

[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.

I always grin when the lector has to read depressing readings. The message is so depressing and then the lector says with great joy: "The Word of the Lord!" And what do WE say in response to this depressing news? "Thanks be to God!" Job is responding to his visiting friend, Eliphaz, who had insinuated that Job must have done something wrong to deserve the misfortune he faces.

Everything that Job had, including his wealth, his children, his happiness, and even his own personal health -- is taken away from him. Further, he endures accusations upon the part of his friends. They accuse him of infidelity against the Law. Job surely did something to deserve his suffering. Job says, "Just accept the misery and move on." Eventually, Job was able to cultivate an attitude of absolute dependence and reliance upon God.

God accompanies us in all our experiences and gives our lives meaning and purpose. Job did not possess this knowledge at the beginning of the book named after him; he had to learn it over time and over experience. His suffering, his misery of life, is part of a broader plan. Only God, the creator of the cosmos and the slayer of chaos, knows what it all means.

You and I cannot solve the mystery of life. Spoiler alert: We are not God! Jesus' healings are the beginning of an answer to Job's cry from the heart. Yes, life is hard -- it is for many, a tragedy. And here is the main point of my homily: God is faithful to us in our suffering. God is faithful in His beloved Son to the very end. God is there in our darkness, in our suffering. He comes to heal us in our woundedness. Indeed, "Praise the Lord, Who heals the brokenhearted and binds their wounds!"

Would you want to be Simon's mother-in-law? Would we choose to be her? Spending all day sick in bed with a fever? Jesus heals her. She gets up and feeds Jesus and his friends. But I can almost hear her saying to her

daughter: "So that's the guy that's got your husband running around here and there all hours of the day and night!" Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen jokingly would say that's the reason why Peter denied Jesus three times!

How about all those people who were ill or possessed by demons? Would you want to be one of them? No thanks. We have enough of them in our world, or we may be one of them ourselves.

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 understood his message. THAT is how he became "all things to all people." He did not compromise the Gospel, he adjusted it. He says, "I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me."

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 others.

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! And in the Upper Sacristy of the church.

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 in being able to handle the good, the bad and the ugly things that happen to us. 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, 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 because of God’s grace 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]

For several years now, the Sunday closest to Valentine's Day has been designated as World Marriage Day. And on this special day, at today's Mass, what do TWO of our three Readings speak about? Leprosy!

It's worth noting that we've spent five weeks still in Chapter *One* of Mark's Gospel. So far, Jesus cast out a man's demon, healed a woman's fever, and then took on a whole village's suffering. Now Jesus is confronted by a leper, or at least a man who endures an ailment disfiguring enough to make people afraid of catching what he's got.

This poor fellow suffers in two directions: physically and also socially. Science tells us that skin is the largest organ of the body. It's also the only organ people can see. So unlike a heart condition or stomach ailment, when your skin is sick, it's pretty obvious. The same is true of healthy and unhealthy marriages.

It is indeed true that society, and the Church, greatly benefit from holy, healthy marriages. In particular, the fidelity and love of good married couples is a living reminder of God's love for His people and His fidelity to His promises.

Paul and Tracy Satterfield are members of the International Council of Retrouvaille, a peer ministry for those struggling in their marriages. Retrouvaille (pronounced "retro-vai") comes from the French word for "rediscovery." It's a process of healing that begins with a retreat weekend, and continues with several follow-up once-a-week meetings. Initially, they were reluctant to invest in the program, but then were encouraged to share their story.

They said, "During our tough times, we never dreamed we'd share our story. We never thought we'd be telling our story. We never thought we'd be involved in leadership in this organization." One of the most frequent questions they are asked by couples earns a big laugh from Paul and Tracy every time.

What is that Number One Question? "How are you going to fix my spouse?" Paul's response is always the same. "We're not. You're going to," he said. Tracy agreed. "And you will have to fix yourself as well. We tell them up front this is a peer ministry. "There are no counselors or professionals on site.

“We tell you what WE did, and we give you techniques on how to communicate on different things in YOUR life. We teach you that, but you’ve got to do the work. We cannot work harder on your marriage than you will,” she continued, “and we tell them that it’s going to be a working weekend and that the post sessions that follow are vital to achieving the goal of saving their marriage.”

“You can ask God to move a mountain,” Paul said, “but you’ve also got to pick up a shovel and share the labor. Retrouvaille weekend is a place of miracles. You will see tangible results of the Gospel in action -- healing, forgiveness, restoration, salvation working in the hearts and minds of people.”

So, Paul and Tracy will be good stewards of Retrouvaille in terms of its present and in terms of its future. Because they know the power that Retrouvaille has in the lives of couples who have no hope at all to stay together. The Archdiocese offers the Retrouvaille weekends locally. Go to the [aod.org](http://aod.org) website.

Married couples, do you remember the first time you fell in love with your spouse? How did you feel? How did you know that this is the person God wanted you to spend the rest of your life with? And now the tough question – when was the last time you were on a date with each other?

In my meetings with engaged couples, I always stress the importance of having a date night. In order to keep a marriage strong, you need time to be an imitate couple. Remember to take time to appreciate the gift of your spouse.

Pray together. Keep Jesus Christ as the third part of your “love triangle.” Set aside time to communicate about important and routine things. Handle money wisely. Let your children come not first, but second to your relationship with each other. Because one day there will be an empty nest. Will you recognize each other with the kids gone? Will you still love each other when you are alone? Reflect on what first attracted you to each other, what keeps you committed to each other, and how your marriage shows the love of Jesus Christ for His Church to the world. Then, have a date night -- or a date afternoon if you are retired! 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 stated 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. The safety ground covering is made from old shoes. 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.

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.

What is that one sin, that one habit, that one weakness that prevents us from being closer to Jesus? Gossip? Negativity? Pornography? Can we give up just this one thing for Lent? 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. Be sure to get to Confession sometime in Lent.

This year, Ash Wednesday falls on a special day this year – 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.” Or will do so tomorrow, Saturday or Sunday. No meat on Friday!

One husband told me that yesterday, he 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-charge our faith and to re-ignite our 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? He has already given us the best Valentine’s Day gift – a share in His cross and Resurrection. Let us walk with Him through the wilderness of life’s trials, traumas and tragedies – and sin – into the Paradise of health, wholeness and holiness! AMEN!

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

What do we make of one of the most shocking stories in the Bible? On the one hand, scholars urge us to hear this story as a “test of faith.” God did not want a human sacrifice; the key lies in God’s words to Abraham: “I know now how devoted you are to God.” But what kind of God would subject a person to such a test?

We hear nothing of Abraham’s feelings; he takes up Isaac up the mountain and has the knife out and ready. Yet for the hearer the story is full of emotional tension, even horror. In response to Abraham’s faith, God makes a promise -- but by seeming to call for the offering of the child who embodied God’s earlier promise. Why? How would YOU respond if You were asked to give up your child?

In my forty-two years as a priest, I can honestly say that the saddest and the most traumatic human experience is the loss and burial of one’s child. Regardless of the age, for a parent to bury their son or daughter is unnatural. Parents are supposed to go first. So that makes the Abraham/Isaac story even more foul when one thinks that God would expect such a sacrifice from anyone.

Guess what? God Himself gave up HIS only Son for us!

Seeing familiar things differently is not easy. This is no more evident than in family relationships. Your spouse is changing, as are you. Yet you expect the dynamic between you to remain the same as always. A renegotiation of terms may feel like a betrayal.

Babies become toddlers, and children become teenagers and then adults. But the parents’ vision of them may be frozen at a younger and dependent stage. Especially if they are still at home.

In the same way, parents are the ones who are there for us, usually as reliable as rocks. Until the time that they become elderly and frail, and unexpectedly dependent on us to care for them.

If lifelong friends suddenly develop new opinions or speak their minds more freely, our jaws may drop and we may wonder if we ever really knew this person, we've always known. Technology creeps into the workplace bit by bit, and one day we realize our profession today is not the same as the one we entered. Everything is changing; that's the nature of being. To not change is to become static and stagnant.

But since most changes happen under the surface over long periods, we don't always see transformation coming until it hits us right between the eyes.

In the same way, a teenager might become almost anyone once out from under the family influence. I remember one year in high school, it seemed that I changed who I was, every week or at least once a month. Maybe that is why I can impersonate so many different people so well. I became a chameleon! And a comedian!

Then there is the geeky character in a movie who may be redefined as the hero once circumstances change, drawing the inner hero forth.

Has that ever happened to you, where you had to rise up to the challenge and found an inner strength that you didn't think was there?

When the disciples first ran into Jesus, they certainly saw Him as a remarkable figure. What He was saying and doing was amazing enough for them to walk away from business as usual and head off into a life full of unknowns. What would it be like, to stand in the presence of a miracle and not recognize it? But we do so every day if

our hearts and souls are closed. If we are going to repent and to be converted this Lent, we need a deeper faith.

Have you seen the T-shirt that says, “God’s not finished with me yet”? Maybe Jesus should have bought that souvenir for the disciples after they went up the mountain with Jesus and saw Him revealed in all His glory. The apostles thought they had attained a state of perfection. Peter even wanted to set up tents and live there permanently. Can you blame him?

But Jesus would have none of that kind of thinking. There was much more to be done. Not only was God not finished with the apostles yet, but they hadn’t even started the work ahead of them.

Whatever situation WE are 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 and within our families. Lent is a time to become aware of both the great revelations and the small.

Many years ago, I attended a retreat week at a local hotel. I did not know exactly where the Fairfield Inn was on Van Dyke in Warren. I was stopped at a red light and asked the Lord, “Please give me a sign so that I can find the hotel.” I looked to my right at a huge billboard that said, “FAIRFIELD INN TURN LEFT NOW!” I looked up to the sky and said, “Thank You!” Small signs and big signs. Keep your eyes and your ears and your heart open!

Jesus always had a few surprises left in store. The event we call Transfiguration is representative of all those breakthrough moments when followers of Jesus suddenly “get” who Jesus is for them in new and life-changing ways.

Some scholars believe this event describes a vision that Peter had long after Easter, when he began to understand who Jesus is and always was in their midst: the One about whom the Law (Moses) and Prophets (Isaiah) foretold, a brilliant guiding star leading us to the heart of the mystery of God.

Who is Jesus for you? Do you listen to Him? How much are you willing to sacrifice for Him? This Lent, we are changing, maybe in ways that are quiet and unseen for now. Who Jesus is for us may be changing too. Listen to Him. AMEN!