

St Pius & St Anthony Homily 5th Sunday of Lent Year C (2025)

The woman in the gospel is surrounded. She is trapped (really between rocks and a hard place-the ground). Jesus had been teaching in the Temple area, holding court, and by them dragging the woman in front of him, He is cornered too with her case. What is He going to do? Keep in mind that John 8:6 says they do this to “test him”! Now what? How’s He going to get through this one?

Our first reading from Isaiah tips a hat to how the gospel will turn-out! Isaiah 43:16 says God “opens a way in the sea.... and a path in the mighty waters.” Of course, that describes the escape of the Israelites when they are fleeing Egypt slavery into desert, with Pharaoh’s troops hot on their tail, and they come to the sea’s edge (like cornered in a cave or against a cliff’s edge). Now what? God will open way, create a path through. St Paul says such a thing too, in 1 Corinthians 10:13 “God, ...in every trial, will also provide a way out, so that you may bear it.”

Seeing how Jesus will navigate running through this gauntlet that the Pharisees have laid before him, a phrase that jumped out at me in the Isaiah reading was the one, “jackals and ostriches” (43:20). What a pair? Jackals and ostriches (something of a wild dog and bird!) Makes me think of the popular old cartoon pair: Wile E. Coyote and Road Runner! In every episode, we see lots of examples of Coyote traps set, being escaped and slipped through by Road Runner. Somehow, the Road Runner always creatively finds a way to get through, and foil Coyote’s trap plans. *(Road runners are very interesting birds - quite nimble and quick on their feet, they can fly, but prefer to run to escape threat (up to 20 mph). Speaking of deserts, they prefer the open scrubland of the Southwest as habitat. And they are no ‘scaredy-pie’ bird- they are actually a predator of rattlesnakes! Interestingly, too, their feet are shaped like ‘X’ so that they can’t be tracked because with 2 claws forward and 2 backward, so you can’t tell from tracks whether they are going or coming.)*

But the cartoon Roadrunner always gets through – finds a way to safely navigate any trap set by Coyote! And Jesus does too in our gospel. When everything is against Him and the poor woman being scapegoated in the gospel, Jesus finds a way through! The Pharisees bring quite the trap to Him. (Recall that He is tested a lot by Pharisees). They drag a case (in fact the actual woman) in front of him – throw a book-quote of Moses at Him, and demand Him to rule on it. Yet, Jesus knows she is being trafficked – this is only half the case – adultery is a two person sin. Where’s the complicit partner. Conveniently the mob is all Pharisee men! Is the man actually stirring up the mob from within it? Is Jesus going to play along with the ‘good old boys’ party club and get rid of their problem for them? (and maybe her black book too!)

Jesus knows this set-up. And like the Road Runner, He creates a way out, by **going to ground!** Jesus de-escalates the situation, by bending down to the ground.

Recall that this whole scene is a trap set. The Pharisees pose the case to him that way, saying, “in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. What do you say? (Jn 8:5) Don’t we all love when someone asks a question, they know the answer to, already? What is that about? Their mind is already closed & hardened. They said it: 1) “ Law and 2) Moses”. Is Jesus going to go against them?

But Jesus wisely and creatively buys some time, trying something different by bending down and writing in the dust. Whether He is doodling or writing words, he does this to bring them in a little closer to Him and her to see it.

Two great questions for us to answer are 1) Why write in the dust? And 2) What does he write?

1) By writing on the ground, is he saying that our sins are written in dust, to be wiped, brushed clean away by God’s mercy, as opposed to our judgmental use of commands written in stones to be hurled as weapons against others? Was He saying that our fabricated judgement cases built against others (we are sinners too!) are like sand-castles wiped out-washed away by waves of God’s mercy?

2)and what did Jesus write? Whatever He wrote defused the situation. Did He write the name of the man involved (& was that man in the mob of his friends?). Or did he write the names of everyone in the crowd as accountability for them too, and to balance this ledger did he start writing their own sins out beside their names (he’d know!) Whatever He wrote, (notice the reading verses 6 & 8 **(2x)** says ‘He bent and wrote’ Busy?), it works to make the crowd repent themselves. His parting shot: “Let the one without sin cast the first stone!” (Jn 8:7)

No one throws. They realize that they have surrounded Jesus and the woman like a circling firing squad and any attack on her, is going to take themselves out! So, humbled now, they begin to walk away one by one.

But the fact that Jesus bent down, going to the ground, is for the woman too. Her posture on the ground, dragged before Jesus humiliated, she hasn’t looked up. Her head is down (like so many ‘perp walks’ we see on news when the accused is led around head covered or looking down)

But Jesus is a personal Savior. He wants to address her eye to eye and by asking her “Has no one condemned you?” He invites her to take a look up. Yet, He first bent down to meet her, to stand with her and affirm her ‘God-given’ dignity helping her open a new path for herself (forgiven and re-created in God’s Mercy).

I think part of Jesus’ writing in the dust, reveals his intention to help her recreate her life. She can write a new chapter in her book of life, like starting over, go back to beginnings and be remade. Like from the Book of Genesis, our creator forming us new out of the dust of earth and speaking life into us, Jesus goes to ground, the original dirt, and speaks new life to her (forgiveness). He refashions her and helps her stand again and walk on.

This remaking, being recreated is what we intend with Lent too. Lent is about our being born new, dying to old ways of sin (whatever we give up, sacrifice or confess through this season of penance) and being recreated new.

The desert is full of dirt-dust. So we have our own work to do! Jesus invites us in today's gospel to look first at the dirt-dust right under our own feet, before we meddle into the sins of others. Before we start throwing rocks at others, we need to see what sin has hardened in us, what sin-rocks we are holding on to! He asks us to drop them, humble ourselves and be recreated first by His Mercy. Again, Lent calls us to begin our judgement examining our own selves. Jesus, His example and His Life is our way out of the desert.

Follow-Up Story Note:

Once there was a wise old man and a smart, though arrogant, boy. The boy was driven by a single desire – to expose the wise old man as a fool. The boy had a plan. He had captured a fragile, small bird. With the bird cupped in his hands, the boy's scheme was to approach the old man and ask, "Old man, what do I have in my hands?" to which the wise old man would reply, "You have a bird, my son."

Then the boy would ask, "Old man, is the bird alive or is it dead?" If the old man replied that the bird was dead, the boy would open his hands and allow the bird to fly off back into the sky. But if the old man replied that the bird was alive, the smart boy would crush the bird inside his cupped hands, and crush it, killing the bird. Then the boy would open his hands and say, "See, old man, the bird is dead!"

And so as the story goes, the smart boy went to the old man and he said, as planned, "Old man, what do I have in my hands?"

The old man replied, "You have a bird, my son."

"Old man", the boy then said, his voice dripping with disdain, "is the bird alive or is it dead?"

*Whereupon the old man looked at the boy with his kindly old eyes and replied, "**the answer is in your hands, my son.**"*

Condemn and judge unjustly, the rock is in your hands!