

[Readings: Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 33; 2 Tim 1:8b-10; Matthew 17:1-9]

Comfort is quite natural to human beings. When we find ourselves in a location that we know, where we have enough food and drink, a place to lay our heads and good, dear friends close by, why leave? All of us, in the end, are looking to enjoy the creature comforts of hearth and home.

Catholicism is not especially compatible with comfort. We profess faith in the God Who was born in a comfortless manger, Who hungered and thirsted in the desert, Who wandered from town to town preaching the Kingdom of God, Who spoke non-comforting words to those were religiously comfortable, Who suffered death for our sake. This God, the Word made Flesh, was raised from the dead, never staying in one place. His ascension into Heaven, at the right hand of the Father, means that His Church should also never get too comfortable.

Our home is not the Tomb of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem, or St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, or even St. Martin de Porres Church in Warren. Our home is Heaven itself, the Beatific Vision, where we will see God face-to-face. For this reason, we Christians are always on pilgrimage. We're like Abram, hearing the voice of God, telling us to leave everything behind, to move on to a land flowing with milk and honey.

The temptation to be too comfortable, to feel that we have arrived at our final destiny, may be seen in the Transfiguration of our Lord on Mt. Tabor. The disciples see Jesus as He really is, as He will be when His flesh is transfigured in the fullness of divine love at the Resurrection on Easter Sunday. In Greek, His "insides" are shown on the "outside." His divine light. How fearfully comfortable this sight must have been to Peter, James and John. They want to set up tents, to dwell ever before the transfigured Jesus, alongside Moses and Elijah. They believe they have arrived. Who wouldn't want to stay there and enjoy it?

Then the voice of the Father speaks. The Transfigured One is the beloved Son of God, the One to whom we owe complete obedience. It is an obedience of love, a delight in the voice of the Son of God.

This is the voice of Jesus that tells us to leave all things behind, to go forth into our neighborhoods, our work places, our schools, even to the very ends of the world preaching the Kingdom of God to those who hunger and thirst for justice.

It is the voice that cries out upon the cross. It is the voice that speaks at the tomb of the Resurrection. It is the voice that ascends into Heaven.

How much faith does it take to follow? How much risk are we willing to take? God asks Abram, "Do you love me? Then move out of the state, out of the country. Do you love me? Then sacrifice your child to prove your loyalty to me. Because Abram said yes, he was given land. He was given a great nation. He was blessed. This didn't mean an easy life would follow.

Whether he or we fully comprehend or cooperate, the divine plan moves ahead, and Abram, in faith, agrees to trust what he could not know and hope in what he could not yet see. Because of his faith and hope, Abram would become Abraham, the father of Jews, Christians and Muslims.

Lent is a time for the Church to cease being comfortable. It's time to leave behind our comfortable tents, to go forth and follow our Lord to the city of Jerusalem. To take risks and, as St. Paul says in our Second Reading, "to bear our share of hardship for the Gospel with the strength that comes from God" alone. The closer we get to Jesus, the more we profess our love for Him, the more change becomes a way of life.

What kind of hardship does Paul endure? Imprisonments, beatings, shipwrecks, attempts on his life. I would hazard a guess that OUR hardships might be more insidious. Medical problems. Mental anguish. Daily pressures and anxieties. Family problems. I don't think any one of these is any greater or any less than the sufferings of St. Paul. And what is his remedy for what ails him? Grace. Grace is that "equipment" that comes to us in baptism. Grace is available to us now and always, especially through the Sacraments. All we require is the humility and the courage to tap into it. Grace is power, power to go on living and loving.

Power to be Christian in every way when being so seems impossible. That is what grace allows us to do!

Jesus does not call us as nameless people in a faceless crowd. He calls us individually, by name. Each one of us -- clergy, religious, lay person; married, widowed, single; adult, youth, child -- has a personal vocation. God intends each of us to play a unique role in carrying out His divine plan.

People who want to live as Christian disciples face serious obstacles. In the United States and other developed nations, a dominant secular culture often contradicts, challenges and even denies our religious convictions about the meaning of life. This culture frequently encourages us to focus on ourselves only and on the gratification of

our immediate pleasures. There is no God, because you and I are gods unto ourselves. There is no objective truth, just serving the truth as we invent it and create it. At times, we can find it far too easy to ignore spiritual realities and to deny religion a role in shaping our human and social values.

But the closer we get to Jesus, the more we profess our love for Him, the more change becomes a way of life. Grace helps get us through those changes in our lives. To follow Him to the very foot of the cross. And to the tomb of Easter Sunday. It's been said that our faith journey, our pilgrimage, is like climbing a spiral staircase. With each step of our faith journey, we cannot see very far, what is ahead of us, but we're getting closer and closer to Heaven. We're going in the right direction!

As members of the Church, Jesus calls us to be disciples. This has astonishing implications:

- Mature disciples make a conscious decision to follow Jesus, no matter what the cost.

- Christian disciples experience conversion -- life-shaping changes of mind and heart -- and commit their very selves to the Lord.

After Jesus, we look to Mary as an ideal steward. As the Mother of Christ, she lived her ministry in a spirit of fidelity and service; she responded generously to God's call. We must ask ourselves: Do we also wish to be disciples of Jesus Christ and Christian stewards of our world and our Church?

The Holy Spirit shows us the way. When in your life has an event so changed your understanding of the world that you don't know what to do or who to trust? God tells you again; listen to my beloved Son. AMEN!

[Readings: Exodus 17:3-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-2, 5-8; John 4:5-42]

We probably all have a friend like this: the one who says, "Let's talk" -- and promptly proceeds to do all the talking! It's tough to have a one-sided conversation. Genuine conversation is also a far cry from idle chitchat. As the point of view revolves around, ideas grow and change. Information is shared and increased. New awareness becomes available to all in a spiral of ascent.

Jesus has such a conversation with the Samaritan woman. Such conversations are rarely recorded in the Gospels. When Jesus is recruiting followers, He doesn't waste words: "Come, follow Me," He says, and they either do or don't. When He teaches the crowds, there's no dialogue. When other rabbis come to Him with trick questions, few are hankering for a true sharing of ideas. The rarely noted conversations are between Jesus and his faithful disciples. After a public teaching, Jesus retreats with His friends, answers their questions, and explores the deeper meanings of what He's been saying and doing. He'll even suggest what they can expect next.

The Gospels don't present these conversations in much detail. We're often merely told that Jesus goes aside with his friends, and the rest happens offstage. A few times in John's account, however, a longer conversation goes on the record. We have such an example here today. In the Gospels, only with the Samaritan woman does genuine conversation take place. She alone, this nameless woman, ascends in understanding as a result of thoughtful time spent with Jesus. Information turns to revelation, and new life comes to many -- all because one woman was willing to talk. And to listen!

In this generation, where are the real conversations happening, and how can we be part of them? I submit that they happen when you are thirsty, uncomfortable, and feeling like you don't belong. In today's Scriptures, you learn that having a relationship with Jesus satisfies all your thirsts and fulfills your hopes. This experience of being understood and wanting to understand makes us truly human. We seek what is good, what is true, what is beautiful. And we find it!

This desire to satisfy your longings is the bridge where Jesus meets you. That is the conversation God wants to have with you so that you may be healed and go on in grace and peace to proclaim what God has done for you.

In every parish I have been assigned, the Number One Concern people share with me is their spiritual hunger. Their spiritual thirst. Their emptiness and loneliness. There is a special place in every human heart that is designed for the Lord alone to enter and to rest: to “pitch His tent” in the center of our life-source.

What prevents Jesus Christ from fully entering your heart? Maybe there is too much Massah and Meribah in our lives. “Massah” means “the place of testing” and “Meribah” means “the place of quarrelling.” For the Jews in our First Reading, they are grumbling about water; next, it will be bread; later it’s meat. Pretty soon, they’ll be whining about after-dinner mints! Too many times, we give in to temptation and too many times we squawk and scream at each other like barbarians. We fail the test, and our conversations turn into shouting matches.

Interestingly, solitude is the cure for loneliness. People say to me, “Aren’t you lonely living in that big house next to the church by yourself?” I say, there is a difference between being alone, being lonely, and being in solitude. I love the solitude after a long and busy day! And I am not really alone after all, am I? I have my Guardian Angel, and Jesus and Mary are watching over me.

When we are afraid of being alone, we should go into it. Dive deeply into it. Solitude teaches profound lessons, especially about ourselves. Feeling lonely has value. Sometimes we need to turn inward to discover what we need to hold on to and what we need to let go of. Once we turn inward and are at peace with ourselves and with the Lord, we can turn outward as Christian Disciples and Christian Stewards.

Initially, the woman at the well tried to fill her heart with five friendships of that turned out to be chaff (cornhusks), but she utterly failed. Jesus tells her, “You will be thirsty again if you drink from that well where you were drinking.”

Life comes from water and is purified and glorified by water. This weekend’s readings are about living water and new life.

The Bible says that Jesus is the living water. Water represents the Spirit of God which comes to us in baptism. That Spirit quenches our spiritual thirst.

St. Paul, in our Second Reading, highlights that Jesus, our savior, poured out the living water into our hearts. The Samaritan woman in our Gospel receives that living water. She was thirsty, still hungering for love.

The Samaritan woman gradually found the Messiah in Jesus, slowly, step by step. It transformed her life. This is what happens when we grow in prayer. We start with a superficial level of relationship with the Lord, and in time, it develops into a profound friendship. First, she found in Jesus a thirsty young man in His early thirties. That is why she points out the caste and color of Jesus when He asks for a drink. "How can you, a Jew, ask me for a drink?" (John 6:9). Second, she slowly realizes that Jesus is a little more than father Jacob. "Are you greater than our father Jacob?" (John 4:12)

Third, when Jesus points out her past sinful life, five husbands, immediately she finds in Jesus a prophet. "I can see that you are a Prophet" (John 4:19). So she begs Jesus to be the living water so that she would not be thirsty again. Fourth, when she fully receives the Spirit of God, she loudly proclaims, "You are the Messiah, You are the Christ, the Savior of the world!"

Then she surrenders herself to Jesus and drops her bucket, the bucket of sin, at the foot of Jesus and receives the source of living water and goes away. She goes to the town and proclaims to her people, "I saw the Messiah, the one who is to come." Like the Samaritan woman, we need to allow Jesus to enter into our personal lives. Step by step, layer by layer. Don't be afraid. Don't hold back. "Is the Lord in our midst or not?" ask the Chosen People of God. And us. God might have replied, "You tell me!" God might say the same to us. Are YOU with me or not? God dwells with us; that's been the promise right along. Whether or not we buy that idea is up to us. What do YOU think? AMEN!

[Readings: Ezekiel 37:12-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:8-11; John 11:1-45]

Are you feeling "dead on your feet?" So did the Jewish people in the time of the prophet of our First Reading, Ezekiel. So did the people listening to Paul in today's Second Reading. So did Martha, Mary, and Lazarus in our Gospel.

Those who had appeared banished from the land of the living would be called forth from their graves of slavery and bondage of the Babylonian captivity, and each would begin to live again the life that seemed lost forever. John does not tell us in today's Gospel if the restoration of Lazarus from death to life brought an awakening of faith in the people witnessing this miracle. For some, it did.

Some interpret this Gospel not as the literal resuscitation of Lazarus, but of the spiritual re-awakening of the Jewish people who were lagging in their faith. I myself felt this story was a test of my own faith. If Jesus Christ is believed to be the first-fruit to be raised from the dead, why is Jesus raising people left and right? The answer: We need to remember that these people who are resuscitated to their prior life-source will die again: the widow's son, Jairus' daughter, Lazarus. Jesus Christ, once Risen from the dead in glory, will never die again. THAT'S the difference! And WHAT a difference that is!

So, are you "dead on your feet?" Are you feeling indifferent, or bored or lazy or in doubt? Do you find yourself being swept away by "fleshly" ways of thinking? One that is shaped and controlled by the values and standards of a world in rebellion against God? Then you're still in the tomb! A "spirited" existence is one that is surrendered to God, to grace, and to the action of the Spirit of God who dwells within. Have you found that power, that grace yet?

"Our friend," Jesus called him (Jn 11:11).

That's what Lazarus was; it's why Jesus came to him, why He raised him from the dead. Because Lazarus was Jesus' friend. Even the bystanders could see it on His face; they said to one another, "See how He loved him" (Jn 11:36). Love and friendship are at work underneath this and, in fact, every miracle. And really, that's the point — the simplest point, at least — that Lazarus is us, or should be. As goes Lazarus, so should we.

We should be [friends with Jesus](#) just like he was. For that's what this Christianity thing is all about: becoming God's friend, finding life in that friendship, even eternal life.

What Jesus did for Lazarus is just what he said He'd do. Earlier in John, he said, "Do not be amazed at this, because the hour is coming in which all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and will come out, those who have done good deeds to the resurrection of life, but those who have done wicked deeds to the resurrection of condemnation" (Jn 5:28-29).

He was, of course, speaking generally here; Lazarus, however, is a sign, a miraculous signal of what is true for all believers. What happened to Lazarus was a glimpse of glory. He said so explicitly: "This illness is not to end in death, but is for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it" (Jn 11:4).

Just as at Cana, or with the Samaritan woman at the well, or the blind man at the pool of Siloam, the miracle of Lazarus was a sign too, also revealing His glory (cf. Jn 2:11). By these signs, many came to believe; that was the point of these miracles. This too is one of the more beautiful points of the story, that God sometimes reveals His glory through the miracles He's wrought in us, that God can change others through us, through our miraculously changed lives. So long, of course, as we're God's real friends.

To be God's friend requires belief — right belief; in fact, orthodoxy. That's the importance of Jesus' [exchange with Martha](#). "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" Jesus challenges her. She answers, "Yes, Lord, I have come to believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world" (Jn 11:25-27).

So, in what ways are you and I still "dead on our feet?" What are some ways that we are still "bound" by sin and need to be set free? What are some wrappings others have put on us? What are the wrappings of habitual sin we have put on ourselves? Are WE ready to step out of the tomb and into the light?

The point here is that real friendship with God demands real belief. If you don't believe in the Gospel, you are no Catholic and no friend of God, nor will the



glory Jesus talked about ever shine through you; it will neither change you nor save you.

This sounds hard, but this story, we remember, takes place at a tomb. The matter and moral of the story is, indeed, life and [death](#). That's why we need to be clear about what friendship with God entails, because the stakes are high. This is the sort of faith the Church wants us to rekindle these final days of Lent before entering the week of Christ's passion. Ours is a primitive but modern faith; we remain enchanted believers in love and friendship and even miracles.

Our faith should be no different from those first witnesses to Jesus' signs. Our faith is purified, of course, by spiritual understanding. We know, for example, why Lazarus kept his burial clothes, and why, unlike Jesus, he didn't neatly fold them up and leave them in the tomb (cf. Jn 11:44; 20:6-7). Lazarus would need them again; he would one day die physically, as all do.

We know that what Jesus gives us is eternal life, heaven; we know that that's what this story is ultimately about. Just before they witness His own death, Jesus wants His believers to have real faith, real hope and real love. Again, all of this is about friendship. Friends understand, friends keep faith, and that's all Jesus wants — friends who'll go with Him to the cross, who'll not lose faith.

As we know, most who were there to see Lazarus raised, scattered at Jesus' arrest. Few made it all the way to see what happened on the [cross](#). What about us? Will we make it to Good Friday as faithful friends of Jesus? Will we witness His death with understanding? Will we see in His death the revelation of God and the work of our redemption? These are the questions the Church gives us just before Holy Week. Questions only the real friends of God know how to answer.

(From Fr. Joshua Whitfield, pastor of St. Rita Catholic Community in Dallas, TX)