



THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT
March 7th, 2010

Introduction to the Word:

As I was reviewing today's readings, I could not help but recall a recent wedding anniversary celebration in which I was privileged to participate. The occasion was a rare one in these times—the golden jubilee of some long time friends. It was a happy time for all. One of the customs that contributed to the good time was the posting of large collages of photos and memorabilia that recalled the special times and experiences of an enduring relationship. Children and grandchildren especially were fascinated to observe the surprising changes from past to present: changes in dress, in hair style, in music, in modes of transportation. They were surprised and amused on hearing some of the untold stories of the jubilarians, stories which revealed the creativity and uniqueness of their lives.

Reflecting on this enjoyable experience, I came to appreciate that the reason for such a communal celebration has more than entertainment value. It reminded me how important it is for all of us to find time to retell the stories of our own past if we are to fully appreciate the meaning and significance of the present. Sociologists point out that this process of *remembering* and *retelling* is especially critical when it comes to maintaining and strengthening basic societal values and religious beliefs.

Little wonder then that the core message of our current Sunday morning Scriptures can be summed up in one word: “*Remember!*” says famed Teacher and Rabbi, Abraham Heschel. More than two hundred times in the Old and New Testaments the sacred writers challenge the reader to remember the important stories of their ancestors in faith—stories which give a glimpse and a feel for the mind and heart of God. For example, we find in today's readings three such stories: in the first reading we hear of "the burning Bush," a story which the renowned philosopher, St. Thomas Aquinas, identifies as having utmost implications for our understanding of who God is; in the second reading Paul makes reference to a mysterious "moving rock" that follows Israel around in the desert for 40 years; and in the gospel we will hear Jesus' parable of the withering fig tree, a reminder to all of Jesus' compassion and patience, never giving up on those who seek to follow him.

By taking time to recall these salvation stories of our ancestors in faith, we are able to re-live God's great deeds of the past, and thereby be more attuned to His continuing activity in the present. Lent then becomes a privileged time when we allow ourselves *a time to remember*.

Warm-up Activity (about 8-10 minutes): You are invited to responds to one or more of the following:

1. As you reflect on your growing-up years and the family customs and values that were so special to you at that time, which of them do you wish were still in evidence today? Why?
2. When you were a child or an adolescent, who could you usually count on to give you *one more chance* if you had messed up?
3. Who seemed to give you the most difficult time? Share your memories and experiences.
4. Of all the people who influenced your life for good or ill, who stands out at this time, and why?



The Table of the Word

Who helps us communicate with God?

One would think that a God as magnificent as ours would not need intermediaries. Yet that is how God chooses to operate—making us partners in his Kingdom—building enterprise. In every generation there are those who are called to speak *for* or act in *the place* of God, and Lent is an ideal time for each one of us to discern our respective roles in this regard.

A few questions we might ask ourselves: For whose life am *I* an emissary? How do *I* reveal to others the message of God that I have received? How do *I* intercede for them? It seems to be a surprise to most people of faith to hear that we too have been chosen, as was Moses; that we too, by reason of our baptism, are called for mission.

In our faith quest we encounter so much mystery; we have so many questions with so few satisfactory answers. At such times we might heed the advice which the renowned poet and philosopher Maria Rilke gave to a young writer: Try *to love* the questions themselves...and try *to live* the questions now. There is a good chance that someday in the distant future you may find that you are gradually learning to *live your way* into an answer (Letters to a Young Poet, 1950)."

Introduction to the Word

Leader: *Repent; take off your shoes, for we stand on holy ground.*

Jesus, liberator of the oppressed,

Lord, have mercy.

Jesus, source of our spiritual food and drink,

Christ, have mercy.

Jesus, the last and certain hope of sinners,

Lord, have mercy.

Let us pray

(together)

*God of holiness and mercy,
you never abandon your people: you see our misery,
you hear our cry; you shatter the hardness of our hearts and open our minds
to the wisdom of the gospel. Help us to grasp the lessons you teach us and bring forth the fruit
of true and continual conversion. We ask this through Jesus your Son and our brother.
Amen.*

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION TIME (45 minutes)

(As Christians we believe that the **WORD** of God we hear proclaimed each Sunday is an empowering Word, and that God is present in the Word proclaimed. This is the Word that God wants us to hear today. The dynamic of the Small Christian Community, namely, reflecting on our life story within the context of this Word, and sharing the insights of these reflections, is such that God's Spirit becomes present, and the gifts of the Spirit are experienced as empowering and life-giving).

FIRST READING (Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15)

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; Moses looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.

Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up."

When the Lord saw that Moses had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am." Then God said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

God said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said. "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey."

But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations." The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

SECOND READING (1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12)

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters that our ancestors were all under the cloud; all passed through the sea; all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of our ancestors, and they were struck down in the wilderness.

Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.

These things happened to our ancestors to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

GOSPEL (Luke 13:1-9)

A reading from the holy gospel according to Luke. **Glory to you, Lord.**

Jesus was teaching the crowds; some of those present told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

Jesus asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them – do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Then Jesus told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?'"

"The gardener replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

The gospel of the Lord. **Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ.**

(Take a few minutes to identify any thoughts or words that resonated with your personal experience)

COMMENTARY:

Some of our readers may still remember your grade school religion classes and the Baltimore Catechism where the attributes of God were so clearly defined, i.e. **God is all-knowing, God is all loving, etc.** While the meaning of such words was quite clear, they really did not contribute much to our understanding of God nor impact in any way our relationship with Him. The content of today's readings, on face value, will confirm this observation.

In the first reading the awesomeness of God is highlighted, both in the description of a bush that keeps blazing without being consumed, and in the mysterious name that God used to identify himself. How could Moses or anyone else explain what was happening here? Whatever the meaning intended by God, it was certainly meant to catch and hold Moses attention, and to alert him to the fact that he would never be able to comprehend fully what he was experiencing.

To this day biblical scholars agree that the Hebrew word the author of Exodus used here is derived from the Hebrew verb meaning "*to be*," but they are not in agreement as to which specific form is more accurate. Do the Hebrew words translate into "*I am who I am*," or "*I will be who I will be*?" Is God claiming to be the source of *all that is*? Is God saying something about the future? Or is the very ambiguity of his name a way of reminding Moses and all those who follow him that the divine name for God is indeed a mystery that will never be understood?

And what about the behavior of the Hebrews toward this God? We seem surprised when we read how they observed and experienced the same miracles as did Moses for forty years yet remained unaffected. They, with their fragile faith and wavering loyalty, never fully bought the idea that God was on their side. They were privileged to be so close to "the fire" yet were not fazed in the least by its presence and its mystery. Not to miss the author's point, however, we must ask ourselves, has our own behavior been much different? We have so many opportunities to engage in the miracle of the sacraments, the marvel of the Eucharist, and your small group *experience* of the power of God's Word yet, we must ask, how often have these sacred experiences really moved us closer to our God?

All of us can take heart in God's response to Moses: "*I will be with you, no matter what. You will never be alone.*" This assurance of the presence of God is something we are happy to hear. We too have our "burning bushes"—holy ground—places where we encounter the truth about our lives, about our relationships, and about our standing with God. If we learn to really listen we will hear God's voice in the agitated tone of a friend as she describes her worrisome medical report or recognize it in the uneasy smile of a lonely parent or grandparent who lives alone. It is so important for us to live our lives in a manner that we remain aware and attentive to the fear and the pain of those around us—to the burning bushes that we encounter but may seldom recognize.

The challenge of today's readings is to learn to listen to the messengers who bring us the name of God, even if this name is not always clearly defined. In the midst of our many questions, we have one sure source we can rely on, advises Dianne Bergant, (2000) and that is Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who reveals the nature and meaning of the divine name; it is Jesus who intercedes for us before God. Most importantly, while most of life we spend looking, straining to see God in the mist or behind the cloud, it is when we face God in *one another* and *in creation*—this is the moment when the real spiritual journey begins. While on this journey, every life experience is meant to stretch us beyond our superficial selves to the Ultimate Good who is God (ibid).

Questions for Discussion:

1. (Exodus) *“I must go over to look at this remarkable sight.”*

These were Moses’ words at catching sight of the burning bush. This was a sacred experience for Moses, giving him a sense of standing in God’s very presence.

- a) Have you ever had an experience of any kind which left you speechless, when you were in a state of complete awe or fear? Describe the circumstances.
 - b) Of all the “memorable sacred sights” you have seen, which has had the most lasting impression on you? For what reasons?
 - c) For your group: Do you suspect that there are some common even daily signs of the sacred which we might miss completely? Identify and share some examples.
2. (Corinthians) *“Let anyone who thinks he is standing upright watch out lest he fall.”*
It has been suggested that Moses had “good posture” in regard to discipleship; not posture of the body but posture of the spirit.
The Israelites never fully bought the idea that God was on their side despite all of Moses’ pleadings to the contrary.
 - a. Describe a time when you had a sense that God was *not* on your side.
 - b. How might you respond to the question: “Why do bad things happen to good people?”
 - c. What can the presider do to help the assembled people improve their “posture” in regard to their participation in the Eucharistic celebration? What can the lector do?
 3. (Luke) *“Cut it down. Why should it clutter up the ground”*
 - a) When it comes to being able to make things grow, how successful are you? How green are your thumbs? Comment on your “gardening” expertise.
 - b) Lent is a good time to weed the garden, to get rid of some old habit that clutters up your life and robs you of time and energy. Without getting too personal, share with your group one habit that you are determined to get rid of this Lent. Invite your small group to offer their suggestions as to how this might be done.
 4. As a *summary learning activity*, go back to today’s THEME. Have one person re-read the theme slowly. After a brief pause, the group members are invited to make any additional observations or identify any insights they found significant in today’s reflection and sharing.

CARING-PRAYING TIME: (15-20 minutes)

1. Word for the Week:

“Today, if you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.”

2. Suggestion for the week:

- a) Take some time this week to check out the health of “your garden.” Get rid of some old habit that clutters up your life and robs you of time and energy. Use that rediscovered plot of ground to plant something fruitful.
- b) From Illuminated Life, (Joan Chittister, Orbis Books, 2000).
On straining to see God... “Until I become truly aware of the world in which I live, I cannot possibly get more out of a situation than a mere outline of reality, a kind of caricature of time.

It takes a lifetime to really understand that God is *in whatever (whoever) is standing in front of me*. Most of life is spent looking, straining to see the God in the mist, behind the cloud, beyond the dark. It is when we face God in one another, in creation, in the moment that the real spiritual journey begins. Everything in life is meant to stretch me beyond my superficial self to my better self, to the Ultimate Good who is God (cf. *ibid*).

3. Intercessions: (Response: **Lord, hear our prayer**)

Leader: *In this season of Lent we are called to the work of repentance. Young and old, faithful and unfaithful, we are all in need of a change of heart.*

That those who have wandered far from the path leading to God will encounter the burning bush of God's presence and return to faith, we pray...

That all who seek the face of God in the various religions of the world may be rewarded for calling on the name of God as they know it, we pray...

That all who follow Jesus, including our elect and candidates, will find in this season of recollection a renewal of their passion for God's goodness, we pray...

That our observance of this season may produce in us the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, and self control, we pray...

That the world may not quickly forget the hundreds of thousands Haitians who still have no homes, or regular source of food or shelter or medical care, we pray...

That the people of Haiti realize that they are the most recent chosen people of God. That they are the chosen ones to receive the special calling of God to bring together all nations of the world in forming a collective global response to their basic needs, we pray...

That the people who make their home in the Holy Land – Jews, Muslims and Christians – mindful of a common God and Father – not give up on their quest for justice and peace, but find ways to live life together with mutual acceptance, forgiveness and love, we pray...

How can we help you in prayer this week?

Let us pray
(together)

Gracious God,

Your kingdom is where believers find their true home.

By the power of your Holy Spirit, we have been given the gifts to live as citizens of that kingdom. May our lives bear fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control, through the guidance of your Spirit. Amen.

With hands and hearts united in gratitude for God's favors on us today, we pray that all those in our influence be moved to be open to your Word and your Spirit, as we say together...OUR FATHER

"God uses our down times to build those up"

Roadside church signs, 2001

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