

Journeying through the Revised Common Lectionary
Readings, Commentary, and Discussion Questions for March 18, 2018
Fifth Sunday in Lent



THE READINGS

First Reading: Jeremiah 31:31-34

³¹The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Worth Noting: The people will know the LORD because the LORD will forgive and forget their iniquity. How is forgiveness worked out in your community? Does forgetting offenses go along with forgiving them?

Psalm 51:1-12 *Alternative Psalm 119:9-16*

¹ Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.

³ For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.

⁴ Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.

- ⁵ Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.
- ⁶ You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
- ⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
- ⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
- ⁹ Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.
- ¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
- ¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
- ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Worth Noting: A personal plea for assistance in repentance. This Lent have you identified the areas in your life that you need to change? Does this psalm give you words to pray for that change?

Second Reading: Hebrews 5:5-10

⁵ So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him,

“You are my Son,
today I have begotten you”;

⁶ as he says also in another place,

“You are a priest forever,
according to the order of Melchizedek.”

⁷ In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸ Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; ⁹ and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, ¹⁰ having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Worth Noting: The author of Hebrews understood a Biblical priest to be one whose primary function is to offer sacrifice for the atonement of sins against God. Is that a function continued in your religious community? Do we need a representative to offer atonement for sins as a society?

Gospel: John 12:20-33

²⁰ Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

²² Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³ Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵ Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

²⁷ “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name.”

Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.”

²⁹ The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.”

³⁰ Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹ Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

³³ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Worth Noting: The appearance of Greeks signals the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry among the Jews and the imminence of his death. That realization prompts Jesus to meditate first on the nature of suffering and martyrdom and then on the effect of his own death and resurrection. In what ways has the ruler of this world been driven out by Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection? Are the people of the world notably better than before Jesus?

CONNECTING WITH THE SCRIPTURES

Entering into the Scriptures

Jeremiah 31:33, above, is commonly understood to describe God infusion of God’s law, or Torah, into the hearts and minds of individuals. Frequent readers of *Journeying* know what’s coming next: It’s time to rethink the “common understanding.”

Rather than a covenant with each individual, perhaps God promises to replace the corporate covenant broken by the nation (Jeremiah 31:31-32) with a new Law inscribed in the city where all can read it. Why say this? First, Jeremiah quite probably understood God’s promise to “put my law within them, and . . . write it on their hearts” to writing the law in the public square (“in the midst of them” rather than “within them”) and in the temple (the heart of religious and civic life). In Jeremiah 6:1 and 6:6, the prophet uses the Hebrew *qereb*, here NRSV “within” to refer to the middle of the city and the psalmist does the same in Psalms 45:6 and 55:11. Then, even though the NRSV and other English translations read “hearts,” plural, the Hebrew is singular, “heart.” As Times Square might be called the heart of Manhattan or Millennium Park the heart of Chicago, so the temple was the heart of Jerusalem and the heart of its residents’ life. Finally, the context of the passage lends itself to a national (or at least municipal) setting. The introductory verses 31 and 32, as well as the succeeding six verses emphasize God’s unending presence with Israel (verses 35-37) and predict the future prosperity of Jerusalem (verses 38-40).

The typical interpretation as the promise representing an individual, interior repentance and new life, need not be dismissed as “wrong.” The exercise first of all points out that translations always interpret. Often translators take the received wisdom of what a

passage *has always meant* as the basis for the next translation rather than look at the text afresh.

Then too the exercise points out the change in understanding of “religion” from ancient times to now. Now we think of religion as essentially a personal, individual experience. Then religion was primarily a corporate, national expression of a nation’s relationship with the gods. This too was the understanding of the Hebrew prophets, like Jeremiah, who called the whole nation to a right relationship with the LORD, who with mighty deeds led out of Egypt the *nation* Israel.

No Pain No Gain

Jesus who cured the leper and raised the dead does not endorse a life of suffering as the only way to attain holiness. At the same time, Jesus recognizes that suffering is a major, inevitable part of life. In this week’s Gospel selection, Jesus calls his disciples to suffering on the cross, to martyrdom (John 12:26).

Lent encourages us to reflect deeply on whether we are losing our lives so that we may gain eternal life (John 12:25). Many use a daily examen for their Lenten reflection. Last week we wrote of the first step in an examen, to recall all the moments of thanksgiving. The second step is to acknowledge when we came up short in our relationships with God, others, and indeed all of creation.

This week’s Gospel encourages us to look deeply at our own sufferings. How well did we handle them? Humans are built to avoid pain and suffering. Oncologists, for instance, follow Jesus when they spend their lives working to end the pain and suffering from cancer. Are there times, however, when being a Christian involves accepting the certainty of pain and suffering? Not only physical pain and suffering, but perhaps the pain of reduced economic prospects, or suffering from broken relationships.

As well, we must review our interchanges throughout the day. Were we able to ease the suffering of others or did we exacerbate it? Did we relieve some loneliness or did we ignore someone? Did we model how to confront racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression, or did we stand silent on the sidelines? When Jesus drew all to himself on the Cross (John 12:32) did he not draw all human pain and suffering up with him?

Questions for Discussion

One might think of the “heart of a city” as that place in which the community gathers in moments of great celebration (the end of war, national holiday, momentous election). Where is the heart of your community?

What laws (besides speed limits) are visible in your community? In particular, what are the unwritten laws of custom and habit (where we can live, what employment we can have, whose lives matter most)?

Does Jesus’ Gospel equate suffering with the Christian life? (Parts of the tradition say yes. During Holy Week some Christians embrace self-mutilation to unite with Jesus’ passion.) As we asked two weeks ago, again we ask: Is this the life to which Jesus calls us? Is this the life we propose to those seeking baptism this Easter?



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