

[Readings: Malachi 3:1-4; Psalm 24; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40]

Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, after the last Sunday Mass, she would stay in church. She kept herself busy gathering the discarded bulletins, spilled Cheerios, and dropped tissues from the pews. She never talked to anyone, but would smile if they acknowledged her.

Of indeterminate age, widowed decades in the past, she once was the parish sacristan assigned to replace the burned-down daily and weekly wax candles lit at the side altars by parishioners, until the wax candles were replaced by safer and cleaner, electric ones. Without that task, she created her job of Official Cleaner of the Pews, with one condition. She stayed and did it only on those Sundays when Baptisms had been scheduled. Her task completed, she would silently join with the families gathered for the ceremony, smiling as if she was remembering happier times from her past. Since no one knew her, everyone thought she was from the other side of the family. Occasionally, she'd even slip quietly into the group photo of everyone there. A few times she was able to hold the baby for a picture with no one questioning her.

Imagine when the family relooked at those pictures years later, husband and wife asking each other who she was and both responding they thought she was a part of the other's family. She wasn't a grandmother or aunt or neighbor or friend, just someone who found hope and consolation in children newly blessed and ready to face their future. That surely was what sustained her. She sounds a lot like the prophetess Anna in today's Gospel.

Here's the Good News for those who've just had a baby: You get to take home a bundle of love who will be the apple of your eye for years to come. It's like being born again yourself. Wonder will come to live at your house. Your lineage will continue. The world has a future. Who knows what this child will accomplish? The possibilities of this new life are endless.

Here's the Bad News: This baby will cry, wet, and need you without mercy for years to come. This child arrives with a huge price tag: a commitment that costs dollars, time, privacy, personal goals, sleepless nights, and nonstop worry.

There will be disappointments, grief, and rejection up ahead. The possibilities for heartache are endless.

All moms and dads get mixed reviews about their new career as parents. As a survival tactic they tend to selectively forget the bad news and focus their hope and energy on the good. The news that Mary and Joseph got when they brought Jesus to the Temple that day, however, was more extreme than usual. An old man they'd never met insisted their son would be a success story for his nation and a path for foreigners to follow. He would be a game-changer for the powerful and the voiceless alike. He would face great opposition and cause great suffering -- to his mother; the absence of his father in this prediction sounded ominous. Meanwhile, at the sight of their baby, a prophetess immediately gave thanks for his life and began to tell everyone that God's ancient promises were about to come true.

After Anna encounters Jesus, we hear that Jesus goes to Nazareth with his family, growing in strength and wisdom. Family homes are places of physical encounters. Moms and dads hugging kids, caring for them in their sickness, teaching them to perform household tasks. This is the mystery of family life taken up by the Word made flesh.

Jesus saves, therefore, not by abandoning the physical world, but entering more deeply into it. As Hebrews describes, since we're flesh and blood, contingent beings who bleed and die, God enters that physical material condition through the Incarnation of the Son. He becomes the High Priest who offers back to the Father our physicality, our flesh-and-blood lives, redeeming us in the process. After all, this is the purpose of the Church. We're saved not when we recognize that Jesus is our savior. We're saved when our bodies are plunged into the baptismal waters of salvation, when our lips speak the words of the Holy Scripture, when we eat and drink Christ's Body and Blood, and when we adore Christ in the hungry and thirsty and homeless bodies of the poor.

According to the Church's liturgical calendar, the feast held on Feb. 2 each year is in honor of the Presentation of the Lord. Some Catholics recall this day as the feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary because such was

the feast day named until the 1969 changes in the Church's calendar. It was also called the Feast of the Circumcision.

In fact, according to Luke's Gospel, the presentation of Jesus and the purification of the Blessed Mother took place in the Temple on the same day, and both are remembered during Mass on Feb. 2. Also, in several countries, Candlemas is simultaneously celebrated on this day and involves a blessing of candles and a procession that was popularized in the Middle Ages. Until the Second Vatican Council the feasts on Feb. 2 ended the Christmas season. Today, the season ends in January on the feast of the Baptism of our Lord.

Under Mosaic Law found in the Old Testament Book of Leviticus, a Jewish woman who gave birth to a child was considered ritually unclean (see 12:1-8). Not morally unclean, not sinfully unclean, ritually unclean. The mother of a newborn could not routinely go out into public and had to avoid all things sacred, including the Temple. If her child was a male, this exclusion lasted for 40 days. If the child was female, the period lasted 80 days. This was a ceremonial seclusion and not the result of sin or some kind of wrongdoing on the part of the mother.

At the end of the 40 or 80 days the woman presented herself at the Temple to be purified. If the baby was her firstborn male child, the infant was brought along to the Temple to be dedicated to the Lord. That's what happens in today's Gospel. The law in Exodus specifies that the first male child belongs to God (see 13:2-16). This law is a tribute to God for His sparing the firstborn Israelite males during the time of the Exodus from Egypt. The first Passover, when the Angel of Death passed over the firstborn Israelite children and took the lives of the firstborn Egyptian children.

When you hit the "enter" button on a keyboard or keypad, you confirm a transaction or get a path to information you desire. You await the completion of the task, as in today's Gospel reading we are reminded of the waiting for a child whose presentation fulfilled the promise of salvation.

Today's questions to reflect upon today and during the week:

What are you waiting for to fulfill your life on earth?

What blessing gives you an entryway to an eternal relationship with God?

Today is also Boy Scout Sunday. I would like to thank Boy Scout Troop 1954 for their presence and service in our parish. Every year, there is some project that they volunteer to do, to beautify our parish grounds and buildings, and they help at our Tree Trimming service.

Last, but not least, Pope Francis has designated February 2<sup>nd</sup> as the World Day of Prayer for Consecrated Life. This is to honor all the men and women religious who have dedicated themselves as a consecrated man or woman. This includes our own Sr. Pat Whalen, who has been a faithful servant and spouse of Christ for over fifty years. Sr. Pat, we are blessed to have you here to serve and to minister! Thank you for being a light of faith for us in our parish community, and for me personally. May all of us be and become a light to break into the darkness of the world, “a light for all the nations.” AMEN!

[Readings: Isaiah 58:7-10; Psalm 112; 1 Cor. 2:1-5; Matt. 5:13-16]

One Christmas, about five years ago, my dear sister Kathy went on a special pilgrimage to Cleveland Ohio to the “A Christmas Story” Museum and Gift Shop to purchase my very own leg lamp, a feature of the movie “A Christmas Story” about little Ralphie who wants a bb gun rifle for Christmas. His dad entered a crossword puzzle contest and wins what is called “a major prize” – a lamp in the shape of a woman’s leg, complete with fishnet stocking and a tacky lamp with black fringe. The first click of the light switch turns on the big light bulb under the shade. A second click turns that light off and illuminates the leg. A third click illuminates both. I did put it up as part of my Christmas decorations the every year, and especially the last two years in memory of my dear sister. But it is not in one of the windows facing the traffic on Hoover Road! It is discreetly in a window on the side of the house to greet parishioners turning into the parking lot!

There is a similar lamp called the adobe lamp. Same concept. The first click turns on the light bulb surrounded by the lamp shade. The second click turns off that bulb but turns on a soft, little night light bulb hidden inside a little adobe house. The third click turns on both bulbs.

The word “pueblo” technically means a communal dwelling or even a whole Native American village. But it also refers to a particular native people, or any member of that group. It’s an intriguingly flexible word: a single building, a whole village, a tribe of people, or just one person.

I thought of how the word “Church” functions in a similar way, or in a “similar light!” I am Church. We are Church together. This building is a church. And the community in which we live and move and have our being is Church on a grand scale. Of course, there is another way in which this analogy is helpful. Consider the exchange of light from the greater light of the primary lamp to the humble glow of the “pueblo” house. That, too, is a movement familiar to the Church. Want to live in the light? Then do justice, says the Lord. Share your bread, shelter the homeless, and clothe the naked.

It's almost predictable how often people return from a simple work of this kind and declare with amazement, "I received so much more than I gave." That "so much more," we could say, is the promised light.

And among ourselves, we need to remove from our midst oppression, false accusation and malicious speech. That means no more bullying, no more gossip, no more judging one another without knowing all the facts. When we move into the world's darkness bringing help and hope, we bear the light with us. It's not ours exactly, and it's not us either. Divine justice harbors its own light, and when we surrender to its service, the light has a chance to rise in some of the darkest places around. When we find the courage to touch other lives, the glory of the Lord goes ahead of us, and the gloom can indeed become like midday.

This "glory of the Lord," understood as the *Shekinah* or hidden-yet-manifest presence of the Divine, always did function as a light in dark places. Remember the smoking brazier Abraham witnessed on the dark night of the first covenant, or the burning bush that appeared before Moses. Consider the pillar of fire that stayed with Israel during long desert nights, or the tongues of fire at Pentecost that lit the way for the newborn Church. When we travel the way of holiness, we won't lack for light.

In today's Gospel, Jesus calls us the light of the world. That's an amazing proposition, considering that we regard Him in the same way. He dares us to take that light and bathe the whole world with its brilliance. The best way to be the light of the world is to shine before others through our example. We are called to be the Christ-bearers, bringing our little pueblo light before us as a testimonial of the greater light of Christ that we have witnessed. If we bear no light in our coming, then we can gesture all we want in the darkness about our faith, and no one will believe us or even comprehend what we are talking about. The only way to reveal the light is to be the light. Christ has shared His light with us so that in our lives, however humble, the promise of that light speaks boldly against the darkness. May our light shine brightly, now and always. AMEN!

[Readings: Sirach 15:15-20; Psalm 119; 1 Cor. 2:6-10; Matt 5:17-37]

One of the more heart-wrenching funerals I have served in my priesthood took place not in church, but in the funeral home. A father was being buried that day, and one of his sons who was serving a sentence in the county jail, was escorted by two county sheriffs to his father's casket. At the eulogy, the son spoke about how great of an example his father had been to him, and then spoke of his regret at choosing to do something wrong which brought shame to his family, especially to his father.

"If you choose you can keep the commandments, they will save you." The readings this week exhort us to keep the commandments but also tell us that doing so is not as simple as it may first appear. Fortunately, Scripture gives us guidance in the sometimes complex call to "follow the Law of the Lord." Rule Number One: Realize that you have a choice. God sets before you "fire and water," Sirach says -- life and death, good and evil. You'll get what you choose. God is not going to compel you one way or the other.

In what ways do you feel blessed in your commitment to follow God's commandments?

Wisdom is a saving gift of the Spirit. Think of a time when Wisdom has revealed herself to you and righted your course.

Honestly assess how do you use God's commandments -- as ever-present guides for greater love or as tools to judge others?

Rule Number Two: It's about more than just following the rules. We hear Jesus say that the key to keeping the commandments is the state of your inner self. When it comes to the things of God, the important direction is inside-out, not outside-in. Our bodies, our sexuality, our talents are to be used responsibly.

Rule Number Three is the really Good News: You don't have to go it alone. You can lean on God's wisdom. "Immense is the wisdom of the Lord." God sees all and understands all, and though that wisdom is mysterious, it is revealed to all who love God.

Years ago, my Dad nicknamed my twin sister's husband "Chief Running Dummy." Why? Because every time my brother-in-law would buy some new gadget or gizmo, the first thing he would do is throw out box along with the owner's manual and say proudly, "I know how to do this." And then he would spend half his time running back and forth between the appliance and the garbage can to find the owner's manual!

Out of deference to my Dad, when Larry bought his first boat – an aluminum fishing boat – he bought peel and stick letters and put the name of his boat on the hull: "Running Dummy." On its maiden voyage, Larry lowered the boat at the launch and it immediately began taking on water: Larry forgot to plug the water holes!

When we live this way—start it up and full speed ahead, without considering the rules of the road—it can lead to trouble, treachery and death. We often regard laws as barbed wire designed to entrap our freedom,

Our Responsorial Psalm is not a song praising the Law of Moses or the Commandments. The Law is more properly understood as a "word to the wise." Have you ever heard that expression: "Here is a word to the wise?" That's where it comes from: Psalm 119.

When I was a young boy in grade school, I entered the kitchen of my home and saw my Mom preparing a recipe for a chocolate cake. On the counter was a HUGE chocolate bar with a familiar brown and white wrapping around it. It had a familiar name on the wrapping: HERSHEY'S. I wanted a bite of that bar.

Mom warned me: "You won't like it. It's baker's chocolate. It isn't sweet." I begged for a piece anyway. Have YOU ever tasted baker's chocolate? YUK!

This, my friends, is the moral life in a nut shell, a chocolate-flavored nut shell. Through the commandments, through the teachings of Jesus in today's excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount, God says this to us about sin: "You won't like it. It ISN'T sweet." It may be very attractive and alluring, even seductive. But once we have tasted the bitter consequences of our sin and the effect it has on us and on others, "it isn't sweet."



When Jesus extends the Law in today's portion of His Sermon on the Mount, He's not doing it to make life harder than it already is. Jesus "builds a fence around the law," as the rabbis phrase it. He tells us that the road to murder begins on the path of anger; adultery's highway has an entrance ramp from lust. Jesus knows that even good disciples can become angry, that they suffer from broken relationships, that they can be tempted.

When we were kids and we asked our parents "Why?" and they didn't want to spend time in virtuous discussion and debate, what did they say as their immediate response? "BECAUSE I SAID SO!" Which then made me think of other authoritarian "parent-isms" that we were not allowed to respond to, such as when your Mom says, "Did you hear me?" (They heard you all the way in China).

Or when my Dad would say "Do I look stupid to you?" (No, I'm not even going there!) As we grow older and are able to handle more complex explanations, we do have a right to know the "why" of our religion's rules and regulations. Almost forty years of priesthood later, I am still learning and understanding why the Church teaches what she teaches.

I have also learned what the philosopher Sophocles said about the law: No one has a more sacred obligation to obey the law than those who make the law. You can also add: those who enforce the law. That includes popes, bishops, politicians and, yes, even parents.

Jesus doesn't erase the Law but extends its horizon, in a way that will challenge any disciple. What would it mean to become the kind of person who can control their anger, who is not disturbed by lust, who recognizes one's fragility before God? It would mean that one was pursuing holiness, allowing the foolish wisdom of God to shape our whole lives.

The interpretation of the Law provided by Jesus, in this sense, is not a checklist easily accomplished. It is a horizon of holiness given to the Church and to each of her believers. The disciple learns to love this horizon. And such love, as the Gospels show, comes to us as a gift, as divine grace. AMEN!

[Readings: Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18; Psalm 103; 1 Cor. 3:16-23; Matt 5:38-48]

I don't remember the movie, whether it was an action film, a war film, or a western. But two groups of men stand ready to fight each other. The leaders of the groups are standing toe to toe against each other. The first man says, "Give it your best shot." So the second man delivers a right hook on his left cheek. When the first man recovers, in the spirit of today's Gospel, he offers the other cheek. So the second man delivers a left hook on his right cheek. The first man recovers a second time, faces the second man, delivers an upper cut, and knocks the second man flat on the floor. The first man's friend asks, "Why did you do that?" The first man replies, "I ran out of cheeks!"

One cold stare invites another. Insult is traded for insult. One punch follows another. Somewhere down the road, there's an exchange of gunfire. Wearying cycles of violence and vengeance spiral through history, each side seeking to deliver the blow that leads to decisive victory. But there's no victory. There's not even a chance of even-stein. Retaliatory justice is never just, because trading pain for pain, loss for loss, never heals anything. Violence only gives birth to more of the same. As Jesus reminds us, "those who live by the sword will die by the sword."

"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" sounds like a good proposal. It seeks to bring equity into the game of reprisal, keeping a lid on how far one might go to achieve satisfaction in revenge. You can't take more from the other guy than he took from you. It sounds right. But how does a hurled stone discriminate between a tooth and half a jaw? What if my single bullet, meant to reply to yours, starts a fire that burns down your village? There's no strict sense of justice in the land of loss, no measured steps to take in the wild territory of retribution.

Most of us, of course, won't be reaching for rocks or firearms in our attempts to get even with those who wrong us. We'll find the shaming word, the scorching secret, and hurl that out in the open. We'll start a lawsuit, or just a rumor. We'll steal from the tight-pursed employer, which hurts the boss a little but turns us into thieves.

Even if we do nothing, or say nothing, just carrying the smoldering desire for vengeance in our hearts poisons our capacity to love, to forgive, and to be human. It poisons us.

What would Jesus have us do in the face of the real wrongs perpetrated against us? Jesus expects us to retaliate against wrong -- with good. Ignoring evil isn't the way to fight it, Jesus says. We must overcome evil with the stronger spirit of love. If you're offended, don't return an offense but remain both innocent and vulnerable. If detained unfairly, stay twice as long and strive to make the oppressor a friend. Be generous without keeping a record of what's owed.

Respond to haters with love, and to curses with blessings. This method of reply may sound like madness, entirely out of the question. Where's the justice in it? The reply is that there's no human justice in it, if that's what you're seeking. But there is divine justice in it. Because this is how God deals with us. This is how God deals with us.

This is not an easy task! When our spirits are rattled, when we ourselves are testy because of a difficult situation, and when we fear the anger, retaliation or withdrawal of the person we are concerned about, confrontation takes a lot of courage. And it takes much thoughtful and prayerful preparation.

In today's First Reading, we find a key to effective conversation. Do not do it out of an inner spirit of hatred, or to gain revenge, or out of some grudge that you keep in your heart. Compassionate love recognizes that we ourselves have our own faults and weaknesses and imperfections.

What injustice in your own life keeps you from an open heart? What keeps you stuck in resentment? You belong to God, and with God's love your heart has the capacity to let go and to move on.

Which brings us to the key commands of two of our readings: "Be holy" and "Be perfect." Once again, the English translation is lacking. In the original Hebrew, the verb is not a perfect imperative: "Do this, right now, and be done with it!" It is not something done once and for all.

It is an active progressive verb. It begins in the present and progresses into the future. The same thing with the command of Jesus when He says: "Become perfected as your Heavenly Father is perfect." It is an ongoing action.

We also remember that while we are correcting ourselves and reproofing one another, that there is a delicate balance between enabling one another and empowering one another. We empower when we say, "I'm proud of you that you are getting your act together." We empower when we say, "I'm not going to be your personal ATM anymore!" We sing in our Responsorial Psalm, that the Lord is "kind and merciful," "gracious," "slow to anger and abounding in kindness." Can we not be the same when we correct one another?

Most of us know the first part of the Serenity Prayer: "God grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the Courage to change the things I can, and the Wisdom to know the difference."

But this is the original version as it comes to us from Reinhold Niebuhr, a German theologian and pastor:

"God, give me grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, Courage to change the things which should be changed, and the Wisdom to distinguish the one from the other."

Most of us don't know that this is only half of his prayer. There is another paragraph that goes with it. Here is the rest of it:

"Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as a pathway to peace, taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, *not as I would have it*, trusting that You will make all things right, *if I surrender to Your will*, so that I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with You forever in the next. Amen."

This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday. The time for conversion, for fasting and prayer and almsgiving will have begun.

To what end do we take up these practices? Do we fast because it's healthy -- a periodic way to control our weight? Do we pray in order to prove each year that we can go to daily Mass? Do we give a bit of alms because it's nice to have something to offer up on Holy Thursday?

Do we give up social media because it's pleasant to take a break from the endless images and words that distract us from the kingdom (plus, all our friends are doing it)? None of these reasons, even a bit of weight loss, are necessarily evil. They're practices that will lead the Christian to a bit of holiness. They focus us on God, moving us away from the excesses that may hinder us from virtue.

But God may have something more in store for us. God is proposing a construction project -- a building of a temple of holiness through the restoration of each Christian.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul reminds us that we are temples of God. Through this image, Paul is making a claim about Christian identity. The Temple in Jerusalem is the place of God's dwelling on earth. The Church is a temple, the dwelling place of the Spirit. Each baptized Christian is a stone in this temple, the presence of God made available to men and women.

If we are to be the temple of God, the presence of the Spirit, we must give up practices of self-deception, chasing the wisdom of the world rather than the foolishness of God. We must give ourselves over entirely to the stonemason, Jesus Christ, who comes to smooth out rough edges, placing us in communion with every member of the Church.

Lent, in this sense, is a time of honest discernment. The foolish stonemason looks at a crumbling stone and says, "It will likely be OK." It is the wise builder who is honest, who sees the defects and does something about it.

We are broken and crumbling stones. Not just me, not just you, but the whole Church. In the coming weeks, the Divine Stonemason, with His typical kindness and mercifulness, will begin to reconstruct this dusty and desolate temple. Will we let Him get to work on us? AMEN!

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

Today, Ash Wednesday, is the beginning of Lent; gray ashes will be blessed and smudged on our brows; ashes that were once the branches of a living, vibrant, green, tropical palm tree. As we are branded this Lent, the words we will hear tell us that *'we are dust and to dust we shall return.'* That is half of the message of Ash Wednesday. Perhaps it isn't a pleasant thought but the Church thinks it is important to remind her children, once a year at least, of the facts of life: one day all of us will be overthrown by time and be transformed into a handful of gray, powdery ash.

As Saint Paul tells us, today is a very acceptable time, the day of salvation. Today we take the plunge into the beautiful but difficult season of Lent, perhaps after weeks of pondering what we will do for Lent, and after a day of feasting before the fast. Today we follow the encouragement of Joel. Whatever our pursuits may have been up to this point, we are called to proclaim a fast, to gather as an assembly, and to rend our hearts as we turn to God and ask for reconciliation and forgiveness.

The ashes that we will wear on our foreheads after today's liturgy are a sign that we're part of a community that is beginning together a sacred time of repentance – of turning back to God. We continue this sacred, communal time of penance with special days of communal fasting and abstinence called for by the Church. This is an important aspect of Lent, as we, the people of God, turn back to our Father as the people in Joel's day did, changing our ways and asking forgiveness. As we celebrate the Sundays of Lent – and especially as we encourage our brothers and sisters who will be joining the Catholic Church and our parish during the Easter Vigil – we draw nearer to our celebration of Holy Week and the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The other half of the message of Lent is this: *Turn away from sin and believe in the Gospel.*

That's a whole lot harder than just dirtying our foreheads and letting our stomachs growl all day. Jesus calls us to go deeper into our own hearts during Lent, as well as participating in our communal liturgies and practices. Each of us has that one area in our own lives that tends to stand in the way of our coming closer to Jesus and to truly following His Way of the Cross.

What is YOUR secret sin? What is that one attitude, that one resentment, that one habit that keeps you from growing in faith? Jesus invites us to quiet time, time in the wilderness and the desert of our busy lives, to discover from Him what we need to let go of and what we need to practice in order to draw nearer to Him and to radiate His life and love to others.

As we begin the season of Lent, let us go to our rooms – or to our inner hearts – close the door, and spend time alone with God. Let God speak to our hearts about our particular call to draw closer to Him, to turn away from any hindrances in the past, and to follow whatever form of prayer, fasting and almsgiving will draw us closer to God and to the people of God.

Ask yourself: What is my five-year plan? What am I doing well in my life, spiritually and physically? What areas do I most need to improve? And what are my dreams for the person I hope to be one day?

Fr. Romano Guardini, a famous priest, who turned to ash in 1968, wrote in "Richer Fare for the Christian People" this consideration:

*Everything turns to ashes, everything whatever. This house I live in, these clothes I am wearing, my household stuff, my money, my fields, meadows, woods, the dog that follows me, the clock in the hall, the hand I am writing with, these eyes that read what I write, and the rest of my body, people I have loved, people I have hated, or been afraid of, whatever was great in my eyes upon earth, whatever small and contemptible, all without exceptions will fall back into dust.*

Now is an acceptable time! Now is the day of salvation! AMEN!