



Fourth Sunday of Lent A
March 22, 2020

- ◆ **Seeing as God Sees**
- ◆ **Lenten Penance Service this Monday**
- ◆ **My Writings on our Parish Website**

The following are some reflections on today’s three readings.

First Reading: Seeing as God Sees

The first reading is a great lesson on seeing as God sees. Samuel thinks that God’s choice of a new king to succeed Saul is surely *not* the young and inexperienced David. But God says to Samuel: *“Do not judge from appearances.... Not as man sees does God see, because man sees the appearance but the Lord looks into the heart.”*

In our society today, we so often judge by appearances. Often, appearance and presentation are everything. We are told to “dress for success.” That may be the way of the world, but it is not God’s way. God is totally disinterested in appearances. His interest is in what resides in the heart. God sees that David has a good heart and chooses him as king. As we all know, David is far from perfect. He commits adultery and then plans to have Uriah and others killed to cover up his sin. But God continues to believe in David because David repents of his sin (Psalm 50 is his Act of Contrition). Commenting on the first reading, Patricia Sanchez writes:

Albert Einstein did not speak until he was four and could not read until age seven. His teacher called him “mentally slow and adrift in foolish dreams.” Rodin’s father described his son as an “idiot.” His uncle called the sculptor uneducable and Rodin failed three times to gain admittance to art school. Beethoven’s teacher called him “hopeless” as a composer. Winston Churchill, who became Prime Minister of England at 62, failed sixth grade. After a lifetime of defeats and setbacks, he began to achieve some success only as a senior citizen. Rudyard Kipling’s work was rejected by the San Francisco Examiner newspaper with the comment, “You just don’t know how to use the English language.” When George Gershwin’s Porgy and Bess was first performed, a reviewer called it “sure-fire rubbish.” Dr. Seuss’s first children’s book was rejected by 27 publishers. This list of so-called “losers” who

surprised their detractors with their stunning successes could go on and on. Those judging them didn’t see as God’s sees.

(Used with permission *The Word We Celebrate: Commentary on the Sunday Lectionary Years A, B, C*, by Patricia Sanchez, Sheed and Ward, publisher)

Reflection Questions

- **Do we tend to judge people by appearances?**
- **Do we have a hard time accepting that God can use people who commit terrible sins and even crimes?**
- **How easy or hard would it be for us to listen to someone who was in jail for years for some crime? Remember President Nixon’s counsel, Chuck Colson, often called Nixon’s “Hatchet man”? Christ touched his heart and he became a very successful Evangelist, especially for all who were and are in jail.**

Second Reading: Live as Children of the Light

In the second reading—often seen as a homily to the newly baptized—Paul exhorts his hearers to put aside “fruitless works of darkness” and to live as children of the light. The Sacrament of Reconciliation gives us Catholics the opportunity to name and face our deeds of darkness and be forgiven for them, and to begin to walk again as children of the light. (See next page for more on the Sacrament of Reconciliation.)

Gospel: Movement from Darkness to Light

This powerful Gospel opens with the disciples asking Jesus: *“Who sinned, the blind man or his parents?”* Jesus answers: *“Neither”*—thus rejecting the strong traditional belief that if bad fortune came one’s way, it must be because he/she had sinned. But that belief lingers on today. People often ask: *“What have I done wrong to deserve this tragedy?”* The answer is “Nothing” (though a qualifier may be added that we can do stupid things that may have terrible consequences.) In this world of darkness and light, bad things happen to good people. In God’s plan, he wants to use unfortunate situations like blindness to show forth the glory of God. We see this happening in today’s Gospel.

Jesus anoints the blind man and tells him to go wash in

the pool of Siloan. He is healed. The anointing and washing are two powerful baptismal symbols. Baptism washes away the darkness of sin and fills us with the light of faith. At Baptism, we are anointed for service just as David was anointed in today's first reading.

After the healing, we notice two movements, one into the light and the other into the darkness. Gradually, the formerly blind man moves into the light of faith. Initially, he simply calls Jesus "*that man*." Then he calls him a "*prophet*." Finally, like the woman at Jacob's Well, he sees that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. If the man had not been born blind, he may never have met Jesus or received the gift of faith, which has given him spiritual vision for the rest of his life. In this story, the blind man symbolizes all who gradually come to faith, overcoming obstacles along the way. He also symbolizes all who experience ostracization because of their belief in Christ.

The *second movement* in the story is the movement into the darkness of unbelief. We see this sad story happening with the Pharisees who, given their background, should have recognized Jesus. Instead, they harden their hearts against him and call him a "sinner." The Pharisees represent all who think they have faith just because they have a "head knowledge" of their religion.

Application to our lives

Who are we in this story? We may be a mixture of all the characters in the story. Like the man born blind, we too were born spiritually blind and ignorant of God. Gradually, with the help of God and others, we received the light of faith.

Like the disciples, we too may believe that bad things happen to us because we are sinners. Like the blind man's parents, we too may distance ourselves from a family member or friend who has a conversion experience. They now may make us feel uncomfortable.

Like the Pharisees, we may be "know-it-alls"—coming to church on Sundays but with closed hearts. We may have closed our hearts to a particular priest or deacon because there's something in him that rubs us the wrong way. Jesus said to the Pharisees: "*It is because you say you see, that it is why I call you blind*." Wow! That's a line worth pondering. If we think we see, we can be sure we are blind and hard-hearted. If we gladly admit our spiritual blindness, we will most likely be blessed with spiritual sight.

Finally, it is said that some of us "*prefer the evil (darkness) we know to the good we do not know*." For

example, we may be in denial about some problem in our personal lives or in our home. It could be a drug or alcohol addiction of a family member, a grief issue or a marital problem. We prefer to stay in the darkness than face the pain involved in moving into the light. Christ's desire is to massage our eyes open, take us by the hand, and lead us into the truth and freedom of his light.

With the cancellation of most parish activities, we have room for more articles to reflect on.

After I give Maria, our bulletin editor, my two-page Pastor's column, she tells me she has space for more reflections since so many of our parish activities have been shut down.

God's odd choices

The following reflection is by Fr. Denis McBride, an English Redemptorist priest.

Eccentric choices

"Once upon a time there was a king who had three sons, the youngest of whom was called Simpleton and was despised and mocked for his overwhelming stupidity." By the end of the story, however, it is Simpleton who has won the hand of the princess and inherited the kingdom. In the world of the fairy tale it is usually the least likely candidate who wins in the end. The least likely candidate is often the youngest son, who is seen to be stupid compared with his elder brothers; he is innocent of their worldly wisdom and cunning. He is the psychological summary of all that is weak and third-rate, and his chances of success in life are regarded as a joke.

Yet he is the one who succeeds. And he does this—not because he follows a course on "How to succeed with nothing going for you"—but because something happens to him. He is *chosen to succeed* by those who see more in him than meets the eye. His success is not due to his native effort but to the fact that he is helped by others who have special powers.

In today's first reading we hear how the prophet Samuel is commissioned by God to choose a successor to King Saul. He is sent to Jesse of Bethlehem to anoint one of his eight sons as the future king. Samuel is impressed by the eldest son and presumes that this young man of great height will be God's choice. But no, the prophet learns: "God does not see as man sees; man looks at appearances but the Lord looks at the heart."

Jesse presents seven of his sons to the prophet; it doesn't occur to him that his youngest son might be suitable: he is only a shepherd boy. None of the seven

comes up to expectation, so number eight is called in from the hills. The Lord sees in David something more than meets the eye. And the young shepherd boy is God's eccentric choice for future king.

A blind beggar becomes a theologian

In today's Gospel we have another example of God's choice, one which confuses the religious leaders of the day: a blind beggar who becomes a theologian! John's beautifully crafted story tells how a blind man comes to see the light in Jesus, both physically and spiritually. When Jesus' disciples first see the blind man they presume that his affliction is a result of sin. But Jesus sees in the blind man something else: this roadside beggar who has always inhabited a world of darkness will be the one to display the work of God and point to who Jesus really is.

When Jesus heals the blind man he returns home a new man. His surprised neighbours check their memory and some refuse to believe their eyes. They are unwilling to let this new event interfere with their fast memories—in spite of the man's protest: "I am the man." He doesn't claim any special knowledge of the one who cured him but identifies him simply as "The man called Jesus."

The Pharisees have their seminar too and are doubtful that given who Jesus is, he could produce such a sign. Unlike the healed man, the Pharisees are sure who Jesus is. But as they grow more blind, the former blind man grows in insight and now identifies Jesus as a prophet. This is not a welcome development, and the man's parents are hauled in as prospective allies in the case against Jesus. They state that their son is old enough to speak for himself. And speak for himself he does! He refuses to deny his own experience: "I only know I was blind and now I can see."

He soon realizes that he will be listened to only when his testimony confirms the prejudice of his interrogators. But rather than frighten him, this knowledge frees him to develop his evaluation of Jesus as a man of God. He does this so well that he annoys his listeners who refuse to be enlightened by the likes of this simpleton. They drive him away, but Jesus seeks out this budding theologian and reveals himself to him. Now the rejected man is the only one in the community who sees Jesus as the Son of Man.

God's choice of us

Both the story of the blind man and the story of David speak to us of God's choices. Because God sees the heart he chooses differently from the way that we do. Both David and the blind man are remembered and celebrated by the Christian community because they point beyond themselves to the reality of the divine. We

honour David as the one who points ultimately to the Son of David; we recall the man born blind as the one who points to the Son of Man, the light of the world.

God has elected us to display his works. In our baptism we have been chosen to point to Jesus by the witness of our Christian lives. To many people, including ourselves, we may seem an unlikely choice. But our greatness lies in the fact that we have been chosen, not in ourselves alone. Allowing God to work in us, we can keep alive the story of God's eccentric choices!

(Used with permission granted by Denis McBride, CSsR, *Seasons of the Word*.)

The following article by Jessie Bazan, *Sisterhood of Saints*, appeared in the March 2020 U.S. Catholic. It reflects on the lives of 6 holy women to pray with this Lent.

My friend Teresa tells an endearing story of her second-grade self-beaming with pride as she returned home from school one day carrying a picture of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. Her class learned about saints that morning, and it tickled young Teresa to think she was named after the "Little Flower."

She scampered upstairs to share the excitement with her mom, only to learn that she is actually named after St. Teresa of Ávila. Her mom pulled out a picture of St. Teresa, who isn't depicted with the same vibrant flair as her counterpart. A crushed Teresa burst out: "I want to be named after the *pretty* St. Teresa!"

A sweet moment of childhood honesty!

Today Teresa writes of the experience, "The disappointment of that afternoon is long gone, but the pride of the morning is not. It delights me to be named after St. Teresa of Ávila and to share a name with two other amazing women in our church history: St. Thérèse of Lisieux and St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta. I am in a sisterhood of Teresas and gain strength and wisdom from each of these women."

The holy women who share her name come alive across generations—even centuries—for my friend. The communion of saints knows no bounds in heaven or on earth. In fact, the communion grows with each baptized person. We are all saints in our own ways, mirrors to the sacred in the ordinariness of our everyday lives.

Some members of the communion of saints make such a lasting impact on the world that the church canonizes them as saints. Canonized saints are holy witnesses to the faith who intercede for those of us still on our earthly journey.

In *The Big Book of Women Saints* (HarperOne), Sarah Gallick writes of canonized female saints who are "martyrs and mystics, rebellious daughters, loving wives and mothers, reformed prostitutes, restless

visionaries and humble recluses.” She says these women “were all blessed with a unique ability to influence the world for the better and an extraordinary capacity for love.”

A great cloud of female witnesses surrounds us. Let us rejoice with them!

Besides coinciding with Lent, the month of March offers another reason to celebrate female saints. U.S. presidents have proclaimed March “Women’s History Month” since 1987. The movement to more formally honor women’s contributions to society started in the 1970s. Up until then, most schools did not include any sort of “women’s history” in their curriculum. In fact, the idea that women have history worth sharing wasn’t common among the people (that is, men) in power.

Unsatisfied, a group of women did what women have done forever: they got organized and told stories.

Soon, schools and libraries began highlighting women such as Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman. March became a time to reflect on equal rights laws on the basis of sex: how far the country has come and how much farther it still needs to go.

The church would do well to reflect on women’s history and how much more work still needs to be done to achieve equity among Catholics of all genders.

To start, consider inviting these six female saints to journey with you this Lenten season. Below are ideas of ways to pray, fast, and give alms inspired by the lives of these holy women.

St. Kateri Tekakwitha (1656–1680), Patroness of ecology and the environment

Kateri Tekakwitha blazed her own trail as the first Native American to be canonized. A woman of Algonquin and Iroquois ancestry, Kateri grew up in the midst of brutal colonization in present-day New York. Her parents died of smallpox when she was just 4 years old. Her uncle, a Mohawk chief who hated the Jesuit missionaries for infiltrating their land, adopted Kateri. A Jesuit priest baptized Kateri around age 20, a move that left her scorned by her Mohawk community. Kateri took another step outside of native tradition when she refused to get married. Kateri offers a striking example of what biographer Nelly Walworth calls a “thoroughly modern quest for personal autonomy.”

Kateri’s deep devotion to her faith showed in her prayer life. She would go into the woods for an hour each day to pray. Her story also raises awareness of the painful history between Catholic colonizers and Native Americans.

Prayer. Lift up a prayer of gratitude for the Native Americans whose land now sustains your home and workplace. Visit the website native-land.ca [1] or your

local historical society to research the specific tribes indigenous to the region. As Paul wrote in his letter to the Thessalonians, “We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly” (1Thess. 1:2).

Fasting. Reverence God’s gifts of creation by intentionally reducing your carbon footprint. Pick one day of the week to carpool—or even go car-free if you’re able. Go on local adventures for spring break instead of getting on an airplane. Buy foods that are in season from local farmers. Go meatless on Mondays as well as Fridays. Do not buy any new clothes during Lent.

Almsgiving. Many organizations that support Native Americans are regional. Learn more about one near you and donate to their cause. Alternatively, consider investing in the American Indian College Fund, a national organization that invests in Native American students and tribal college education.

St. Monica (330–387), Patroness of wives, mothers, and alcoholics

Monica worried about her family—and never gave up on them. She married a pagan man with a hot temper whose equally difficult mother lived with Monica. After giving Monica much grief for her Christian faith, both eventually converted to Christianity.

Monica’s eldest son, Augustine, caused particular concern. Monica worked hard to raise her children with strong Christian values. Yet Augustine constantly found himself in trouble: skipping school, fooling around with women, and insulting the people around him. Monica prayed each day that Augustine would turn his life around. She even elicited the help of the local bishop to try to talk some sense into her son. Eventually, Augustine changed his ways and became an influential father of the church.

Monica modeled patience and persistence throughout her life. Her story continues to serve as a source of comfort for those who worry about their loved ones.

Prayer. Pray a decade of the rosary each day—or even better, make your way around every bead. Dedicate each decade to a loved one going through a difficult time. Ask Mary to intercede for them. Who knows the trials of family life better than Mary? Like Monica, Mary worried, wondered, and grieved over her son.

Fasting. Put family first this Lenten season by giving your full, undivided attention to your loved ones. A simple—but not always easy—strategy is to put your phone away when others are around. Devices divert attention when in sight, even when we are not actively

using them. Put the phone in a drawer and feast on together time.

Almsgiving. Many families at the southern border face separation and incredible stress. The fate of their loved ones hinges on government policies, many of which do not respect the dignity of every human being. Give of your time by calling your local and state representatives to ask them to stop separating families at the border. Donate to the good work being done by Catholic Charities in El Paso, Texas.

St. Dymphna (7th century), Patroness of people with mental illness or nervous disorders

Dymphna felt the effects of mental illness firsthand. Her father Damon's mental health declined rapidly after her mother died. Dymphna was just 14 years old when Damon went on a hunt to remarry a woman who looked like his deceased wife. A colleague made the sick suggestion that Damon marry his own daughter. Dymphna caught wind of her father's plan and fled to the small town of Geel (in present-day Belgium). Legend says Dymphna brought enough money with her to found a hospital for people in poverty—a generous move that allowed her father to track her down.

Damon killed Dymphna's travel companion first. When she refused to return home to marry him, Damon severed Dymphna's head. She died at age 15. Centuries later, the people of Geel erected a church to honor her. People who experience mental illness pilgrimage from all over the world to the church to ask for Dymphna's intercession.

Prayer. Millions of people in the United States face mental illness. One of the best ways to help someone struggling is to be a calm, peaceful presence. Practice centering prayer for 10 minutes a day to put yourself and those around you at ease. Allow the prayer to seep into the rest of your day.

Fasting. Anxiety affects all people in one way or another. Improve your mental health by fasting from one part of your routine that triggers anxiety. Maybe that means leaving home a few minutes earlier to avoid rush hour, staying away from a personal relationship on the fritz, or asking for help on a stressful work project.

Almsgiving. Treatments for mental illness, such as counseling, medication, and support groups, have come a long way since the time of Dymphna. For 40 years the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) has helped individuals and families experiencing mental illness build better lives by providing advocacy, education, support, and public awareness. Check out NAMI's website at nami.org [2] and consider making a donation.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–1897), Doctor of the church; patroness of priests, missionaries, and florists

Thérèse of Lisieux revered the “little things” during her short and influential life. She felt called to both serve the outside world and withdraw into the contemplative, cloistered life.

In her autobiography, Thérèse shares a deeper understanding of her calling: “Jesus, my Love, I have at last found my vocation; it is love. In the heart of the church, I will be love. So shall I be all things, so shall my dreams come true.” Thérèse came to know herself as beloved at a young age. God's love freed her to tend to the needs, big and small, of those around her.

She was named a doctor of the church—one of only four women given such an honor—for the ways she lived the gospel message of love in ordinary life.

Prayer. Thérèse once said, “A word or a smile is often enough to put fresh life into a despondent soul.” Pray your way through the day by offering a smile to people you encounter, especially those in the service industry who often get overlooked: grocery store clerks, gas station attendants, or custodians. This simple, ordinary action can leave a lasting impression.

Fasting. Fast from rushing from place to place. Known as the “Little Flower,” Thérèse embodied an old saying: “Stop and smell the roses.” Pause to marvel at the world around you: the ray of sun beaming through your window, a child's eager enthusiasm, or the music playing in the lobby. Block out more time in your schedule between appointments to help facilitate your slower pace.

Almsgiving. Give of your time this Lent to a “little thing” in your community. Ideas include picking up trash along a few blocks of sidewalk, bringing communion to people who are homebound in your parish, making a meal for a neighbor in grief, or paying for a stranger's drink at a coffee shop. Gestures don't need to be big to make a big difference.

St. Josephine Bakhita (1869–1947), Patroness of Sudan and human trafficking

Josephine Bakhita knew suffering. Slave traders kidnapped her from her home in Darfur when she was 8 years old and brought her to central Sudan. As a teenager Josephine endured brutal physical abuse at the hands of her owners. Scars covering her body told the story.

In 1883 she was sold to the Italian consul in Sudan. A few years later the consul took her to Italy and gave her to his friend Augusto Michieli. She soon became a

nanny for Michieli's young daughter, whom she accompanied to Venice's Institute of the Catechumens, run by the Canossian Sisters. This first experience of Christianity hooked Josephine. She fought to stay at the convent rather than return to Sudan—and won. Josephine, scars and all, emerged from the waters of baptism with a newfound freedom in body and spirit.

She lived out the rest of her days at the convent. Later in life Josephine told a student that she would “kneel and kiss their hands” if she were to ever encounter her former slave owners. Through unspeakable trauma, Josephine witnesses to the transformative power of forgiveness.

Prayer. Discern if there is anyone in your life you need to forgive—or seek forgiveness from. What are the disagreements, issues, and deep wounds you carry with you this Lent? Are there ways relationships can be mended? What could it feel like to be free of the hurt you carry? Meditate on these words from the Lord's Prayer: *Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.*

Fasting. Slavery continues to wreak havoc on lives across the world. The rise of global capitalism leads to increasing demands for cheap labor. As the gap between the poor and the rich widens, those starving for basic income often end up working in sweatshops, where managers exploit and abuse their labor. This Lent, fast from purchasing clothing and other goods made in sweatshops. Check the tags and ask questions of store management if you're not sure of the product's history. Commit to buying ethically made goods instead.

Almsgiving. Check out and support the campaign from Catholic Relief Services University against human trafficking, another form of modern-day slavery. Human trafficking is a direct attack on the dignity of every human being. It includes sex trafficking, forced labor, debt bondage, domestic servitude, and the use of children in armed conflict.

St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1910–1997), Patroness of doubters

Mother Teresa spent her life among the poorest of the poor—serving, loving, and walking humbly with those whom society forgot. Her heart broke for people lying sick in the streets—and so she made a home in the slums of Calcutta. Teresa honored the dignity of each person as she bandaged wounds and fed children dying of hunger. She founded the Missionaries of Charity religious congregation as more people felt drawn to her ministry.

Teresa also knew darkness, living for years in a “dark night” of the soul, where she felt separated from God. She once wrote, “If I ever become a saint—I will surely

be one of ‘darkness.’ I will continually be absent from heaven—to light the light of those in darkness on earth.” This pain would end up drawing Teresa even closer to Christ, who also experienced times of great darkness.

Prayer. What better way to gain strength through darkness than to pray when it gets dark outside? Compline, or night prayer, is the final prayer of the daily office. It offers space to reflect on the day's events. Traditionally prayed during compline, Psalms 4, 91, and 134 ask God to bless and keep us through the darkness of night.

Fasting. Fast from walking or driving by a person in need of help. Maybe they are holding a sign near an intersection or sitting with shoulders slumped along the curb. Stop and talk. Carry extra snack bars and gloves in your car to give out as needed.

Almsgiving. Women's religious communities minister to the lonely and neglected across the world. Support their ministries by donating your time or treasure. Connect directly with the Missionaries of Charity or find a local community to support.

May all the holy women—and men!—pray for us this Lenten season.

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Have a blessed week,

Jessie Bazan

