

[Readings: 2 Chron. 36:14-16, 19-23; Psalm 137; Eph 2:4-10; John 3:14-21]

“Early and often,” as the First Reading suggests, we know where our actions are taking us. We know, for example, that violent means do not lead to peaceful ends. Yet we pursue them over and over, hoping the laws of human dynamics will change this time, just this once, just for us.

Or how about the folk wisdom that says people aren’t going to change just because you marry them? How many couples have seen the warning signs, early and often, that the “sparks” between them included flamethrowers and went ahead anyway, counting on the grace of matrimony to transform the situation?

Early and often, we observe, anger does not make for a satisfying or successful lifestyle. Nor does surrender to addiction, greed, the blame game, or self-righteousness. Each time we exercise these life strategies, they fail us; yet we persist in them because they are familiar and well-worn grooves in the road.

The theology of original sin might be viewed through this lens: Early and often, humanity chooses against the primary law of love and suffers the effects of that decision in a world fraught with corruption and death. When you consider that there are more than 7 billion people on the planet right now, that’s an awful lot of sin we’re talking about. Never mind the thousands of generations that have gone before us, leaving a legacy of sinful choices in their wake.

The Hebrew story is a cautionary tale about what happens when an all-loving God creates an all-good world and then sets it free to pursue its own destiny. Sin happens, as the bumper stickers remind us in a more colorful way. But it doesn’t just “happen” -- it is chosen. Free people freely choose it. The original sin is deliberate, as is every decision for sin that follows. Though we are caught in a web of sin that now permeates our imperfect world, we also make clear and reasoned choices away from goodness.

For example, early and often Jesus preached forgiveness, conversion, and salvation. But we make choices for unforgiveness, insisting people don’t change and that they deserve destruction. So we identify our enemies (when Jesus said we should love them) and find ways to isolate and even kill them.

In this regard, we much prefer the God described by Chronicles, who first warned the people to change their ways and finally consigned them to be conquered, crushed, and swept into exile. *That* God makes sense to us. *That* God does what we ourselves do or would like to do. *That* God, frankly, is as moral as we are and doesn't challenge us to go beyond a this-for-that moral yardstick.

But what about the God that Saint Paul describes for us? A God who is rich in mercy, with great love for us, who encounters us "dead" in our transgressions and wills, through grace, to raise us up to new life! Paul talks about God's "kindness" and the pure "gift" of salvation. We are God's handiwork, not the shame of our Creator. And God has prepared in advance a way of "good works" for us to live in -- not the bog of centuries of sin and its wages.

How do we reconcile the view of Chronicles and that of Ephesians? Chronicles looks through the lens of original sin and concurs that, early and often, humanity suffers the natural consequences of its sinfulness. Paul views human history through the lens of grace and acknowledges that, early and often, God reaches out to save and preserve us. Whose perspective is the right one? Both are true -- yet the verdict, Jesus tells us, has already come in, in favor of salvation.

We are told, rather uncomfortably, that Jesus became sin for our sake. It is an ugly phrase, equating the embodiment of love with the source of human suffering. But it is not really much different from saying that the Lord of heaven and Earth took on our flesh and was born as one of us. If we want to be cured of the effects of our mortality, we must lift our eyes to the one who shared it fully and suffered it profoundly. By taking on sin, suffering, and death, Jesus transformed our relationship with all three.

God did not come into the world to condemn us but to save us, and participate in the work of salvation. God's verdict favors the light. THAT is something to rejoice about! AMEN!

[Readings: Jer. 31:31-34; Psalm 51; Heb 5:7-9; John 12:20-33]

Next to the precious gifts of love and faith, *time* is another great and precious commodity. Is it the right *time* to say or do this? Is it the wrong *time*? Has *time* run out? How much *time* do we have left?

Jesus Christ was very much aware of time, and the proper time. St. John tells us in his Gospel that at the right precise moment, the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. He speaks of “my hour” and “not my hour.”

Time is understood in the Bible in two ways. The first way is to think of time as linear. The Greek word for this concept is *CHRONOS*. This is the linear measure of time. It has a beginning point, a line of actions and events, and an end-point, or an arrow indicating infinity. We get the word “chronology” from *chronos*. This is how we measure history, science and our individual lives.

The other way of understanding time is called *KAIROS*. This points to specific moments and events in history and in our individual lives. The time of our birth, marriage, ordination, graduation, promotion, death. These are significant and noteworthy moments in the chronology of life.

In John’s Gospel, he uses the *Kairos* word often. At the wedding feast at Cana, Jesus says to His Blessed Mother, “My hour (*Kairos*) has not yet come.” Today He says, “The hour has come” for the Son of Man to be glorified. The word “glorified” in the New Testament, “*doxa*” means the very glory of God, God’s presence. How does that presence of God take place? As we will see, through the death of Jesus. And then through His Resurrection. And ours.

There is one verse in the words of Jesus that follow, which has caused confusion and misinterpretation: “Whoever loves their life loses it, and whoever hates their life in this world will preserve it for eternal life.” Does this mean that we should hate life? When I was in high school and suffering the trials of being a teenager, I said in despair to my mom: “I hate my life. I didn’t ask to be born!” And she wisely replied, “Neither did I. Welcome to the club!” We are here because God’s love willed us into existence. We are not called to hate our earthly life but to put it into proper perspective, with our eyes focused on eternal life.

If we love our earthly life, we know that we lose it in the Lord’s service. If we love our earthly life in a selfish way, we just lose whatever we think we have.

The key is to find out through discernment, not what WE want out of life, but what GOD wants for us out of life. We want to be good and moral people. So we can find some consolation in today's reading from Jeremiah, "I will place my law within them and write it upon their hearts." We can approach the task of discernment with the knowledge that the impetus to goodness is within each one of us, just waiting to be nurtured. This is how we serve Jesus Christ and follow Him, so that where He is, His servants will also be. And the Father will honor whoever serves Him.

The ability to discover that law within our hearts is called discernment, the ability to listen and heed the inner voice of God. Discernment helps us navigate our way through the sometimes conflicting chorus of voices that we can hear within. It allows us to distinguish God's truth from other inner voices prompted by the likes of selfishness, self-absorption, and fear.

Discernment is a sophisticated skill, one that needs to be developed over time through practice. And we can develop this key moral capacity in a number of ways: to listen to our own hearts; to recognize that God's ways are loving ways; to expect an answer, however subtle, when we turn to God; to learn that answers don't always come in obvious ways; to consult with people we know to be wise; and to foster a sense of trust that if we have a sincere heart, we will find our way.

This weekend, we celebrate two feasts: St. Patrick and, on Monday, St. Joseph. Guess what? St. Patrick was NOT Irish! He was born in England to Italian parents who were diplomats from Rome living in England! How many of you already knew that? (3/4 at the 5 PM and 8:30 AM Masses; 1/2 at the 11 AM Mass). A political raid forced Patrick into slavery, where he was sent to Ireland to labor. He escaped, returned to Rome, discerned the call to priesthood, and was sent as a missionary to Ireland.

St. Joseph, husband of Mary and foster father of Jesus, discerned HIS life choices to marry his pregnant fiancé, to leave his homeland for Egypt, to return to a quiet life, and to be faithful to His God. May we learn obedience through discernment from our life's blessings, joys and sufferings, to follow "the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him," and "to see Jesus." In this world and in the next. AMEN!

Readings: Isaiah 50:4-7; Psalm 22; Phil. 2:6-11; Mark 14:1-15:47]

In his book, *A Spirituality of Waiting*, Fr. Henri Nouwen writes about “Waiting for the Passion” and “the Passion of Waiting.” He says, “In the passion and resurrection of Jesus we see God as a waiting God.... In a way, [Jesus’] agony is not simply the agony of approaching death. It is also the agony of having to wait. It is the agony of a God who depends on us for how God is going to live out the divine presence among us. It is the agony of the God who, in a very mysterious way, allows us to decide how God will be God.

“All action ends in passion because the response to our action is out of our hands. That is the mystery of friendship, the mystery of community – they always involve waiting. And that is the mystery of Jesus’ love.”

How is it that today we are still waiting for the Passion? That each year the Church in her goodness gives us a season of self-emptying to be filled with something greater; a season of joy grounded in trust, of hope in the promise of the Resurrection – the season of Lent? We wait because God is ever new.

Each Mass we are present at Calvary. Each Easter Triduum we are no less mysteriously, but TRULY present at Jesus’ Passion. His Sacrifice of love has not changed, but we have. As we enter into Holy Week, He waits for us. Waits for our trust, for our invitation for Him to act, to be present at *this* moment, at *this* time in our lives.

Every day we participate in our own small way in the Paschal Mystery: The Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ. To the extent we allow ourselves to be present to these little “passions,” dying to ourselves in hidden ways, so to the extent we share in the joy of the Resurrection.

Today is Palm Sunday and still we are haunted by those ambiguous feelings which have to do with triumph and tragedy, victory and defeat, honor and dishonor. Today is Palm Sunday and we remember, "Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." Today is Palm Sunday and there's a crowd of people out there lining the street to welcome this Jesus to be King of Jews.

Today is Palm Sunday and Jesus comes riding in on some young donkey like the old kings of Israel centuries before as they entered the Holy City. Today is Palm Sunday and some little boy who lives out in the country is the first one to come running barefoot into town to tell us the news, "The King is coming!" Jesus is coming down the road to Jerusalem. Today is Palm Sunday and the king is coming. The king is coming and no one can remain neutral. The king is coming and someone must decide.

The king is coming and you must make up your mind about Him. The king is coming and we can no longer remain the same -- "something's gotta give." Something has to change in our way of thinking. Something has to be different about our loyalties. Something has to be renewed about our commitment. It confronts us always with a choice, for always this King is coming to our city, in our place and time, for over and over again we are Jerusalem. So on this Palm Sunday, I want to remind us of what is before us today.

If we want to be just bystanders -- parade watchers: palm waving, flag waving Christians who go home after the parade and forget it, then we can do just that. Drop in our envelope, have a good feeling, be at ease and let the world go to hell. But, if you are serious about this Jesus stuff, if you want to be a participant, then you had better watch out and prepare yourself and get ready.

One friend wrote to another friend: "Waiting is active, patiently present, open-ended, hoping in a promise, lived in community this is it! God grant me faith, hope and love in the waiting." As we enter into Holy Week, may we choose the way of quiet confidence. In the midst of apparent defeat, hopes seemingly unrealized, or work left undone -- we wait with Mary and the Apostle John at the foot of the cross. Let us respond to Jesus' Passion -- His sacrificial suffering -- with trust and invitation, certain that our little offerings, even our greatest agonies, when truly offered to Him will lead to our joy in the glory of the Resurrection.
AMEN!

[Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14; Psalm 116; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 12:1-15]

Tonight, as we celebrate the Mass of the Lord's Supper, we enter into the sacred time of the Triduum (Three Days) – our recollection for the next three days of Jesus' saving life, death and Resurrection. As the Jewish people hold the Passover celebration of the Exodus story as their perpetual institution, so are we Christians called each year to commemorate the sacred events of Jesus' final days on earth – leading to the triumph of His Resurrection on Easter.

Tonight, we recall – with solemnity and gratitude – Jesus' institution of the Eucharist, the ordained priesthood, and the mandate to serve -- on the night before His death. In his First Letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul recalls Jesus' loving transformation of the bread and wine of the Passover Meal into His Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity, which will soon be sacrificed for humanity in Jesus' brutal death.

The Catholic Church firmly insists that in the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, Jesus Christ is indeed present. The elements of the sacrament do not *represent* the Body and Blood of Jesus; they *ARE* the Body and Blood. "This is my body; this is my blood."

Tonight the Church around the world solemnly celebrates this extraordinary mystery: The substance of the bread changes into the substance of the Body of Christ; the substance of the wine changes into the substance of His Blood. We call this Transubstantiation.

Knowing that His betrayer has already left the room and is preparing to hand Him over, Jesus then opens His heart in a remarkable gesture of love for all time. In a very short time, we will be sharing in this love that Jesus pours out for us every day as we come to Mass and receive Holy Communion.

Both the Jewish and the Christian traditions call for more than just rituals and remembrances – as important as they are. The people of the time of Moses were told to eat the Passover meal with their loins girt, sandals on their feet, and a staff in hand, to eat as those who are in flight. Ready to flee Egypt and to face the unknown. We too eat, and in doing so, prepare to become people of action.

And yet all around the world, the Gospel for this celebration is the narrative of Jesus washing the feet of the apostles. John does not record the words of institution of the Eucharist as the other three Gospels do. He focuses on the Master's washing the servant's feet.

The Church's decision to read this account on Holy Thursday must reflect a theology that unites Eucharist and service; it encourages us to become other servant Christs. We are to become what we eat, and what we become through this sacrament of service is the living presence of Jesus Christ as servant of the world. Jesus said to them "I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do." Fed by this Eucharist, we, too, are to be servants to the world.

What specifically can you do? Last fall, when we had our Festival of Ministries, we were able to view all of the dozens of ministries and services provided by the parishioners of St. Martin de Porres. They ran the range of physical, intellectual and spiritual works, depending on our abilities and our availability. They ran the range of something that could be done in one day or one week, or regularly throughout the year. Festival Booklets are still available.

Following the Passover Meal, Jesus, Peter, John and James went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. At least Jesus prayed. The Apostles, probably worn out by the emotional intensity of the evening and a long day, slept. The intensity of Jesus' prayer turned His sweat into drops of blood. Following tonight's Mass, we will process to the parish center for a time of prayer and periods of quiet meditation. We will remain with Jesus as He rests in the Altar of Repose. Let us this night remember the importance of what Jesus did for us and does for us. Let us this night re-commit ourselves to prayer, ministry and service. Let us this night thank Jesus for the gift of His very presence in our lives.

Matthew Kelly, in today's final Lenten reflection says this:

I wonder what the disciples were thinking that Thursday morning. You know, did they just think it was another Thursday? Did they just think it was another Passover?

We've been talking a lot about awareness, as we made our journey through Lent. I wonder what sort of awareness the disciples had. They spent three years of their lives with Jesus. They probably had dinner with Him every night. Did they know this night was different? Did they know this night was special? And when He broke the bread, said the blessing, shared the wine -- what kind of awareness did they have about what was happening? Did they realize they were at one of the most pivotal moments in history? Did they realize they were at the most important meal in the history of the world?

Probably not.

I guess the point is that we can wander through life half asleep. We can wander through life unconscious of a lot of really, really, really important things. And God's constantly trying to wake us up.

And so, as we enter into these very, very sacred days, I think God's probably trying to do the same thing to us. He's probably trying to give us a little shake and say, "Wake up. Pay attention. This is important." And if we do, I think, He always richly rewards us.

So let's let Him shake us, let's let him wake us up, and let's experience these sacred days like we've never experienced them ever before in our lives. AMEN!

[Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 31; Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9; John 18:1-19:42]

Sometimes God really does give you more than you can handle. I really don't like blaming God for our troubles. I prefer to blame life, or YOU, or ME.

We did it. We're the ones who denied Jesus somewhere between three times and 77 times, just since Lent began. We sold him for a wad of cash, or a comfortable lifestyle, or a moment's peace. We took a snooze when Jesus asked us to pray. We kissed him in public, but looked the other way when He was abused. We twisted His words to suit our purposes, mocked Him with thin praise, and ran when He needed a friend, hid to save our skins.

"Jesus said, if anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9:23).

Yes, "I have the strength for everything through him [God] who empowers me" (Phil 4:13).

But maybe no -- quite possibly no -- "God doesn't give you more than you can handle." It's a popular quote, but not Scriptural.

It's religiously cultural and, most times, meant to be helpful. Comforting. Encouraging. Empowering. *Meant* to be.

On the other hand, perhaps LIFE does give you more than you can handle, and, like Jesus on his way to Calvary, you need some help. Perhaps sometimes you need your own Simon of Cyrene. And perhaps sometimes the strength God is giving you is the wisdom and courage to ask for help from others.

It could be the root of the problem, the misunderstanding, is first person/second person. Singular and plural. Pesky grammar.

God never gives me more than I can handle? Well, he certainly seems to.

God never gives you more than YOU can handle. Both singular "you"? Same problem.

God never gives me more than WE can handle. Now that has possibilities.

God never gives you (singular) more than you (plural, that is, you and others working together) can handle. Sounds good!

That could be it. But first let's have a little (catechetical, religious ed., CCD) review of how troubles on earth weren't part of God's original plan.

All down through history, all of our sins at best muddy the waters of what God invites us to do now, including accepting His offers of grace to do it. At worst, they cause ripples of pain that can stretch out farther than we can see or imagine. But let's be clear. That isn't to say those who face hard times and heartaches do so because they sinned -- "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (Jn 9:2). Yes, they sinned, but I sin, you sin, he or she sins. We sin, you sin, they sin.

So, yes, it can be said God/life never gives you more than you can handle because God gives the rest of us -- sinners all -- the opportunity, the privilege and the obligation to help you. Coupled with this, making it even easier to zip along on our merry way -- as if we needed to make it easier for ourselves -- is another far-less-than-helpful catchphrase: "pull yourself up by your bootstraps."

Never mind that it's unclear where that little chestnut originated or how one is supposed to pull oneself up by bootstraps, those leather loops on the backs or sides of some boots.

Dominic Albano from Dynamic Catholic says this: We all have darkness. We all have our own little version of Good Friday somewhere in our lives. There's something that hurts, something that's hard, something that's dark, and we want to find our way around it. We want to find a way to skip over it. We don't want to go through it. We want to get right to the Resurrection. We want to skip the death and get right to the Resurrection.

Even Jesus, right? Even Jesus is like . . . He's in the garden, and what's He say? "Lord, let this cup pass from me. Don't make me go through this. Isn't there a way around it? Isn't there a way I can skip over it?"

No. There is no way around the darkness in our lives; it's there. There is no way to skip over it. And Jesus shows us we've got to go through it.

I know it's easy, right? It's easy to want to skip the Good Fridays of our lives and just try to get to Easter. But God shows us in this Gospel

passage. It invites us to enter into the darkness for a while, to embrace it, to go through it, so we can get to Easter. What do we still have in common? Being kicked to the curb by life. Being called to the role of Samaritan. Needing help. Giving help. I and we. You (singular) and you (plural).

And in doing that we catch at least a glimmer of the Resurrection in a world that can seem so dark and cold and heartless. A brief, encouraging glimpse at what God had, and has, planned.

And here is what happens from the Acts of the Apostles: “They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one’s need” (Acts 2:42, 44-45).

So, I guess it’s true: God (or LIFE) never gives you (singular) more than you (plural, that is, you and others working together) can handle.

It’s pretty easy to look around and conclude that one of the things humans do best is inflict suffering on one another. Christ’s Passion draws attention to suffering, both what He endured because a group of leaders put their own power and security ahead of everything else, and what people have endured ever since for similar reasons. Yet Christ gathers up all suffering and death in His own. The Passion and Resurrection of Jesus forever ended meaningless suffering and death. All sacrifice, all loss, now has ultimate value because Christ offered Himself for sacrifice and rose again. You can participate in this redeeming sacrifice by exercising kindness wherever you find suffering.

We adore you, O Christ and we praise you. Because by Your Holy Cross, You have redeemed the world! AMEN!