

The Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 11, 2018

Saint Mary of the Assumption Parish



Today's Scriptures

In today's first reading the writer of Chronicles interprets the fall of Judah, its 70-year exile in Babylon, and its return to Jerusalem in light of the relationship between God and his covenant people. Judah's fall began with her infidelity, as her rulers, religious authorities, and people steadily turned away from God and fell into corruption. Weakened by the effects of their faithlessness and sin, they were easily conquered by their enemies and taken into slavery. From the beginning of the people's infidelity, God's response was one of compassion and commitment. Rather than abandon his faithless people, he made relentless efforts to bring his people back into the protection of his covenant. Despite their rejection of him, God never abandoned his people. He continued to work on their behalf, eventually inspiring a Gentile king to allow them to return to Jerusalem.

Today's responsorial psalm is the bitter lament of a people who are separated from their God and experiencing great loss. The somberness of the psalm stands in contrast to the joyful tone of St. Paul's words to the Ephesians. Like the writer of Chronicles, Paul saw the situation of sinful humanity as dire. Not only were people lost in sin, they were already dead as a consequence. Unlike an indifferent ruler, God was not content that his people were lost to sin; they were his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus, for a greater good. So God offered each person the chance for salvation through faith in Jesus. Out of his kindness and mercy, God planned and acted to rescue his people through Jesus; their faith in him would not only rescue them from the slavery of sin, it would raise each believer to new and eternal life.

The Gospel starts with an allusion to the Israelites who were bitten and killed by serpents when they wandered in the desert. When they begged Moses for help, God told Moses to mount a serpent on a stick. If someone was bitten, then looked upon this serpent, she or he would not die. Recalling this event, Jesus said he would also be lifted up in a similar way. Some might see his death as a defeat, but those who believed in him, though infected with sin and subject to death, would not perish but find eternal life.

Throughout history, many people have railed against God as harsh and demanding, indifferent to suffering, or easily judging between the worthy and unworthy. Yet, today's Scriptures make clear that this is not who God is. God does not choose to judge or condemn. He is, and always has been, relentless in his effort to save his people. Out of an abundance of mercy, love, and kindness, God was even willing to allow Jesus to lay down his life so that people could be brought to new life through him. This great, saving love is the message and power of Easter.

Sunday Readings and Backgrounds

Reading I: 2 Chronicles 36:14-17, 19-29

Early and often did God send messengers to them.

- The Second Book of Chronicles was written after the Babylonian exile as a reinterpretation of history for the new situation in which the people found themselves.
- A major focus of hope for the returned community was the rebuilt temple, a sign of the return of God's presence.
- The people saw the destruction of the former temple as a punishment for their sins and a fulfillment of the prophets' warnings.

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 137: 1-2, 3, 4-5, 6

Let my tongue be silenced if I ever forget you.

Reading II: Ephesians 2:4-10

God is rich in mercy.

- The Letter to the Ephesians emphasizes that God's salvation is a gift and not something earned by human effort.
- In the Hebrew Scriptures the major covenant virtues of love and fidelity are manifested in God and demanded of humans.
- In Ephesians we are told again that it is because of God's great love and abundant mercy that we are brought to life in Christ.

Gospel: John 3:14-21

The light came into the world.

- In today's Gospel, Jesus explains the truth seen in faith to Nicodemus.
- Those who choose eternal life receive it because of faith in Christ.
- Humans choose salvation or reject it just as they choose or reject life.

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A song for this Sunday.

Reckless Love by Cory Asbury. Listen on:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZLFaK6No4GV>.

Praying, Believing, And Living in God's Love

Lex orandi, lex credendi! This ancient dictum states that “The law of prayer is the law of belief.” Interpreted in a general way, it means that the way we pray is a very good sign of what we believe, or that our prayer forms our belief. It is a pretty solid principle, much like the advice that if you want to know how a guy will treat his future wife, watch how he treats his mother and sisters. But, just as you can’t always tell the difference between affectionate teasing and disrespect, we may all say the same words in our prayer and hold to entirely different concepts behind them. Today’s Gospel features a key statement by Jesus that can be interpreted in very diverse and even mutually exclusive ways.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.” There are interpretations of this that suggest that Jesus’ mission was to atone to God for human sin by dying a painful death. That point of view believes that according to justice, God had to exact a fitting punishment for sin, but that in mercy God sent the Son as the only one who could adequately pay the price. This allows people to see God as both just and merciful and says that anyone who believes in Jesus can receive the benefit of his sacrifice. This theory can be buttressed by any number of scriptural quotations when one reads them from this mindset.

This Sunday’s readings offer an alternative interpretation of the statement by showing both its roots in the Hebrew Scriptures and one expression in Ephesians of Paul’s reflections on its theme. The readings present an image of God who is relentless in reaching out to lost humanity. This alternative is beautifully articulated in Eucharistic Prayer IV which could have been written with these readings in mind. The selection from Chronicles briefly summarizes salvation history: The people sin and God tries in every possible way to save them. We hear that poetically expressed in the eucharistic prayer, which, when translated into a dialogue instead of a proclamation, sounds like this: “You formed us in your own image ... When through disobedience we lost your friendship, you did not abandon us ... but came in mercy ... so that we who seek you might find you. Time and again you offered us covenants ... and prophets ... and taught us to hope for salvation.”

This eucharistic prayer reflects the Gospel of John as it says, “In the fullness of time, you sent your only begotten Son to be our Savior.” John adds, not to condemn the world, but “so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.” The eucharistic prayer states “To accomplish your plan, he gave himself up to death ... he destroyed death and restored life.” In John’s Gospel Jesus says, “So must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”

When Jesus speaks of his being lifted up as our salvation, as a light and a path to life, we begin to realize that he is talking about the cross as the ultimate revelation of love. Instead of compensating to God for human sin, Jesus reveals God’s self-offering to humanity, God’s unceasing love. No matter what we do to reject that love, God continually offers us eternal life. All we have to do is accept it.

In the selection from the Letter to the Ephesians, Paul sounds almost like he’s stammering with emotion as he expounds on this expression of God’s great love and mercy. Paul calls it the grace of being joined to Christ and destined for eternal union with him. The eucharistic prayer expresses this by saying, “that we might live no longer for ourselves but for him ... he sent the Holy Spirit ... so that, bringing to perfection his work in the world, he might sanctify creation to the full.”

Lex orandi, lex credendi. Some add lex vivendi, indicating that as we pray and believe, so shall we live. On this Fourth Sunday of Lent, we are invited to look at our prayer, our belief and our life and to ask ourselves: How does our prayer form our belief? What image of God is in our heart when we hear that God so loved the world that he sent his only Son? And perhaps most importantly, how is our prayer and our image of God made manifest in our daily interactions?

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