

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

What do YOU do when you hear a siren? The Civil Defense siren, or the siren of a police car, of a fire truck or of an ambulance. Remember, "Stop, Look and Listen?" Joel says today to "sound the trumpet in Zion," to blow the shofar, the ram's horn which in "olden days" was like ringing the bell or sounding the siren today. We are forced to stop, to look and to listen. That's what these forty days of Lent are all about. *We stop*. We purposely and deliberately slow down and eventually come to a stop so that we can examine our lives, our choices and the consequences of those choices. We stop to remember that we will die.

*We look*. We look at our lives. Are you where you wanted to be a year ago, five years ago, ten years ago? Did you think life was going to be different than it has turned out? How much of that is because of our shift in options and our priorities? Could we have done things differently? Should we have?

And finally *we listen*. We listen to God's Word proclaim a message of hope and joy. We listen for the sounds of new life stirring in the ground and stirring in our hearts, in the depths of our being. We listen for the affirming power of God's love shown in the shameful death and glorious Resurrection of His Son.

Lent is about finding God and discovering the fullness that can only come from Him. To identify the barriers to God's grace and God's action in our lives. To turn away from sinful habits and selfish addictions and reach out to others.

Make this your best Lent ever! Let us be open to the many opportunities we have to become set on fire anew, to re-evangelize ourselves before we can set the world on fire with our faith. Use your Little Black Book for Lent. Sign up with our Monday afternoon video series, The Chosen. Come to Sung Evening Prayer on Mondays at 7 PM or to Stations of the Cross on Fridays at 3 PM. Check in with Archbishop Fulton Sheen's book of daily meditations you received at Christmas time. Get to Confession if it has been a while or a lifetime.

The next time you hear the siren -- ask yourself: What have I done for God lately? How can I turn back to God with all my heart? Stop. Look. Listen. And have a blessed -- and disturbing -- Lent. AMEN!

[Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18; Ps. 27; Phil. 3:17-4:1; Luke 9: 28b-36]

Today's Gospel is called the Gospel of the Transfiguration, but it might help us to see it as a Gospel of Transformation. Transformation experiences – significant and subtle, good and bad – are part of being human. We experience transformation when we see a baby grow to full stature as an adult. But when that same human being is ravaged by some illness or disease, one has to look deeper to find the person's true beauty.

Have you had any transforming experiences that have left you better for the experience? Abram does in today's First Reading. He is made a solemn promise by God Himself, who "seals the deal" by "cutting a deal" (this is where the expression "to cut a deal" comes from.)

Remember that to "cut a covenant" meant to stake your whole life on the agreement two parties make with each other. The animal sacrifices are carcasses cut in half and placed on a road. The two parties of the agreement walk between the severed halves, saying, "May this happen to me if I fail to fulfill this contract, this covenant." Here we have the actual description of God making His covenant with the human family with Abram.

We also remember that Abram – later to be called Abraham – was asleep, or in a dream-like trance of some kind and did not walk between the sacrificed animals. Only God commits Himself to the covenant here.

It was the late, great Archbishop of Recife, Brazil, Dom Helder Camara, who said, "We must all be transformed so that people see Jesus shining out from us." People said that they saw Jesus shining in Dom Helder Camara's face. Have we seen that glow in people that reflects the very presence of Jesus?

Then we come to the Gospel story of the Transfiguration. As Jesus is transformed and is speaking to Moses and Elijah, representing the Jewish Law and the Prophets, the three sleeping disciples finally awake. Note that in both our First Reading and in our Gospel, the key people are asleep. Only God is alive and active in both scenes! Are you and I still "asleep?"

Imagine how the disciples must have felt seeing Jesus in a gloriously transformed state! Were they dreaming? What was happening? Could they

even understand what they were experiencing?

St. Peter is so overwhelmed with the glorious vision before him, he wants to build three tents. To “build a tent” in the time of Jesus, was to establish residence. “My Father and I will come to them, and we will pitch our tents within them.” God will establish His residence in the heart that welcomes him.

Peter doesn't want to leave the mountaintop. He wants to stay there forever with Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Then they hear the voice of God the Father say, “This is my chosen Son; listen to Him.” Again, I ask you to reflect on the transforming experiences in your life. Especially those brought about by relationships and encounters with others.

Just as the transfigured Jesus has a transforming effect on Peter, John and James, significant people in my life have had a transforming effect on me. . There were times when I would be in conversation with them that our faces would just glow with delight. You can have that same transforming effect.

In our Second Reading, St. Paul describes a transfigured view of ourselves. As citizens of Heaven, we are merely tourists in this earthly land where money, power, fame, and security are the forces in charge.

What promises have you made with God that remain unfulfilled? Why? Do you have a sense that God has fallen short in some way? What keeps you from honoring your covenant with God to remain faithful?

Abram, Paul, Peter, John, and James all experienced fear and confusion at their first real encounter with The Divine Presence. What are you feeling in your faith life right now?

And then we have to come down the mountain... And are charged with bringing God's transforming power to the world. We take the radiance of the glory of God, experienced in Word and Sacrament and in our relationships, and carry that light into the darkness of the world. AMEN!

[Readings: Exodus 3:1-8a, 13-15; Psalm 103; 1 Cor.10: 1-6, 10-12; Lk.13: 1-9]

This is a weird grouping of readings we're invited to consider! We've got a bush that's burning and also not burning. We've got a rock that migrates all around the desert and is the Christ. And we've got a fig tree that doesn't produce figs. What are we to make of this biblical collage?

The characters in these passages are trying to do the same thing: fit the pieces together so they can see what each puzzling series of events is about. First there's Moses. He grew up in a palace raised by Pharaoh's daughter. But he's not an Egyptian, he's Hebrew -- a dangerous thing to be since Hebrews aren't treated so well by Egyptians. Which makes Moses mad enough to kill. Which he does, murdering an Egyptian who's beating a Hebrew slave. Now Moses is a man on the lam.

Flash-forward now to Moses 2.0. He's the husband of the daughter of a Midianite priest. But Moses is no Midianite. Nor is he really an Israelite, since he's never been circumcised. Moses sees a bush on fire that's not actually burning. Weird! What's even weirder is that the God of Israel is waiting for him there. God wants Moses to go back to Egypt and set the Israelites free. You've got to be kidding!

Moses was wondering if the whole thing about leading the Israelites to salvation was going to work. There he would be, an unknown appearing out of nowhere claiming God had sent him to lead God's -- and his -- people out of slavery. He needed some credentials. Asking God's name would do it.

One thing you might not know, is that to know someone's name was, in a sense, to have power and control over them. But God will not be controlled. So God tells Moses "I am who am..." Moses was the first to hear this new name, which was not a proper name at all but a form of a verb: "to cause to be, to create"; "I am what I am"; or "I will be what I will be." From this moment the "LORD-YHWH" would mean a God who is and always will be utterly free and powerful to do great things -- like free God's people. God is an action verb!

Look now at our Second reading: Paul is writing the Corinthians. They're not Jewish. Paul's not Greek. But Paul is something more than Jewish -- he's an apostle of Jesus Christ. Paul tries to explain Moses to the Greeks by way of Jesus. This leads to a very strange metaphor about Christ being the rock from which Israel drank in the desert years. And it followed them around, of course, because what good is a drinking rock if it's not there when you need it?

Finally, we arrive at the Gospel. Folks are discussing current events with Jesus. Pilate just had some Galileans slain. Hardly newsworthy: Josephus says Galileans were troublemakers, and Pilate had put mobs of them to death before. Jesus is a Galilean. The people telling him these things are probably not. Jesus is in Judea. So the reporters are Judeans.

Pilate is a ruthless killer. The Galileans who travel south to Jerusalem arrive to make their sacrifices in the Temple. They kill the sacrificial animals and spill their blood on the altars of sacrifice. But Pilate's guards rush in and massacre them while they are at worship in their house of worship. Sound familiar? That is why Jesus says that the blood of the Galileans mixes with the blood of the animals.

Jesus responds to them by noting that some Judeans were also killed in a tower collapse recently in Jerusalem. He equates the two events: Pilate's coldblooded killing with a random accident. The message: Don't read the will of God into either of these things. I shudder when I hear someone say after surviving a near accident, a near house fire, a near collision with another car, "My Guardian Angel must have been watching over me." What about those who suffer the accident at work, or whose house goes down in flames with all their uninsured possessions with it, or who dies in the car crash? Where was THEIR Guardian Angels? Taking a cigarette break? On their day off? On vacation?

Jesus calls us to be fruitful especially in those situations, in those relationships, in those circumstances where you can make a difference.

Who has been so hurtful to you that you wish God would punish them? Can you feel sorry for them? Can you pray for God to do good for them? In this, you'll find freedom from the anger and pain that has been holding you captive.

When we don't care enough to grieve over a person's inner destruction, we ourselves are sinning. We are disregarding what Jesus did for them and for us on the cross. We are damaging and potentially endangering our own souls.

All those who have sinned against you are like that fig tree in Jesus' parable. If you have access to them, He wants you to till their soil. He wants you to fertilize their souls with love and with the truth of the Gospel as taught by your actions and, when they're ready, by your words. He wants you to give them a gentle but obvious invitation to grow in the right direction.

Notice that Jesus doesn't want us to keep a diseased, disintegrating tree in the garden forever. After (and only after) we have done everything possible, if the evil-doer does not want to change, the best care we can give to the garden is to cut down the tree. This means walking away or calling in the authorities for intervention and letting the sinner reap what they sow. This, too, is very loving.

When fertilizer won't produce good fruits, a fallen tree becomes mulch and enriches the ground for a new beginning. So, you see, there is hope for all of us! Saints and sinners! AMEN!

[Readings: Joshua 5:9, 10-12; Ps. 34; 2 Cor. 5:17-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11-32]

Lent has had a bad rap as a time for its gloominess. We aren't even allowed to say the word "alleluia" because it's too happy! Maybe it's the penitential purple that casts a shadow on these weeks or the knowledge that we are moving ever closer to Holy Week and to the Holy Cross. It's a time for fasting, sacrifice, and challenging ourselves with the task of conversion. It's also the best season for reconciliation. Lent is, from every point of view, hard work.

And yet the Roman Missal calls Lent "this joyful season," and we set aside this Sunday, Laetare Sunday, or as I like to call it, "Manly Rose Sunday." Even without the alleluias, we find ways to rejoice! Because when it's time to celebrate, even the color of the season can't stop us.

Knowing when a celebration is in order is as crucial as the celebration itself. In our First Reading today, when the Israelites led by Joshua got as far as Jericho, it was time for the Passover feast. But they were commemorating more than the 40th anniversary of their deliverance from Egyptian slavery that year. Israel was also acknowledging that they had made it through the desert wilderness, past the generation caught in the old ways, and preparing to settle in the land of Canaan.

This was the day the manna ceased, which might seem an odd way to begin a celebration. The loss of the free lunch surely rattled the complacency and security of more than a few Israelites. But the manna was a gift from God to sustain a dependent people. Once they had reached the Promised Land, they no longer needed a divine handout. It was time for them to become self-reliant and to enjoy the harvest of the land they would work for themselves. We can think of the conclusion of the manna as a kind of ancient Labor Day in which a liberated people finally embraced what it means to be free and in charge of their own fate.

In today's Gospel, another story of independence and celebration starts out rather badly. Let me tell the story the way I think it SHOULD have happened.

The younger son approaches his father and wants his share of his inheritance NOW. In the culture of the time, this would mean only one thing.

He wants his father dead. You dads out there, what would YOUR reaction be if one of your adult children asked for their inheritance NOW? At the time of Jesus, that

adult child would have been DIS-inherited and thrown out of the house! If not beaten or even killed! But that is not what the father does. He gives the money to his son. Maybe the father knew that his son was immature and needed to learn some life lessons. So the younger son squanders his share of the inheritance, and ends up a financial and social loser. He decides to go home and creates an apology which may or may not be heartfelt. Is he going to manipulate his father with false repentance, or is he sincerely sorry? Jesus does not tell us.

When the younger son arrives, cultural rules would say that his father would have every right to ignore him and his rehearsed speech, sit in his Archie Bunker chair, and demand that his prodigal son kiss his feet and grovel. But that doesn't happen here either. The father does the unthinkable. The father goes out to the end of the property every night, looking, waiting for his son to appear, and then, when the son doesn't, would return to his home disheartened. When the servant tells the master that he can see the son in the distance, the father races to meet him halfway. That's what God does with us! He meets us halfway!

We can certainly sympathize with the older brother, who considered the return of his worthless brother offensive. According to any worldly standard you can measure by -- just deserts, the work ethic, simple evolution -- his younger brother has squandered his place in the gene pool and deserves whatever hard times he gets. But the father doesn't use a worldly standard to measure his son. He loves him. He worries about him, looks for his return, and sees in the very fact of his survival a reason to rejoice. We are not told if the older son eventually joined the homecoming party. More about him later.

Another way of looking at this story is to think about freedom, God's and ours. Our free will gives us the choice to take the high road or the low road, for grace or for sin. The young man in the Gospel story chooses the low road, and his father takes the high road, freely chooses to forgive him, *carte blanche*, for everything.

The only person in the story who doesn't exercise his freedom is the older brother. He has bound himself to his brother's sins. A free person can show compassion, but a slave can only serve his master. This older son is mastered by the spirits of anger, resentment, self-righteousness, and a rigid sense of justice. It's particularly telling that the older brother still lives at home, even after the younger son had set out on his own.



The older brother, evidently, has not embraced his independence and does not want the responsibility of human freedom. He still gets his daily manna and prefers it that way.

God keeps all promises even when we don't, and God is forever willing to be reconciled with us. God promises to provide for us, to feed us, to love us. All we need to do is trust in God. How well have you kept your end of the bargain? During what times in your life have you found it hardest to trust that God is with you, at your side?

Have you experienced the joy of God's all-consuming, forgiving love so vividly described in today's Gospel? When did that happen? For me, it is when I am hearing confessions and bringing back home someone who has been away for years. Or when I give a homily at Mass, and someone who I don't even know by name comes up to me afterwards and says: "your words were meant for me today."

Saint Paul tells us that "whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away." At this half-way point of our Lenten retreat, what part of yourself do you feel is most a part of your new creation in Christ?

Only free people can celebrate. The older brother can't even come into the house or in contact with the spirit of celebration. But celebration is not an option in the life of faith. When the lost turns up found, no matter how deliberately lost or in what condition they are found, God calls such a day a holiday. A day to rejoice and to celebrate!

Do you have places in your heart you try to hide from God? What are they? How can you open them to God's renewing Spirit?

When have you experienced the kind of unconditional love -- despite your past mistakes -- that the Prodigal Son received from his loving father? Today is the day to Laetare -- to rejoice, to celebrate! And to wear manly rose! AMEN!