

[Sirach 27:4-7; Psalm 92; 1 Cor. 15:54-58; Luke 6:39-45]

I think I am here long enough for most of you to know that I have a sense of humor. Some would call it “creative” and others might call it “bizarre.”

When I hear the Gospel story about the plank and the splinter, I remember a very creative teacher in a parish where I was assigned as Associate Pastor in a parish with a school. The teacher told the children to be creative and to return the next day with props explaining any Gospel parable they would choose. The next day, during Religion Class, one of the clever students stood up with a baseball cap that had been taped to a long, skinny, empty cardboard box with at least a half a roll of duct tape. He went from student to student saying, “You’ve got a splinter in your eye...”

When I hear the words of St. Paul from our Second Reading, I remember that I didn’t hear them first in Church. I actually heard those words for the first time while watching an old W. C. Fields movie. He was a comic star from the 1930’s and 40’s with a distinctive appearance and a tall hat. He spoke out of the side of his mouth with a distinctive voice. The movie scene was at their home. They were sitting around the table having breakfast. W. C. was at one end of the table, his wife was at the other, and sitting alongside were a teenage daughter and a young son, and W. C.’s mother-in-law. She scowled at him and asked, “Isn’t it a bit early to be drinking alcohol?” He sneers at her and says under his breath, “Shut up you old nag.” Then the mother-in-law raises her finger in the air and says, “One day you are going to drown in a vat of whiskey!” “Drown in a vat of whiskey,” repeats Fields. Then, he says, “Oh, Death, where is thy sting?”

Abraham Lincoln said it a little differently than the wise man who composed our First Reading, but it’s the same idea. Lincoln said: “It is better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to speak up and remove all doubt.” Since the time of ancient Egypt, many have agreed that, compared with most speech, “silence is golden.” And silence earns its glorious reputation because we often use language so badly.

Sometimes we lie; sometimes we just bend the facts a little. We say what we don't know, yet assert it as fact. We speak impulsively and cause irreparable harm. We chatter aimlessly, suffocating our listeners with our prattle. We gossip and ruin reputations. We voice opinions, some of which may reveal how dark our hearts really are. "From the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks!"

Before any election, we scrutinize the candidates to hear how their words confirm or betray their character. Of course when we talk, we give ourselves away too, despite our best intentions. That's why there's a law that says, "You have the right to remain silent." We might want to exercise that right more often!

The words we speak not only reveal us; they also have a way of deepening who we are. This shouldn't surprise us, as we confess our faith in an incarnate God, a Word made Flesh. God takes on flesh, and becomes all the things that flesh is: fragile, hungry, in need of friendship, capable of bleeding and dying. But in Jesus, flesh also becomes all the things the Divine Word is: life-giving, truth-telling, soul-healing. Not to mention, stronger than death and even stronger and more powerful than Hell itself.

All of this might make us more mindful of the words we choose. When you and I speak bitterly as a matter of habit, we harden into cynics. When we think violent thoughts, it's only a matter of time before we indulge in violent actions.

Remember the story of *My Fair Lady*? In a class-conscious society, this girl in London who speaks with a low-class Cockney dialect is not considered a "lady" at the start of the story. But as she learns to overcome her dialect, the power of new upper-class speech transforms her. A new identity blooms in her, and she becomes one with it.

Words take on flesh -- and flesh, words. God's Word of Love becomes the Baby of Bethlehem. The stories Jesus tells of forgiveness become the Man on the Cross in Jerusalem. Words become flesh as surely as a tree produces its fruit -- good or rotten -- with integrity to its inner nature. If we intend gentleness, we must use softer words. If we're not yet ready within to produce loving speech

And now, for some upcoming events. On Tuesday, we will be wonderfully schizophrenic. It is Paczki Day, and the members of the Active Christian

Women's Club are providing one free paczek and many more paczki for a free-will offering. Later that evening, we will have a Family Mass for our families in our Faith Formation program and for everyone in our parish family. Mass will be at 6:00 PM, followed by a simple soup and bread meal in the parish center. This dinner is sponsored by our local Knights of Columbus Council and our Ushers.

This Wednesday, we begin another season of Lent. In order to promote silent prayer during this season, we will have silent time just before the start of Mass. We liturgical ministers will be in our places in the sanctuary. Mass will begin with the welcome read by the Lector. There will be no entrance procession or opening hymn. We will simply begin with the Sign of the Cross and go right into the Penitential Rite.

Come join us on Monday nights for Sung Evening Prayer. It transports me into another world. A world of praise and worship, a world of reflection and prayer. If you haven't experienced Sung Evening Prayer, please join us, beginning on Monday, March 11th. It will deepen and enhance your prayer life.

Are you free during the day? We will pray the Stations of the Cross on Fridays at 3:00 PM, the Hour of Divine Mercy. Did you know we have evening Mass on Wednesdays at 7:00 PM? This is followed by Confessions at 7:45 PM. We also have Confessions on Saturdays at 3:00 PM. All of these opportunities for grace can be found in our parish bulletin and on our website. Also, go to the FORMED website for full length articles, movies and other video presentations.

After Mass today, I invite everyone to take home with you a pamphlet explaining Lent and giving you some helpful hints how to make this Lent a time of prayer, thanksgiving, stewardship and spiritual growth.

Last year's Advent resulted in a radically missionary Christmas. You and I have the power to make this Lent the best Lent ever! And, at the end, for all of us, a radically missionary Easter! AMEN!

[Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18; Ps. 27; Phil. 3:17-4:1; Rom. 10:8-13; Luke 9: 28b-36]

I mentioned this during the week. How many of you have seen the movie, "Bruce Almighty?" There is a scene where Jim Carrey is driving his jalopy of a car at night on a highway, and asks God to give him a sign about the future of his relationship with his girlfriend, Grace. After making the request, a run-down pick-up truck with all kinds of road signs in the back cuts in front of him. The signs say, STOP, WRONG WAY, and DO NOT ENTER. Then the truck suddenly turns off the freeway, causing Jim Carrey's car to run into a light post. He says, "Thanks for the sign!"

If you were waiting for a sign from heaven to confirm that God was on your side, what exactly would you be looking for? And where would you go to look for it? Ancient people knew, or thought they knew, what a sign from heaven looked like. Many years ago, I was looking for the Fairfield Inn on Van Dyke. I had never been there before. I looked up in my car and asked, "Lord, give me a sign." I was stopped at a red light, and looked around me. A large billboard had this message: FAIRFIELD INN, TURN LEFT NOW! I, too said, "Thanks for the sign!"

In the Scriptures, signs came from the general direction of heaven, which was up. It usually had something to do with stars or heavenly beings or uncontrollable forces like weather. A sign from heaven would be powerful, and chances are it would be terrible or at least terror inspiring.

If you wanted an advantageous position from which to receive such a sign, a mountaintop was a good place, being closer to heaven and the realm of God. In fact, one of the original names for God used in the Hebrew Scriptures is *Elohim*, the "God of the mountain." That's why the Tower of Babel experiment made sense in a sad and ill-considered sort of way. The closer to the sky you got, the closer to the seat of true power you might expect to be.

So Abram looked to the starry sky and found confirmation of the future God was promising his descendants. And in a state of trance he saw God's covenant expressed to him in the powerful symbols of fire. The scene would be utterly frightening but for the comforting words of God's promise.

An elderly childless couple will be transformed into a mighty nation. Abram understands that the power of this God can bring such a change into being.

Recall what is being said in our First Reading. To “cut a covenant” meant that you took the animals listed, cut them in half, and set the carcasses on both sides of the road. Both parties to the covenant would walk past these carcasses and say, “May this happen to me if I do not keep this covenant.” But look carefully. Who passes by on the road in our First Reading? Only God does. Abram is asleep, in a “deep trance.” God is committed to the covenant with us!

Which was harder to see: the nation hidden in the two old people Sarah and Abram, or the celestial glory concealed in Jesus of Nazareth? One might think that the continual stream of healings and miracles emanating from their Teacher would have tipped the disciples off. But apparently it took the mountaintop setting, radiant light, and the inexplicable presence of two famous and very historical holy men to cue Peter, James, and John that something glorious was hidden in the very person of Jesus Himself. Perhaps they had been hoping for a sign from Heaven to confirm that Jesus was the one Israel was waiting for. Maybe it hadn't occurred to them that Jesus might *be* the sign from heaven they sought. THE Sign was right in front of them the whole time!

A hallmark of Christian thought is the idea that what *was*, is *now*—and what *will be* is also remarkably at hand. The past and the future are simply two expressions of the “eternal now” of the realm of God. And the coming Kingdom, we might say, has already arrived. The Kingdom is “here,” and “not yet.”

Visions and trances and apparitions give certain privileged glimpses into the divine realm that garner a lot of attention for their startling supernatural qualities. But they are all ways of saying, “Wake up! See the divine presence and activity all around you!” This is the same Jesus Who walked and talked with His friends for years. This same radiant Jesus went to His Crucifixion, rose on Easter Sunday, lives in His Church, and comes to us in word, sacrament, and the least of our sisters and brothers. Can we receive the Holy Presence with understanding in all of these forms? Or are we still looking for a mountaintop view, special lighting effects, and a little fire?

In our Second Reading, St. Paul describes a transfigured view of ourselves. As citizens of Heaven, we are merely tourists in this earthly land where money, power, fame, and security are the forces in charge.

If we claim our citizenship in the Kingdom, our relationship to worldly dynamics can be a little more objective. Kingdom people are also more attuned to the idea that it is always “good for us to be here,” where the glory of God is breaking into time once more.

St. Peter wants to build tents on the mountain, which means that he wants to stay on the mountain, where it is safe, protected and comfortable. Jesus says, “You may build one big tent or three smaller tents, but not two. Because you are too tense! (Two tents – a groaner pun.)

Today’s readings take us into the realm of signs, symbols, promise, and revelation. Take a moment to think about the strongest sign of God’s presence in YOUR life and the greatest symbol of your faith. [Pause.] Now ask yourself:

What promises have you made with God that remain unfulfilled? Why? Do you have a sense that God has fallen short in some way?

What keeps you from honoring your covenant with God to remain faithful and listen to the words of Jesus?

Abram, Paul, Peter, John, and James all experienced fear and confusion at their first real encounter with Divine Truth. What are you feeling in your faith life right now? What do you know to be true above all else? Witness to those encounters with a dark and sad world which is still looking for signs. AMEN!

[Readings: Exodus 3:1-8a, 13-15; Psalm 103; 1 Cor.10: 1-6, 10-12; Lk.13: 1-9]

This is a weird grouping of readings we're invited to consider! We've got a bush that's burning and also not burning. We've got a rock that migrates all around the desert and is the Christ. And we've got a fig tree that doesn't produce figs. What are we to make of this biblical collage?

The characters in these passages are trying to do the same thing: fit the pieces together so they can see what each puzzling series of events is about. First there's Moses. He grew up in a palace raised by Pharaoh's daughter. But he's not an Egyptian, he's Hebrew -- a dangerous thing to be since Hebrews aren't treated so well by Egyptians. Which makes Moses mad enough to kill. Which he does, murdering an Egyptian who's beating a Hebrew slave. Now Moses is a man on the lam.

Flash-forward to Moses 2.0. He's the husband of the daughter of a Midianite priest. But Moses is no Midianite. Nor is he really an Israelite, since he's never been circumcised. Moses sees a bush on fire that's not actually burning. Weird! What's even weirder is that the God of Israel is waiting for him there. God wants Moses to go back to Egypt and set the Israelites free. You've got to be kidding!

Second reading: Paul is writing the Corinthians. They're not Jewish. Paul's not Greek. But Paul is something more than Jewish -- he's an apostle of Jesus Christ. Paul tries to explain Moses to the Greeks by way of Jesus. This leads to a very strange metaphor about Christ being the rock from which Israel drank in the desert years. And it followed them around, of course, because what good is a drinking rock if it's not there when you need it?

Then we arrive at the Gospel. Folks are discussing current events with Jesus. Pilate just had some Galileans slain. Hardly newsworthy: the pagan historian Josephus says Galileans were troublemakers, and Pilate had put mobs of them to death before.

Pilate is a ruthless killer. The Galileans who travel south to Jerusalem arrive to make their sacrifices in the Temple. They kill the sacrificial animals and

spill their blood on the altars of sacrifice. But Pilate's guards rush in and massacre them while they are at worship in their house of worship. Sound familiar? That is why Jesus says that the blood of the Galileans mixes with the blood of the animals.

Jesus is a Galilean. The people telling him these things are probably not. Jesus is in Judea. So the reporters are Judeans.

Jesus responds to them by noting that some Judeans were also killed in a tower collapse recently in Jerusalem. He equates the two events: Pilate's coldblooded killing with a random accident. The message: Don't read the will of God into either of these things.

I shudder when I hear someone say after surviving a near accident at work, a near house fire, a near collision with another car, "My Guardian Angel must have been watching over me." What about those who DO suffer the accident at work, or whose house goes down in flames with all their uninsured possessions with it, or who dies in the car crash? Where was THEIR Guardian Angels? Taking a cigarette break? On their day off? On vacation? Don't try to read or control the will of God in the bad things that happen.

Moses was wondering if the whole thing about leading the Israelites to salvation was going to work. There he would be, an unknown appearing out of nowhere claiming God had sent him to lead God's -- and his -- people out of slavery. He needed some credentials. Asking God's name would do it.

One thing you might not know, is that to know someone's name was, in a sense, to have power and control over them. It also meant that you have responsibility over them. When you name your child, you are accepting responsibility for them. You have power and control over them. But God will not be controlled. So God tells Moses "I am who am..."

Moses was the first to hear this new name, which was not a proper name at all but a form of a verb: "to cause to be, to create"; "I am what I am" (Popeye the Sailor Man takes that name!); or "I will be what I will be" (Que sera, sera!). From this moment the "LORD-YHWH" would mean a God who is and always will

be utterly free and powerful to do great things -- like free God's people. God's Holy Name is an action verb! Our God is an action verb!

Moses would find his mission and return to his people -- but though he knew he was in the presence of God, he still had some reluctance -- not the last Israelite prophet to feel that way. So, if even a great figure like Moses could be out of place and struggle to find out what God was calling him to, it can happen to anyone. Come, approach the Lord. Remove your sandals. Stand on holy ground. Come to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Find YOUR holy ground. When you feel adrift or without purpose, how do you find direction? That is YOUR burning bush, your drifting water rock, the will of God for YOU.

How do you feel when someone who's been hurtful, cruel, or morally corrupt gets hit with a hardship that makes them suffer? Our natural tendency is to rejoice because justice has finally been meted out. Karma. What goes around comes around, right? Jesus addresses this in this Sunday's Gospel reading. He wants us to understand that we cannot truthfully say that someone is a "greater sinner," even if that person is doing more damage than anyone else, is more un-Christian than we are, or is blatantly an evil-doer.

I'm thinking of Adolph Hitler. Osama Bin Laden. ISIS. All those folks who entered Christian churches, Islamic mosques and Jewish synagogues to commit murder and mayhem. They don't understand that they can be healed by the Sinless One who conquered evil for their redemption as well as ours. We should feel sorry for them -- this is the gift of mercy. We should mourn with Jesus for the tragedy that continues within their souls -- this is the most precious gift of mercy.

When we don't care enough to grieve over a person's inner destruction, we ourselves are sinning. We are disregarding what Jesus did for them and for us on the cross. We are damaging and potentially endangering our own souls.

All those who have sinned against you are like that fig tree in Jesus' parable. If you have access to them, He wants you to till their soil. He wants you to fertilize their souls with love and with the truth of the Gospel as taught by your actions and, when they're ready, by your words. He wants you to give them a gentle but obvious invitation to grow in the right direction.

Who has been so hurtful to you that you wish God would punish them? Can you feel sorry for them? Can you pray for God to do good for them? In this, you'll find freedom from the anger and pain that has been holding you captive.

Notice that Jesus doesn't want us to keep a diseased, disintegrating tree in the garden forever. After (and only after) we have done everything possible, if the evil-doer does not want to change, the best care we can give to the garden is to cut down the tree. This means walking away or calling in the authorities for intervention and letting the sinner reap what they sow. This, too, is very loving.

When fertilizer won't produce good fruits, a fallen tree becomes mulch and enriches the ground for a new beginning. So, you see, there is hope for all of us! Saints and sinners! AMEN!

[Readings: Joshua 5:9, 10-12; Ps. 34; 2 Cor. 5:17-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11-32]

As a liturgical season, Lent has had a bad rap as a time for glumness. We aren't even allowed to say the word "alleluia" because it's too happy! Maybe it's the penitential purple that casts a shadow on these weeks or the knowledge that we are moving ever closer to Holy Week and the cross. It's a time for fasting, sacrifice, and challenging ourselves with the task of conversion. It is also the premiere season for reconciliation. Lent is, from every point of view, hard work.

And yet the Roman Missal calls Lent "this joyful season," and we set aside this Sunday, Laetare Sunday, or as I like to call it, "Manly Rose Sunday" for a certain deliberate buoyancy even in a time earmarked for buttoned-down spiritual discipline. Even without the alleluias, we find ways to rejoice! Because when it's time to celebrate, even the color of the season can't stop us.

Knowing when a celebration is in order is as crucial as the celebration itself. When the Israelites led by Joshua got as far as Jericho, it was time for the Passover feast. But they were commemorating more than the 40th anniversary of their deliverance from Egyptian slavery that year. Israel was also acknowledging that they had made it through the desert wilderness, past the generation caught in the old ways at last and preparing to settle in the land of Canaan.

This was the day the manna ceased, which might seem an odd way to begin a celebration. The loss of the free lunch surely rattled the complacency and security of more than a few Israelites. But the manna was a gift from God to sustain a dependent people. Once they had attained the Promised Land, they no longer needed a divine handout. It was time for them to become self-reliant and to enjoy the harvest of the land they would work for themselves. We can think of the conclusion of the manna as a kind of ancient Labor Day in which a liberated people finally embraced what it means to be free and in charge of their own fate. Without independence, as every young person knows and most of us still remember, liberty remains only an illusion.

In today's Gospel, another story of independence starts out rather badly. One of two brothers approaches his father for his share of the inheritance and sets out on his own. A young man freshly removed from his father's house with lots of money burning a hole in his pocket sounds like disaster waiting to strike. And it was: Before long this young person was broke and humiliated. His lack of judgment was no surprise, because here was a fellow who couldn't wait for his father's death to receive his inheritance! Here was a fellow so full of *chutzpah* and with no sense of appropriate timing that he went out to celebrate for the sake of celebrating. The party wound down when the money was gone, and he found himself predictably friendless.

We can certainly sympathize with the older brother, who considered the return of his worthless kin an occasion for offense. According to any worldly standard you can measure by -- just deserts, the work ethic, simple evolution --this young fellow has squandered his place in the gene pool and deserves whatever hard times he gets. But the father doesn't use a worldly standard to measure his son. He loves him. He worried about him, looked for his return, and saw in the very fact of his survival a reason to rejoice.

Another way of looking at this story is to think about freedom, God's and ours. Our free will gives us the choice to take the high road or the low road, for grace or for sin. The young man in the Gospel story chooses the low road, and his father freely chooses to forgive him, *carte blanche*, for everything.

The only person in the story who doesn't exercise his freedom is the older brother. He has bound himself to his brother's sins. A free person can show compassion, but a slave can only serve his master. This older son is mastered by the spirits of anger, self-righteousness, and a rigid sense of justice. It's particularly telling that the *older* brother still lives at home, even after the younger son had set out on his own. The older brother, evidently, has not embraced his independence and does not want the responsibility of human freedom. He still gets his daily manna and prefers it that way. God keeps all promises even when we don't, and God is forever willing to be reconciled with us.

God promises to provide for us, to feed us, to love us. All we need to do is trust in God.

How well have you kept your end of the bargain? During what times in your life have you found it hardest to trust that God is with you, at your side?

Have you experienced the joy of God's all-consuming, forgiving love so vividly described in today's Gospel? When did that happen? For me, it is when I am hearing confessions and bringing back home someone who has been away for years. Or when I give a homily at Mass, and someone comes up to me afterwards and says: "your words were meant for me today."

Saint Paul tells us that "whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away." At this half-way point of our Lenten retreat, what part of yourself do you feel is most a part of your new creation in Christ?

Only a free people can celebrate. The older brother can't even come into the house or in contact with the spirit of celebration. But celebration is not an option in the life of faith. When the lost turns up found, no matter how deliberately lost or in what condition found, God calls such a day a holiday.

This is why Lent is a 40-day celebration, despite the days when we don't eat meat or even much else. This season of reconciliation is one long party in God's eyes. Folks who have been out of touch with the Church or any kind of vital prayer life have crept closer, drawn by the public sign of our ashes and the natural signs of the budding spring around us. Those who would be new members are spending these weeks making final preparations to join us in full communion at Easter.

All of us, no matter how active we may be in attendance, have been invited to move a little deeper into our faith commitment and to examine what holds us back from the work of love. Lent might seem a little Purgatory from our point of view, but speaking in Heavenly terms, it's a celebration. The more we take part in the spirit of reconciling our lives with the person we were born to be, the more there is to celebrate. AMEN!