

# Around the Lenten Circle

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February 18, 2024 • First Sunday of Lent • Year B

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*He was among wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him.*

—Mark 1:13

## OPENING PRAYER

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Reader: We gather to reflect on this season of Lent,  
quieting ourselves so we may better hear God's message for  
us.

All: **Lord, be with us on this journey.**

Reader: We gather to reflect on our own personal deserts and how  
God has walked with us through them.

All: **Lord, help us to see how you have  
been with us even if we did not  
recognize it at the time.**

Reader: We pray that we may leave  
here inspired to be more  
aware of and sensitive to  
those who are experiencing  
times of darkness or  
temptation now.

All: **Help us to be more like Jesus,  
so that we may withstand the  
temptations which pull us away from life, love, and light.  
Amen.**



## SHARING

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Does it seem like the Christmas season just ended? It's only been six weeks since we celebrated the coming of the Magi to meet the baby Jesus. In the Lenten readings we will hear over the next six weeks, Jesus is a full grown man: teaching, performing miracles, and being tested by humans as well as Satan. We begin our Lenten journey so as to come to know this Jesus better, and follow him more closely.

- ① What is your general experience of Lent? Is it something you look forward to? Dread? Or has it not had any significant impact on you in the past? Please share.
- ② Do you have any particular hopes for how you would like to observe Lent this year? What commitments are you considering, especially in the realm of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving?
- ③ What would you like to get out of this group?

## LISTENING: PSALM 25:4-7, 9-10

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*Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me...*

There are hundreds of stories of journeys in the Bible. Abraham and Sarah left their people and their homeland to journey to a new land. Moses led the Hebrews out of Egypt and on a 40 year journey through the wilderness. Ruth and Naomi journeyed back to Bethlehem together after their husbands died. Mary went on a journey to visit Elizabeth when she realized they were both pregnant. Jesus journeyed from his home in Nazareth to the Sea of Galilee, and then to Jerusalem where he was killed. Many of the biblical journeys involved unforeseen twist and turns, detours, and/or interruptions.

Like the biblical characters, we have all undertaken many journeys in our lives too: sometimes physical moves from one part of the country to another, or even to foreign countries. Sometimes our journeys are more symbolic: for example, when a five year old leaves his parents to go to kindergarten for the first time, when a teenager strikes out on her own after high school, when we journey into a romantic love relationship, or when we change a career path. In all of these journeys we would do well to pray to know which paths the Lord is inviting us to follow. Which paths call out a greater steadfastness of love and faithfulness? *Those* are the paths we want to take, not the ones which may look attractive at first glance but would lead us away from truth and love.

## SHARING

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- ① Please share about a time when you chose a path that moved you away from steadfast love and faithfulness. What learnings did you glean from that experience?
- ② Share an example of a time when you made a decision that led to greater love, truth, and more abundant life. What told you that it

was the right path for you to take?

- ③ What has your journey this past year been like? How has God shown you the right path? Please share.

## REFLECTION: MARK 1:12-15

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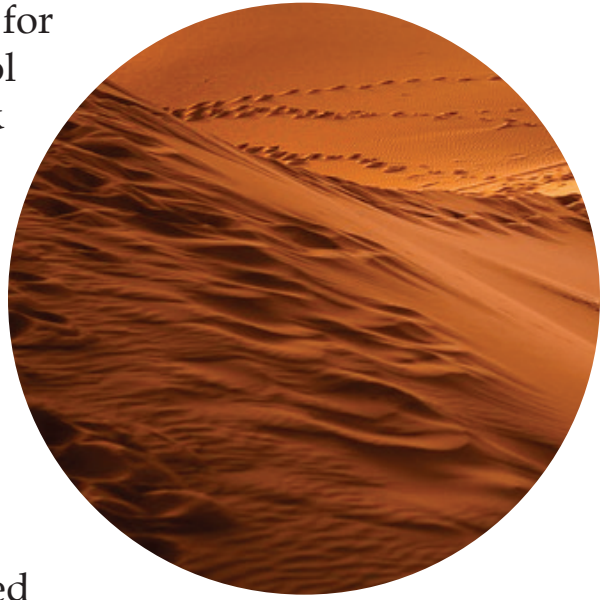
*And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."*

Mark's story of Jesus' temptation in the desert is the shortest one of any of the gospels. It gives no details about how he was tempted by Satan or how he overcame those temptations. It does, however, tell us the interesting detail that after Jesus came through the ordeal, angels cared for him. When he returns, he begins his public ministry, bringing Good News to those who are suffering and encouraging people to turn away from destructive behavior.

This season of Lent provides a great opportunity for us to practice turning away from unhealthy or sinful habits and to begin living more and more into Jesus' Good News. We have 40 days to experiment with what changes might be fruitful. Traditionally, Catholics are encouraged to commit to action in three areas: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving (giving to the poor). All of these have the potential to lead us back to Jesus and his teachings.

We are encouraged to strengthen our prayer lives. If we have a prayer practice, maybe we can add a little time to it. If we don't have a regular time for prayer, Lent can be the push we need to get started. It can be as simple as following a Lenten prayer booklet or on-line daily retreat program.

Commonly, we Catholics are known for fasting from coffee, sweets, or alcohol for 40 days but then going right back to our regular habits after Easter. Perhaps this Lent, you might consider fasting from something that is unloving, unproductive, or just not good for you and the world community. That might mean fasting from gossip, from social media, or from buying things you don't need.



Finally, with almsgiving, we are called to share our resources with the poor. Save the money you would have spent going out to eat once a week and donate it to a food program instead. Use the money you would normally use for a personal luxury and give it to a homeless person—without judging how he/she might use it (because he/she could easily judge how you might have used it!)

## SHARING

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- ① Share what you are considering doing to observe Lent this year, particularly in the areas of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.
- ② Share about a temptation that is currently vexing you. What helps in your efforts to resist it? What hurts your efforts?
- ③ How might you call upon the support of others (angels around you) in order to resist the temptation?

## CLOSING PRAYER

Reader: Lord God, teach us your paths.

**All: Help us to choose the ways that lead to life,  
and to resist any temptations that lead us further away  
from love, hope, and justice.**

Reader: We ask this in Jesus' name.

**All: Amen.**

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# Around the Lent Circle

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February 25, 2024 • Second Sunday of Lent • Year B

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*This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him.*

Mark 9:7

## OPENING PRAYER

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Reader: Gracious God, we gather again to share our Lenten journeys.

All: **Help us to see your presence in our lives.**

Reader: May this time together strengthen our desire to follow the path of life.

All: **Give us strength to continue the journey,  
even when we can't see where it is leading. Amen.**

## SHARING

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Last week, our group focused on the metaphor of journeys, reflecting on how we have chosen the paths we are on, and how we can listen for God's invitation to follow a particular path. We also considered some commitments in the areas of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving for the Lenten season.

- ① Did you have to make a decision (big or small) this past week in which you more intentionally tried to choose the path that God wanted you to take? Please share.
- ② How was your first week of Lent?



## LISTENING: GENESIS 22:1-2, 9-13, 15-18

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*After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you."*

*When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.*

Paul points out in the second reading today that God did not withhold his own beloved Son. God would not allow Abraham's child to be hurt, but he allowed his Son to become human, knowing that he would suffer intensely at the hands of humans, who sometimes do terrible things to each other.

The gospels are a beautiful witness that God doesn't ask anything of humans that God isn't willing to do himself. Ultimately God didn't require Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, but God "sacrificed" Jesus by allowing him to come into our world and become human. God didn't intend for Jesus to be harmed, or plan for him to suffer and die exactly as he did, but he allowed it because he respects human free will. In the same way, we don't consider offering our own children up as





burnt sacrifices, but we do allow them to go to school even though they may get hit by a car on the way. We allow them to move away from home even though we may lose them to a different part of the country. We allow them to get married, even though that means “sacrificing” them to another person who may or may not protect them as much as we can. We are willing to do all these things because we love them and we know that ultimately they don’t belong to us. Maybe Abraham had some sense of this when he was willing to follow God’s directive. Thankfully, he didn’t have to endure a terrible outcome and he learned that God does not want harm to come to any of his children.

## SHARING

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- ① What do you make of this story? Can you find any lesson in it?
- ② Have you ever felt compelled to make a decision that seemed so irrational or counter-intuitive that you couldn’t explain it to loved ones? What came of it?
- ③ Have you ever sacrificed something that you loved (a home, a relationship, a job, a possession, etc) for a greater good? Please share.

## REFLECTION: MARK 9:2-8

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*Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.*

It is difficult to imagine this Gospel scene when Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a mountain and was transfigured in front of them. There’s nothing in our experience of seeing someone glow in dazzling white clothes brighter than any white we can imagine. Nor have we had visions of two people who lived long ago appearing in front of us like Moses and Elijah did with Jesus. Probably we would be terrified as the three apostles were. Maybe we would even wonder if we were losing our minds.

It gets even stranger when the three apostles hear a voice from a cloud telling them to listen to “my beloved Son.” At that point, they find themselves left alone with the same Jesus they have always known.

Obviously, the experience is something the apostles couldn’t have understood with their minds, at least not before Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. Before this scene, the apostles—as well as pretty much everyone else Jesus was meeting—were trying to figure out just who he was. He appeared human to them in every other way except for the incredible miracles he was performing. The Transfiguration probably left the impression that although Jesus was more than just an incredible human being, the apostles still didn’t fully understand who he was. Yet they were being asked to trust in him, to listen to him, and to follow him.

## SHARING

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- ① When you think of Jesus, do you think of him more as human or as divine? How so?
- ② If you were one of the apostles at the Transfiguration, what might you have been thinking or feeling? How would it have changed how you thought of Jesus?
- ③ Sometimes when people didn't understand Jesus or know what to believe about him, they had to rely on the faith of others and their experiences of Jesus. Do you have people in your life who help you to understand Jesus more? Who are they, and what have they taught you about him?



## CLOSING PRAYER

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Reader: Gracious God, you sent Jesus to show us your compassion and love for us.

All: **Help us to listen to him and to trust that he wants only goodness and grace for everyone. Amen.**

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# Around the Lent Circle

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March 3, 2024 • Third Sunday of Lent • Year B

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*“Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”* John 2:16

## OPENING PRAYER

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Reader: Gracious God, be with us now.

All: **Send your Holy Spirit to enliven and guide our conversation.**

Reader: Give us the inspiration to speak the words that others need to hear.

All: **Open our minds and hearts to hear the message you have for us today.**

Reader: Inspire us during this time together...

All: **...so that we may go out from here strengthened to share your good news.**

Reader: We ask this all in Jesus’ name.

All: **Amen.**

## SHARING

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Last week we reflected on the puzzling and disturbing near-sacrifice of Isaac. We also discussed the Gospel story of Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain top and how we might experience him as both human and divine.

- ① Describe any further reflections you've had about the possibility of God asking you to sacrifice something that is dear to you.
- ② Do you feel any greater willingness to trust God by listening to Jesus after reflecting on the Transfiguration?

## LISTENING: EXODUS 20:8-11

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*Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.*

The first reading today lists the 10 commandments, most of which we think of as "thou shalt nots." "Thou shalt not kill... thou shalt not steal... thou shalt not commit adultery..." etc. A few of them, however, are phrased positively, like the third commandment highlighted here. "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy." How do we do this? We keep it holy (which means set



apart, or different) by doing things differently on Sunday than we do the other six days of the week.

It is tempting to say we have done our duty to honor the sabbath just because we have attended mass on Sunday. But God's commandment isn't focused on attending a worship service. God's commandment is about resting; specifically, resting from work and creating an environment where everyone in the society gets to rest. Often our orthodox Jewish brothers and sisters are much better at this than we are. Not only do they avoid doing paid work, but they arrange to do the week's laundry, cooking, and yard work ahead of time so that the Sabbath really is a full day of rest, renewal, and re-creation.

## SHARING

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- ① How do you currently spend your Sundays—or if you have to do paid work on Sundays, how do you spend another weekly day off?
- ② What are your memories of how you spent your Sundays as a child? Were there any traditions that were important to your and/or appreciated by you?
- ③ When you have set aside Sundays for something special in the past, what have been the graces that have come from it?



## REFLECTION: JOHN 2:13-17

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*The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."*

Imagine a man entering your church in a rage and waving a weapon to chase all the ushers, altar servers, eucharistic ministers, and priests out of the building. Picture that person flipping over the tables that were displaying flyers about the upcoming Crab Feed and Bingo nights. Finally, imagine him finding the collection baskets and throwing their contents across the floor while he shouts that his father's house is being dishonored.

It would be a shocking and probably terrifying scene—which is how Jesus' cleansing of the Temple would have been experienced during his time. Temples, synagogues, churches, and mosques are supposed to be places of peace, prayer, and good behavior, aren't they?



## SHARING

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- ① What would you think and how would you react if someone came into your church and did what Jesus did in the Temple?
- ② Are there ways in which your parish has strayed from its mission of preaching Jesus' way of life? Has it become a "marketplace" in any respect? How so?
- ③ What would you like to see your parish do to return to the central mission of Jesus: to love and serve our neighbors?

## CLOSING PRAYER

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**All: Gracious God,  
thank you for this time to step away from our daily  
business  
to rest and reflect on you.**

**Help us to make more time in our lives to allow you to  
restore our souls.**

**We pray that this coming week  
we may have our eyes opened to new possibilities.**

**We pray this in confidence,  
knowing that you are the Light of the World.**

**Amen.**

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# Around the Lent Circle

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March 10, 2024 • Fourth Sunday of Lent • Year B

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*Those who do what is true come to the light.*

John 3:21

## OPENING PRAYER

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Reader: Gracious God, thank you for calling us together again.

All: **May this conversation strengthen us  
to continue living out our Lenten journey  
as we draw nearer to you.**

Reader: We ask this in Jesus' name.

All: **Amen.**

## SHARING

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Last week we reflected on the commandment to keep the Sabbath day holy. We considered different ways that we could use Sundays for rest and renewal instead of unending work. We also read the story of Jesus' anger that the Temple was turned into a marketplace rather than a place for worship and prayer. We reflected on how sometimes our parishes might get off track from their primary mission.

- ① Describe any further reflections you've had on either of those two readings.
- ② Have you had any more insights about what gifts of practicing the "Sabbath"?

## LISTENING: EPHESIANS 2:8-10

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*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us...*

For centuries Catholics and Protestants argued about whether we are saved by our faith or by our works. Now we are in better agreement that we need faith—and that good works should flow out of faith. As St. James wrote, “faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (James 2:17).

These verses today are a good reminder about the former—that God’s grace is a complete gift, freely given, and never earned by good behavior or hard work. We need to hear this, over and over! Often it’s not so easy to accept, especially because our culture focuses us on hard work and responsibility, and praises those who pull themselves up by their bootstraps. It doesn’t seem right to accept something we haven’t worked to deserve, right?

Yet think of tiny, newborn babies—we shower them with love and tenderness and we rush to fulfill their needs although they haven’t done a single thing to earn it, only offering us poop diapers, crying, and interruptions to our sleep in return. Our God loves us like that! Our God *wants to shower us with even more, and doesn’t ask us to earn it.*



## SHARING

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- ① In terms of your own spiritual life, do you tend to focus more on “faith” or “works”? How so?
- ② Share an example of a time when you were offered a gift or an unexpected blessing that was difficult to receive because you didn’t feel you earned it.
- ③ Reflect on an example of a time when you saw good works flow out of someone’s faith—either yours or that of another person.

## REFLECTION: JOHN 3:19-21

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*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."*

In John's Gospel, Jesus teaches often about light and darkness. It is from here that we get the image of Christ as the light of the world, a light that can never be overcome, no matter how deep the darkness of the world might seem at times.

In this passage, Nicodemus, a Pharisee, comes to Jesus at night, probably because he doesn't want the other Pharisees to see him meeting with Jesus whom they dislike. Jesus explains to Nicodemus that people who are evil like to work in the dark where their wickedness can be hidden. They don't want to be exposed, so they do what they can to hide their actions. On the other hand, people who are trying to live with honesty, integrity, and truthfulness are not afraid to do their work in the light. They are not trying to hide their actions because they have nothing to be afraid of if they are discovered.

This conversation is a great reminder that if we are tempted to keep something secret we should question our motives. Why do we need to hide our actions or intentions? Is there something we are trying to cover up, and if so, why? If we are living in truth, Jesus assures us that we can be confident in letting our works be clearly seen.



## SHARING

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- ① Are there things you have been tempted to keep hidden or secret? If so, can you share an experience of allowing something to “come to the light”? How did that bring you freedom or relief?
- ② Share an experience of a time when someone (you or someone else you know) had the courage to bring to light a troubling situation that needed to be addressed. What happened?
- ③ Give an example of a current social ill that is being more openly dealt with because someone or some group of people has brought it into the public light.



## CLOSING PRAYER

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**All: Gracious God,  
thank you for this time to step away from our daily  
business  
and reflect on your teachings.**

**Help us to remember that you want to love us  
and be in relationship with us  
regardless of how we act.**

**We pray for the courage  
to do the work we are meant to do in the light and to  
strive to bring into the light  
all that needs to be revealed.**

**We ask this in Christ's name.**

**Amen.**

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# Around the Lent Circle

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March 17, 2024 • Fifth Sunday of Lent • Year B

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*I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.*

Jeremiah 31:33

## OPENING PRAYER

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Reader: Christ Jesus, we come together to spend time listening to your words.

All: **Open our ears so that we may hear your message.**

Reader: We believe in you, but want to trust you more.

All: **Help us to know your presence with us.**

Reader: We pray this all in your name.

All: **Amen.**

## SHARING

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Last week we reflected on the interplay of faith and works, specifically how God's love is freely-given grace that we can't earn. We also discussed themes of light and darkness, and were challenged to live our lives in the light, rather than hiding our deeds in the dark.

- ① Share an experience of receiving a blessing or an unexpected grace last week, something that you didn't do anything to "earn."
- ② Share about an event or news story that came to your attention that involved a good work being done in the light or an evil deed that came to light after being hidden or shrouded in secrecy.

## LISTENING: JEREMIAH 31:31-34

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*The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.*

Jeremiah’s words in today’s reading are addressed to his fellow countrymen. They have found themselves in exile in a far away land after their country was attacked, and their capital, Jerusalem, was destroyed. The people would have been despairing, wondering if they would ever see their homeland again and if God would “take them back” as his people. They had, after all, broken their covenant with God over and over, disobeying the Ten Commandments (written on stone) as well as many of the other laws that were in place to organize a just society. Those with wealth and those in power had cheated the poor and neglected the widows, orphans, and immigrants—the most vulnerable of their day—in pursuit of their own comfort. Jeremiah saw their exile as a punishment for such sins.

Yet Jeremiah believes in a Lord who does not abandon his people but continues to forgive their sins. This God, he declares, will find a new way to make his laws known, not by writing them on stone again, but by placing them within their hearts. They won’t have to look externally to learn and memorize a list of rules, but will be able to know what is good and just from feeling within themselves. No one will need to teach them how to know the Lord because they will recognize him in all that is good, true, merciful, and beautiful.

## SHARING

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- ① Share about a time when you have experienced what felt like a defeat and/or exile which caused you to wonder if God was still with you.
- ② Have you had an experience of betraying a loved one only to have him/her continue to love you and “take you back”? Please share.
- ③ When you need to make a choice and there is no written rule telling you what to do, how do you access God’s laws “written upon your heart”?



## REFLECTION: JOHN 12:23-25

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*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.*

In Jesus' day and time, almost everyone who heard him would have had farming experience or at least been exposed to the farming life. It meant that Jesus could use examples and images from agriculture that would be easy for most people to understand.

For those of us in today's world who haven't had the experience of planting seeds, we have missed out on this amazing miracle. A person buries seeds—that appear to be dead—into the ground. Nothing seems to happen for a long time. Then, one day the person wakes up to see living, green shoots sprouting out of the ground. The seeds weren't dead after all!

Jesus wants us to believe that a similar cycle happens when humans experience death. When we experience the death of a loved one—or a death of any sort—it may seem impossible to imagine that new life can come of our pain. That is when we need this reminder from Jesus. Not only do we know that seeds appear to be dead before sprouting again, we have the example of Jesus showing us that death does not have the final say. We may not want to let someone or something in our life go, but we can do so in an act of faith. We can choose to act in faith, to act despite our feelings of pain and hopelessness, trusting that God can bring new life in some unforeseen way out of death.

## SHARING

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- ① Think of an example from your life of experiencing new life after a death (the death of a loved one, or the death of a dream, a lifestyle, or a relationship).
- ② In what area of your life are you still awaiting new life after a death?
- ③ Share about a time when you were asked to let go of something valuable in your life which led to a greater gain that you couldn't have foreseen at the time.





## CLOSING PRAYER

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All: **Gracious God,**

**Thank you for the reminders from prophets like Jeremiah that nothing we can do will cause God to cease loving us.**

**Help us to trust more and more that even in times of loss or apparent death, you will bring new life.**

**We ask this in the name of your son, Jesus, who passed through death to bring life.**

**Amen.**

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# Around the Lent Circle

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March 24, 2024 • Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion • Year B

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*"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

Mark 15:34

## OPENING PRAYER

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Reader: Christ Jesus, we come together to prepare for this Holy Week.

All: **As our Lenten journey comes to a close,  
help us to keep our eyes focused on you.**

Reader: Let us not give in to the temptation to skip over this  
challenging week  
in our eagerness to get to Easter.

All: **Help us to stay present to the story of your Passion and  
death.**

Reader: Open our minds and hearts to what you want us to learn this  
week.

All: **May your life story shed light on the passions and deaths  
that we experience in our lives. Amen.**

## SHARING

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Last week we reflected on God's promise spoken through Jeremiah that he would write his law on our hearts so that we would always know them. We also discussed the paradox that sometimes things must die in order to come to new life.

- ① Did you have any experience of listening to your heart to see how God might be leading you last week? Please share.
- ② Please share any further thoughts you have had about last week's materials on the necessity to die in order to gain new life.



## LISTENING: ISAIAH 50:4-7

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*The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher,  
that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.*

*Morning by morning he wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are  
taught. The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not  
turn backward. I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to  
those who pulled out the beard;*

*I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. The Lord God helps me;  
therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and  
I know that I shall not be put to shame.*

This reading from Isaiah references an unidentified servant who continues to do God's will despite being persecuted and tortured. No one knows whom Isaiah is referring to in this passage and three others like it. Some people have suggested it might be Isaiah himself, or Moses, or another historical figure of Isaiah's time.

Christians see Jesus in this description. He was a teacher who gave hope and encouragement to people who were burdened and exhausted by their lots in life. He regularly took time to listen to his Father in prayer. Even though he begged to be rescued from death, he did not run away from it when the time came for his arrest. He refused to lash out against his torturers who insulted him, spit on him, and struck him before his crucifixion. Clearly, Jesus suffered great anguish physically and mentally—as any human who had to undergo what he experienced would suffer. Yet even in his suffering he was able to show us how to remain faithful and how we can still call on God's help.

## SHARING

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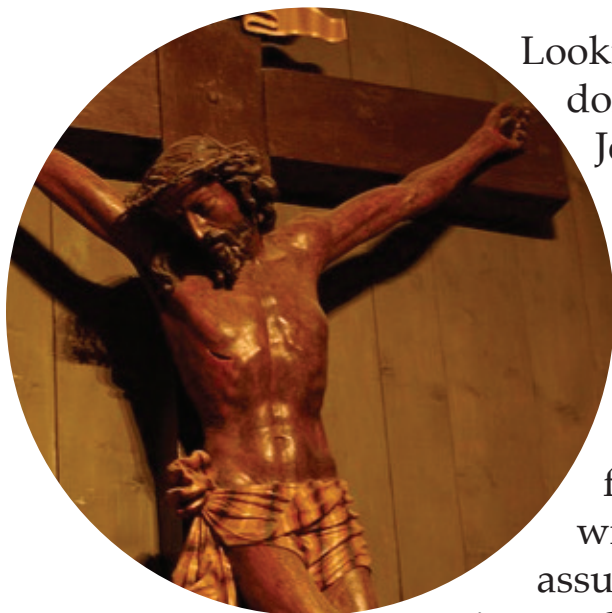
- ① Who in your life has been a servant “with the tongue of a teacher”? Perhaps it was a teacher you had in school, or a mentor, a colleague, or a family member, someone who has the ability to say the right thing at the right time to you.
- ② Share about what you do to open your ears to hear whatever it is God wants to say to you.
- ③ Think about someone you know or have heard or read about who suffered with dignity as he or she stood up to injustice and persecution. Please share your response to their actions.

## REFLECTION: MARK 15:33-37

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*When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last.*

Each Gospel writer tells the story of Jesus' passion and death slightly differently, emphasizing particular aspects of Jesus that they especially want to be remembered. Mark's account makes it very clear that Jesus suffered intensely and that he experienced deep human emotions. Mark does not want us to think that Jesus was God just dressed up in a human costume who didn't really suffer when the nails were hammered into his hands and feet. No, Jesus was just like one of us in his experience of pain and despair, even to the point of wondering why God had abandoned him.



Looking back on Jesus' death now, we don't believe that God abandoned Jesus. Yet Jesus felt that way at the time. This point can remind us that our feelings do not make up all of reality. If we feel despairing or hopeless or that all is lost, we can remember that Jesus felt the same. If we are terrified of death, or can't feel any sense of God's presence with us in our suffering, we can be assured that God has not abandoned us, just as God did not abandon Jesus. Sometimes all that can be done is to stay the course, remembering that God found a way to bring life out of death, even when Jesus and the others around him could not see it in the moment.

## SHARING

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- ① What is your first reaction to reading Jesus' cry "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
- ② Share about a time when you felt—or were tempted to wonder—if God was still with you. Looking back on that time now, do you have a sense of how God was still present and active then? How?
- ③ Think of someone in your life now whom is suffering or despairing for any reason. How might you make yourself available to that person so that he/she will know she is not alone?

## CLOSING PRAYER

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**All: Ever-compassionate God,**

**We thank you for sending your son  
to be human like us.**

**Teach us to be more like him in our ability to sustain the  
weary with our words,  
and to continually open our ears to hear your will for us.**

**In times of suffering, may we remember that Jesus, too,  
knew what it was like to feel despair.**

**Remind us then that you never abandon us.**

**We ask this in the name of your son, Jesus.**

**Amen.**

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