

The Transfiguration of Our Lord

Old Testament Lesson: Deuteronomy 34: 1-12

Moses, now realizing that his death is imminent, takes this opportunity to give one last **sermon** to the Children of Israel as they are encamped on the Plains of Moab, on the **east** side of the Jordan River, just **across** from Jericho. He **reviews** the events of the last 40 years, emphasizing God's **love and mercy** and how he sustained them in every way possible; and also **admonishing** them to follow **only** the Lord. He ends his talk by advising them to **choose life** rather than death by being **obedient** to and worshipping only The Lord. As his last official acts, Moses appoints **Joshua** as the new leader of Israel, and then blesses the Children of Israel.

According to God's instructions, then, Moses **climbs** to the top of Mt. Nebo (at the age of 120), where God enables him to see for distances of over 100 miles so that he can see the **entire** Promised Land, the land promised to Abraham over 500 years earlier. There Moses dies, and God **himself** buries Moses near there. There then ensues a 30-day period of mourning for Moses by the Children of Israel. And what does God say about Moses? There has **no** prophet arisen in Israel since who

- knew God face to face,
- did the **signs and wonders** in Egypt, to Pharaoh, his servants, and the land of Egypt,
- performed **miracles, wonders**, and punishment ("**terror**" to those who sinned) with **power** during those 40 years in the desert.

Epistle Lesson: Hebrews 3: 1-6

The author of Hebrews has been establishing that Jesus is both **God and human being** in the previous chapters. He now makes a **comparison** of Moses with Jesus, noting the following:

- Both Moses and Jesus were **faithful** to God,
- Jesus is counted as worthy of **more glory** than Moses, just as a builder of a house is considered **more** worthy than the house itself.

- Moses was faithful in God's house as a **servant**, but Jesus is faithful in God's house as a **Son**.

Then the author of Hebrews observes that **we** are God's house **if** we hold fast to our **faith**.

Gospel Lesson: Luke 9: 28-36

A lot has happened since the teaching by Jesus that served as our gospel lesson last week:

- The **deathly** sick slave of a Roman army officer has been made **well**,
- Jesus brings a widow's son back to **life**,
- Jesus **reassures** John the Baptist through the disciples that John sent,
- Jesus identifies John the Baptist as the **Elijah** that is to come,
- A woman living a sinful life receives **forgiveness** from Jesus as she **repents**,
- Jesus tells a parable about a **sower** of seed,
- Jesus identifies as his family those who **hear and obey** his Word,
- Jesus cures a man with many **demons**,
- Jesus heals a woman with **chronic bleeding**,
- Jesus raises from the **dead** Jairus' daughter,
- Jesus miraculously **feeds** 5000 men (plus women and children),
- and Jesus tells what is **required** to follow him (pick up our cross **daily**).

Approximately a week later, Jesus invites His inner circle (Peter, James, and John) to accompany Him in a hike up a mountain to pray. Jesus suddenly becomes brilliantly white, with **Moses and Elijah** discussing with Jesus his imminent departure from earth. Peter, of course, can always find something to say, no matter how meaningless it is, so he offers to build three **tents**, one each for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, as if they are going to be on that mountain top for an extended period of time. **That** thought is erased when suddenly a **cloud** envelopes them, causing the disciples to become **afraid**, and a **voice** comes out of the cloud, saying that Jesus is His beloved Son, and that they should **listen** to Him. When the disciples come to their senses, only Jesus is left with them. The event undoubtedly had a **profound** impact on the three disciples, because they kept **quiet** about what they had just seen.

Ash Wednesday (Wednesday after Transfiguration Sunday)**Old Testament Lesson: Joel 2: 12-19**

Joel was one of God's prophets to the **Southern** Kingdom, or **Judah**, during the reign of King **Joash**. (You may recall that he was rescued from the murderous Queen Athaliah, an Israelite who planned to **eliminate** King David's line. Joash was made king when he was age **seven**, and remained **righteous** as long as the priest **Jehoiada** lived.) Joel is writing to the people of Judah who are suffering under a plague of **locusts** that is devastating the land. And **after** the locusts, Joel warns, will come the Day of the Lord with even **greater** judgment.

As this evening's reading begins, God is advising the people of Judah to **return** to Him, not just going through the **motions** of repentance, but returning to God with **fasting, weeping, and mourning**, figuratively tearing their **hearts** rather than their clothes. God reminds the people that he is **gracious and merciful, slow** to anger, **abounding** in steadfast love, and **relenting** over the punishment he had planned when the people **do** repent. So Joel tells the people of Judah to consecrate a **fast**, and assemble the entire congregation—from elders to nursing infants—to repent and **cry out** to God for mercy.

Epistle Lesson: 2 Corinthians 5: 20b - 6:10

Toward the end of his **second** missionary trip to Asia Minor, Paul found himself in Corinth, where he initially discussed the Scriptures with the **Jews** in their synagogue. But because the Jews **opposed** him, he left the synagogue to share the Good News with the **Gentiles**, staying with a man named Titius Justus. His next door neighbor was Crispus, the **synagogue leader**, who **believed** in the Lord, with his entire family. After the Lord gave St. Paul **encouragement** one night in a vision, St. Paul **stayed** in Corinth for over a year and a half before he left to make an initial visit to **Ephesus** before returning to Antioch.

The church in Corinth had **many** growing pains, requiring St. Paul to write **two** letters to the Corinthians. In today's reading, St. Paul **urges** his readers to be **reconciled** to God because God had caused to be placed on Jesus **their** sins so that **Jesus'** righteousness might be placed on **them**. Then St. Paul **pleads** with his readers/listeners **not** to ignore the message being delivered to them, because right **now**, God was reaching out to them in order to save them **now**. St. Paul is so **serious** about their salvation that he lists all the things that he **endures** in order for that message of salvation to come to them.

Gospel Lesson: Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21

Jesus is in the midst of his Sermon on the Mount. As we begin the reading for this evening, Jesus is addressing Christian **hypocrisy**, that is to say, **doing** "righteous" things in a way that everybody can **see** that you are doing them, thus earning others' **praises, honor and recognition**. Instead, Jesus says, if you want **God** to give you credit for doing "righteous" things, then all of these things must be done **without** others seeing or knowing that you are doing them.

Then Jesus addresses **who or what** your god **really** is. If you are trying to get lots of **money** so that you can enjoy **material wealth** and **financial security**, or if you are looking to get **power and control**, then **those** are your gods. Instead, Jesus recommends that you lay up your treasures in **heaven**. How does one do that? By devoting your life to **loving and serving** one another.

First Sunday in Lent

Old Testament Lesson: Deuteronomy 26: 1-11

Moses is nearing the end of his farewell sermon, reviewing the events of the last forty years and reminding the Children of Israel of all the **goodness** that the Lord has showered upon them during this time. But God does not want the Children of Israel to **forget** these forty years and God's **provision** from the time of Abraham until the present, **whenever** the present may be. So he inspires Moses to instruct the Children of Israel in a **procedure** that will help to remind them of God's **continuing** goodness and mercy. The procedure went like this.

Once the Children of Israel had taken **possession** of the Promised Land and each family occupied its assigned territory, **every** harvest time they are to gather some of the **first** of all their harvest, put it in a basket, and bring it to the Lord wherever his tabernacle or temple is at that point in time. There he is to **give** it to the priest, after which he is to declare that he is in **possession** of the land that God had promised, and that from the time of Abraham (here referred to as a wandering Aramean) through the time spent in Egypt and through their wandering in the desert, God has done **mighty wonders and deeds** for him and his family, including bringing them to this wonderful land and their own **inheritance**, in **gratitude** for which he now presents the **first** of his harvest to the Lord. He is then to **worship** the Lord, and then leave to **celebrate** with his family, the Levite, and the sojourner that may be among him. **Sojourner?** Yes, from the very **beginning** God intended that the Children of Israel should use the bounty that he provided to draw **others** (*i.e.*, the **Gentiles**) to God by the sharing of that bounty in whichever way that might be appropriate. They were God's chosen people, yes, but they were chosen for the **responsibility** of drawing the world to God.

Curiously, God has given us the **identical** responsibility (see **1 Peter 2:9**). How do **you** express your gratitude to God?

Epistle Lesson: Romans 10: 8b-13

In his treatise on the Christian faith that represents the book of **Romans**, St. Paul now turns his attention to the topic: **How** does one get to be saved? He notes that in previous times, God had required adherence to the **Law** given through

Moses: whoever keeps the **entire** Law will be saved. Obviously, that doesn't work, since **everyone** not only has inherited Adam's original sin, but also sins him/herself. (Read **Romans chapter 1** for a review.) So then, what **does** one do? St. Paul answers, it is in your mouth: simply **confess** that Jesus is Lord, and **believe** in your heart that God raised Him from the dead. After all, **saving faith** is that which one believes in his **heart** and confesses with his **mouth** that Jesus is **Lord**, who suffered the punishment for our sins. And it makes **no** difference whether one is Jew or Gentile: the **identical** faith is required of **everyone** in order to be saved.

Thus St. Paul confirms God's intent to have **everyone** saved that was the responsibility of the Children of Israel, as mentioned in our Old Testament Lesson for today.

Gospel Lesson: Luke 4: 1-13

Jesus has just begun his ministry, which started with him being **baptized** by John the Baptist in the waters of the Jordan River, during which the **Holy Spirit** descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove. So why doesn't Jesus hit the road, proclaiming the Kingdom? Because to be a teacher and to be able to empathize with others, one must have **experience**. And the Holy Spirit is determined that Jesus will get that experience starting with 40 days and nights of temptations in the wilderness, all presented by Satan himself. So far, no problems for Jesus. But after 40 days of **fasting**, Jesus might be a bit hungry, so Satan attacks Jesus at that point, telling him to perform a miracle for his **personal** benefit. Jesus' response is that his hunger for **righteousness** takes precedence over his hunger for food. Then Satan tries to offer Jesus an easy way to regain all the kingdoms of the world, lost with Adam's sin, simply by Jesus worshipping **him**. Jesus responds that one worships only **God**. But perhaps he also had in mind the fact that Satan has always been a **liar**, and his keeping **any** promise or agreement was not worth the paper it was written on in the midst of the fires of hell. Finally, Satan tries to convince Jesus that, by doing something **spectacular** like jumping off the peak of the temple in the sight of the people, and living, he could get people to follow him. Again, Jesus resorts to the Word of God, saying that one should not **test** God himself by doing something so foolish.

Defeated at every turn, the Devil leaves Jesus, licking his wounds and planning out a **different** strategy to cause Jesus to sin.

Second Sunday in Lent

Old Testament Lesson: Jeremiah 26: 8-15

As you may recall, God called Jeremiah to be His prophet to the **Southern Kingdom**, or **Judah**, when Jeremiah was still a **youth**, and he served in this capacity for over 40 years. His ministry began during the reign of King **Josiah**, the Southern Kingdom's most **righteous** king, who attempted to undo his father's and grandfather's introduction of every kind of **idolatry**, and to stimulate a **revival**. Unfortunately, the **succeeding** four kings were all **evil**, and they led the nation back **into idolatry** from which they never recovered. This culminated in the Babylonian captivity. Jeremiah's ministry was to **support** King Josiah but to **rebuke and warn** the nation during the reigns of the last four kings. Thus God's messages through Jeremiah were calls to **repentance** from apostasy, warnings of **punishment** if not repentant, and promises of **restoration** to a repentant people. Obviously, Jeremiah's messages did not earn him any favors from a people intent on pursuing **worldly** pleasures, including the hedonistic pleasures sanctioned by the **idol** worship.

This is the situation described in our reading for today. God has told Jeremiah to go to the **Temple** and declare that, unless all the people **repent** of all their evil ways, God will make the temple and Jerusalem like **Shiloh** (remember that warning in the Old Testament reading of three weeks ago? If not, see **1 Samuel 4:1-11** and **Psalms 78:60-61**). The people of Jerusalem understand **fully** what Jeremiah is saying, that God will remove their city **as well as** the temple, which they at this point regard as a **talisman**. As our reading for today begins, we see the **response** of the people, the priests, and the prophets alike: Jeremiah deserves to **die** because he has spoken against their city and temple. So they grab Jeremiah and haul him before the city officials to **try** him. Jeremiah defends himself by saying that he is just conveying **God's** message to them, calling for **repentance** in order to avert **disaster**. But if they condemn him to death, they are to know that they will be guilty of **murder**, the taking of innocent blood, in addition to all of their **other** sins.

Epistle Lesson: Philippians 3: 17 - 4: 1

During his **second** missionary journey, St. Paul, along with his partner Silas, found themselves in Asia Minor, trying to figure out **where** they were supposed to go next, because doors kept shutting before them. Finally, God sends a **vision** to St. Paul, prompting them to go to Macedonia, to **Philippi**, a leading city of Macedonia. There they founded another church, whose members St. Paul loved dearly. St. Paul is now in **prison**, but he is **remembering** his converts as he writes to them. In the part of his letter that constitutes the reading for today, St. Paul encourages the Philippians to **imitate** the way that they saw **him** walk in the Lord. This would be in contrast to some so-called Christians whose walk is more in keeping with an **enemy** of Jesus, because their minds are set on **earthly** pleasures. So St. Paul admonishes them to **avoid** getting sucked into earthly things, because their citizenship is in **heaven**, where Jesus will ultimately present them with a much greater reward, a **glorious** body.

Gospel Lesson: Luke 13: 31-35

The story of the ministry of Jesus continues from two weeks ago, where we heard about the **transfiguration** of Jesus in the presence of Moses and Elijah. Since then, the following represents **some** of what has happened:

- Jesus cures a boy possessed by a **demon**,
- Jesus foretells his **betrayal**,
- Jesus sends out 70 of his disciples in advance of his arrival, to preach the **Kingdom** and to heal the **sick**,
- Jesus relates the story of the good **Samaritan**,
- Jesus teaches on the power of **prayer**,
- Jesus is accused of casting out **demons** by the power of **Satan**, his accusers thus ascribing the work of the **Holy Spirit** to Satan,
- Jesus states that the sign of his Messiahship will be the sign of **Jonah** (indicating that he would be in the grave over a three-day period),
- Jesus castigates the Jewish leaders for their **hypocrisy**,
- Jesus warns that he will return when people **least** expect him, and
- Jesus heals a **disabled** woman.

Our reading for today begins as Jesus is comparing the **wide** door and the **narrow** door, and how that relates to entering the kingdom of Heaven, when some Pharisees come to Jesus to tell him **not** to go to Jerusalem because King Herod wants to **kill** him. Jesus responds by saying that he is **staying his course** to cast out demons and heal the sick, because it is in **Jerusalem** where God's prophets are killed. Then Jesus laments that he has so often **reached out** to the people of Jerusalem, that they would **repent**, but they **refused**. Consequently, the next time they see him for who he **really** is will be on Judgment Day (see **Revelation 5:13**).

Third Sunday in Lent

Old Testament Lesson; Ezekiel 33: 7-20

Ezekiel, a member of the priestly class, was one of God's prophets to the citizens of **Judah**, beginning during the reign of King **Zedekiah**—the **last** king of Judah—and ending during the early part of the Babylonian Captivity, Ezekiel himself being one of the **captives**. His general message was one of God's **judgment** on an apostate nation as well as God's promise of **restoration** to a repentant people.

In today's reading, God re-issues his call to Ezekiel to be a **watchman**, to warn those who fall into sin to **repent**. And he holds Ezekiel **responsible** for the man who sins whom Ezekiel did not warn. God then warns that someone who **starts out** as a child of God but then falls into **unrepented** sin will **not** be saved by his previous "good deeds." But a sinner who repents **will** be saved despite his previous sinful nature.

More to the point, as St. Paul warns in our upcoming epistle lesson, if we think we are **standing**, we should be careful that we are not actually **falling**, because **previous** acts of godly behavior (*e.g.* being baptized and confirmed, going to church, being a volunteer or officer in the church, praying before meals, *etc.*) do **not** cancel out **unrepented** sin.

St. Peter gives us this picture of the unrepentant "Christian": "**For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it, to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. What the true proverb says has happened to them: 'The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire.'**" (2 Peter 2:21-22)

Epistle Lesson : 1 Corinthians 10: 1-13

St. Paul cites several examples from the Old Testament where the Children of Israel were saved by God's **intervention**, and were **baptized** in both the cloud that led them and the Red Sea that they passed through on dry ground.

Furthermore, they ate and drank of the **spiritual** food and drink that God provided in the desert for 40 years, the spiritual drink being none other than the pre-incarnate **Christ!** Yet they were **not** saved spiritually because of their repeated and **unrepented** rebellion in the desert. St. Paul then points out that this history was recorded for **our** benefit, so that when **we** sin, we are **quick to repent**—to **change*** the way we think and act. And what **was** that history to which St. Paul was referring? The Children of Israel were **idolaters**, they engaged in **sexual immorality**, they **tested** the pre-incarnate Christ himself, and they **grumbled** against God because they were not getting what **they** wanted. And each time God **punished** the Children of Israel.

Then St. Paul says that **our** claiming to be tempted in some **unusual** way is not an excuse, because **all** temptations are common to man. Instead, we should recognize that **despite** the temptation, God is looking out for us, **not** allowing us to be tempted **beyond** our ability to resist, and in addition providing a way for us to **escape** the temptation. In other words, **we have no excuse!**

*Many thanks to the **God's Word** Bible for this appropriate translation.

Gospel Lesson : Luke 13: 1-9

Today's reading takes us back from last Sunday's reading, to another time when Jesus is teaching. Here Jesus makes clear that just because **bad things** happen to some people does not mean that they were **worse** sinners than everyone else. Rather, **everyone** deserves punishment, so if we wish to avoid **eternal** punishment, we need to be sure to **repent** of **our** rebellious **attitude and ways** toward God and our fellow servants.

Bottom line for God: do we bear the fruit of **God's** righteousness (*i.e.*, are we becoming more **Christ-like** daily in our attitude and deeds? If we are **not**, then, just like the unfruitful fig tree, we will be cut down).

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 12: 1-6

Isaiah was called by God to be a prophet to **Judah**, the **Southern** Kingdom, during the reigns of Kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, from around 740 to 695 B.C. **King Ahaz**, you will recall, was to the Southern Kingdom what **King Ahab** was to the Northern Kingdom: he introduced every kind of idolatry and evil, and led his nation into **apostasy**. On the other hand, **King Hezekiah** was one of the more **righteous** kings. Thus, during this time, the kings and people of Judah seemed to be vacillating between **faithfulness** to and trust in God, to falling into **apostasy**. Isaiah's message, therefore, was one of calling God's people to **repentance**, warnings of **punishment** if they didn't repent, and promises of **restoration** if they repented.

Today's reading continues the description of the promised **Messiah** that was started in the previous chapter (**chapter 11**). God indicates that when the **Messiah** comes, the people will give **thanks** to him, because he looked upon them in his **mercy** instead of his **anger**. The people will exclaim that God is their **salvation** and **strength**, because they will be able to draw water from the well of **salvation**. Thus the people will sing **praises** to God, for God in their midst, as their **Messiah**, is **great**.

Epistle Lesson: 2 Corinthians 5: 16-21

Toward the end of his **second** missionary trip to Asia Minor, Paul found himself in **Corinth**, where he initially discussed the Scriptures with the **Jews** in their synagogue. But because the Jews **opposed** him, he left the synagogue to share the Good News with the **Gentiles**, staying with a man named Titius Justus. His next door neighbor was **Crispus**, the **synagogue leader**, who believed in the Lord, with his entire family. After the Lord gave St. Paul encouragement one night in a vision, St. Paul **stayed** in Corinth for over a year and a half before he left to make an initial visit to Ephesus before returning to Antioch.

The church in Corinth had **many** growing pains, as we have noted previously, requiring St. Paul to write **two** letters to the Corinthians. In today's reading, St. Paul continues his discussion of the desire of the faithful to rid themselves of our **present** body with its old nature, and replacing it with the **glorious** body that we

will receive in heaven. So we walk each day by **faith**, with the intent to please God in **all** our daily doings. And even though we once regarded Christ as with a human body, we can do so no longer because **that** has passed away. Instead, we now regard Christ as a **new** creation, in his **glorious** body, given to him by **God** who **reconciled** the world to himself **through** Christ. And now God has given those who bear Christ's name that **same** ministry of reconciliation, because as Christ's **ambassadors**, we are carrying that **message** of reconciliation to the rest of the world. And that message is that God made **Christ** carry the sins of the **entire** world, even though he himself lived **without** sinning, so that by **believing** in Christ's work of reconciliation we would receive Christ's **righteousness** in return.

Gospel Lesson: Luke 15: 1-3 and 11-32

Today's reading finds Jesus out and about, with a large **crowd** following him as usual. Among the crowd were **tax collectors** and other unspecified **sinners**, causing the scribes and Pharisees to **grumble** that Jesus is associating with sinners. So Jesus begins to address them in parables, the parable of the Prodigal Son being the subject of today's reading. The story involves the younger of two sons claiming his **inheritance** when he became of age, and who left to discover the world, which he did in spades. Now penniless and forced to feed pigs, he **finally** comes to his senses and decides to **return** to his father as a servant—since he had already **squandered** his inheritance. Nevertheless, when his father sees him approaching from a distance, he **runs** to his son to welcome him back **as** a son, and begins to celebrate.

But then there is the **older** son, who now basically owns the entire remaining inheritance, taking **exception** to a party for his younger brother. Furthermore, he expresses **bitterness** toward his father for never having thrown a party for **him**. But the father explains that the older son can throw **himself** a party whenever he wants, but there had to be a party **now** for the younger son who, for all intents and purposes had become lost and **died**, but now was found and made **alive** again. And that is why Jesus was associating with tax collectors and sinners, because they **knew** that **they** were lost in the sight of God and were therefore glad to return to their Father in **heaven** through the **grace** extended to them through Jesus. And obviously God the Father, as well as the **angels**, rejoice over each and every sinner who finds his way back to his Father. And so should **we!**