

[Readings: Job 7:1-4, 6-7; Ps. 147; 1 Cor 9:16-19, 22-23; Mark 1:29-39]

If you could choose to be with any of the people in today's three readings for one day, who would they be? We probably wouldn't choose Job, who was full of drudgery and misery, troubled nights and hopeless days. Job is responding to his visiting friend, Eliphaz, who had insinuated that Job must have done something wrong to deserve the misfortune he faces. Job learns to deal with the challenges of his life by adjusting his attitude regarding God, his personal health, his wealth and his welfare. All of it could be lost in a moment. Job was able to cultivate an attitude of absolute dependence and reliance upon God.

How about Simon's mother-in-law? Spending all day sick in bed with a fever? I'll pass! How about all those people who were ill or possessed by demons? No thanks. But there are two other people to consider: St. Paul and Jesus. Paul spent his days preaching the Gospel free of charge, and being "all things to all people." We also know that Paul faced constant challenges and hardship. The Good News is that Paul could endure everything because of the very nature of the Good News and from his sense of his role in God's plan. His preaching demanded that his hearers live a way that reflected the truth of the Good News. He says, "I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me."

This weekend, we lift up in prayer three groups of people – the members of our parish who are involved in Stephen Ministry, Boy Scout Troop 1954 on this Boy Scout Sunday, and all consecrated men and women were celebrated on Friday, the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, and extended to this weekend on the World Day for Consecrated Life.

Stephen Ministry is the one-to-one lay caring ministry that takes place in congregations that use the Stephen Series system. Stephen Ministry congregations equip and empower lay caregivers -- called Stephen Ministers -- to provide high-quality, confidential, Christ-centered care to people who are hurting. Today, we re-commission our parish Stephen Ministers, some of whom have served over 30 years. St. Martin de Porres was the first parish in the Archdiocese of Detroit to establish this ministry. Congratulations!

Most of us are familiar with the Boy Scouts of America. Here at St. Martin de Porres, we are proud of our Troop 1954 and we thank them for their help in our parish and for their delicious popcorn and their delicious pancake breakfasts!

In 1997, Pope Saint John Paul II instituted a day of prayer for women and men in consecrated life. This celebration is attached to the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord on February 2nd. This Feast is also known as Candlemas Day; the day on which candles are blessed symbolizing Christ who is the light of the world. So too, those in consecrated life are called to reflect the light of Jesus Christ to all peoples.

The celebration of World Day for Consecrated Life is transferred to the following Sunday in order to highlight the gift of consecrated persons for the whole Church. We pray for all those who have made commitments in the consecrated life, and thank them on their special day. May they continue to be inspired by Jesus Christ and respond generously to God's gift of their vocation.

Last week, we listened to Jesus as He teaches in the synagogue on the very first day of His three years of public ministry. Although few of us can claim teaching as our profession, each of us can still teach by example. Some of life's most important lessons – love, forgiveness, patience, compassion, fidelity – are learned more outside the classroom than inside it.

Jesus does something equally miraculous – he confronts the evil that possesses a man. Later that day, as we hear in today's Gospel, Jesus spends the late night healing all kinds of illnesses and expelling all kinds of demons. Jesus confronts anything that stands in the way of God's Kingdom. While you and I may not have the power or the authority to cast out demons, we still have the power to cast out many evils around us and within us. Do we hold grudges? Does our unwillingness to forgive stand in the way of reconciliation with others? Imagine the miraculous difference you and I would make if, by the grace of God, we could cast out THOSE demons! Also, we CAN heal the sick and lonely simply by being present to them as Jesus was. Jesus did not say He was "too busy" or "too stressed." How did He get re-energized to do all this?

Jesus re-fuels Himself by leaving the busy-ness of his work and going off to a deserted place, where He prays. In that deserted place, Jesus quiets Himself and communes with God. Because of this, both Jesus and Paul find themselves grounded and centered entirely on God, and to the service of God's people. Where is YOUR "deserted place?" A bedroom, a corner of the living room or family room? A room that has a lot of ceramic tile in it? Mine is my "man-cave" on the second floor of the rectory!

Now, if both Jesus and Paul needed to pray in order to do God's work, how much more so do you and I need to do the same. It should be abundantly clear that prayer makes all the difference. If we begin and end each day in prayer, and come to this altar table every Sunday; if we listen to God in Scripture and receive the Risen Lord in the Eucharist, we more closely resemble Jesus.

When we teach by good example and confront evil, when we heal and pray, we become the very presence of Christ in the world. Through us living our days with the companionship of Jesus, the world will not only imagine, but will know the love of God in Christ Jesus.

What you and I can accomplish in our busy day may depend on what we do early in the morning and late at night. By surrendering to God first and last every day, we acknowledge that any good we accomplish is only flowing through us. This frees us from any notion that we ourselves are the source. For the people of Galilee, the many healings performed by Jesus in and around Capernaum in today's Gospel could have only come from the hand of God.

And so it is with us. AMEN!

[Readings: Lev. 13:1-2, 44-46; Ps. 32: 1 Cor 10:31-11; Mark 1:40-45]

The leper in today's Gospel is not a man who lived 2,000 years ago. It is you and me. The Gospel tells the story of how Jesus cures a leper and then tells him to show himself to the priest. It happens in a beautiful exchange that shows the leper's faith and Jesus' love.

"If you wish, you can make me clean," says the leper. Jesus touches him and says: "I do will it. Be made clean." Then Jesus says: "But go, show yourself to the priest." Why does he need to show himself to the priest? The first reading explains: The priest is the one who declares him unclean. If he is clean, he can be reincorporated into the community. If unclean, he would have to stay separate from his family and friends, and shout, "Unclean! Unclean!" before him wherever he goes. 🗑️ The reason for this, in primitive times, is clear: The diseased person would contaminate others.

It sounds harsh to us. We are used to the New Testament's mercy and its inclusion of new people (Samaritans, sinners, Gentiles, etc.). The Old Testament's rules seem almost cruel.

But they aren't cruel -- and if we are not careful, we can easily miss the wisdom of the Old Testament that the New Testament incorporates.

Consider today's Second Reading. "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God," says St. Paul. "Avoid giving offense, whether to the Jews or Greeks or the church of God."

In other words, even we are asked to avoid contaminating the community by "ostracizing" certain parts of ourselves. Only for us, it isn't external factors, or parts of our history, that make us "unclean." It is our moral behavior right now.

Sin is the disease that ruins people. It is every bit as infectious, disfiguring and deadly as leprosy. If I participate in the evils that haunt our time, I become a moral threat. If I indulge in lust, I draw others with me; if I am greedy, I perpetuate a cycle of greed; if I am envious or angry, my gossip and backbiting will spread; if I am proud, I make my family miserable; if I am gluttonous or slothful, I shut down sacrificial love for others.

That puts us in exactly the position of the leper. Jesus can make me clean if he wills it — and he does will it.

In a broken and fractured world, people are torn apart by distance rather than illness. They are separated due to ignorance and prejudice. People are broken by addictions. They are lacking the true compassion that is found in humility, but only experience pity rooted in arrogance. People are living outside the community of believers as a result of a failure to lovingly embrace the sinner while seeking to remove the sin. The healing touch of Jesus fails to reach the broken because unlike in today's Gospel, we and others fail to call out to Jesus. We fail to realize that we are in need of healing or think we are undeserving of it.

Today is the World Day of Prayer for the Sick. It is also the weekend dedicated to World Marriage Sunday. Lent begins this Wednesday. This is our opportunity to call out to Jesus like the leper in the Gospel of today. It is our time to realize we have need of healing. What is your need this year? Is it an addiction, a bad habit, a sinful past that has been eating at you for years, or an event that happened to you that has never been spoken about and needs to come out so that you can move towards a better life? What is your leprosy? In some ways we are all unclean, but we try to hide it. The passage in the Old Testament spoke about tearing your garment to bear the disease. We too must rend our hearts to bear our sin before the Lord. Why hide in caves, in the darkness, when Jesus comes to heal and bring us into the light? Why hide behind a mask of denial, when we can live free from false images and vanity?

The Lord wants to heal you. He wants to give us new life. Leave behind the sinful past and be embraced by Jesus. This Lent will only be different if we seek to lay ourselves open before the Lord. This Lent will be different if we are willing to be different than we are; to be who we are capable of being. What is so great about sin that we should want to hold on to it? Today is the day to cry out to Jesus because he does want to heal you. Hear his voice calling to you; "I do will it. Be made clean".

One of the more popular phrases during the Lenten season is "Give Up." It works for singles, for married couples and for this sick. It works for all of us!

Craig Gates of Jackson, MS, tells us "What to Give up for Lent:"

GIVE UP grumbling! Instead, "In everything give thanks." Constructive criticism is OK, but "moaning, groaning, and complaining" are not Christian disciplines.

GIVE UP 10 to 15 minutes in bed! First thing in the morning and the last thing at night, use that time in prayer, Bible study and personal devotion.

GIVE UP looking at other people's worst points. Instead concentrate on their best points. We all have faults. It is a lot easier to have people overlook our shortcomings when we overlook theirs first.

GIVE UP speaking unkindly. Instead, let your speech be generous and understanding. It costs so little to say something kind and uplifting. Why not check that sharp tongue at the door?

GIVE UP your hatred of anyone or anything! Instead, learn the discipline of love. "Love covers a multitude of sins."

GIVE UP your worries and anxieties! Instead, trust God with them. Anxiety is spending emotional energy on something we can do nothing about: like tomorrow! Live today and let God's grace be sufficient.

GIVE UP TV one evening a week! Instead, visit some lonely or sick person. There are those who are isolated by illness or age. Why isolate yourself in front of the "tube?" Give someone a precious gift: your time!

GIVE UP buying anything but essentials for yourself! Instead, give the money to God. The money you would spend on the luxuries could help someone meet basic needs. We are called to be stewards of God's riches, not consumers.

GIVE UP judging by appearances and by the standard of the world! Instead, learn to give up yourself to God. There is only one who has the right to judge, Jesus Christ.

"If you wish, you can make me clean," says the leper. "I do will it. Be made clean." "But go, show yourself to the priest." AMEN!

(Readings: Joel 2:12-18; Ps. 51; 2 Cor 5:20-6:2; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18)

An Italian newspaper recently carried a story about a young couple in Milan who seemed particularly devoted in their worship. The priest at a cathedral there reported that the pair spent an hour or more on a regular basis sitting before a statue of the Virgin Mary. Naturally, he assumed they were praying.

Turns out, this young couple was recharging their cell phone. They had noticed a stray electric cable sticking out of the wall behind the statue of the Virgin Mary. Whenever their phone's power supply dwindled, the young couple came to the church and re-charged it from the cable behind the Virgin Mary. The priest states that the young couple is welcome to use his church for this purpose.

We talk about coming to church to "re-charge our batteries," but this is ridiculous! What looked to the unobservant eye like an act of piety was actually a self-serving ploy to save money. This young couple was using the church for their own needs. And we're shocked -- until we realize that sometimes we may be guilty of the same mistake.

We are fortunate to live in a time when recycling is becoming ever more prevalent. By diverting paper and plastics and other materials away from landfills and toward recycling, that which we once threw away can be transformed into something new and useful. Think of the equipment on local playgrounds. Much, if not all, of the plastic we see comes from recycled milk jugs and other plastic items. Something that once seemed to have reached the end of its useful life was collected, reshaped and re-formed into something that will provide joy and usefulness for many years to come.

As we gather on this Ash Wednesday, we enter into the Church's great plan for recycling. The ashes that will be imposed on our foreheads in just a short time are a wonderful representation of this.

Once the beautiful palm branches that we waved in great joy as we recalled Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, these palm-branches-become-ashes will be used to remind us of the need for repentance, change and growth as we enter into this season of Lent.

That recycling of the palms of Palm Sunday into the ashes of Ash Wednesday is a reminder that God is seeking to recycle us: “Even now, says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart.” God wishes to lovingly reshape and reform our hearts and our lives.

Whatever is not true or beautiful or worthy of God in our lives needs to be purged from us by God’s grace and mercy during the forty days of Lent. Although the springtime of Easter may seem distant now, we have this opportunity to respond to God’s loving invitation to grow and change.

Just as we gathered the palms of Palm Sundays past, so we are now gathered here to begin this Lenten journey of recycling. We ask that the season of Lent that opens before us may be a time filled with God’s love and mercy, and the grace of conversion in our hearts and in our lives. This is our opportunity to be gathered into God’s recycling bin, so to speak.

Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday fall on two peculiar secular days this year. Today is February 14th – Valentine’s Day. A time for lovers to re-ignite their passion and romance for each other. Because today is a day of fasting from big meals and abstaining from meat, I hope you celebrated Valentine’s Day last Sunday or yesterday on Mardi Gras – “Fat Tuesday.”

One husband told me that treated his wife to a meal fit for royalty – he took her to Burger King for dinner and Dairy Queen for dessert!

But wouldn’t this Valentine’s Day be a most appropriate day to observe Ash Wednesday: to re-ignite our faith and faith-practice, to fall in love once again with the God-Man Who gave everything He had in death because of His love for us? Can we this Lent ask Jesus Christ to be OUR Valentine, and us to be His?

Remember all those little tiny paper valentines we would give to each other in school? I wasn’t one of the popular kids back then, so I didn’t get many. And those little candy hearts that had messages written on them became “weapons of slight destruction” when aimed and fired at us!

What would Jesus’ Valentine look like? Why not draw it in your imagination? On the front of the card is a face of Jesus asking, “How much do I love you?” On this inside, Jesus spreads His arms wide on the cross and says,

“This much!”

Easter Sunday falls on another, more dubious day – April Fool’s Day. And again, what kind of a fool gives up Divine Glory to humble Himself to come among us as a man? What kind of foolish Messiah is looking for a kingdom not of power, and weapons and victors and losers, but a kingdom filled with the poor, the crippled, the disabled, the castaways, and the brokenhearted? And what kind of fool gives us His very self on this altar of sacrifice? Only a fool, it would seem, but what a fool!

St. Josemaria Escriva said, **"Lent should suggest to us these basic questions: Am I advancing in my faithfulness to Christ, in my desire for holiness, in a generous apostolate in my daily life, in my ordinary work among my colleagues? ... What better way to begin than Lent? Let’s renew our faith, hope and love."**

Let us pray that the same God who graciously transforms our simple gifts of bread and wine into the body and blood, soul and divinity of his Son will lovingly transform each of us, so that we might rise, reshaped and renewed, in the glory of Easter.

Today, when you leave church, you are going to leave as "ambassadors of Christ" as St. Paul tells us. You will be walking posters with crosses on your foreheads, living advertisements of faith. As Jesus reminds us, we are called to put our Catholic faith into practice. May God give us the strength to do that this Lent. AMEN!

[Readings: Genesis 9:8-15; Psalm 25; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:12 -15]

In the movie musical, "The Wizard of Oz," – one of my all-time favorites -- Dorothy singing "Over the Rainbow" to Toto remains one of the most magical moments recorded on film. It touches something deep within many people's hearts. In many ways, the only thing more delicate than the colors of a rainbow in the still-glistening sky, its darkness being overcome by the bright light of the sun, is the look on a child's face when he or she sees a rainbow for the first time. What is it about a rainbow that is so special for young and old alike?

How do we reconcile our beginning of this season of Lent -- what is supposed to be an austere time of introspection, repentance, penance, and forgiveness -- with the bright image of the rainbow?

It is most unlikely for Jesus to see a rainbow as he prays in the desert. Like Jesus, our 40 days in the Lenten desert will be filled with temptations and wild beasts bent on drawing us away from the task of reconnecting ourselves with God. God promises that God's loving presence will always be with us. God makes a covenant with us, and the rainbow is a sign of that promise. But when we go searching for rainbows, we seldom find them. They seem, rather, to find us, to appear when we least expect them to. This Lent, perhaps it would be better not to spend our time in the desert scanning the horizon. We might be looking in vain for what is already present in our own hearts.

Another dreadful mass shooting took place in our country. And it led to the usual responses: condolences and prayers, calls for gun control, stiffer qualifications and limitations on the purchase and kinds of firearms. I am a firm believer that whatever tragic evil befalls us – as a nation, as a state, as a city, as a parish and as individuals – God will bring about a greater good for us. Archbishop Allen Vigneron has often said that there is no death from which Resurrection cannot come forth. There is never a Good Friday without an Easter Sunday. This is the rainbow that breaks through the storm clouds after a rain. If anything marks us uniquely as Christian believers, it is our faith, it is our hope.

It is our loving acts of Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy – being Christ for others. We will do this this week as we host the Warming Center.

A “friend of a friend of mine” is a Trappistine nun who spends a good part of each day in silent prayer. She once told her friend that the hardest adjustment she faced when entering the monastery was not the serene quiet of the monastery, but realizing how much “noise” was going on inside her heart and head – especially at times of silent prayer. That was helpful to hear.

I thought it was just I who had such a difficult time quieting down for prayer. When I set aside time for quiet prayer, my brain quickly generates thoughts and fears, desires and anxieties, inner turmoil and random troubling emotions, and all that bad news on the television. Plus today’s and tomorrow’s work. Maybe that’s what Jesus experienced when He went out into the desert. Today’s Gospel tells how He went out into the desert and dealt with bad news as if He were encountering wild beasts.

Because He was like us in all things but sin, those wild beasts might simply have been the very human array of wild emotions, notions, and passions rolling around within Him. The Good News is that the Gospel says He was also ministered to by angels. The same can be true for us. This Lent, as you take up new practices of prayer, don’t be discouraged if the first thing you find in the silence is a noisy self. Continue patiently, trusting that you will, in due time, encounter the angels of peace, serenity, surrender, and love to comfort you and guide you past the wild beasts and into the presence of God.

This is God's purpose in times of testing, to help us grow and to show us that we have the faith and ability to stand up to the testing so that we will trust God in difficult times -- to strengthen our faith and Christian character. At the same time, Satan has his own purpose -- to turn those being tested away from God -- to "tempt" them to sin. Jesus has opened and made available the very life of God. All people have to do, then, is open themselves to Jesus and follow His way of prayer to prepare, to fortitude in the desert, to love when asked to be faithful, and to service when challenged to put that faith into practice. AMEN!

[Readings: Gen. 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18; Ps. 116; Rom. 8:31b-34; Mk. 9:2-10]

Let's have a show of hands: Who gave up something for Lent this year? For many Catholics, the Lenten sacrifice is part and parcel of these 40 days. It's another reason to wear penitential purple: 40 days without chocolate. Without dessert. Without coffee. Without TV or electronics for one day a week!

But we know that sacrifice doesn't necessarily involve the rejection of material things. This year, some of us may be giving up gossip or using cuss words or spending the evening criticizing others or complaining. These are good practices that hopefully will take root in Lent and become standard behavior during the Easter season and beyond. Some people may have decided to go all out and give up large sums of money in a generous show of Christian charity. We could use more of those! Have you seen our weekly support reports?

But some folks have given up on "giving up" as a spiritual practice. They are trying instead to do something positive and proactive: spending more time in prayer or with their kids, or caring for their health in exercise or pledging involvement with social concerns. The "giving up" business focused too hard on the negative for these people, and they are trying a new approach to the disciplines of Lent.

What if we stopped thinking of ourselves altogether? What if we gave up thinking about Lent as a kind of moral self-improvement program and considered the root meaning of the word sacrifice?

Sacrifice shares a root with the word **sacred**. A sacrifice is an act that makes one holy -- that is, a sharer in the nature of God. Every religious tradition includes sacrificial practices intended to bring worshipers closer to the Divine. The goal is not to become better people but to experience union with God. All ancient sacrifice involved offering a gift of some kind, and the gift invariably was alive. Life, understood to reside in the blood, was offered to God because it is the most precious thing there is. Every sacrifice therefore consisted of an animal sacrifice, plus grains and "first fruits" to set a full banquet before the Lord.

When the blood was poured, sprinkled, or splashed against the altar, the sacrifice was considered complete. Human sacrifices, rare even in ancient cultures, fell into the category of whole burnt offerings. The ultimate gift was rendered to God as a testimony of perfect confidence and praise.

Every parent I know shrinks at the story of Abraham and Isaac in the land of Moriah. What kind of father agrees to sacrifice his child to God in cold blood, under any conceivable circumstances? It does not help matters to point out that God sent an angel at the last minute to stop the sacrifice, nor to compare this event with the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. No parent, the compassionate heart insists, should be called upon to kill his or her child. Period.

This event is a test of Abraham's character before God. The story was most likely told to later generations as an example of **God's** character before humanity. The God of Abraham had higher dreams for human life than to simply see it splashed against an altar.

You might remember comedian Yakov Smirnoff. When he first came to the United States from Russia he was not prepared for the incredible variety of instant products available in American grocery stores. He says, "On my first shopping trip, I saw powdered milk -- you just add water, and you get milk. Then I saw powdered orange juice -- you just add water, and you get orange juice. And then I saw baby powder, and I thought to myself, "What a country!"

Smirnoff is joking, but we make these assumptions about Christian transformation -- that people change instantly at salvation. Some traditions call it repentance and renewal. Some call it sanctification of the believer. Whatever you call it, most traditions expect some quick fix to sin. According to this belief, when someone gives his or her life to Christ, there is an immediate, in-depth, miraculous change in habits, attitudes, and character. Unfortunately, some of us come to church as if we are going to the grocery store as a consumer looking for the Powdered Christian mix. Just add water, and instant disciples!

Unfortunately, there is no such powder, and disciples of Jesus Christ are not instantly born. They are slowly raised through many trials, suffering, and temptations. A study has found that only 11 percent of churchgoing teenagers

have a well-developed faith, rising to only 32 percent for churchgoing adults. Why? Because true-life change only begins at salvation, takes more than just time, and is about training, trying, suffering, and even dying (adapted from James Emery White, *Rethinking the Church*, Baker, 1997, p. 55-57).

"Beloved sons" abound in this Sunday's readings, and God is moving in big ways around them. In the end Abraham did not have to sacrifice his beloved son -- though he was willing to -- but either way it's a harrowing story. Saint Paul invokes a God whose support for us is seen in the handing over of God's own Son, thereby causing our fears to crumble. And once again we hear, "This is my beloved Son," a "secret" too great to be kept entirely hidden.

Have I ever had to sacrifice something dear to me for a greater good?
How did this sacrifice enrich my relationship with God?

As much as anything, today's scripture is about faith -- the willingness to follow God's command, really believing God is for us, gradually coming to realize glory will also involve the cross. Do I respond to God's call as readily as Abraham? Does God give me strength? Am I willing to walk the road of suffering in order to reach true fulfillment? What am I letting separate me from God?

Have you seen the T-shirt that says, "God's not finished with me yet?" Whatever situation we're in, we must have faith that the unfolding of God's will for us is not complete. More will be revealed, and it will be revealed in the day-to-day activities of our lives -- in our homes and workplaces, at school and within our families. Lent is a time to become aware of both the great revelations and the small. God wants something from us, and it may not be what we think. And surely God has more in mind for us, too. For most, discovering God's will for us will not come in a blinding flash of light, but rather in the small acts of love and generosity we practice right in our daily lives. AMEN!