

It may draw us to Him; it may make us more aware of our common humanity. But it leaves the
permanent riddle of humanity unsolved. Over all our innocent suffering, all our undeserved pain, all our
unmerited sorrow, Jesus Christ or no Jesus Christ, there is still written the unanswered question, “Why?”
And yet, the question, at least in the form in which our Lord asked it, contains its own answer. It is, of course, a quotation from the twenty-second Psalm. Every Jewish boy was brought up on the Psalms. They were a staple item in the diet of his education. Our Lord, therefore, would have been as familiar with the twenty-second Psalm as you and I are with the twenty-third. Was He quoting from it here, even perhaps quoting the entire Psalm to Himself as an act of prayer and devotion, though those standing by caught only this, its opening verse? Or was this cry from the cross no quotation at all, but something born from the anguish and desolation of His own heart at the moment?

Whether a quotation or His own question, the important thing to see is that these words answer the very question that they ask, offer the only possible solution to the problem which they put. “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”

We need spend no time describing what our Lord felt when He spoke these words. Though to an infinitely smaller degree, we have all known the feeling. We have it whenever we feel that we have been asked to shoulder burdens greater than we can bear, greater than we deserve to bear, whenever we feel that some situation of suffering, our own or that of someone we love, is totally and absolutely underserved. Above all, it comes over us when we feel that in this place of pain God doesn’t care, God offers no help, God has turned away his face and forgotten. That was what Jesus Christ felt at this moment. We know what He felt for we have felt it, too.

How often in hard and difficult situations have you asked “Why?” or “Why did God let that happen?” Or you might have even asked, “Why has God forsaken me?” “My God, why hast thou forsaken me?” is a very different question from “Why has God forsaken me?”

For even there in that place of despair and anguish, our Lord did not speak about a God of whom He had heard and in whom He had been led to believe. Even on Calvary, he spoke with a God whom He personally knew and personally trusted…not God, but my God…not, “Why has He?” but “Why have you?” Even though He questioned God’s ways, failed to grasp His purpose, was unable to fathom his activity, of this one thing He was certain, of this one thing He would not let go—this darkly mysterious God was still His Father. My God! Never once did He permit even the most trying circumstances to make God a stranger or an enemy. Even in loneliness, lostness, and forsakenness, my God.
And here is the reason why this apparently darkest moment in the gospel is really one of the brightest, why this word of despair which we think contains no answer actually contains the only answer that will hold against all doubts and all questions. No one will deny that the life of any of us will contain, if it hasn’t done so already, many hard moments, many difficult problems, and many strange events. They are the raw materials out of which our lives must be made, whether we like them or not.

Now in the face of these things, there are only two answers that can finally satisfy. Either the panorama of life is one big fairy tale and the story of our lives has no more meaning than the drawings of a chimpanzee—either that, or my God—difficult to understand, hard to follow, uncompromising in His demands but always known, always trusted, always my God. It must be either one thing or the other.

If it’s the first, then light your candle and go out into the dark alone as bravely as you can, knowing that sooner or later a breath of cold air will snuff out its flame forever. But if it’s the second, remember that though life may sweep everything else away from you, so long as you can keep this elemental creed you can go on in hope. My God. Not the God of the universe, not the God of the Bible, not the God of the Bishop, not the God of the theologians or the philosophers, not the God of my father, my mother, or my Sunday School teacher, but my God.

You and I cannot question the God of the universe, that vast and knowledgeable being who spins the stars like tops and spread out galaxies like blankets. He is too vast for our minds to comprehend. How could we possibly think that such limitless intelligence heeded our queries? How could I question the God of the universe?

But we can—you and I—can question our God. I can question my God, not because I have the right to answers, not because He owes me anything whatsoever, but because He is my God whom I know, whom I trust, whom I love. Whenever I question Him, I know I will always receive an answer which, though it may not at the time solve the superficial riddles posed by my intelligence, will always meet those deeper needs posed by my heart. Here is the only satisfying answer to life’s complicated and troubling questions—to have the faith to bring them to a God who is personally known, personally trusted, personally loved. He will make His own way plain... in his good time.
The Fifth Word

I thirst. (John 19:28)

“I thirst.” The fifth word of Jesus from the Cross brings us face to face with human suffering. It’s so human. It calls attention to a physical need. I thirst. I am thirsty.

Who would not have been thirsty after hanging for three hours beneath a blazing eastern sun while His life’s blood ebbed away? Of all the needs of the human body, thirst is by far the most agonizing. A person can endure hunger for a fairly long period of time. It is amazing how much physical pain the human body can take. But thirst is like a consuming fire. The most devastating, the most intense agony we can know is to feel our tongue thickened and our throat parched for lack of water. I thirst. I am thirsty.

It ought not surprise us, therefore, that sooner or later there should come from the lips of the Crucified Christ this cry of human need. The surprise comes only when you set this whole scene in the context of our Christian faith about Jesus Christ. If He was a man and only a man—even the finest and fairest flower of humanity, who died a martyr’s heroic yet tragic death on Calvary—then, though this word is touching, it does little more than remind us of the suffering which He endured before He died. If Jesus Christ was purely human and nothing more, there would be little more to say about these words. What message would there be in these two words, which simply draw attention to the fact that crucifixion is a painful way to die?

But if Jesus Christ was and is what our Christian faith asserts—the Son of the living God, the translation into human personality of the Divine Mind and the Divine Heart—then even these two words glow with meaning and burn brightly with significance. How many of us, when we hear the word “God” would see a man nailed to a cross, murmuring with parched lips, “I thirst”? Yet that is exactly the picture God presented to us in this scene. Each of these seven last words is a precious photograph of the mind and heart of God. But this one is a picture that requires considerable study.

This fifth word has nothing to do with religion, morality, or character, but with pure physical need. But that fact that the gospel presents us a picture of God in a position of purely physical need has everything to do with religion. The fact that at the center of our faith you find not the figure of a remote and awesome deity, not some heroic superman, not some spirit who lives beyond human pain, but One divine enough to forgive and
human enough to be thirsty—that fact makes our Christian faith unique, different from all the religions of the world.

It may sound ironic that Jesus, who had claimed that “he who believes in me shall never thirst” would say He is thirsty. He does give that living water. But to obtain it for us, He Himself had to pass through “a dry and thirsty land where no water is.” (Ps. 63:1).

Someone near the Cross, possibly a soldier, responded by putting a sponge full of vinegar on hyssop and holding it to our Lord’s parched and dying lips. It was a kind act, one of very few performed at the Cross. Of the person who showed this gentle act of kindness, it may be said “inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.” (Matt. 25:40).

Here is the God of the Gospel, a poor, pathetic dying man who pleads for a little water to moisten his cracked and burning lips. You may call it an incredible picture. But you can never stand at the Cross, hear this fifth word, and say that the God of the Gospel is immune to human suffering, unconcerned with human pain, too big to be bothered with human need. We may go through life thinking of God as a blind and unpitying force in the sky. But here at the Cross we are brought up short to learn that it is not so. The God of the Gospel cares for every human need because He has shared every human need, even the simplest and most elemental of all. I thirst.

Jesus Christ is in pain. But He does not pretend. There is about Calvary a rugged honesty that cannot fail to impress, whatever may be your religious convictions. There is no pretending that things are not so bad as they seem. There is no effort to find the silver lining in the cloud. There is no deluded attempt to dismiss pain as imaginary or sorrow as unimportant. Here are human sin and human suffering in all of their savage reality. I thirst.

Here on the Cross is a God who has honestly faced and felt the same suffering we have faced. We can relate to Him. We do not know how our problems will be resolved. But at least we have a guide we can trust. He has been where we must go. The only God who can meet our needs is the God who has honestly known our needs. The God of the New Testament is a God who offers no prescriptions, no panaceas, but simply goes the way we must go and gives the simple command to take up our Cross and follow. This God who shares our needs can meet our needs. For we, too, thirst.
We thirst for certainty. We thirst for assurance. We thirst for meaning and significance. We thirst for peace and contentment. Our hearts are hot and dry and sometimes they are so parched we think we can no longer stand the pain. Here at the Cross are no answers, no easy speeches, no quick solutions. But here is One who has opened the way for us.

**The Sixth Word**

“It is finished!” John 19:30

“It is finished!” Now, I ask you, what was finished? The meaning of this sixth word from the cross is rather uncertain if we look no further than the word itself. Just these three words, taken by themselves, could constitute a very pathetic yet very human cry of weakness and defeat. It is finished. It is all over with now—the suffering, the pain, the scorn. Death will soon draw its merciful curtain across the scene. There are no more burdens to be borne. There is no more pain to be suffered, no more torment to be endured. The powers of death have done their worst. It is finished.

Yes, and more than life itself is finished. Finished are the dreams and the hopes with which Christ had once enthralled the multitudes. Finished is the teaching which had once rung with such authority. Finished is the career that just a few days earlier had drawn excited hosannas from hundreds of hearts. Finished is that kingdom the coming of which He had proclaimed so confidently. To what other conclusion can you come when a man who claimed to be a king hangs there nailed to a cross? At least He had the courage to admit the shattering of His hopes and dreams before He died. It is finished.

It would be perfectly possible on the basis of these three words to conclude that this was the way in which Our Lord took His leave of life, gladly accepting the end, when it came, as a merciful release, meekly bowing His head to breathe His last. And much as you could have wished the end to be something else, what could you say? What could you say indeed but that at the last, as with all of us, the world proved too much for Jesus Christ, too? It is finished.

But if you look beyond these three words, you will see that such was not the case at all. For one thing, only St. John records this next-to-the-last word, “It is finished.” The other three evangelists do not tell us what
Jesus said at this point in the story. But all three of them record the fact that just before He died, He cried with “a loud voice.” And by the words that they use, they indicate clearly what they mean.

For this “loud voice” is exactly the phrase which is used in Greek to indicate a victor’s shout, a triumphant cry, such as might rise from the throat of a runner who was first to cross the finish line in a race, such as might escape from the lips of a tired ballplayer whose team had won a spirited contest. St. John apparently understood the words which the other three had heard only as a victor’s shout. But putting the two accounts together makes it clear that these words were not whispered weakly as a last sad farewell to life, but shouted triumphantly as the victor crossed the goal line.

But more than that, there is the word itself which came from His lips. In Greek it is not, as in English, three words which might mean one of several things, but a single word which can mean one thing and one thing only: Tetelestai! Finished! Accomplished! Achieved! Here is no weak admission that, thank God, it’s all over with now. Here is the triumphant assertion that the job which was to be done has been completed. The mission that was assigned has been accomplished. In spite of incredible difficulties, in spite of almost insurmountable barriers, he has done it. Now let them say what they will, do what they may. They can neither injure nor destroy what He has completed. The word which He chose is rich with purpose and the tense He used indicates the completion of that purpose. It is finished. With every flag proudly waving, with every banner still flying defiantly, the ship has been brought safely to port.

Perhaps you have heard the alto aria, “It is finished,” in Bach’s Passion according to St. John. It begins with a setting of the words which is almost a sob. You can hear the sorrow of humanity in it. But Bach was too good a theologian, too perceptive a Christian, to let it stop there. Immediately the trumpets sound the note of victory, and the solo continues: “The Lion of Judah has conquered!” That’s the only way in which these words are rightly understood. Even while the sobbing sounds, the trumpets of victory echo over it. The Lion of Judah has conquered. It is finished.

But now, exactly what was finished? The original question still stands, even though we now know the manner in which He spoke these words. What was finished? His life, to be sure. But what had He accomplished, what had He completed with the ending of his life? What was this goal the achievement of which gave our Lord such a conviction of victory as He died, transforming His very death into triumph?
There are many ways in which we could answer that question. And there are many answers to it that lie beyond the poor power of our minds to grasp and understand. But no one who studies the life of our Lord even casually can fail to perceive that He was a man with a mission. Even as a boy of 12 He was conscious that He ought to be about his Father's business. And in the mature years of His ministry, His father's business was the motive for every word that He spoke and every deed that He did.

It was his Father's business that took him through Galilee preaching the kingdom of God and His righteousness. It was his Father's business that moved Him with compassion when He saw the multitude. It was his Father's business that led him to heal the sick and forgive the sinner. It was his Father's business that brought Him willingly to Pilate's judgment hall. It was his Father's business that made Him stumble up Calvary with the heavy cross. It was his Father's business that nailed Him to that tree. And now it was his Father's business which He had completed with the victorious cry, "It is finished."

And what was his Father's business? We used to say it was the saving work of Jesus Christ in both His life and His death to bring men back to God. But more profoundly and deeply still, it was His business to bring God back to man. In Jesus Christ, God has found us. In Jesus Christ, we have found God.

Calvary is history's most terrifying battleground. The powers of hell, of death and sin there unleash against Him the whole arsenal of their weapons, those same weapons with which they have defeated us time and again. But they cannot defeat Him. They cannot capture Him as they have captured us. Alone He stands against them and drives them beaten from the field. Look up at the cross; brush away the tears. The Lord is reigning from the tree! It is finished.

In the deepest sense of the word, it is finished. But in a lesser, though not unimportant sense, it is not finished. And that is why we have Good Fridays. For though the sketch has been drawn, the picture painted, completely and finally, the battle won once and for all, in all the turmoil and confusion of our living it is so easy to forget, to wonder, to lose the vision and its assurance.

We need to see not just once but often the love of God hanging triumphantly on a cross. With all of our doubts and fears, we need to be assured once again that God so loves the world. We need some tangible token that all this is not somebody's hopeful guess, some empty preaching, but burning reality. That is why time and
time again we gather to hear the old, old, story. That is why we frequently eat the bread and drink from the cup. This is my body, which was broken for you. This is my blood of the New Testament, which was shed for you.

The God who found us in Jesus Christ will never leave us. The love that grasped us at Calvary will never let us go. The victory of the cross is true today, tomorrow, always. It is finished!

The Seventh Word

"Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." Luke 23:46

This last sentence that our Lord spoke is, except for a single word, another quotation from the Psalms. The fifth verse of the 31st Psalm reads, "Into thy hands I commend my spirit." Jesus led off that quotation with the single word "Father."

In itself there would be nothing unusual about such a quotation. For the Psalms were both the hymnal and the prayer book of Hebrew religion. There was hardly any lad in Palestine who had not committed them to memory as part of his religious education. In times of great exaltation or of deep distress, various words of the Psalter would naturally come to mind as the finest expression of the heart's deepest feelings. Once before this, our Lord had quoted from another Psalm when He cried, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" It should be no surprise, therefore, that once again and for the last time He fell back upon the Psalms to express what was in His heart.

But there is something more about this last word from the Cross. Every little Hebrew child was taught by his mother to say "into thy hands I commend my spirit." He said this before he closed his eyes at night, much as you and I were taught "Now I lay me down to sleep." That very Friday night in countless homes in Palestine when the mothers had tucked their little ones in their beds and blown out the lights, they would hold their hands and listen while little lips formed this prayer: Into thy hands I commend my spirit.

Thirty years before in such a home in Nazareth time after time Mary had kissed her son good night and then listened while he said his evening prayer. Into thy hands I commend my spirit. And now that same son, grown to manhood, climaxing his ministry on the Cross, can find no better way to take farewell of life than that which he had learned at His mother's knee. Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.
In his final moment of suffering, Jesus Christ spoke not some lofty discovery of the mature religious mind, some bit of wisdom to be shared only by the few, but a childhood prayer, very likely the first prayer that He had ever learned, one that had stayed with Him through the years and now at the end was still able to nourish His soul.

The shadows have lengthened and the evening has come. The busy world is hushed, the fever of life is over, and His work is done. The wheel has turned full circle. Did He in those last moments see once again the old familiar home in Nazareth, the face of His mother bending over Him, as like a tired child He rested His weary head? Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.

Concerning Jesus' last words from the Cross, Luke tells us that he cried “with a loud voice.” Many of the early church fathers interpret the “loud voice” as evidence of the fact that Christ died voluntarily. The cry now was not only a word of assurance. It was also a shout of victory!

Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit. In one sense, these words are a prayer. But in another sense, like every good prayer, they are a creed. They are Jesus Christ’s final conviction about life and its meaning, hammered out in the agony of the Cross. This last word is not simply His farewell to mortality. The last word is His last word on what life is and what life means.

And that last word, that creed, that final assertion can all be summed up in this: Our lives are held gently but firmly in the strong grasp of a loving Father. In the darkness, confusion, mystery of our lives, the hand of God is something extended for us to grasp, for us to hold. Sometimes the path is rough. Sometimes the water is cold and deep. We may wonder why it should be that way. But it is that way and there is no better answer. Yet no matter how rough and dark the path, no matter how chill and deep the stream, there by our side, if we will reach out to grasp it, is the hand of our loving Father. And if there is anything in life and death of which we may be sure, it is this: That hand is always there and will always be there.

We may not know where we are going. We may not know how we will get there. But this we can always know: The hand of God is stretched out to us in all of His strength. And once we grasp it, He will never let us go—no, not even when we must enter that darkest valley and cross that coldest stream. Even then we can walk without fear, in full confidence that that same hand that has led us all the way will lead us safely across and up into those eternal hills that shine in their glory on the other side.
What, then, was Jesus Christ’s final creed, His last conviction about human existence? Although for reasons which pass our understanding our lives contain materials that are rough and raw, the only person who needs to be without the strong hand of God is the person who chooses to be. For if we put out our hand in faith, we will always find His hand grasping ours in love. Like little children afraid to climb the stairs in the dark unless their father takes them by the hand, so we cannot find our way unless our Father grasps our hand in His. But once we feel that powerful hand supporting us, we can go on and not be afraid.

This last word from the Cross is not dying man’s philosophy of life, no mere echo of a childhood prayer. It is the secret of victorious living, to be renewed every day that we live. Do we face problems that we cannot even begin to solve? Into Thy hands. Do we experience sorrow we cannot bear? Into Thy hands. Do we face temptations stronger than we can endure? Into Thy hands. Is life too much for us? Into Thy hands.
Easter Day

FIRST READING: Acts 10:34 - 43

PSALM: 118

SECOND READING: Colossians 3:1 - 4

GOSPEL: John 20:1 - 18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12 and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.
Alleluia. Christ is risen.
The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.

The strife is o’er, the battle done.
The victory of life is won;
The song of triumph has begun.
Alleluia!

Alleluia, alleluia! Give thanks to the risen Lord.
Alleluia, alleluia! Give praise to His name.

Jesus Christ is risen today, alleluia!
Our triumphant holy day, alleluia!

Welcome happy morning! age to age shall say:
Hell today is vanquished, heaven is won today!

Hail thee, festival day!
Blest day that art hallowed forever,
Day whereon Christ arose,
Breaking the kingdom of death.

I hope you have compassion on your organist and choir director. All these beautiful hymns... and such a
great occasion. But choices must be made. I doubt if we would be willing to stay long enough to hear them all.

I appreciate the opportunity to be your worship leader today... on this the Feast of the Resurrection of
Jesus Christ, the greatest and oldest feast of the Christian Church. Retired rectors aren’t often honored in this
way. When you retire from a community of faith, your ties to that congregation are severed and it’s sometimes
difficult to make a new connection. So thanks for inviting me to join you today.

It has been said that if we can attend church services on Easter Sunday and believe what happened at the
Resurrection of Jesus... empty tomb and all... we’re well on our way to being a committed Christian... and no
barrier can keep us from worship services on the other 51 Sundays of the Church Year. What makes the
Resurrection of Jesus Christ so important?...so special? First, it is unique, and it has broad implications. Lazarus
was raised from the dead. So was Dorcas... and let’s not forget Jairus’ daughter... the widow’s son... and
Eutychus. Yes, they all died and were called back to life. You might say they were resuscitated... but all of them
died again.

The Resurrection of Jesus is quite different. He passed over the border into the realm of the departed
spirits... or, as the Apostles’ Creed tells us... He descended into hell. He is not brought back to this life, destined
to die again. No. He is raised forever to the right hand of God. This was no human act... and it was not done through any human agency. This was done by God alone. But this is too great an event... and it’s too full of drama... for us to use the passive voice. We should say it this way: God Himself raised Jesus Christ from the dead. And only of His raising does the New Testament use the term “The Resurrection.” There is a major distinction between the Resurrection of Jesus and any other. His is the Resurrection of the Messiah. It is the Resurrection of Jesus that designates Him as the Christ... and He was proclaimed as the Messiah in the earliest Christian preaching (Acts 2:36; 13:33; Romans 1:4). Peter’s moving Pentecostal sermon tells us: “The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, till I make thy enemies a stool for thy feet: Let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

A major point that Paul made in a sermon (Acts 13:32-33) in Antioch: “…We bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus.” And in his letter to the Romans, Paul speaks of Jesus Christ as having been “designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

What these Scriptural passages are telling us is this: Jesus’ reign as Messiah began with His Resurrection. He has entered into and inaugurated the age of Glory. God’s Messianic act is completed... at the hour when Jesus is glorified (Luke 24:26; John 12:23; Acts 3:13; Romans 6:4; I Peter 1:21). And the age to come has begun to replace what was thought of as the present age... now that Jesus has been declared the Messiah. God’s raising of Him can be spoken of as The Resurrection. Prior to “the third day,” the day on which Jesus was raised from the dead, the term “the resurrection” could only mean “the last day,” or the day of the general resurrection.

What was the first instinctive reaction to the Resurrection of Jesus? “It is the Lord!” That’s what the disciple whom Jesus loved, John, exclaimed. Soon the other disciples were gathered together... and, John tells us, they knew it was the Lord. Luke says He was “alive” and that He was “risen indeed.” “I have seen the Lord,” says Mary Magdalene to the disciples. “We have seen the Lord,” say the other disciples to Thomas. Incredulity
and doubt run through the narratives…but putting emphasis on the physical appearance of Jesus’ body assured the 11 and His other close associates that it was their Lord whom they had seen. “See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me and see,” said Jesus. And, John tells us, “the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.” In every appearance before them, Jesus either says something or does something that establishes His identity.

What was the effect of these appearances of Jesus after His Resurrection? More than anything else, they were decisive for the disciples’ faith. And they were an essential part of the earliest witness. It was an abiding and transformative experience—grounded not on reports of others, but on the first-hand awareness of the living Christ—that made and sustained the Christian Church. And the existence of the Church was the embodiment of a major part of the evidence of the Resurrection.

But the greatest evidence of all is this knowledge of the living victorious Christ, which affirms that He is risen and that He lives with God. So the Resurrection inaugurates the new age… the new creation. “In Jesus,” the apostles can proclaim the resurrection from the dead.” (Acts 4:2). By being the first to rise from the dead, the resurrected Jesus belongs to the age to come, which has already set in. It’s now a present reality. The age to come is no longer reserved for Jesus at the “last day.” Now He is “the resurrection and the life.”

And yet the new age is not confined to Jesus’ life. He is also the “first-born from the dead,” the “first fruits of the new order.” In another sense, He remains unique: The resurrection of those who belong to Christ will wait upon His coming. Even those raised by Jesus and the apostles still had to die again. Only Jesus Himself is exempt from this. For the rest of mankind, the last enemy, death, remains. Yet at the same time, Jesus promises us that “he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever believes in me shall never die (John 11:25-26). “If any one is in Christ his is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come.” (I Cor. 5:17).

The Spirit of God…the Holy Spirit… is the vital link, not only between Christ’s resurrection and ours, but also between our present and future state. “That what is mortal will be swallowed up by life and is now guaranteed by the gift of the Spirit.” (II Cor. 5:4-5). “For the spirit is in anticipation of the end in the present, and the events of the last trumpet when we shall all be changed” (I Cor. 15:51-52) are but the climax to that
transformation wrought by the Spirit by which already “we...are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another.” (II Cor. 3:18).

So... on this great Easter Day... at this celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ we hold fast to... look forward to... the hope of our own resurrection. And because we are “in Christ,” we are already “alive to God.”

The resurrected Jesus is more than a figure in a book... He is more than a great historical person. He is a living presence. He is not someone we talk about... but someone we meet... now and at the end of our Christian journey. Meanwhile, He is our companion along the way. Let us pray: Thanks to you, O Christ, because you have broken for us the bonds of sin and brought us into fellowship with the Father. Thanks to you, O Christ, because you have overcome death and opened to us the gates of eternal life. Thanks to you, O Christ, because where two or three are gathered together in your name you are the in the midst of them. Thanks to you, O Christ, because you live forever to make intercession for us. For these and all other benefits of your mighty resurrection... thanks be to you, O Christ. Amen.
I greet you this morning in the name of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ on the anniversary of His resurrection. Is there any doubt in your mind that the Resurrection of Jesus is the greatest event the Christian Church has ever known? Some will even go further…calling it the greatest day in history!

Perhaps the Easter hymns say it better than we can:

-0-
Hail thee, festival day, blest day that art hallowed forever.
Day whereon Christ arose, breaking the kingdom of death.
-0-
Alleluia, alleluia! Give thanks to the risen Lord!
Alleluia, alleluia! Give praise to His name.
-0-
Welcome happy morning, age to age will say:
Hell today is vanquished, heaven is won today!
-0-
He is risen, He is risen!
Tell it out with joyful voice:
He has burst His three-day prison;
Let the whole [wide] earth rejoice:
Death is conquered, we are free,
Christ has won the victory
-0-
That Easter Day with joy was bright,
The sun shone out with fairer light
When to their longing eyes restored
The apostles saw their risen Lord.
-0-
Jesus Christ is risen today
Alleluia!
Our triumphant holy day
Alleluia!
Who did once upon the cross
Alleluia!
Suffer to redeem our loss
Alleluia!

I trust we are singing the Easter hymns today with enthusiasm…and with confidence.

We’ve come a long way… from the first Easter morning. At that time… chaos reigned. But little by little the significance of that first Easter began to unfold. The followers of Jesus were able to piece together the events of the preceding days. Jesus’ Resurrection appearances and the receiving of the Holy Spirit were critical to their
changed lives... from scared defectors to bold proclaimers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ who was crucified, died, and was buried... but whom God raised from the dead.

After the arrest of Jesus, Mark tells us, “all forsook him and fled.” They were devastated. They were in disarray. They were nowhere to be seen. Judas Iscariot had already betrayed his Master with a kiss... for 30 pieces of silver. Peter, who had only recently professed his steadfast love for Jesus, had—in a moment of weakness—denied him... not once... not twice... but three times.

Earlier, when Jesus had suggested that they go to Lazarus at Bethany, near Jerusalem, Thomas, the Twin, remembered that Jesus’ enemies had threatened to stone Him. At that time, Thomas had said, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” But Thomas didn’t follow up on his offer. Only John... sometimes referred to as the disciple whom Jesus loved... was around. He was standing at the cross when Jesus entrusted his mother to John’s care. The other 10 were nowhere to be found. John tells us that standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother... Mary the wife of Clopas... and Mary Magdalene. Mark and Matthew identify Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses and Salome, the mother of the sons of Zebedee, as being present. Quite a small delegation... but by that time things were going badly. Earlier... you will recall... Jesus had attracted large crowds.

What words would we use to describe the feelings of the followers of Jesus after His arrest and crucifixion? Disappointed? Let down? Abandoned? These thought may not cover all the emotions of the disciples...but they certainly are applicable.

What were His followers’ first reactions on the Day of the Resurrection? John tells us that Mary Magdalene was distraught. At first... she thought someone had taken Jesus’ body from the tomb. Later... Peter and apparently John went to the tomb... and John believed that Jesus had risen. This was before Mary’s conversation with the risen Lord.

Matthew says that after the women visited Jesus’ tomb and found it empty, an angel told them that “He is not here for He has risen, as He said. Come, see the place where He lay. Then go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead, and behold, He is going to Galilee, and there you will see Him.” And Jesus met them and said: “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.”
But it wasn’t long until the apostles... who had forsaken Christ and fled... experienced a renewal of faith that enabled them... inspired them... to preach, teach, and live out the Gospel. And the fact of Jesus’ resurrection was basic to their preaching.

The Acts of the Apostles... the Book of Acts... tells us how Peter’s Pentecostal sermon had cut the people to the heart... and they wondered what to do. Peter’s answer: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Acts goes on to say that about three thousand souls received his word and were baptized after hearing Peter. And further... that fear came upon every soul and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles... and have been continuing for almost 2,000 years.

An incident happened in England during the 1940s that I think could be identified with the feelings of the disciples after Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion... then was followed by what they later realized the Resurrection was to mean to them... and to us.

During World War II, when the Germans were bombing London and other English cities regularly... night after night... damage was heavy... fires were numerous... thousands of lives were lost. A newspaperman was looking around in London after a long night of heavy bombing. In spite of the wreckage around him, the sun was shining and the sky was blue. He came to a small house, whose windows had been blown out by an exploding bomb. Roof tiles littered the tiny garden. Standing at the door was a young woman... holding a baby in her arms.

The newspaperman stopped at the gate. “What a terrible night,” he said.

To which she replied, “Yes, but what a wonderful morning!”

Do you see similarities in these two situations? In both cases the nightmare is over. They have survived. And now... the disciples and the mother and her child... have much to look forward to. For all... for them, for us... it is a statement of resurrection: New hope... new beginnings... new possibilities.

The strife is o’er, the battle done
The victory of life is won.
The song of triumph has begun. Alleluia.
April 12, 1998  Sunday of the Resurrection: Easter Day  Transfiguration, Buckhannon

Greetings in the name of our risen Lord, Jesus Christ. Thank you for helping us to celebrate the greatest and most holy day in Christendom... the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. It’s impossible to find words adequate to proclaim this great event when God intervened in history to raise His son Jesus Christ from the dead. In so doing, He destroyed death... and, thanks be to God, we can all share in that victory.

We must never forget that although He Himself was sinless... He died for you and me. His life... once offered... was in atonement for the sins of the whole world... past... present... and future.

The events of Holy Week almost decimated the little band of Jesus’ followers. Some had been His close personal friends. Others observed Him closely but didn’t become emotionally involved in His life or His ministry. Still others were on the fringe, moving in and out of the circle. They were not unlike many people today... they saw and heard some things that they found attractive and interesting... but others they didn’t like... so they were unwilling to make a commitment to Him. Does this sound familiar?

The disciples of Jesus experienced a variety of emotions after His arrest and Crucifixion. They felt let down, abandoned and disappointed. We really don’t know the full depth of their emotional involvement because they were nowhere to be found.

Over the centuries, the matter of the empty tomb of Jesus has sometimes been divisive. However, as one noted commentator once wrote, “there is no suggestion in the New Testament that to believe in the Resurrection means to believe in the empty tomb. For the empty tomb is not itself the Resurrection, and more than the shell of the chrysalis is the butterfly. Moreover, however objective it may appear, it can never be decisive. On the face of it, it looks the most public and solid piece of evidence: Either it was empty or it was not. Yet the fact the body was not produced will never prove that it could not have been produced. And, even if the tomb could be certified empty with complete assurance, what would it establish? Precisely, as the women realized with dismay, that “He is not here.”

So if the empty tomb didn’t prove decisive for the disciples’ faith, what did? It was the appearances that Jesus made. They were an essential part of the earliest witness. Paul gives a detailed list of them in First
Corinthians as forming part of the original tradition that he himself had received. At the time of Paul’s writings, most of the witnesses were still alive. And there are further accounts in all the gospels.

Jesus seems to have made at least 11 different appearances apart from that to Paul (I Cor. 15:8; Acts 9:3-8; 22:6-11; 26:12-18), which Paul claimed to be one of the series. They also include:

1—To the women (Matt. 28:9-10)
2—To Mary Magdalene (John 20:11-18)
3—To Peter (I Cor. 15:5; Luke 24: 34; Mark 16:7)
4—To two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-31)
5-8—Four appearances to the 11 and other disciples (See Resurrection in Interpreter’s Dictionary)
9—A visit to 7 disciples (John 21:1-14)
10—To more than 500 brethren (I Cor. 15:6)
11—And Jesus also appear to James (I Cor. 15:7)

Isn’t it interesting that all of Jesus’ appearances were to those who were already followers of Him? Scripture says He appeared, He made Himself visible, He revealed Himself, and He presented Himself alive. These various appearances did much to encourage and strengthen those whom He visited. The Book of Acts tells us that Jesus appeared “not to all people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses.” (Acts 10:40-41). Jesus had taken the initiative, and His appearances did much to build up their faith. His appearances to Peter, in particular, had tremendous impact on the downcast and distraught disciple whose boldness and courageous preaching of the Gospel made a 180-degree turn from the Peter who denied His beloved Master. From then on, the Spirit of the Lord and the transformed and inspired fisherman were inseparable... doing a variety of mighty acts.

Looking back... What did Jesus’ Resurrection mean? What does it mean now? The meaning of Jesus’ Resurrection has not changed. It can still be expressed in two words: Love triumphed. Love triumphed.

As Jesus Himself said before undergoing the agonizing hours on the cross: Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for His friends. (John 15:13). Yes, love is revealed at the cross...and in the personhood of Jesus Christ...for as Paul tells us in Romans (5:8), “God shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.”
Christ chose to die and did this to redeem us. In the sacramental waters of baptism those who believe in Jesus as the risen Christ and trust in Him are united with the Lord who died for us. And rising out of the waters of death, the believer is renewed in spirit by the divine Spirit. He or she becomes a new creation, a new person, a limb of Christ's spiritual body, the Church.

Because the Cross stands for victory over sin and evil, love is almighty. Divine Providence looks out for us. God's care is constantly exercised for the good of mankind. Christians have needed the assurance that love reigns and God will never desert them. God's love is the very same as Christ's love, which was demonstrated once for all.

In gratitude to God for all He has done for us... let us approach the throne of grace:

We thank you, O God, our Heavenly Father, for incorporating us into your Holy Catholic Church...and for making us worthy to share in the inheritance of the saints of light. We pray this, O God, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who gave His life on the cross for us... and who now reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.
SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER


PSALM: 133

SECOND READING: 1 John 1:1 - 2:2

GOSPEL: John 20:19 - 31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.
Today’s lessons... especially the gospel passage from John and the reading from the Acts of the Apostles... give us much food for thought. In fact, they provide us with far more than we can digest or assimilate at one sitting. They are central to our belief... so we need to study and ponder what they have to say. A quick reading of these passages... while telling us much... certainly doesn’t exhaust the possibilities. One reading should only whet our appetite for more... more information... more insight... even more faith.

As the scene opens in the passage from John… the disciples are gathered together behind closed doors... for fear of the Jews. I don’t question that for a minute. But perhaps it’s well and good that they’re where they are for other reasons. They are a scared, distraught, disorganized lot. They felt let down, abandoned and disappointed. They have not yet been able to sort out what has happened to Jesus and to them over the last few days. It was truly a nightmare. And they’re probably scared of just about everybody: The Jews, the Roman authorities, the soldiers. So the closed doors represent to them safety and security. At this time, they aren’t interested in moving on... or going back to what they had been doing before they met Jesus and joined His entourage.

They probably wouldn’t be thinking much about their future. What future? The only person who had ever given them encouragement, the only person who had brought meaning to their lives, the only person who had ever treated them with dignity, respect, and importance was gone. He had died an agonizing and humiliating death on a cross. Soon afterward, their lives had sunk into the pits. Then some strange things began to happen.

Looking back... what were the first reactions of Jesus’ close followers after three days of quiet but living hell... or turmoil within their inner selves? John tells us that Mary Magdalene was distraught when she went to Jesus’ tomb and did not see His body. She thought someone had stolen it. Later Peter… and apparently John... went to the tomb... and John believed Jesus had risen. This was before Mary’s conversation with the risen Lord.

Matthew says that after the women visited Jesus’ tomb and found it empty, an angel told them He is not here, for He has risen as He said. Come, see the place where He lay. Then go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead, and behold, He is going before you to Galilee, and there they will see me. And Jesus met them and said: “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.”
So... all the disciples were faced with an empty tomb. This has at times over the centuries been a divisive matter. “However,” as one noted biblical commentator wrote, “There is no suggestion in the New Testament that to believe in the Resurrection means to believe in the empty tomb. For the empty tomb is not itself the Resurrection, any more than the shell of the chrysalis is the butterfly. Moreover, however objective it may appear, it can never be decisive. On the face of it, it looks the most public and solid piece of evidence: Either it was empty or it was not. Yet the fact the body was not produced will never prove that it could not have been produced. And, even if the tomb could be certified empty with complete assurance, what would it establish? Precisely, as the women realized with dismay, that “He is not here.”

So it’s doubtful the empty tomb translates into empty pews in our day... that it kept many of our acquaintances from worship services on Easter Sunday or today... here or elsewhere. There are countless other more convenient reasons that require less thought.

So if the empty tomb didn’t prove decisive for the disciples’ faith, what did? How about the personal appearances that Jesus made? They were an essential part of the earliest witness. So was Jesus’ breathing on the apostles. He transmitted to them some of His own ways, His mind, and His nature... His Spirit... God’s Spirit.

The disciples’ newly renewed faith was soon to be challenged... It was tested and tried. And it proved to be solid... productive... a living faith that overcame the actions of those who imprisoned them... who would tell anyone who would listen... the amazing action of God in raising His Son. And the Spirit of God... the Holy Spirit... was obviously present in the lives of the disciples. The same scared, cowardly-appearing people who had been with Jesus... and then distanced themselves from Him... were now bold and courageous proclaimers of the Gospel. What a turn-around. They weren’t the same people; were they? No... they had been empowered by the Holy Spirit... and there was no stopping them. They weren’t intimidated by the religious authorities. They spoke boldly and did mighty acts. Even prison bars could not contain them. Nobody could silence them.

As Peter and the other apostles said, “We must obey God rather than men.”

O that we would take their words seriously! No doubt we also would live better... more useful... more exciting lives!
Today's gospel lesson from John (Chapter 20) opens with a series of events that happened on the evening of the day of Jesus's Resurrection... the first Easter Day. The scene is a house in Jerusalem... a building where the disciples are gathered... behind closed doors. Why are the doors closed? For fear of the Jews, John tells us. The doors may also give us some insight into the nature of the Resurrection body of Jesus. It was recognizable and capable of communicating thought. The body of Jesus also appeared and disappeared at will in spite of the closed doors.

The people who met with Jesus in the house in Jerusalem were scared, they were broken, they were disappointed, they were disillusioned. They had been cut adrift and had no place to go. They also deserted Jesus... let Him down. All their hopes... their dreams... their aspirations had disintegrated. What did they have to look forward to? Jesus, in whom they had put their trust, had let them down. Or so it seemed... so they thought.

After Jesus breathed on the disciples in their brokenness... their disillusionment, their dark despair... something wonderful happened to them. The power of God broke through their defeatist attitude... and they began to accept His grace. Great things now happened. In fact, the scared and broken disciples began to do wonderful things. The Book of Acts gives us example after example of ordinary people doing extraordinary things. After hearing Peter's Pentecostal sermon, 3,000 people were converted. Healings became routine. We know the source of these healings and other miraculous acts: God. God provided inspiration, encouragement, power, incentive, and whatever else was needed. He still does.

Do you remember Mary Magdalene's surprise when she went to the tomb on Easter Day and immediately realized that the body of Jesus was not there? When she saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb, she went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him."

Later, Jesus, whom she first thought was the gardener, appeared before her and spoke to her. Only then did she recognize Him. Mary could not find Him because she was looking for a dead Christ. He was not dead, but alive, which she and the others were soon to learn. Mary's search for a dead Christ was unsuccessful... but
fortunately she found the live Christ. Since then, innumerable people have sought the dead Christ. The Christ they know lived in Palestine 2,000 years ago. What He did, what He taught, and what He suffered impress them. Some are deeply moved about His crucifixion... even to the point of becoming emotional about the various events of His passion.

But they don’t have any first-hand experience with the living Lord. It’s only second hand, at best. They don’t walk with Him day by day, they don’t talk to Him regularly, nor do they commune with Him often. This means that their faith, sincere and genuine as far as it goes, does not measure up. A devout Christian has a personal relationship with God. He or she is more concerned about living a Christian life... day in and day out... than in learning about history, theology, or tradition. To him... or her... Christianity is a relationship with a person... with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit... not a theology, not a history, not a list of traditions... not a group of paintings, statuary, or ions, or other symbols. Let me tell you about a distinguished church leader from Birmingham, England. His name was R.W. Dale, and, like me, he was up in years. While preparing an Easter sermon, the thought of the risen Lord broke in upon him as it had never done before. “Christ is alive,” he said to himself... then paused. “Alive!” he repeated and paused again. Then he said again, “Alive! Can this really be true? “Living as I am?” He got up and walked about, repeating “Christ is living! Christ is living!” “To me,” he said, “it was a new discovery. I thought that all along I had believed it; but not until that moment did I feel sure about it. He then said, “My people shall know it; I shall preach about it again and again until they believe it as I do now.” Then also began the custom of singing an Easter hymn every Sunday morning in Carr’s Lane, Birmingham.

What about us? Are we seeking a dead Jesus? Have we found a dead Jesus in history, art, tradition, or symbolism? If so, we are on the wrong track. He is the God of the living... and He is the living God. Mary Magdalene was seeking Jesus among the dead. But the living Jesus found her. May God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit find us. Amen.
Third Sunday of Easter, Year A

FIRST READING: Acts 2: 14a, 36 - 41

PSALM 116:

SECOND READING: 1 Peter 1: 17 - 23


Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.
The Risen Christ on the Road to Emmaus. That’s what today’s gospel lesson is about. But it is more than that. We are receiving a bonus. Luke is giving us something special... both from a literary and a spiritual standpoint. Crammed into 22 verses of his gospel we actually have not one story... but seven. Some of them are very brief... but at the least the outlines or skeletons are there. Earlier in the same chapter we have the women finding Jesus’ tomb empty and telling the 11 and others of their discovery.

As our lesson opens, two men are walking west from Jerusalem toward Emmaus. They are walking toward the sunset. Luke wants us to understand that they were dulled supernaturally, not by preoccupation. Please note that the two men whom Jesus joined were heading toward the sunset. And some suggest that is why they didn’t recognize Jesus. They were walking away from Jerusalem... and the sun was setting. The sunset may have been so brilliant that their quiet visitor was relegated to the shadows.

And why were the two going west? True, they were disappointed, disillusioned, scared, bewildered, lost, and emotionally drained after the Crucifixion of Jesus. Their hopes had been crushed. In their hearts and minds, they had become convinced that Jesus wasn’t the long-awaited Messiah, after all. Perhaps that would explain why the two men were heading west... toward the sunset. This is counter to Christian tradition. A Christian is a person who walks not toward the sunset... but toward the sunrise. (Numbers 21:11).

In the next story in today’s lesson, Jesus shows His ability to make sense out of what appears to His two walking companions to have no meaning. They gave their unexpected guest a brief synopsis of what had happened concerning Jesus of Nazareth, whom they called “a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people” Then they said, “the chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him.” They later told of their dashed hopes. They had looked upon him as the one who would rescue Israel.

What they had viewed as the tragedy of the Cross had robbed them of all hope. Then Jesus told them of the suffering the Christ must bear before entering into glory. He went on to interpret for them what the Scriptures said about the Christ. Then...what had been darkness became light... because Jesus opened their eyes to what the Scriptures said. He told them what was important in life... the meaning of life... what really counts.
The next mini-story in our gospel lesson tells of Jesus’ courtesy to His fellow travelers. Luke tells us He would have gone on after they had reached Emmaus... even though evening was near. He did not force Himself on them. They had free will. But they invited Him into their lives... to be their overnight guest. Jesus accepted their gracious hospitality with gratitude.

Next we read of how Jesus was made known to the two travelers in the breaking of the bread. Does this sound like the Sacrament? Yes, it does. But it isn’t. It is an ordinary meal in an ordinary house where ordinary people are eating. But when an ordinary loaf of bread was being divided, these men recognized Jesus.

It has been suggested that perhaps these men had been present at the feeding of the 5,000 and recognized Jesus’ hands again. This ought to remind us that Jesus’ presence isn’t limited to the Communion table. We can meet Him at the dinner table, too. Of course, He is our host in His Church. He is also the guest in every home. The Christian lives in a Christ-filled world. The world around him isn’t Christ-filled, but his world is.

The next story tells us the reaction of the two men who received the good news from Jesus Himself. How did they respond? With joy and enthusiasm. They found this news too good to keep to themselves. They immediately went on the road again... and walked the seven miles back to Jerusalem. They didn’t consider their good news a matter that they should keep secret. They couldn’t wait to tell others. O that we had such a joyful, confident, attitude!

It’s interesting to read what happened to the two when they reached Jerusalem. They found the 11 gathered together with others. Those they joined also had good news to report... that Jesus was risen. Their experiences were quite similar... and they had much to share.

That’s what Christian fellowship is all about. They were sharing a common experience and a common memory of their Lord. Our experiences are different from theirs in many ways but similar to those we meet on our spiritual journeys.

The last story in today’s gospel lesson is told in a very few words: The Lord is risen, and He has appeared to Simon. Ten words. The Lord is risen, and He has appeared to Simon. We can only imagine how much this personal appearance meant to Peter. We have no details but we know Jesus’ personal visit lifted up his spirit... he who only a few days earlier had denied his Master and Lord... not once... not twice... but three times.
Not only was Jesus’ visit with Peter dramatic…but it turned Peter’s life around. It uplifted his spirit…and it inspired him to do great and wondrous things in the days ahead. Jesus’ visit changed Peter’s impetuous nature into strength and courage…and made him an energetic and faithful apostle. His influence on those around him was tremendous. He became one of the most effective preachers in the Early Church. Can you imagine a simple fisherman with no special skills, training, or education becoming such an eloquent preacher that he converted three thousand persons with his famous sermon on the Day of Pentecost? Isn’t it remarkable…amazing…what the Spirit of God can do with one who submits to His power!

What can we learn from today’s gospel lesson? When the two men who walked with Jesus on the road to Emmaus realized who He was…they didn’t say to themselves that I have enjoyed a wonderful spiritual experience…one that I will always cherish. I fear that’s what many Christians today would say. And it’s a most selfish attitude. Such good news is to be shared. And Jesus’ companions on the road to Emmaus wanted to tell everybody they saw what a great thing had happened to them.

Why do we think that our religious experiences are too personal to share? Or is it possible that we haven’t had any personal religious experiences and therefore we don’t have anything to share? Let me assure you that it’s all right to talk about your faith. Others would like to hear what you have to say. Who knows how much it might mean to them? Sometimes it should be shouted from the housetops. Something special happened to the members of that little Christian community in today’s gospel lesson. Their faith had brought them together. But they were surprised when Jesus made His presence known…at a common everyday meal.

Have we seen Jesus in similar circumstances? Do we see Him in others? Do we look for Him in others? If we saw Him in another person would we recognize Him? If we saw Him…at a gathering…or in someone…would we tell our friends and relatives and others whom we know? Or would that be such a personal religious experience that we would be unwilling to share it?
Third Sunday of Easter, Year B

FIRST READING: Acts 3:12 - 19

PSALM: 4

SECOND READING: 1 John 3: 1 - 7

GOSPEL: Luke 24:36b - 48

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you--that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things."
As the scene opens in today’s gospel lesson from Luke, Jesus is standing among His disciples. These men, whom He had hand-picked for His ministry, were huddled together... filled with fear. In fact, they were so scared that they were hiding together... if that could be possible... behind closed doors.

Their world had collapsed around them. With His constant teaching, inspiration, encouragement, cajoling, and other assistance, they had finally begun to have some understanding of Jesus’ message and to make a conscientious effort to help Him carry it out. They weren’t really doing any great works themselves, but they were growing spiritually and they were becoming a part of His vision for ministry. At least they were functional.

Then came a series of events that would wreck all their hopes and dreams... that would leave this little band leaderless and in disarray. The bubble that had shielded them from outside pressures while at the same time providing them with a nurturing environment... had burst... with a loud bang. For them... all seemed to be lost.

Never mind that it was Jesus who had been betrayed. Why had He chosen Judas, anyway? He may have seen some potential in Judas... but he certainly had many liabilities. Was Judas disillusioned over Jesus? If so, he was not alone. The other disciples had their disappointments, too. The upshot of it is that their Lord and Master had been betrayed... but the disciples felt abandoned. So they fled. Destination: undetermined. But Peter, in particular, probably wanted to go as far away as possible. He felt so terrible after he had denied his Lord... not once... not twice... but three times. How could he have done this?

It would have been difficult to find any of Jesus’ disciples after His arrest... although it’s true that John, the son of Zebedee, appeared at the scene of Jesus’ crucifixion. It was to him that Jesus entrusted His mother Mary. To her, Jesus said, “Woman, behold your son!” And to the disciple John: “Behold your mother!” And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

In defense of the disciples: Yes, they had fled the scene. But, don’t forget, they had felt let down. All four Gospels say that Jesus foretold His own death... but had the disciples really grasped the significance of what this would mean? Were they sure He would let this happen? Would God permit Him to die? And by crucifixion? However, Matthew says Jesus knew he would die by crucifixion... and that He foresaw the same fate for some of His followers.
What a terrible way to die! And what a let-down for His disciples. They weren’t prepared to lose Him... especially to such a lowly and degrading death. Before long... His body is in the tomb... somebody else’s tomb. He doesn’t even have one of His own. What is left for His disciples? No wonder they deserted Him! They are worse off than they would have been had they never met Jesus. Or were they?

Who is this figure... this person... this ghost... who claims to be Jesus? In today’s Gospel lesson, Luke tells us... Jesus Himself stood among them. Who wouldn’t be disconcerted... startled? Then He spoke. “Why are you troubled? And why do questionings rise in your hearts?” It wasn’t that they didn’t want to believe it was their beloved Lord. But they needed some assurances. “See my hands and my feet,” said Jesus. “It is I myself. Handle me and see, for a spirit has no flesh and bones as you see that I have.” And when He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet. And while they disbelieved for joy, He said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave Him a piece of broiled fish, and He took it and ate before them. Then, Luke says, Jesus opened their minds to understand the scriptures and said to them, “Thus it is written that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses to these things.”

Later, Luke tells us, Jesus led the disciples as far as Bethany and blessed them... and then He parted from them. Then the disciples returned to Jerusalem with great joy... and were continually in the temple blessing God.

What a contrast! This scared... and defeated... band of disciples who had deserted Jesus in his hour of need... when the going got tough... had seen the Resurrected Lord... and they believed. They were sure that it was He... and not a ghost... who was in their midst. Incredulity and doubt run through the narratives... but putting emphasis on the physical appearance of Jesus’ body assured the 11 and His other close associates that it was their Lord whom they had seen. In every appearance before them, Jesus either says something or does something that establishes His identity. More than anything else, these appearances were decisive for the disciples’ faith.

A common feature of all these appearances is that they were granted to those who already were followers of Christ. Scripture tells us that “God... made him manifest,” not to all the people but to us who were chosen by
God as witnesses (Acts 10:40-41). The initiative lay with Christ in making Himself visible. Luke tells us (24:34), “He appeared.” According to John, “He revealed Himself.” (21:1-14). The Book of Acts tells us, “He presented himself alive.” (1:3). These appearances were assurances given to those who had previously accepted Him, not proof to compel faith. It was these appearances that transformed the apostles. They seem to have been frequent enough to raise their morals and sustain their interest...but not so often as to be considered routine.

We see quite an obvious difference between the apostles at the time today’s Gospel lesson opens and a few weeks later... after the Ascension of Jesus... and after the Day of Pentecost. This timid, scared, bewildered, band of humanity was transformed into bold, courageous, devout... even eloquent... witnesses to their faith in Jesus Christ. Who would have dreamed that we could be talking about the same people in the Acts of the Apostles? But we are! However, that’s another story. In fact, it’s several other stories.

We spoke of the amazing transformation of the apostles after the crucifixion of Jesus. But it’s even more amazing that those who have not seen Jesus during His post-Resurrection appearance have been won to a faith as great as those who had seen Him. And this has been going on for almost 2,000 years. Otherwise we wouldn’t be here today... and hundreds of millions of Christians wouldn’t be worshiping the God of our fathers... Father, Son, and Holy Spirit... throughout the world today. St. Augustine once said: “Faith is to believe what we do not see; and the reward of this faith is to see what we believe. Do we sincerely believe this? And are we passing this faith on to others by the way we relate to them and by the way we live?
"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."
Before we do anything else... let's set the scene for today's gospel lesson. John tells us it was at the Festival of the Dedication in Jerusalem. The latest great Jewish festival to be founded. The Jewish name is one that we hear often: Hanukkah. It is sometimes called the Festival of Lights. The date of this festival is the 25th day of the Jewish month of Chislew (Kislew), which corresponds to our month of December. So it falls very near our Christmas time, and it is still celebrated by Jews throughout the world.

Do you know the origin of the Festival of Dedication? The king of Syria from 175 to 164 B.C. was named Antiochus Epiphanes, and he liked all things that were Greek. So he decided to destroy the Jewish religion and replace it with Greek ways and thought, Greek religion and gods throughout Palestine. He planned to do this on a low-key basis... and let these new thoughts move into the lives of the Jewish people. But it didn't work out that way. Most of them opposed the king's ideas, remaining loyal to the faith of their ancestors... although there were some who went along with the king.

Because Antiochus Epiphanes' ideas didn't go over well... he toughened his stance... and in 170 B.C. he attacked Jerusalem... killing 80,000 people. A similar number were sold into slavery. The temple treasury was robbed, the Temple courts were profaned, and the Temple chambers were turned into brothels. Antiochus also transformed the great altar of the burnt-offering into an altar to the Olympian god Zeus, and to it he offered swine's flesh to the pagan gods. What a terrible and demeaning series of acts!

Laws were passed that made it unlawful to possess a copy of the law or to circumcise a child. Mothers who permitted their children to be circumcised were crucified with their children clinging to their necks. Things were really at a low ebb. The situation must have seemed hopeless. It was time for heroes to appear on the scene. Judas Maccabaeus and his brother Jonathan led an epic fight for religious freedom, which they won in 154 B.C.

There was much work to be done. The Temple was cleansed and purified. The altar was rebuilt and the robes and utensils were replaced after three years of pollution. The Feast of the Dedication was instituted to commemorate the purification of the Temple. The First Book of Maccabees 4:59 in the Apocrypha tells us: Then Judas Maccabaeus, his brothers, and the whole congregation of Israel decreed that the rededication of the altar should be observed with joy and gladness at the same season each year, for eight days, beginning on the twenty-fifth of Kislew (Chislew).
This is why the festival was sometimes called the Festival of the Dedication of the Altar, and sometimes the Memorial of the Purification of the Temple. It also had another name, the Festival of Lights. There were great illuminations in the Temple, and there were lights in the windows of each Jewish home. One oil light was lit each day for eight days. Devout Jews still do this.

These lights are important for two reasons. First, they were a reminder that at the first celebration of the festival the light of freedom had come back to Israel. Second, they have been traced back to a legend which tells us that when the Temple had been purified and the great seven-branch candlestick re-lit, only one cruse of un-polluted oil could be found. It was still intact, and still sealed with the impress of the ring of the high priest. There was only enough oil to light the cruse for one day. But by a miracle it lasted for eight days... until new oil could be prepared according to the correct formula and had been consecrated for its sacred use.

The location of the discussion between Jesus and the Jews that John writes about in today’s Gospel reading is Solomon’s Porch. The Court of the Gentiles was the court in the Temple precincts. Two rows of magnificent pillars almost 40 feet high and under roof ran along the court. People strolled there to pray and meditate. Rabbis walked there to talk to their students. It was here that Jesus was walking, according to John. A roof protecting people from cold weather made this a good meeting place.

As Jesus walked, the Jews came to Him. In fact, they may have forced themselves on Him... surrounding Him... or boxing Him in. What were their motives? Mixed. Mixed. Obviously... some were there to celebrate that great and glorious festival. And, to the devout, it was a red letter day... a significant event in their religious history and heritage. Some of the religious leaders wanted to know more about Jesus, who He was, and how He fit into the religious spectrum. However, there were others who wanted to trap Jesus. They were interested in a confrontation... and trick questions or twisting of His responses were to be expected. That’s the way they operated... and they were looking to find a way to charge Him with blasphemy in their own courts... or insurrection, which would be handled by the Roman authorities. Either way of dealing with Jesus would be equally acceptable to this group. They were intent in getting Him out of the way. He was causing problems... and they were ready to deal with Him... whatever it took.
"How long will you keep us in suspense?" the Jews asked. "If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." "I told you," answered Jesus, "and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep."

The Jews were correct when they said Jesus and not told them plainly who He was. True, He had made hints but had not said publicly that He was the Messiah. He had revealed His person and mission to the woman at the well (4:26). She said: "I know that the Messiah is coming; when He comes He will show us all things." Then Jesus told her: "I who speak to you am He."

Jesus also revealed His identity and His role to the man born blind (9:37). After He healed the man, Jesus asked him if he believed in the Son of Man. He answered, "And who is He, sir, that I may believe in Him?" Jesus said to him. "You have seen Him, and it is He who speaks to you." He said, "Lord, I believe; and he worshiped Him."

If Jesus revealed His identity only to the woman at the well and the man blind from birth, how could He tell the Jews He had told them and they did not believe? The answer is found in (5:36), in what He said in a dispute that took place after the healing of a cripple on the Sabbath. At that time He said that the Father bore witness to the Son whom He had sent, by means of the works which He enabled Him to do. In today's reading, Jesus repeats that statement, adding that the unbelief of His hearers shows that they are incapable of recognizing Him... by nature and by disposition. He illustrates His point by bringing in the figure of the shepherd. Those who are spiritually capable of recognizing the true Messiah will follow Him as the flock follows the shepherd. The Messiah inaugurates the kingdom of God, which is a spiritual gift—eternal life. Jesus says further that I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. Those who belong to Jesus are the Father's gift to Him. They are not only in Jesus' care... they are in the Father's care, too. And the Father is all-powerful. This means that no one can wrest the followers of Jesus from God's hand. God's love has a firm grip on His followers... and He will continue to keep us in His hand. Jesus assures us of this. He speaks with confidence. And He speaks from experience. Jesus and the Father enjoy a shepherd-sheep relationship, too. But it's even more intimate than that. It's unique because, as Jesus tells us, I and the Father are one.
Most of us have no special knowledge of understanding of sheep. Nor do we see any obvious similarities between their behavior and our… or their needs and ours. But we do know that the Old Testament is full of images of the flock (the people) and the shepherd (God). Let’s take a look at a few of these references. We’ll begin with Psalm 23. After all, it’s probably the most familiar psalm to all of us. And we heard it again a few minutes ago. It starts this way: The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul; he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his Name’s sake. That’s the first half of it. You probably could repeat the other half without any help.

The prophet Jeremiah (23:1-4) warns against shepherds who don’t give the sheep the care they need. “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” says the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: You have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, not be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, says the Lord.”

I call your attention to a legend the Jewish people have about Moses. It tells how God chose him to lead his people. It goes back to the time when Moses was tending the flocks of his father-in-law, Jethroe the priest of Midian. A lamb ran away. Moses followed it until it ended up in a ravine, where it found a spring. When Moses reached it, he said, “I did not know you ran away because you were thirsty. Now you must be weary.” He put the lamb on his shoulder and carried it back, according to the legend. “Because you have shown pity in leading back one of a flock belonging to a man,” God is reported to have said, “you shall lead my flock Israel.” Of course, this is only a legend, but it tells us that the character of the shepherds should reflect the unceasing vigilance of the love of God and the shepherd’s duty to his fellow men, women, and children…especially if they hold any office in the church of God.

Sheep were raised in Palestine mainly for their wool and a shepherd and a flock often spent year after year together. In the case of many sheep, they had the same shepherd for 10 years or more… from infancy until death. This shepherd devoted himself fully to the sheep. He looked after all their needs. It was a lonely life…
and it was impossible for the shepherd to obey the Law because of all the ritual hand-washings it required. And the shepherd was looked down upon by other people, especially the religious leaders.

As in the Old Testament, the leaders of the New Testament church are also shepherds, and the people are the flock. The shepherd is not to be motivated by power or money. He is to be an example (Acts 20:20) for other Christians to follow. Jesus is the Good Shepherd and the best example anyone can have.

Shepherds and sheep also figure in Christ's statement in today's gospel lesson that "I am the door." In the towns and villages of Palestine there were communal sheep-folds. All the village flocks were kept there when they returned from the pasture in the evening. They were kept behind a strong door, the key to which only one person had. This is the door to which Jesus refers when He says, "I am the door." He can and does give us what the world cannot. Through Him we can enter into the peace that passes all understanding. Through Him we can have a life that has purpose and meaning... an abundant life. Through the door... Jesus... we can attain unlimited spiritual blessings. Without Him life can be empty... and meaningless.

Being a member of Jesus' flock puts some responsibility on us. We must look out for others. We are called on to help them... that their needs can be met. Our lives are to be filled with service to others. Jesus asked who is the most important, the one who sits at table, or the one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at table?

But I come among you as one who serves.

As members of Jesus' flock... we are called on to love our neighbor as ourself. Obviously this is not easy to do. But if we can't greet our fellow Christians with a friendly smile and warm handshake or a hug there must be something missing in our lives. Have we been misinformed? Or are we where we should be? How many times have Christians been given the silent treatment when they come into a new fellowship? It's very difficult for some members to accept them. And what if he or she is "different" from our pre-conceived ideas of what they should be like? This sometimes makes what should be a routine matter one of great concern.

Should members of the family of God receive an enthusiastic welcome wherever they worship? Yes. But do they? Not necessarily. Accepting a newcomer can be a heart-rending experience.

Let us pray that we are not stumbling blocks. After all, we are members of the same flock. We have the same shepherd. And we enter the church fellowship through the same door. Amen.
At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one."
As today's gospel lesson from John opens, we are told that the Jews were celebrating the Feast of the Dedication in the Temple at Jerusalem. This was a day of remembrance when the Jews called to mind the great deeds of their forefathers who had won and protected their freedom for them. They also gave thanks to God... for His grace and His goodness, which were vital to their many great triumphs over the centuries.

This winter celebration, which lasts eight days, is still held today. It is best known now as Hanukkah or the Festival of Lights. The ceremonial lighting of candles, an additional one on each day of the feast, has taken on significance, especially since the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 A.D. A legend in the Babylonian Talmud reports that a small quantity of Temple oil burned for a miraculously long time until new oil could be consecrated. Attention is called to this in the ceremonial lighting of candles.

In the days of worship in the Temple there was a joyous celebration such as the one Jesus attended and to which the gospel writer John calls attention. Hanukkah is not a feast prescribed by the law but it has been observed without interruption... and in recent times it has come to exert greater religious influence than before. Many families now carry out this rite in their homes. Festive celebrations of dedication in Israel, especially with respect to the Temple, probably date back to the days of Solomon. However, it was the re-consecration of the Temple in 165 B.C. by Judas the Maccabee, after its desecration by the Greeks, that led to the establishment of the annual Feast of Dedication. And dedication of the new altar in particular was the center of attention for the first observance.

Thanksgiving and praise were two of the most notable characteristics of the celebration on this Jewish Day of Remembrance... or Hanukkah, if you prefer. And the fact that Jesus was there tells us that at least one worshiper put His heart and soul into the service. When He was with God, thanksgiving set the tone for His worship.

In the early church... thanksgiving to God for His kindness and for His continuing grace to an often nondescript group of believers seemed to be at the forefront of their services. In the Acts of the Apostles we find that a Christian service is a meeting for thanksgiving in which the congregation, assured of its salvation, would with one mind and mouth sing praise to God as one great choir.
The services in the Upper Room must have shown great religious fervor as the little band of Jesus’ followers… in the words of Luke… “with one accord devoted themselves to prayer.” Of course, this would have to have been after they had gone through a period of being perplexed… and anxious… and downright scared. When Peter stood up to ask for the replacement of Judas Iscariot as an apostle, it would appear that this happened at a worship service rather than at a meeting. (Could you imagine something like this happening at a vestry meeting?) In any event… after prayerful consideration… they cast lots and Matthias was elected. I remember one time at a diocesan convention when someone stood up and asked that the people nominated for office be elected by the casting of lots. The person making the suggestion was practically laughed out of the hall.

Then in Acts came Peter’s Pentecostal sermon… and the huge ingathering of souls. These were exciting times and one can feel safe in saying that thanksgiving and gratitude to God were uppermost on their hearts and minds. And… quoting from Acts… “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” Still quoting from Acts: “And fear came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs were done through the disciples. And all who believed were together and had all things in common.”

So… that’s how things were for a while in the early church. Somehow over the centuries many congregations seem to have lost their enthusiasm for worship… or perhaps it would be more accurate to say enthusiasm and an attitude of thanksgiving seem to be missing from their worship. Back in the old days… in the early church… the people seemed to take their cue from the psalmist (Ps. 100) who wrote: Enter his gates with thanksgiving; go into his courts with praise; give thanks to him and call upon his name.” This is from our psalm of the day… Psalm 100. Perhaps we should quote the rest of it because it seems so appropriate. Here are the other three verses:

Be joyful in the Lord, all you lands;
Serve the Lord with gladness
And come before his presence with a song.

Know this: The Lord himself is God;
He himself has mad us, and we are his;
We are his people and the sheep of his pasture.

For the Lord is good:
His mercy is everlasting;
And his faithfulness endures from age to age.
The words of this psalm seem to set the natural mood for worship... and add zip to it. First thoughts of the people seemed to be that they wanted to bless and praise God.

To this day... the Jewish service opens with a noble act of adoration and thanksgiving. It has been suggested that the Christian had... has... far more to be thankful for than his father ever knew. We have Jesus Christ. In Him we have been redeemed... uplifted... and ennobled. The early Christians knew that they were sinners... saved sinners or sinners being saved. They were aware of the dangers they faced. They were conscious of their own frailties and imperfections. But they were extremely conscious of the grace of God, from which they benefited greatly. It caught and held their attention. And so, said Clement of Alexandria, “the prayer of a Christian is a thanksgiving. The very function of such a one is thanksgiving, and a pleading for the conversion of his neighbors. ... He rejoices in the good he has, and in what is promised, as if it were already present; ...and is well pleased with all that happens, persuaded that the affairs of the universe are managed in the best way, and so has little or no petition.”

They seem to take care of the little things... like their own relationship with God... and with their neighbors... and to trust God for whatever else they needed. Perhaps we could learn from them. In those days, it was said that praise and thanksgiving and happiness in worship were taken as the characteristic and sure marks of a true Christian. These were the qualities and attributes that separated Christians from others. But that doesn’t seem to be the case for now. A more sober form of worship evolved. It would be difficult to say with certainty why this has happened. The fact that many of us have not had a personal experience of Christ... as the first Christians did... certainly would have a bearing on this. In addition... we have heard the gospel so often that we accept it as a matter of course... routinely... as we accept the senses of sight and hearing and other natural phenomena.

In any event... our gratitude to God... and our thanksgiving for Jesus Christ aren’t reflected with the same enthusiasm in worship as they once were. Need I remind you that Jesus always seemed to be thanking God for something... His daily bread... His friends... and sometimes for people and situations that seemed to be liabilities rather than assets. He could see beyond our infirmities... our weaknesses... our sinfulness.
It is also true that our form of public worship was designed by the Reformers, who patterned after the form used by the Roman Catholics...and that their worship put great emphasis on penitence and confession. So... obviously much of that attitude has rubbed off on us.

But let us not forget that the Greek word for Eucharist, the central act of Christian worship, means thanksgiving. It may be explained either by the fact that at its institution Christ “gave thanks” (I Cor. 11:24; Matt 26:27 and in other references) or by the fact that the service itself is the supreme act of Christian thanksgiving.

There are four accounts of the institution of the Eucharist, one by St. Paul in I Corinthians, and three in the gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. There is no record of it in John but its existence is suggested (6:32-58). We know that from a very early date the Holy Eucharist was a regular part of Christian worship. So... even though our form of worship includes confession and penitence... as a worshiper our attitude should be one of thanksgiving. We do need to confess our sins... we do need to be sorry for them... we do need to be forgiven... and we do need to be renewed.

But our attitude before, during and after the Holy Eucharist, should be one of thanksgiving... giving thanks for our many blessings... giving thanks for our redemption... giving thanks for the presence of Jesus Christ in our lives.

Thanks be to God.
Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year A

FIRST READING: Acts 7:55-60

PSALM: 31

NEW TESTAMENT: 1 Peter 2:2 - 10

GOSPEL: John 14:1 - 14

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him."

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. I believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it."
Chapter 14 of the Book of John, from which our gospel lesson is taken, is filled with a series of statements, which Jesus makes to comfort His disciples. And they are in great need of cheering up. Their lives... their world... is about to collapse. Trust in God is their only hope... and it’s hanging by a thin thread.

They don’t understand what has happened. They don’t know what looms on the horizon. So it’s up to Jesus not only to comfort them... but also to give them a crash course on what lies ahead. Will they understand?

Were the disciples gripped with fear? Wouldn’t you have been? Where is Jesus going? Where I am going,” He tells them, “you cannot come.”

Then, says Jesus, “Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.”

This is a deep, dark hour for the disciples; Jesus tells them to believe in God and also to believe in Him. God is willing to give them... and us... everything that He has. Jesus Himself is the proof. God did not withhold anything... not even His only beloved Son! That’s what God’s love is all about. It’s so amazing that we can’t really understand it.

Jesus also speaks of the many rooms... places... He has gone to prepare for us. He has gone on ahead to get places ready for us that where He is we might also be. Isn’t this a wonderful promise? Life with Jesus... life with God... eternally... forever. And what about the places that Jesus... as the advance man... the trailblazer... has prepared for us? He has gone to great effort... He has endured tremendous pain and suffering... literally... to make ready a place for us. He has also done His very best to be inclusive. There’s plenty of room... but in order to assure us a reserved place of abode... we must be one of His followers. We must follow Him. Yes, He has paved the way for us. But in order to spend eternity with Him, we must be a follower of Him. Simply stated: We must follow Him.

Jesus also tells us that he who believes in me will do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do because I go to the Father. This is an incredible promise: That believers in Jesus... His disciples... will do the works that He does... and greater works. What does Jesus mean?
We’re very aware of the fact that the early church had a powerful ministry of healing. Those with a gift of healing laid hands on the ailing and they were cured. This was not uncommon. Paul tells us that various Christians had this gift. The early church did things that Jesus did. But greater things?

Certainly Jesus healed numerous people during His days on earth... but He did all this in a small geographical area. After He went to the Father, His influence... and His inspiration... were no longer limited to those who lived nearby. He could help an unlimited number of people. Not only that... but His disciples could reach larger numbers of people as Christianity... and His influence and inspiration... spread. It’s a time when the Holy Spirit played a significant role in the healing ministry of the early church and in later centuries.

It’s certainly true that Jesus Christ has influenced more people... inspired more people... than any other person in the history of the world. This is especially noticeable in the lives of those who suffer from disease and other ailments. Physicians and surgeons and researchers and others now have powerful weapons with which to fight these ailments. None of their techniques and powers would have been dreamed of in ancient times. Pain and disease are being fought with treatments... techniques... medicines... and skills that would have seemed miraculous in the ancient world. As a matter of fact... some of them might seem miraculous to us even now.

So the inspiration of Christ over the centuries has been of tremendous significance. And no doubt many of those involved in such medical treatment and research aren’t even aware of who it was who started such a ministry... nor do they know who is the source of healing and curing of patients today. Healing is their doing, many think. But we know better; don’t we? Healing is of God. Jesus began his healing ministry almost 2,000 years ago. And it wasn’t limited to physical ailments... even then.

Now let’s take a further look at Jesus’ words about preparing a place for us. “When I go and prepare a place for you,” He says, “I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way where I am going.”

In response to Thomas’ remark about not knowing where He was going and not knowing the way there... Jesus said: “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me.”

This leads to the question of how can we be assured of spending eternity with Jesus? The answer: By following Him. Literally. By doing what He tells us to do. Amen.
Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year B

FIRST READING: Acts 8:26 - 40

PSALM: 22

SECOND READING: 1 John 4:7 - 21

GOSPEL: John 15: 1 - 8

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.
As you're probably aware, we're still in the Decade of Evangelism in the Episcopal Church. I haven't seen any printed information on the subject for some time so I really don't know precisely where we are. But I'm sure that... over the years... you have been reminded that one of the great needs of the church is evangelism. How many programs have we had that were designed to bring others to Christ? What kind of results have they produced? Have there been some successes? Has this congregation been able to build on them? Or have we, as a congregation, held back... waiting rather than proceeding? Has the spark that seems necessary to get things moving been absent? Does that mean we're on shaky ground when it comes to articulating our faith? Many modern day Christians are. They aren't comfortable talking about their faith... even to their friends. They consider it too personal. And they certainly wouldn't dare talk about their faith to people they don't know. Such attitudes could be at the heart of at least two problems:

1—Inability to grow spiritually as individual Christians and as communities of faith.

2—Failure to attract others to our existing congregations or to be effective and influential in forming new ones.

Why were the early Christians so effective in spreading the Christian faith? The first reason is that their lives had been changed. No longer were they like they used to be. They were changed... for the better. They were new persons... their old selves had died... their new selves had appeared on the scene. They were born again... as Jesus told Nicodemus he had to be. Nicodemus had been a member of the congregation all his life, and one of its leaders for many years, but he had never experienced a spiritual rebirth. He was still the same old person he had always been.

When our lives change... when we experience a spiritual rebirth... the lives we live begin to attract attention. Those around us will see the love of God and neighbor which we demonstrate in our everyday lives and be attracted to us. It's there for all the world to see. Like the typical early Christians, we'll have something other people will recognize as being worthwhile... and they'll want to join us.

In the second century Tertulian wrote: See how these Christians love one another! See how these Christians love one another! And that's why Christianity spread like it did.

And they talked about their faith... what it meant to them... how it had changed their lives... the effect of
a confrontation with Jesus Christ, whether it was brought about by a personal encounter or through one of the apostles, or another follower. Case in point:

Our lesson today is from the Acts of the Apostles. Philip was a devout and enthusiastic Christian. He was on fire with the life and message of Jesus. God directed him to go southward by the desert route. He had an urge to go up to the man journeying by chariot. And when he saw that the eunuch was reading... he entered into conversation with him. At his invitation, Philip climbed up on the chariot, explained the passage from Isaiah to the eunuch and preached Jesus to him. Then, at his host's request, he baptized him and the Spirit of God took Philip away from the scene. The eunuch was rejoicing... and Philip moved on to the other towns to preach the gospel.

Philip found a man sincerely and diligently seeking something. Philip... with a prompting by God... realized this. He ministered to his spiritual thirst for information... then he preached to him... and later baptized him. Phillip lived the life of a devout Christian. He had a receptive ear... and the eunuch had a receptive mind. So when he talked to the eunuch... good things really happened.

What if Philip and the other early Christians had functioned like many modern Christian? I think the results would have been predictable... and disastrous: After a few years... after the death of the most devout... and most vocal... the entire movement would probably have collapsed. What had begun as an enthusiastic, dedicated, and highly motivated band of Christians would have lost zeal... influence... heart... and energy. No longer would the early Christians have boldly proclaimed the Good News of the gospel. No longer would they have identified completely with their risen Lord. No longer would their faith be so strong that they had to share it with whomever they met... wherever they were. And if that's what had happened, the successors to these pioneers in the Christian faith would not have had anything to talk about... or the inclination to spread the gospel.

When are we modern day Christians going to start talking to others about our faith? And further, when are we going to start sharing it with others? Someday? Someday is vague... and it doesn’t demand anything... but, to some, it offers at least the possibility of hope.

The word “someday” recently attracted the attention of the writer of an article in a church publication... causing him to suggest that we have a “Someday Week.” He reasoned that there are already so many observances
during the year on various and sundry topics that one more wouldn't be out of line. The article noted that scarcely a week passes that one does not say, "Someday... we'll do this... or do that." Someday is the day we're going to take the family, or just the grandchildren to the zoo, or Sea World, or Disneyland. Or someday is the day we are going to turn off the television set and read a good book so we'll really learn something new.

Then the writer asks this penetrating question: What would this world be like today if the apostles had answered our Lord's call to follow Him by saying "Someday?" For this congregation... and the other congregations of the North Central Cluster... "Someday" is here. Now is the acceptable time. For many years we've had more people leaving us than joining our congregations. How many clergy have served here in the last 20 years? Do you view the congregation as a pyramid with the clergy at the pinnacle? Some still do... even though the system has been in revision for several years. It hasn't really changed everywhere, but we're working at it. The make-up of a congregations should be viewed as a circle... with Jesus Christ in the center and a worshiping community of laity and clergy together, gathered around and ministering to each other. We come together in God's house on the Lord's day... to commune with God, to receive His pardon and strengthening power, to hear His holy gospel and then to go out into the community to act on it for the next six days. That's why we need to keep coming back... for strength and renewal... as well as to receive the fellowship of those who worship with us.

Remember our Maundy Thursday meal, Eucharistic celebration and time of fellowship together? We came together to worship... to confess our sins... to receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ... to enjoy fellowship with fellow Christians... to ask God to strengthen our faith and renew our lives. These are some of the most important aspects of our communal life... our life together... loving God and neighbor... and ministering to the needs of others.

Would that our lives would be as receptive as Philip's were to the needs of the eunuch. And would that those with whom we come in contact be as receptive as the inquiring mind of the eunuch! Amen.
Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year B

FIRST READING: Acts 10:44 - 48

PSALM: 98

SECOND READING: 1 John 5:1 - 6

GOSPEL: John 15:9 - 17

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."
How often has someone told you that he or she is looking for a challenge? Or that their job is no longer challenging? Or that school—or a specific class—is boring? That’s another way of saying it offers no challenge.

But I have a feeling we’re all likely to back off from some of the challenges Jesus is giving us in today’s gospel lesson from John. After commanding us to love one another as He has loved us, He immediately reminds us of an overwhelming fact: Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Now if we’re looking for a challenge, that would be one!

Who can love as Christ has loved? Who can give as He has given? The answer is: Nobody. Yet... on the other hand... we can hardly claim to be a follower of Jesus Christ if we don’t do what He tells us to do. If we do what Jesus tells us to do, we’re far more than a lukewarm follower of His... we’re his friend. And, if we’re His friend, we’re somebody extra special!

The old Testament tells us (Deu. 34:5) that Moses was the servant or the slave of God. In the Greek the word is Dulos. And it was not a title of shame. On the contrary, it was a title of highest honor. Very few people in the Bible attained that title. Moses, Joshua (24:29), and David (Psalm 89:20) were proud to be called the slaves of God. The apostle Paul (Titus 1:1) considered it an honor to be called a slave of God. So did James (1:1). Paul begins his letter to Titus this way: “Paul, a servant (or slave) of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, to further the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of the truth which accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life, which God who never lies, promised ages ago and at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by command of God our Savior; to Titus, my true child in a common faith: Grace and peace from God the Father and Jesus Christ our Savior.”

James is not to be outdone. This is the way our Lord’s brother identifies himself in the letter of James: “James a servant (or slave) of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the dispersion: Greeting.” James certainly doesn’t sound like he considers himself a second-class citizen, either. He’s pleased to be playing this role of servant or slave.

This might be of interest to someone looking for a challenge: Jesus speaks of a higher calling for those who love Him... for those who serve Him... those who do what He commands them to do. He calls those who obey His commands friends. “No longer do I call you servants (or slaves),” says Jesus, “for the servant (or slave)
does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.” Jesus offers us an intimacy with God that even the greatest of men never knew before He came into the world. Being a friend of God is a term that was known in Biblical times…but few ever attained this distinction. Isaiah the prophet (41:8) tells us that our spiritual father Abraham was a friend of God. And, in the book of Wisdom (7:27), Wisdom is said to make men the friends of God.

The Eastern kings and Roman emperors used to have a select group of men called the friends of the king or the friends of the emperor. They had access to the king, or emperor, at all times. They could go to his bedchamber at the beginning of the day. It was to them that he talked even before meeting with his generals, his princes, and his diplomats. It was with these men that the kings and emperors had their closest and most intimate contacts.

It’s a wonderful thing to have friends. We don’t always know who are friends are…and sometimes we find that someone we thought was our friend really is not a friend at all. In fact, the opposite is the case. We usually learn who our friends are when the going is tough…when it really counts. An old Italian proverb says it very eloquently: A true friend is a treasure. A true friend is a treasure.

We can discuss anything we wish with a good friend. Nothing is too far out or too personal to talk about…as far as a good friend is concerned. He or she wants to be helpful. A good friend is a good listener. A good friend doesn’t tell us what to do. A good friend has broad shoulders and big ears, but his or her lips are sealed. All of us could benefit from a large number of good friends but the sad truth is that most people have only one or two or three. And that’s a main reason why a friend is so important.

In our relationship with Jesus, we can be assured of His interest in us…that we can always come to Him. It’s never too early…or too late. He always offers us His friendship…but sometimes we’re reluctant to accept it. Yes, He’s our friend…but are we His friends? This is up to us. Jesus doesn’t force His friendship on anyone.

Don’t forget: Jesus has called us to be His friends and friends of God. That’s a higher calling than a king or an emperor could ever offer us. We don’t have to think of God as a distant figure… we don’t have to gaze longingly at God from afar. We are not like slaves who can’t enter into our Master’s presence. No. We are far more than that. No longer is Jesus a distant stranger…unless we ourselves keep him away. He wants to be our
close friend. In fact, He offers us the opportunity to be His partner. And this is a role to which a slave could never aspire. A slave was defined in Greek law as a living tool. A slave’s master never shared his life, his hopes, or his dreams with him. He told the slave what to do and he did it. But he didn’t tell him why, nor did he explain how. But Jesus is telling us that we are not His slaves... that He wants us as His partners. He wants to share His mind with us. He wants to share Himself... His life... with us. Of course, we can decline to be His partners. He doesn’t force us to accept this role of being a partner in the work of leading the world to God. But don’t you think He would be sadly disappointed in us if we turned Him down?

So we’re called to be a friend of God... a partner with Jesus is His work. But that’s not all. There’s more: Jesus has also called us to be His ambassadors. “I have chosen you,” He said, “to send you out.” He did not choose us that we might live in isolation. He did not choose us that we might withdraw from the world. No. He called us to represent Him in the world. First, He called us to come to Him: “Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Matt. 11:28). “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” (Matt. 24:34).

But Jesus also told us to go... and that is the thrust of what He calls on us to do. It is summed up quite succinctly in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20): Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”

We are to love one another... as He has loved us. Greater love has no man than this, that a many lay down his life for his friends. If we love Him... we will do what He commands us to do. Then we’ll become his friends... and more. We’ll be His ambassadors! Friends of God! Partners with Jesus! Ambassadors for Jesus!

Do we need any further challenges?
This quotation from today’s gospel lesson from John tells us what Christianity... the Christian life... our life together... is all about. But before we look at this new commandment that our Lord Jesus Christ has called on us to keep, let us first examine what has led to it.

As the Father has loved me, Jesus says, I have loved you. John presents Divine love... the love of God for His Son Jesus... as the life to which we Christians are called. God, who loved His Son dearly, sent Him into the world to be its Savior. This love was ultimately to require a supreme act of sacrifice. The Father’s love is absolute... and absolute love is the model of Jesus’ love for His disciples, whom the Father has given Him. “As the Father has loved me,” says Jesus, “I have loved you.” Now it’s up to the disciples to accept that love... and further... to continue in it. They are to follow His teachings and observe His commandments as He has observed His Father’s commandments... even to acceptance of the cross. In this way, they... we... will be able to continue in the Father’s love.

Jesus demonstrates His love by laying down His life for those whom He loves. And, as He puts it, “Greater love has no man than this, that a many lay down his life for his friends.” Use of the word “friends” here is extra special. Members of this new community of Christ... that means us... are to love one another in the way that Jesus has loved them... loved us. Jesus is laying down His life for His friends. If His disciples are loyal to Him... obey Him... He gives them a new designation: Friends. We might hope to be servants or slaves of God... but that would probably be all that we would expect. But Jesus calls those who love Him friends... friends of God. That’s special. That puts us in select company, with our spiritual father Abraham, for example, whom Scripture honors as “friend of God.”

What’s the difference between a servant or slave of God and a friend of God? A great deal. Jesus says that the servant doesn’t know what his master is doing... but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from the Father I have made known to you.

To repeat: Jesus said that we are His friends if we do what He commands us to do. What does He mean by friendship? Other religious leaders and thinkers have gone to great lengths to expand and enlarge the concept of friendship... but Jesus outdoes them all, regardless of how noble their thoughts are. To Him, true friendship
involves a drawing to... and attraction to... another person. Such relationships develop because of a kinship of spirit more radical than the surface differences between them.

The key concept of friendship... as far as Jesus is concerned... is that we expend oneself for another. Not only are we to do this ungrudgingly... but without counting the cost. And what is our attitude to be? We are to be joyful people, eager and ready to help, ready to give and give and give... even our life, if necessary... to aid and save a friend. Friendship also involves opening our whole heart and mind to another... without shyness and without being secretive. If we’re someone’s friend... we must be willing to let him or her see us as we really are... warts and all... not as we seem to be when we’re on our very best behavior. Perhaps it would cover the situation if I said we don’t play games... or we don’t act out any selfish desires we might have. In true friendship there is a trust in the other that believes in him or her, never doubting... but always having confidence in the other person. Christ is calling us to more than mere obedience. That’s what a slave would be called to. We’re called to a higher, warmer, more intimate relationship. We’re called to be friends of Christ.

Now back to Christ’s commandment to love one another... as He has loved us... sometimes referred to as “the 11th Commandment.” How does it differ from the Second Commandment? It says that we are to love our neighbor as ourself. In today’s Gospel lesson Jesus tells us that we are to love one another “as I have loved you.”

The quality of Jesus’ condescending, gracious, and sacrificial love is to be a model for His disciples in their relations with each other. He considers it so important that He makes it a commandment. God has a right to make such demands of mankind. Jesus is God... the Word of God incarnate. He is also our Master and Lord. So He has the authority to set the conditions for discipleship. So we should walk in the way He has walked and do as He has done... embodying in His person and death the goodness that pleases God.

So it behooves us not only to love one another... but also to live actively and intentionally for each other... serving our fellow Christians... ministering to their needs. This is agape love... in which we offer the very best that we have to minister to the needs of others. We want the best for those around us... and we are to go to great lengths to see that they receive it. We are not to seek personal glory or prestige... but rather to be an advocate for others... to look out for them. If that requires us to be humble ourselves... so be it. As Jesus says: “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”
Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year C

FIRST READING: Acts 16:9 – 15

PSALM: 67

SECOND READING: Revelation 21:10, 22 - 22:5

GOSPEL: John 14:23 - 29

Jesus answered him [Judas, not Iscariot], "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, "I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe."
Today’s gospel lesson is taken from Jesus’ farewell address. It is so full of His teachings, of Himself, and of His promises for the future that we won’t have time to cover it all… but that doesn’t mean we’ll have any shortage of material. Much of today’s passage deals with Jesus’ promise of the Holy Spirit. He said, “If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.” And further: “The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things.”

These statements open up an entire new realm of possibilities… of opportunities… for the Christian. When we stand up and proclaim our faith… as we will do in a few minutes… we will say these words, found in the Nicene Creed: We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the prophets.

Now back to Jesus’ farewell address in John: How can Christ manifest Himself to us in a way that others cannot share? How can He make Himself known to us… but not to others? Jesus’ answer to Judas was really the same statement He had previously made: If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him. Then comes this startling statement: And we will come to him and make our home with him.

God to live in my heart! Isn’t this amazing? But with this great news come some awesome responsibilities. What sort of preparations have we made to welcome God? Will He find our hearts to be repositories of love? Is there a sign of welcome? Or do we put limits on what’s open to God? Are there areas of our lives that we don’t want God to occupy?

What do we have to offer God? For obvious reasons… a believing heart would be a necessity. People with little to offer God… but who do so freely… have been generously rewarded. On the other hand, those who don’t believe… who don’t have a believing heart… don’t have anything to offer God. Even God can’t dwell someplace where there is no room for Him… where there is no place for Him… or where He is not wanted.

But in the new era, of which Christ speaks, God in all His fullness dwells in the believing disciple who enters into Communion with Christ. Obedience to Christ is required. Later this is described as a triple relationship. Jesus said I am in the Father and the Father in me. That life of diving fellowship is to be extended to include believers in them. You will know that I am in my Father, and you in me and I in you. Then Jesus
opens up a vision of a still wider fellowship. It includes those who come into the faith through the disciples’ testimony, “that they may all be one, even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they may also be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.”

This mystical communion is also an ethical fellowship. Two conditions are put on this new life of the church: Obedience and love. If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me does not keep my words.

As Jesus expressed it, the full mission of the Holy Spirit would lie in the future... after Jesus has been glorified. This, of course, has come about. After the Resurrection of Jesus, the apostles received the bestowal of the Holy Spirit in the Upper Room. The Book of Acts also tells us that the Holy Spirit fell on the apostles on the Day of Pentecost... and some dramatic changes took place in their lives. This small band of followers... who had undergone a series of anxious moments... who were so scared they didn’t know what to do... became bold witnesses to the Resurrected Christ... preaching and teaching and healing and witnessing for Him... regardless of the ever-present dangers that they faced. They also became eloquent preachers and teachers of the Christian Gospel. What a change had come over them! And in a matter of a few days. How could this be? The hows and whys and wherefores will remain a holy mystery. We cannot point to them and analyze them... but we should harbor no doubt that this was the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. And this is a matter that the apostles were quick to recognize and to call attention to... for they were plain ordinary people who were doing extraordinary things. They were doing things they were not capable of doing. They became over-achievers... thanks to the power of the Holy Spirit and thanks to the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

The Book of Acts tells us that the apostles were conscious of receiving direct communications from the Spirit. (11:12, 16:6f) The Spirit also shared with the apostles on the questions of the law (Acts 15:25) on the matter of what foods they were permitted to eat. And even more noticeable... and more dramatic... the gift of the Spirit was conveyed from the apostles to others through the imposition of their hands (Acts 8:15f, 19:6).

When Peter and John laid their hands on believers in Samaria, those being ministered to received the Holy Spirit. In a similar situation, Paul laid hands on several persons at Corinth who had received only the baptism of John. They were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus and when Paul laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit
came on these believers. In our tradition, we’re familiar with the laying on of hands at confirmation. At ordination, and at healing services. So, you see, there is a connection between the laying on of hands and the presence of God... the Spirit of God... the Holy Spirit.

Paul would be quick to say there is much more to Christ than he (Paul) realized. That I may know him was his constant prayer as he became deeply involved...as we was led into uncharted waters...as he experienced more and more of the Lord of his life. Like us, he had Jesus’ personal promise that the Holy Spirit will teach us all things...that the Spirit will lead us on and on and deeper and deeper...sometimes into areas that are mind-boggling. What has the Holy Spirit done for us? What is He doing for us?

Have you ever been so tired... so exhausted... that you felt you couldn’t go on? But you experienced a calmness... a peace that took over...and you became conscious of a burst of energy and enthusiasm? Nothing you, yourself, did could have brought this about. But did it occur to you that the Spirit of God could come to your aid when you had virtually given up?

Have you wrestled with a problem that seemed to have no solutions...and after long agonizing moments...the solution was revealed to you? You didn’t solve the problem...but after turning it over to God...His spirit broke through and presto! Your problem was resolved. It wasn’t avoided. You couldn’t possibly work it out...but don’t underestimate God...who still moves in mysterious ways. Don’t forget...there have been countless miracles since the days of the apostles. Miracles didn’t end with the Biblical writers.

Jesus said: The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things. Are we open to the Holy Spirit? Jesus was speaking in the future tense... and we are aware that the Holy Spirit came into the lives of the early Christians. But do we look forward to the Holy Spirit... the Spirit of God... to give us strength? To give us courage? To empower us? To get us through our problems...not to help us avoid them? To help us to confront the trials, the crises, the dilemmas of our daily lives? If not, we’re likely to be missing out on our reason for being here. And the sooner we realize we can’t resolve everything by ourselves the sooner we can draw on the power of God... the Holy Spirit... not only to make our lives bearable... but to give them focus... to give them meaning... to give them inspiration. After all, that’s God’s role. And He never lets us down. We can always depend on Him.
Just before today's gospel reading from John begins, Jesus has told His disciples, “I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you. Yet a little while, and the world will see me no more, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.”

We shouldn't be surprised that one of the disciples would have a question. John says that Judas, not Iscariot, also identified as Jude or Lebbeaus or Thaddeus, asked Jesus: “How will you manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?”

Jesus assures His disciples that He will not leave them forlorn... as orphans... without a father. He tells them He is coming back. He is talking about His resurrection and His living presence. They will see Him again... because He will be alive. They will be spiritually alive. At this time, they are bewildered. They are fearful of a future tragedy. But later, He assures them, their eyes will be opened. Their minds will understand. Their hearts will be kindled. And then they will really see Him. This is what is happened when Jesus rose from the dead. The despair and defeat that they knew was changed to hope... and they realized for certain that Jesus was the Son of God.

John goes on to say that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and is sent at the request of Jesus and in the name of Jesus. Alternately, John says, Jesus sends the Holy Spirit from the Father. John identifies the ministry of the Holy Spirit as teacher in these terms: Remaining with and in the disciples forever, to teach them all things and lead them into all truth. He will speak not on His own authority but as directed by Jesus. In addition, the Holy Spirit will bear witness to Jesus and glorify Him... as well as reminding the disciples what Jesus taught and to announce future things to the disciples.

In today’s lesson, Jesus also repeats a former statement that if we love Him and keep His commandments, He will love us. Now, Jesus says, we (He and His Father) will come to those who love them and make their homes with them. What sort of home have we to offer God? We aren’t always aware of His interest in us and may not give much thought to Him. Are we willing to offer Him a place in our hearts? After all, we
know many people who are unwilling to make room for Him. Some see no need to worry about Him. Others might be willing to do so... but not yet.

Have you ever thought of your heart as the home of God? For the evangelist John love is the basis of everything. God loves Jesus. Jesus loves God. God loves us. We love God through Jesus. We love each other. Heaven and earth, mankind and God, mankind and mankind are all bound together by love. And there is only one proof of love. What is it? Obedience. Obedience. After His Resurrection, Jesus didn’t appear to the scribes or the Pharisees or to the Jews who were hostile to Him. No. He appeared to those who loved Him... to those who kept His word... to those who obeyed Him... to those who believed in Him.

Our lives are unworthy of God’s presence... but a believing heart is the appropriate place to start. If we’re serious about being a follower of Jesus... if we do things pleasing to Him, then He has something to work with. He can do a great deal with us. We can make significant growth by letting Him take over our deficiencies. It’s amazing what He can do in the life of a believer. When we are weak, He makes us strong. Much can be accomplished when He adds His strength to our weaknesses.

Jesus didn’t have any property to leave the disciples. Even His clothes would soon be taken by Roman soldiers at the scene of His crucifixion. But He did have something special to give His disciples. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world give do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. You heard me to say to you, ‘I go away, and I will come to you.’ If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I go to the Father. For the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you before it takes place, so that when it does take place, you may believe.”

Even though Christ was going away, He offered peace to His disciples... to get them through the trying days ahead. He was encouraging them... and what He offered them was very real. Trust God with all your heart, He tells them, as I have trusted Him and continue to trust Him. Accept His plans for your life, He says. Lay your whole being at His disposal. Hold back nothing. And you will have a peace that passes all understanding. You will come through calmly, steadfastly, and unafraid.

Are we willing to trust God with our lives? ... To offer ourselves... our skills, gifts, and talents in obedience to His will? If we are, we can experience the peace that surpasses all understanding. Amen.
Seventh Sunday of Easter, Year A

FIRST READING: Acts 1:6 - 14

PSALM: 68

SECOND READING: 1 Peter 4: 12 - 14, 5: 6 - 11

GOSPEL: John 17:1 - 11

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

"I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."
Jesus' Intercessory or High Priestly Prayer, from which today's gospel lesson is taken, is divided into three parts:

1—The prayer to be glorified.
2—The prayer for the disciples.
3—The prayer for the Church.

First, Jesus prays to God the Father to glorify Him that He may glorify the Father. The glorification that Jesus seeks will result in the giving of eternal life to His disciples. Knowing His Son Jesus Christ, whom He has sent into the world, means...results in...eternal life to the disciples and the other believers who follow. God the Father is made known only through Jesus. And He glorifies God by completing the work the Father has given Him to do. That assignment was to Jesus the glory of life and the way to the glory of eternity.

In His own words, Jesus said, “I glorified thee on earth, having accomplished the work which thou gavest me to do, and now, Father, glorify thou me in thy own presence with the glory which I had with thee before the world was made.”

Before Christ went to face the cross, He lifted up his eyes and opened up His heart to the Father. Although the setting might appear desperate to us, it did not seem that way to Jesus. In fact, His prayer contains much adoration and thanksgiving. And it is held together by eight references to the words glorify, glory, or glorified. Moreover, as Christ went to face crucifixion, He expresses adoration and thanksgiving to the Father for allowing Him to suffer. Did we hear this right? Jesus thanked God for allowing Him to suffer for the world?

In His prayer for the disciples, Jesus tells God the Father: “I have manifested Thy name to the men whom Thou gavest me out of the world. Thine they were, and Thou gavest them to me, and they have kept Thy word.” Jesus is rejoicing in the fruit of His instruction, adding that “the disciples have kept Thy Word.” Their hearts were receptive to His teaching and they realized that both Jesus and His teaching had come from God.

You or I or other modern-day Christians might have a different opinion of Jesus' disciples. We might cite their imperfections... their bumbling... their lack of understanding of what Jesus was trying to teach them. But Jesus saw their potential... what they could be... where we might have seen their faults. Who was better at making such choices... you or I or Jesus? I think you'll agree, Jesus knew what He was doing when He made His choices. Would we, even in our wildest dreams, have imagined that these 11 common ordinary men would
accomplish what they did? I don’t think so. In fact, if it were up to us, I seriously doubt if these would have been the people we entrusted with Jesus’ message. But Jesus had confidence in them, and they came through. They spread His gospel message to the known world—the uttermost parts of the earth. And that was in spite of the fact that most of their travel was on foot. Isn’t it amazing what they accomplished? They had to be inspired because they had limited ability. But look at what they did!

To Jesus, the cross was the glory of life and the way to glory of eternity. In death, He found not only glory—but also accomplishment. In death, He did what He had been unable to do in life. The same would later be true of other persons—who were glorified when they died or in how they died. Like Christ, they showed the people who and what they really were.

Abraham Lincoln had his share of enemies—political and otherwise—while he was alive. “Now he belongs to the ages,” said an Official coming out of the room where he had died. Even Edwin M. Stanton, his War Minister, who had little personal respect for him during his lifetime, changed his tune after Lincoln’s assassination. As he looked upon Lincoln’s body with tear-strained eyes, Stanton said, “there lies the greatest ruler of men the world has ever seen.” Quite a statement for one whose contempt for Lincoln was well-known.

Joan of Arc was burned as a witch and a heretic by the English. One of the Englishmen who was in the crowd around the fire in which Joan died paid her this tribute: “Would that my soul were where the soul of that woman is!” A secretary of the King of England had this to say when he left the scene of the fatal fire: “We are all lost because we have burned a saint.”

The Resurrection of Jesus was a mighty act of God in which He was raised from the dead and exalted by God the Father to His rightful position of glory at the Father’s right hand. It was the victory of Christ over death which results not only for Him, but also for all Christians. That the Lord Jesus, after his crucifixion and burial, rose again on the third day is a fundamental tenet of Christian belief, to which the New Testament and the Creeds attest. It was the Resurrection that gave the Apostles the renewal of faith and enabled and inspired them to preach the gospel. And the fact of the Resurrection was itself basic to all the preaching and teaching of the Apostles.

Our eternal hope… our hope of eternal life… is based on the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus, which the Apostles and their successors have been preaching for almost 3,000 years.