

[Sirach 27:4-7; Psalm 92; 1 Cor. 15:54-58; Luke 6:39-45]

Abraham Lincoln said it a little differently than the wise man who composed our First Reading, but it's the same idea. Lincoln said: "It is better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to speak up and remove all doubt." Since the time of ancient Egypt, many have agreed that, compared with most speech, "silence is golden." And silence is always better than when we often use language so badly.

Sometimes we lie; sometimes we just bend the facts a little. We say what we don't know, yet assert it as fact. We speak impulsively and cause irreparable harm. We chatter aimlessly, suffocating our listeners with our prattle. We gossip and ruin reputations. We voice opinions, some of which may reveal how dark our hearts really are. "From the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks!"

Before any election, we scrutinize the candidates to hear how their words confirm or betray their character. Of course, when we talk, we give ourselves away too, despite our best intentions. That's why there's a law that says, "You have the right to remain silent." We might want to exercise that right more often!

The words we speak not only reveal us; they also have a way of deepening who we are. This shouldn't surprise us, as we confess our faith in an incarnate God, a Word made Flesh. God takes on flesh, and becomes all the things that flesh is: fragile, hungry, in need of friendship, capable of bleeding and dying. But in Jesus, flesh also becomes all the things the Divine Word is: life-giving, truth-telling, and soul-healing. Not to mention, stronger than death and even stronger and more powerful than Hell itself.

All of this might make us more mindful of the words we choose. When you and I speak bitterly as a matter of habit, we harden into cynics. When we think violent thoughts, it's only a matter of time before we indulge in violent actions.

In computer science, the phrase "Garbage in, garbage out" means the quality of input determines the output. If incorrect data is introduced into a system, the output will, inevitably, contain mistakes. (This is important to remember as Artificial Intelligence expands...)

"Garbage in, garbage out" isn't just a good principle for computing, it's a good principle for the spiritual life. St. Cyril of Alexandria says, "The virtuous person therefore speaks such things as become his character, while one who is worthless and wicked vomits forth his secret impurity." What goes in, must come out.

People often raise the fact that they're struggling in prayer and I quickly ask what they're reading and watching. It's going to be more difficult to be recollected, for example, if you spend hours a day binging television shows. That's the point of Our Lord's teaching in today's Gospel: "A good person out of the store of goodness in his heart produces good, but an evil person out of a store of evil produces evil; for from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks."

As we start the season of Lent this week, each of us should ask: What am I allowing to enter my heart? We should take stock and evaluate our consumption, especially the things we watch, read and listen to. If they're not helping us grow in holiness or virtue, then perhaps they need to be reevaluated this Lent. Garbage in, garbage out!

The easiest way to know if a thing is good or bad for us is by its fruit. Is what I consume making me angry or anxious? Does it make temptation too close at hand? If so, it's time for a change! And the graces of Lent will help you along the way.

Words take on flesh -- and flesh, words. God's Word of Love becomes the Baby of Bethlehem. The stories Jesus tells of forgiveness become the Man on the Cross in Jerusalem. Words become flesh as surely as a tree produces its fruit -- good or rotten -- with integrity to its inner nature. If we intend gentleness, we must use softer words. If we're not yet ready within to produce loving speech just yet, then it is surely better to remain silent.

Remember, before the next time you speak ask yourself: "Am I speaking the truth? Is it necessary for me to speak that truth? And can I speak that truth kindly, with charity? That is what we mean by Christian correction.

Today's readings provide a simple reminder of the importance of our words as they relate to God's Word, made flesh in Jesus. Jesus tells us that "from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks."

- ! Do I have a full heart?
- ! If not, what is causing any feelings of emptiness?
- ! What can God do within me this Lent, to restore the fullness of joy in my heart, which is absolutely necessary if I am to "go in peace, preaching the Gospel with my life"... and especially my words?

May you have a challenging and joy-filled Lent. AMEN!

[Readings: Deut. 26:4-10; Ps. 91; Rom. 10:8-13; Luke 4:1-13]

After three weeks, we hear the voice of Pope Francis again!

From Rome: This update on Pope Francis.

Faithful around the world heard Pope Francis's voice for the first time since he was admitted to Rome's Gemelli Hospital three weeks ago in an audio message thanking believers for their prayers for his recovery. In his audio recording, the pope spoke in Spanish, with a labored and breathless voice, saying,

"I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your prayers for my health from the Square, I accompany you from here."

"May God bless you and the Virgin protect you. Thank you."

The pope's message was played in St. Peter's Square just before a 9 p.m. nightly rosary.

It marked the first time since he was admitted Feb. 14 that the world has heard his voice as he continues to battle double pneumonia. No pictures of the pope since he was hospitalized have yet been released.

Given his ongoing hospitalization, he will be unable to preside over events for the Jubilee for the world of Volunteering this weekend. As the pope continues treatment, prayers and Masses are offered daily for his health and recovery, including a daily hour of adoration and two daily Masses at Gemelli Hospital, and a nightly rosary said in St. Peter's Square that is led and attended by cardinals resident in Rome and members of the Roman Curia.

Before I share my homily reflections with you, some commentary on abstaining from meat and meat by-products on the Fridays of Lent. Debating the morality of eating an Impossible Burger from Burger King on a Lenten Friday might be as Catholic as it gets.

It's "hilarious" that Catholics on social media and elsewhere are discussing the ethics of eating plant-based products that are manufactured to taste and smell like real beef. Secular media outlets have asked canon lawyers and diocesan officials to weigh in on whether eating fake meat on Fridays during Lent constitutes a mortal sin. For the record, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops explains in its Lenten guidelines that the Church's laws on abstinence hold that meat "comes only from animals such as chicken, cows, sheep or pigs." Birds are also considered meat.

"It seems to me that eating faux meat satisfies the letter of the law regarding abstinence from meat in Lent," Father Andrew Menke from the U.S. bishops conference's Secretariat of Divine Worship.

So, canon law will not require Catholics to confess the dubious choice of eating a soy burger that tastes just like a Whopper.

But this overlooks the interior conversion and self-denial that Friday abstaining is intended to foster. "I think it goes without saying that it's against the spirit of the law," Father Menke said. "Everyone knows that!" But again, abstaining from meat but indulging in lobster or a hearty meal of fish and chips still defeats the purpose of Lent. The value we are looking for here is penance and sacrifice on the Fridays of Lent. "It's not meat, but it's certainly not suffering, either.

As we enter Lent, I would propose that today's Readings apply to our individual relationship with Jesus Christ Himself. The same steps you take to enter into a relationship and grow in that relationship with others is the same way to enter and grow your relationship with the Lord. It's all about getting to know each other, falling in love with each other, and living to serve the other.

I have not experienced such openness as I have from you folks here at St. Martin de Porres. You hunger, you thirst, you long for a closer walk with Jesus, and with your fellow pilgrims. We cry out to the Lord in our loneliness and in our need.

How many times have you called on the name of the Lord and been disappointed? How many times have you experienced disappointment in your relationships? Was it because you didn't get what you wanted? Or was it because the answer you got was what you didn't expect?

Moses gives us a short history lesson that teaches us about confidence and gratitude. He challenges the Chosen People – and us – to remain faithful even in difficulties. In our Second Reading, St. Paul challenges the Romans and us to live daily with that confidence and gratitude. Then we come to the temptation of Jesus in the desert. Jesus is “led by the Spirit” into the desert to fast and pray. The “desert” in Old Testament times was a place of evil and death. Scapegoats were driven there. Fugitives often died there.

But Jesus makes the desert a place of holy encounter. Jesus makes the desert a place of deep contemplation and prayer. And the devil leaves him... for now. “For now” are two important words.

Because the devil will come back, when Jesus is at His lowest and most vulnerable two more times: in the Garden of Gethsemane at His agony and when Jesus is hanging pitifully on what would become His Holy Cross.

The devil always will come back to tempt us and to test us in our relationships. In our self-confidence and in our gratitude.

Do we remember how God has been there for us when we most needed God? Surely, you and I have called upon the name of the Lord and in some way have been saved. Even through others who love us. Think about those times. Think about what there is in your life – maybe something no one else in the whole world even knows – that you can thank God for seeing you through. Love can be a comma, a question mark, or an exclamation point!

Enter the desert with Jesus this week. You'll be surprised at what you will find, what you might discover about yourself, and what you discover about our God! 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 a few weeks ago when I said 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. Abram's commitment was to let God do everything!

I am grateful for the new translation of today's First Reading. In the old translation from the New American Bible, it says that "the Lord God appeared as a flaming brazier." Now a "brazier" is a metal container used to burn charcoal or other solid fuel for cooking. Unfortunately, most of the Lectors at Mass misread the word and said, "the Lord God appeared as a flaming brassiere."

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 not two tents, but 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. 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 and listen to the words of Jesus?

During a pastoral visit with young people, Archbishop Allen Vigneron was asked a few personal questions following his formal presentation. The two that I remember from that experience were these: What do you like most about your job, and what do you like the least? His first answer, without hesitation was: teaching.

Archbishop Vigneron loves to teach. My own father, when he was preparing for the permanent diaconate, had to take several classes at the seminary. He told me that hands down, then-Monsignor Vigneron was his favorite teacher. He taught clearly and he graded fairly.

The thing that Archbishop Vigneron said he liked doing the least, the worst part of his job as Archbishop, was “dealing with difficult people.” He did not elaborate, but I cannot imagine the number of clergy, religious, lay people, e-mails, phone calls and meetings he has to deal with.

And all this is in addition to his VERY full sacramental ministry every day. Difficult people drain the Holy Spirit out of every encounter. They do the work of the Evil One. That should scare us.

Shortly after I recovered from my heart attack, triple bypass and recovery back in the summer of 2010, I saw Archbishop Vigneron at a function for clergy and lay people at the at the seminary.

I solemnly told him, “My cardiologist says that in order to complete my medical recovery, I need an immediate transfer. I need to be transferred to a parish where there is no worry, no stress and no anxiety.” His answer: “I have a great parish to send you that is worry-free, stress-free and anxiety-free. Unfortunately, there are no people in it!”

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

We start with our hearts burning during the Liturgy of the Word. The second is when we receive the very Jesus in whom God is well pleased. We hear our Heavenly Father say to us: “YOU are my chosen son, my chosen daughter.” And then we have to come down the mountain... And are charged with bringing God’s transforming power to the world.

To places where the people conduct themselves as enemies of Christ. We take the radiance of the glory of God, experienced in Word and Sacrament to those whose “God is their stomach and the glory is in their shame.” We accept the radiance of the glory of God within our own hearts and in our relationships, and carry that light into the darkness of the world. AMEN!

[Ex. 3:1-8a, 13-15; Ps.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 run.

Flash-forward 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!

The 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?

Then, 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.

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. Don't try to read or control the will of God in the bad things that happen.

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!

Moses would find his mission and return to his people -- but though he knew he was in the presence of God, he still had some reluctance -- not the last Israelite prophet to feel that way. So, if even a great figure like Moses could be out of place and struggle to find out what God was calling him to, it can happen to anyone. Come to Eucharistic Adoration with the Lord. Remove your sandals. Stand on holy ground. Come to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Find YOUR holy ground.

Am I willing to acknowledge my mistakes and repent my wrongdoings? Do I show mercy on those who sin against me? Do I seek justice and show solidarity with all members of the community? Most of all, do I find joy in loving and serving God?

Do I really believe that God exists? When do I experience the greatest doubt? What brings me the most assurance?

And second, like Moses, we must consider how best to persuade others of God’s loving existence. Do I show it in my actions? Am I bearing fruit? Do I live in right relationships and cultivate a spirit of openness and hospitality?

When you feel adrift or without purpose, how do you find direction? That is YOUR burning bush, your drifting water rock, the will of God for YOU. AMEN!

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

As a liturgical season, Lent has had a bad rap as a time for gloominess. We aren't even allowed to say the word "alleluia" because it's too happy of a word! But our Orthodox brothers and sisters sing "alleluia" even more during Lent!

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 the Cross. It's a time for fasting, sacrifice, and challenging ourselves with the task of conversion. It is also the premiere 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" for a certain deliberate buoyancy even in a time earmarked for buttoned-down spiritual discipline. 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. 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 at last and preparing to settle in the land of Canaan. This was the day

the manna ceased, which might seem an odd 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 attained 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.

Without independence, as every young person knows and most of us still remember, liberty remains only an illusion. St. Pope John Paul II often said, "True Freedom is not for doing whatever we want; Tre Freedom is for doing what is right and just.

In today's Gospel, another story of independence starts out rather badly. One of two brothers approaches his father for his share of the inheritance and sets out on his own. A young man freshly removed from his father's house with lots of money burning a hole in his pocket sounds like disaster waiting to strike.

And it was: Before long this young person was broke and humiliated. His lack of judgment was no surprise, because here was a fellow who couldn't wait for his father's death to receive his inheritance! Here was a fellow so full of *chutzpah* and with no sense of appropriate timing that he went out to celebrate for the sake of

celebrating. The party wound down when the money was gone, and he found himself predictably friendless.

We can certainly sympathize with the older brother, who considered the return of his worthless kin an occasion for offense.

According to any worldly standard you can measure by -- just deserts, the work ethic, simple evolution -- this young fellow 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 worried about him, looked for his return, and saw in the very fact of his survival a reason to rejoice.

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 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, self-righteousness, and a rigid sense of justice.

God keeps all promises even when we don't, and God is forever willing to be reconciled with us. Can we do the same?

Who do you most resemble in today's Gospel? The risk-taking Son? The merciful and loving, compassionate father? The older son imprisoned in his hatred and resentment? The more we take part in

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the spirit of reconciling our lives with the person we were born to be,
the more there is to celebrate. AMEN!