

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT A

Note to Facilitator: If possible, set up a Lenten environment in the center of your meeting place (e.g., a purple cloth on a small table, an open Bible, a candle, a barren branch, a bowl of water) to remind us that we are preparing to renew our baptismal promises at Easter.

Note to seasonal groups and groups with new members: In his article on Small Christian Communities, priest/psychologist Msgr. Thomas J. Morgan writes: “Small Christian communities gather together to share their story in the context of God’s story as found in the sacred scriptures.... The Small Christian Community experience is not a discussion group. Rather, it is a sacred space where individual stories are shared and revered. It is done in the mirror of the great God story as revealed in the scriptures.... In this sacred sharing and listening, we see the seeds of conversion. When we share our faith, we grow in our faith. The sharing opens for us new vistas and new ways of visioning this one and only journey we are on.” Excerpts from “Lent Conversion through Small Group Experiences” by Msgr. Thomas J. Morgan The Priest Magazine 2012 © Our Sunday Visitor Publishing. Used with Permission.

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Creator God, you formed the first man and woman from the clay of the earth and breathed into them the spirit of life, but they turned from you and sinned. We have also turned from you and your ways. During this Lenten season of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, you call us back to you and to repent of our sins. Be with us when we face temptations. Give us the strength we need to remain faithful to you. Draw the Elect preparing to join the Church this Easter, and all of us, closer to you during this season. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week’s Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week’s Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: For *catechumens* (unbaptized) and *candidates* (already baptized), the season of Lent is a time of final preparation, purification and enlightenment prior to their Baptism and reception into Full Communion with our Church. For us, the already baptized, Lent is a *penitential season* during which we prepare to renew our baptismal commitment to Christ and his Church. In a spirit of solidarity, we journey with our brothers and sisters who are preparing for Baptism and/or entry into the Church. We pray for them and for ourselves that this season may be a time of renewal, purification and enlightenment for all of us.

Let us listen to God’s Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Genesis 2:7-9, 3:1-7

This is the story of Adam and Eve’s fall from grace, the loss of an intimate relationship with their Creator. The reading begins with the creation of the man. The man is brought to life by God’s breath, showing the absolute dependence of the creature on his Creator. Then God creates a beautiful garden, which the first man and woman

are given to enjoy—with one stipulation, namely, that they are not to eat of the fruit from the “tree of knowledge of good and evil” in the middle of the garden. The tree presumably represents, on one hand, man’s ability to distinguish between good and evil and, on the other hand, the knowledge that belongs to God.

Enter the serpent, the most cunning of all creatures, tempting Eve to disobey her Creator. The serpent plants the seeds of doubt in Eve's heart about God's command and God's love for her. She falls for the serpent's irresistible challenge, "...the moment you eat of it (forbidden fruit), your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods who know what is good and what is evil." In tempting us, Satan cleverly presents evil as some desirable good. The forbidden fruit was "pleasing to the eye" (sensual dimension of temptation) and "desirable for gaining wisdom" (intellectual dimension). Having succumbed to temptation, the woman leads her man into the sin of disobedience. Sin loves company.

Having sinned, Adam and Eve's "eyes are opened." They realize the wrong that they have done, and they experience shame. Sin always leads to inner disease within one's self. Adam and Eve cover themselves up with fig leaves (the first 'cover-up' story). If we read the Fall story in its entirety (Gen 3:1-24), we will see that Adam and Eve's sin of disobedience not only ruptured their relationship with God but also with each other and within their own selves. Harmony with God, with each other and with self, was replaced by discord.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 51

David recites his prayer of contrition after God opens his eyes to the poor choices he had made in committing adultery and planning a murder to cover up his sin of infidelity.

SECOND READING: Romans 5:12-19

Paul draws our attention to the universal consequences of the sin of our first parents. Sin is pervasive. It exists even when there is no law to convict us of it. Then Paul goes on to contrast the sin of Adam to the infinitely greater gift offered to us when Christ entered the world. If there is a "sin force" operating in the world and in us, there is an even *greater* "grace force" at work everywhere and in each one of us. While we may still struggle with sin and evil, we must remember that our baptism into Christ has given us the

divine power to say 'no' to the enticements of sin and the evil one.

Original Sin. The sin of disobedience spoken about in this reading was called 'original sin' by St. Augustine in the fifth century. In a way that we cannot understand the sin of our first parents has had consequences for all humanity. Because of Adam and Eve's sin, each of us was born with a certain *inclination* or *tendency towards sin*. Original sin means that our natural powers for relating to God and choosing good have been weakened and our emotions and passions are disordered. We live with a certain resistance to the Holy Spirit. (For more on this topic, see eamontobin.com Catechism Topics Article 4).

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: Matthew 4:-11

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 4:1-11

At his baptism, Jesus becomes aware of his identity as the Son of God. Matthew presents God's Son as the new Moses who has the authority to bring the old law to its fulfillment.

Jesus resists every temptation to use his authority in any self-serving way. In each temptation, Satan seeks to coax Jesus into abusing his power to prove that he is the Son of God. In two of the three temptations, the devil begins by saying: "*If you are the Son of God...*" The setting for the temptations of Jesus is the desert, where the Israelites spent forty years and frequently succumbed to the temptations to disobey God.

The *first temptation* has to do with *hunger*. At the end of forty days of fasting, Jesus must have been very hungry. Satan tempts Jesus to prove his power by transforming stones into bread—to use his power for himself. The temptation recalls the hunger of the Israelites in the desert when they rejected the bread God offered them. Rebuking Satan, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:3: “*One does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.*” Unlike the Israelites who argued with God about the bread he provided for them, Jesus acquiesces to be fed and sustained by the living bread of God’s Word.

In the *second temptation*, Satan lures the Son of God into demonstrating his power by using it in a sensational way, i.e., throwing himself down from the parapet of the temple. Refusing to yield to the devil’s machinations, Jesus once again refutes Satan by quoting a Scripture passage that spoke about Israel’s rebellion against God: “*You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test as you did at Massah*” (Deut 6:16).

The *third temptation* involves *idolatry*. Israel had failed this temptation many times, notably by their worship of the golden calf in the desert. Satan tempts Jesus to change his allegiance from God to him. Outraged at his tempter, Jesus tells Satan to get lost, saying: “*The Lord, your God shall you worship and him alone shall you serve.*” The temptations of Jesus remind us of a verse from Hebrews: “*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin.*” (4:15)

At the beginning of our Lenten journey, our Church places before us stories of temptation and testing— temptations which Adam and Eve gave into and temptations which Jesus resisted. Like Jesus, we too are tested by Satan to abuse and misuse the gifts God has given us. We too are tempted to forget our true identity as beloved sons and daughters of our heavenly Father. During the forty days of Lent, we pray, fast and do almsgiving, so that we may have the strength to say ‘no’ to Satan and ‘yes’ to Jesus.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. When tempting us, Satan seeks to present evil as something good, e.g., eating the forbidden fruit will make you gods. Can you name how Satan does that today?
3. As stated in the piece at the end of the Second Reading, Original Sin leaves us wounded with a tendency or pull towards sin. How do you experience that in your life?
4. What can help us to be more aware of the devil’s temptations as we begin this holy season of Lent? What can help us to be more aware of the ‘grace force’ (see commentary on second reading) that is always available to us?
5. Jesus confronted the devil's temptations by quoting scripture. Does scripture come to mind when you're challenged or tempted? How does it impact you?
6. Name one thing today’s Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God’s Word and listened to others’ reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

FACILITATOR: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, as I begin this Lenten journey to Easter, help me to be aware of Satan’s temptations and give me the strength to say ‘no’ to them.*

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestions: Be aware of how Satan seeks to pull you away from the ways of Jesus. Do some form of fasting.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we wish to pray?

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

Prayer to St. Michael the Archangel

Saint Michael the Archangel,

defend us in battle.

Be our defense against the wickedness

and snares of the devil.

May God rebuke him, we humbly pray;

and do thou, O Prince of the Heavenly Host,

by the power of God,

cast into hell Satan and all the evil spirits

who prowl about the world

seeking the ruin of souls.

Amen.

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Loving God, in today's Gospel you call Jesus "beloved son." Through Baptism, we are your adopted sons and daughters. May we never forget our wonderful identity in you. Fill us with your light and wisdom as we prepare to share our lives in the context of your holy Word. Lead us with the Elect and Candidates to a fuller life in you. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: In the Gospel, Peter, James and John have a "heavenly experience" in which a voice tells them to listen to Jesus. In the first reading, we have a concrete example of a man listening to and obeying a heavenly voice. In the second reading, Paul reminds Timothy of the holy life he has been called to.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Genesis 12:1-4

Last week, we listened to the story of the Fall. This week, we listen to the call of Abram (later changed to Abraham to signify his new relationship with God). Our reading introduces us to the epic journey of one man who, despite great odds, his age, and uncertainty, trusted that God would make him a great nation in which communities of the earth would find blessing. The reading consists of a call, a promise, a mission, a blessing, and Abram's faith response. "*Abram went as God directed him.*" His obedience to God's call is a model for all believers.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 33

This psalm emphasizes that God's Word is trustworthy and that God protects us in our time of need. This is at the heart of what Abraham and every believer discover about God when we "place our trust in him."

SECOND READING: 2Timothy 1:8-10

After exhorting Timothy to be willing to suffer for the Gospel, Paul reminds him of the holiness of life he has been called to and how Christ grants us the grace to live a holy life. We are able to live in holiness because of the "grace bestowed on us," not because of "our works."

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: Matthew 17:1-19

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 17:1-19

Last week, we encountered Jesus out in the desert doing battle with Satan. This week we encounter him on Mount Tabor having a heavenly experience. Jesus takes with him Peter, James and John, the same three disciples he will take with him to Gethsemane. Matthew says Jesus is transfigured before them. His face shines like the sun and his clothes become white as light.

Then Moses and Elijah arrive on the scene and begin to converse with Jesus. Moses represents the Law given on Mt. Sinai, and Elijah represents the Prophets. Peter is enjoying his mountaintop retreat experience so much that he wants to camp out and remain there. None of us would want such

a glorious experience to end. Scholars tell us that the experience for Jesus and for Peter, James and John was a taste or foreshadowing of Jesus' Resurrection.

But the whole experience becomes even more dramatic when a heavenly voice begins to speak, a voice like the one that spoke at Jesus's baptism. Speaking of Jesus, the voice says: *"This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."* The voice is telling Peter, James and John that Jesus is God, that he is the Messiah, that he is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets and so they need to *listen* to his words. Overcome with the holiness or otherness of the heavenly voice, the disciples prostrate themselves on the ground.

On their way down from the mountain, Jesus tells the disciples to be tight-lipped about what they have experienced. Why does Jesus do this? Because he does not want them to talk about what they themselves do not yet understand and will not understand until *after* Jesus has risen from the dead. Then the disciples can tell the whole world about their heavenly experience.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. God called Abraham and Sarah in their old age. If older or middle aged, do you feel God is still calling you to do his work? If so, in what ways? If younger, how do you experience God's call at this time in your life?
3. In the Second Reading, Paul is strong in his exhortation, "Beloved: Bear your share of hardship for the gospel..." When have you endured hardship for the gospel and did you realize at the time it was God who was strengthening you?
4. The religious experience that Peter, James and John had on Mount Tabor was unforgettable. Did you ever have a religious experience that has had a lasting impact on you? If so, what was that experience like?

5. In the Gospel, the voice from on high tells us to "listen to Jesus." How does Jesus speak to you? Do you have a recent example of how Jesus may have spoken to you?

6. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God's Word and listened to others' reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, your mountaintop experience sustained you through the dark times. May our moments of closeness with you also sustain us during tough times.*

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestion: Try to be a good listener this week to God and to others.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we wish to pray? Remember to pray for all those who will be entering our Church this Easter.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Holy God, Baptism has made us
your beloved daughters and sons.*

*Free us to answer your call
wherever it leads.*

*Help us to put our trust in you
on the peaks and in the valleys of life.*

Amen.

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Jesus, you are the Living Water that brings us here today. Thank you for pouring the living waters of faith, new life and love into us at Baptism. Bless us as we journey together during this Lenten season. May Easter find us washed of sin and more ready to embrace you and your ways. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: During the next three Sundays of Lent, we will read and reflect on three powerful Gospels which tell us about Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman, a blind man, and a dead man. All three Gospels speak to us of *baptismal themes*: living water, healing of blindness (enlightenment), and Jesus' power over sin and death. The three Gospels proclaim God's power to quench our deepest thirst (this Sunday), to heal our spiritual blindness (next Sunday), and to raise us from whatever tomb of death we may find ourselves in (fifth Sunday). From the earliest days of Christianity, these three texts were used as sources of instruction for the *Elect* (the unbaptized) who were preparing for Baptism at Easter. In our Church, these three texts are used for the *Three Scrutiny Rites* which our Elect will experience on the next three Sundays as they prepare for their entrance into our Catholic community at Easter. The purpose of the scrutiny ritual is to uncover, and then heal all that is weak, defective and sinful in their lives, and to call out and strengthen all that is upright, strong and good. As we pray for the Elect, we ask God to do exactly the same for us as we prepare to renew our baptismal promise at Easter.

This week all three readings highlight Baptism. The Sacrament of Baptism is prefigured by Moses providing water for the Israelites in the desert. In the Gospel, Jesus presents himself as Living Water for the Samaritan woman. In the second reading, Paul reminds us that the water of the Spirit has been poured out for us in great abundance. Another way to look at this week's readings is to see God as the one who can quench our deepest thirst. In the first reading, God miraculously provides water for the thirsty Israelites. In the second reading, Paul speaks of the love of God being poured into our souls. In the Gospel, Jesus is the Living Water for a soul seeking him.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Exodus 17:3-7

The grumbling, mistrust, and lack of gratitude shown by the Israelites as they journey through the desert is the very opposite of the attitude of faith and trust that those who seek Living Water must possess. In the face of their grumbling, Moses, the great intercessor and mediator, lifts up his hands in prayer. In contrast to the people's mistrust in God, Moses places his trust in his power to save his people, even his rebellious people. When the going gets tough, when resources are running low, we are called more

than ever to place our trust in God. The water pouring from the rock shows God's care for his people. The water also prefigures the living waters of baptism.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 95

This well-known psalm invites us to open our hearts to the Lord and to sing joyfully to him, something the Israelites in the desert failed miserably to do, but which the Samaritan woman accomplishes very beautifully.

SECOND READING: Romans 5:1-2, 5-8

Paul speaks of the ‘faith that justifies,’ that makes us acceptable to God. He also reminds us that through the Holy Spirit, “*the love of God has been poured into our hearts.*” Our Gospel story will give us a concrete example of the love of God being poured into the heart of a nameless woman. Finally, Paul points out to us that God is so gracious that he was willing to die for us *even* while we were still sinners.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: John 4:4-42

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: John 4:4-42

This is a story of a woman coming to faith in Jesus, the Living Water, and leading others to place their trust in him.

The story opens with an image of the *human Jesus*. He is tired and thirsty. By speaking to a *Samaritan woman* in public, Jesus violates two cultural taboos, i.e., (1) Jews do not speak to Samaritans; (2) Jewish men do not speak to strange women in public. By speaking to this woman, Jesus is ignoring centuries of prejudice toward *women* and *Samaritans*.

As the story unfolds, the woman opens up to Jesus who *gradually* reveals his true nature to her. Initially, she calls him ‘Sir,’ then ‘prophet,’ and finally, ‘Messiah.’ Jesus reveals himself as the ‘Living Water’ whom she has been *unconsciously* searching for in her relationship with her five husbands.

In verses 21-24, there is a discussion about true worship. Jesus tells us that worship is not made authentic by the *place* where one worships (Jerusalem or Gerizim) but by the *Spirit* and *truth* in which one prays.

In verses 27-38, Jesus carries on a dialog with his disciples who are very surprised, if not scandalized, to see him talking to a Samaritan woman. But no one asks why he is talking to her. Then they offer him food but Jesus responds by telling them that his “*food is to do the will of him who sent me*” (v.34). Doing the will of his Father is the central consuming passion of Jesus’ life. He urges them to pray for more workers to come to reap the crop ready for harvest (probably a reference to the Gentiles hungry for the Good News).

In the meantime, the woman filled with the Living Water races back to her village to share her Good News. “*Come and see a man who told me everything I have done. Could this be the Christ?*” The rejected and scorned woman has become a messenger of God’s love. The people invite Jesus to stay in their village. After a ‘retreat with Jesus,’ they tell the woman: “*We no longer believe because of your word; for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.*” In his writings, John is predisposed to showing how Jesus becomes known to others through a personal encounter.

Finally, this story brings alive many of the promises and verses of the Old Testament, e.g., “*With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation*” (Is 12:3) and “*All you who are thirsty, come to the water. Come without paying...without cost, drink*” (Is 55:1).

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.

2. In the first reading, the Israelites ask: “*Is the Lord with us or not?*” Have you ever had that feeling? If so, what helped you deal with it? If not, what enables you to always feel that God is with you?

3. In the second reading, Paul reminds us that Jesus died for us while we were still sinners. Yet sometimes we may wonder if God loves us. Why is this? What can help us to always be aware of God’s unconditional love for us?

4. The Gospel tells us that many people come to believe in Jesus because of the witness of the Samaritan woman. What made her witness so powerful? How easy or how hard is it for you to share your faith with others?

5. Jesus is the One who satisfies our deepest longings and thirsts. Yet we may sometimes look elsewhere. We may look to relationships, work or some hobby. Why is this?

6. Name one thing today’s Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God’s Word and listened to others’ reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

FACILITATOR: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, help me to have such strong love and faith in you that I may feel a strong urging to share it with others.*

RESPONDING TO GOD’S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week’s readings. Suggestion: Make an extra effort on how you, like the Samaritan woman, can share your faith with others; in other words, how you can be a missionary disciple for Jesus.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we wish to pray? Remember to pray for all those who will be entering our church this Easter.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Blessed are you, God of all life,
we praise you for the water of life you offer us.
Scrutinize us, heal us, and strengthen us
along with the Elect.
We make our prayer through your Son,
Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Amen.*

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Blessed are you, God of Light, for you have opened our eyes to see your truth and to know your love. Open the eyes of our heart as we journey through Lent so that we may perceive even more clearly the signs of your love that surround us. Enlighten our minds and hearts so that we may recognize the Word you wish us to hear this week.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: In the early centuries of the Church, baptism was sometimes called the sacrament of 'enlightenment.' Light has been used as a metaphor for belief in God from gospel times, and so it was a natural step to refer to the Christian initiation as a process of enlightenment, a 'coming to see' that Jesus is Lord and Savior. This 'seeing' imagery dominates all of today's readings and provides the key to interpreting them in the context of the Lenten season's focus on preparation for Baptism or renewal of one's baptismal commitment to Christ. For the *Elect*, Lent is a *Period of Purification and Enlightenment*. As we journey with our brothers and sisters, we too seek to be *purified* of false values and sin so that we can more clearly *see* God's truth and live as children of light. We can view all three readings through the lens of light. In the first reading, David is brought into the light of God's call for his life. Paul speaks about living in the light. In the Gospel, we witness a movement from the darkness of unbelief into the light of faith.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: 1Samuel 16:1, 6-7, 10-13

Samuel is seeking a successor for Saul. He thinks that God's choice is surely one of Jesse's seven sons who are present when he arrives, but he is mistaken. Who but God would choose the young and inexperienced David to be the symbol of God's power and strength? This is a concrete example of how God's choices are not like ours. God *sees* in people what we fail to see. David may have been young and inexperienced, but he has the inner disposition that God is looking for, namely, love of and loyalty to God. The anointing is a solemn ritual act sealing God's selection of David.

During this Lenten season, as we examine our conscience, and as the *Elect* prepare for Baptism, we are reminded that we must always seek to see as God sees. At our Baptism, we too were

anointed with oil to remind us that God has a special mission for us.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 23

The sentiments in this most loved of the psalms can be applied to both David and the man healed in today's Gospel.

SECOND READING: Ephesians 5:8-14

Fr. Lawrence Mick once wrote:

Those who sin prefer the darkness. They do not want their deeds to be seen or their thoughts to be known. Thieves and murderers prefer the dark. So do those who commit lesser sins. Thus coming into the light is an image of conversion.

In this passage, though, Paul goes further and suggests that we not only live in the light of Christ but also become light for others. If we produce “goodness and righteousness and truth,” then we light the way for others and make their lives brighter. That’s a good goal for each of us this Lent.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:

John 9:1-41

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

A participant reads the Gospel, then all pause to reflect.

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: John 9:1-41

In last weekend’s Gospel, Jesus revealed himself to a nameless Samaritan woman. In this week’s Gospel, Jesus reveals himself to a nameless blind man as the One who gives the light of faith. The atmosphere of hostility and controversy which pervades the story, symbolizes the struggle which goes on between light and darkness, belief and unbelief. As in last week’s Gospel, the story operates on different levels. On *one level*, we notice a man receiving *physical* sight. On *another level*, we see the same man receiving *spiritual* sight. On a *third level*, there is a contrast between the openness of the blind man to Jesus and the closed-mindedness of the Pharisees to him.

The story begins with the disciples asking if the man’s blindness was caused by his sin or the sin of his parents. Jesus answers: *Neither*, thus defying the traditional belief that sickness and suffering in a person’s life are caused by one’s sinfulness. As a result of the ritual washing, the man is healed of his blindness, symbolizing the

enlightenment we receive in the sacramental waters of Baptism. Then the healed one undergoes a series of interrogations. During the interrogations, we note how the blind man *gradually* comes to recognize the true nature of Jesus. First, he calls Jesus *‘that man,’* then *“prophet”* and finally, he worships Jesus as the *‘Son of Man.’* In the story, the blind man represents people who overcome many obstacles as they come into faith. He also represents those who suffer ostracization because of faith.

As we gladly watch the blind man gradually move into the ‘light of faith,’ we sadly notice the Pharisees move into the ‘darkness of unbelief,’ an act which reaches its climax when the Pharisees call Jesus ‘a sinner.’ The Pharisees also call the blind man a sinner. But as the story unfolds, we clearly see that the real sinners are the Pharisees, not because they do not see, but because they insist that they do see and, therefore, have no need for enlightenment. In the story, the blind man’s parents represent all those who claim that they ‘see’ just because they have head knowledge of their religion. The blind man’s parents represent those who fear expulsion from the Jewish community for believing in Jesus. They also represent our weak side that is not willing to risk much for our faith.

The Christian journey is moving out of the ‘darkness of unbelief’ into the ‘light of faith.’ During the coming week, we might wish to reflect on our own Christian journey. We may want to name and give thanks for the events and the people who opened our eyes to Jesus and his values. We might also think about the things in our lives that presently hinder us from moving more and more into the light.

As for this Gospel’s *sacramental significance*, Jesus’ cure of the blind man has several baptismal references. Healed and anointed and enlightened by Jesus, the blind man who comes to see and believe in Jesus typifies every baptized believer. Washed and anointed at Baptism, we are to live in the light of faith, walk by the light of truth, and follow Jesus who is the Light of the world in all we are, in all we do, in all we say.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. Samuel judged by outer appearances. This is a temptation for many of us. We are told to ‘dress for success.’ What might help us to quit judging by appearances so that we can see the inner good qualities of someone poorly dressed or someone not blessed with social skills?
3. In the second reading, Paul reminds us that vocation is to live as a ‘child of the light.’ Name one or two ways that you try to live as a child of the light.
4. What are some examples of spiritual blindness? What causes it? What can free us from it?
5. When have you, like the blind man's parents feared expulsion or other reprisal for your faith in Jesus? What helped you overcome the fear and respond boldly - or not?
6. Name one thing today’s Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God’s Word and listened to others’ reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

FACILITATOR: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, help me to see others and myself as you see us.*

RESPONDING TO GOD’S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week’s readings. Suggestion: Ask the Holy Spirit to help you to see the ways in which you are spiritually blind and then ask Jesus to heal you of your blindness.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: Pray for all who suffer from physical blindness and for those involved in research to find a cure. Pray for the Elect as they prepare for their second *Scrutiny*. Pray for all of us that we be graced with the ability to see as God sees.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Jesus, who heals all ills,
open my eyes to see as you see.
Fill me with your light
so that I choose to see your goodness
in others, the world, and myself.
Heal the self-righteousness
that keeps me blind.
Amen.*

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *God of all creation, we gather together to share our lives in the context of your life-giving Word. You came that we might have life in abundance. Help us to reject sin and evil so that we might come to a fuller life in you. Open our graves to new life in your Son, Jesus. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: On the Fifth Sunday of Lent, our series of three Johannine Gospel readings reach their climactic conclusion in the *Story of Lazarus* raised from the dead. In communities where the *Elect* have been celebrating the scrutiny rites in preparation for Baptism, this story about resurrection from the dead serves to remind them and us of the ultimate purpose of Christian initiation: eternal life with Jesus Christ, the Risen One. All three readings speak of the victory over sin and death that we experience from living our lives in union with Christ.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Ezekiel 37:12-14

This reading is intended to be a prophetic word of hope for the Israelites living in physical exile from their homeland and in spiritual exile from God. They feel God has abandoned them. We listen to the final verses of Ezekiel's famous 'dry bones' vision that God gives him while living in exile with his people in Babylon. The scene is one of complete devastation and desolation. The ground is covered with the bones of countless soldiers killed in battle. After bringing Ezekiel to this horrible scene, God asks him a startling question: "*Son of Man, can these bones come to life?*" These prophetic verses are a challenging call to the people to believe that God will deliver them from the death of exile. Read in the context of Christian faith, one could understand these verses as a reference to personal, individual resurrection beyond bodily death. When this text is read today with Paul's words to the Romans (8:11): "*The one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to our mortal bodies,*" we understand how comforting the fullness of Christian faith can be

in the face of whatever darkness, defeat or disaster may strike us.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 130

This is a cry to God from the depths of one's being, a cry in which the psalmist puts his trust in God as he awaits forgiveness and deliverance.

SECOND READING: Romans 8:8-11

Paul contrasts 'life in the spirit' with 'life in the flesh.' He reminds us that we are to live 'in the spirit' and not 'in the flesh.' This does not mean that we are to deny our human nature as flesh-and-blood creatures. When Paul uses the word 'flesh,' he is referring to that part of us that is not yet surrendered to God and transformed by grace, that part of us that continues to be self-centered and rebellious against God and his ways. When Paul uses the term 'spirit,' he is referring to that part of us that seeks to follow God and his ways over our sinful cravings. But we can only make such good choices because our spirit has been infused with the Holy Spirit at Baptism. For Paul, the Spirit is

the life force behind Jesus' Resurrection and is the same Spirit who will raise our mortal bodies from death to life. Our incorporation into Christ at Baptism makes it possible for us to share in his victory over death.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: John 11:1-45

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

A participant reads the Gospel, then all pause to reflect.

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: John 11:1-45

In last week's Gospel, Jesus declares himself "*Light of the World*" and he proves it by giving physical and spiritual sight to a blind man. This week, Jesus declares himself to be "*The Resurrection and the Life*" and proves it by raising a dead man from the sleep of death. The raising of Lazarus prefigures Jesus' own hour of Death and Resurrection.

The great paradox of the story is that as Jesus gives life to Lazarus, the authorities begin to plan his death (vv 49-53). Jesus is condemned to death for being a life-giver. How strange and evil! We also notice again the struggle between light and darkness, belief and unbelief. Many come to believe in Jesus, but others recede into the darkness of unbelief.

This particular story gives us a beautiful blending of both the divinity and humanity of Jesus. We witness the *human* side of Jesus in his reaction to the death of his friend. As he '*weeps*' and is '*troubled in spirit*' the bystanders observe: "*See how much he loved Lazarus.*" We see the divinity of Jesus at work when he raises Lazarus from the

tomb. The heart and center of this story is found in verses 25-26, in which Jesus declares: "*I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he should die, will come to life. Whoever is alive and believes in me will never die.*"

When Jesus goes to the tomb of Lazarus, he is confronted by the reality of death and is 'troubled in spirit.' It seems Jesus is angered by the power and hold that death has over humanity. At the tomb, Jesus speaks three commands: "*Take away the stone.*" "*Lazarus, come out.*" "*Untie him and let him go free.*" By raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus shows that he is more powerful than death. Of course the 'life' Jesus offers is much more than biological life; it is 'eternal life' that begins here and now as soon as we unite ourselves to Jesus. In John 5:28-30, Jesus says: "*The dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God...and shall live.*" The raising of Lazarus actualizes this promise.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. Name types of graves people can find themselves in today, e.g., grave of depression, grief and poverty. What can we do to lift ourselves out of a grave we may find ourselves in?
3. In the Second Reading, Paul speaks of the Spirit dwelling in us. Are you aware of the Spirit in your life and soul? Do you pay attention and act accordingly?
4. According to John's Gospel, our three big enemies are the *world*, the *flesh* and the *devil*. The 'flesh' is that tendency in us to live life without reference to God and his ways. What causes us to sometimes live in the flesh and to ignore God and his ways?

5. At the grave of Lazarus, Jesus says, “*Unbind him and let him go free.*” What can hold us bound (e.g., an addiction, resentment) so that we are prevented from living life as freely and as fully as God wishes for us? What can help us to get unbounded and go free?

6. Name one thing today’s Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God’s Word and listened to others’ reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

FACILITATOR: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Lord Jesus, you are the resurrection and the life, draw me away from fleshly desires that hinder me from hearing and responding to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.*

RESPONDING TO GOD’S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week’s readings. Suggestion: If you, a friend, neighbor, or co-worker are in a season of death (grief, depression, failure), be aware of and use the resources that can help one another. Name the things that may be keeping you bound at this time and stopping you from being fully alive. Decide on a step you can take to set yourself free.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: Especially pray for the dying and for spiritual freedom, the freedom to say ‘yes’ to the Spirit no matter what it costs you.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*With Jesus, we pray:
Father, we thank you for hearing us.
Help us to go to the tombs in our lives
so your Spirit can open our graves
and raise us from them.
Amen.*

REMINDER: Next week’s Gospel will be the Passion story according to Matthew. Decide if you wish to have participants read it prior or during your get-together.

PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Almighty and ever-living God, you have given the human race Jesus Christ, our Savior, as a model of humility. He fulfilled your will by becoming man and giving his life on the Cross. Help us to bear witness to you by following his example of suffering and make us worthy to share in his Resurrection. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: The readings for Passion Sunday revolve around the two meanings of the word 'passion.' Paul's letter to the Philippians illustrates how these meanings intertwine. Christ felt such passion (love) for humanity that he took on our human condition and endured the most extreme passion (suffering) we can imagine as the servant of God.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 50:4-7

This is the third of four 'suffering servant songs' found in the book of Isaiah. As the early Christians read these passages, they see in them images of Jesus, the suffering servant of God.

In Isaiah's mind, the *servant* spoken about may have been an individual or the nation of Israel. The *servant* is entrusted with a special mission on behalf of God's people. The *servant* is, first of all, portrayed as a disciple who *listens* to God. Morning after morning, the Lord 'opens' the ear of the *servant* that he may hear God's Word. Unlike the Israelites in the desert, the *servant* is not rebellious, nor does he turn back. Because of his faithfulness to God, the *servant* undergoes all kinds of humiliations and sufferings. (Looking at the servant as Israel, the sufferings might point to her time in exile.) In the midst of his sufferings, the *servant* displays great trust in God. "*The Lord is my help, therefore, I will not be disgraced.*" The phrase '*set my face like flint*' refers to the *servant's* determination to be faithful to God.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 22

This is the moving psalm that Jesus prayed on the Cross. It is a combination of *lament* in a time of great suffering and *thanksgiving* for God's deliverance. The imagery used is very powerful and vivid. The opening verses describe the suffering and derision that the psalmist endures from onlookers. Among other things, they mock him for placing his trust in God. But the mockery and brutality of the onlookers cannot undermine the devotion of the psalmist who remains steadfast in his trust in God. The psalm ends on a positive note with the psalmist proclaiming God's goodness in the midst of the assembly.

SECOND READING: Philippians 2:6-11

Writing from prison, Paul addresses the community of Philippi, a people with proud and independent ways, which often leads to bickering and disharmony amongst them. Paul admonishes the community to set aside their bickering and to live in harmony. He holds up as a model before them the 'attitude of Christ,' who 'emptied himself' and became like a 'slave' (or like the

servant in the first reading). Because Christ emptied himself and because of his humility, God raised him up and exalted him. Like the servant in the first reading, God came to the help of Jesus, the servant *par excellence*, and gave him the name ‘Lord,’ a name given only to God in the Old Testament.

To be filled with God, we must first do the work of self-emptying/ridding ourselves of our false self that is proud, jealous, greedy, rude, unforgiving, dishonest, self-sufficient, etc.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: The Passion according to Matthew

This Sunday’s Gospel is the Passion of Matthew. You most likely will not decide to listen to it twice. If you read it once, consider breaking it up among several readers.

GOSPEL: Matthew 26:14-27–27:66

Scripture scholars point out that each of the four accounts of the Passion of Christ has its own unique characteristics. We will look at three of the unique characteristics of Matthew’s Gospel.

- Fulfillment of the Scriptures. Matthew’s Gospel is written primarily for Jewish audiences who have embraced Christianity. Matthew goes to great pains to show that the events spoken about in his Gospel, including his Passion narrative, happened not because of some outside forces, but to fulfill what was foretold in their Hebrew Scriptures about God’s plan.

The Passion story begins with the betrayal of Jesus by Judas for 30 pieces of silver. This event is alluded to in Zechariah 11:12-13. When Jesus is arrested, Matthew says: “*All this happened to fulfill the prophecies in scripture*” (26:56). Immediately after this statement, Matthew tells us: “*All the disciples left him and fled*” (v.57), thus fulfilling Jesus’ earlier prediction (26:31) as well as the prophecy of Zechariah, “*I will strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered*” (13:7). During his trial, Jesus’ behavior and the mistreatment heaped upon him parallel

the experiences of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah (see today’s first reading). On the Cross, Jesus prays with the words of today’s Psalm (22).

- Obedient and faithful Son of God. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as the faithful Israelite who enjoys a unique relationship with his Father. Judas is mentioned more as a means of *contrast*: he is the ‘dark side of discipleship.’ In Matthew’s Passion story, Jesus is depicted as strong, peaceful and faithful despite all the infidelity, hatred, violence and cowardice around him. He especially shows himself to be a faithful friend to his Apostles. He forgives them for their weaknesses and failures. Most of all, he remains faithful to his Father. The seeming cry of despair: “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” should not be interpreted as Jesus feeling abandoned by God. This lament, which is taken from Psalm 22, “*lays bare the tortured body and spirit of the believer who complains to God and cries out for relief, but never doubts that he will be saved and vindicated*” (Patricia Sanchez).

Matthew contrasts Jesus’ faithfulness to the unfaithfulness of his Apostles and his own people who betray him, reject him, beat him, jeer at him, deny him, fall asleep on him, and abandon him in his greatest hour of need. Of course not all of them fail him. Simon helps him to carry his Cross and the women are faithful, even if at a distance. Jesus is presented as the *suffering servant*, obedient unto death, even death on the Cross (second reading).

- *For the forgiveness of sins*. On this aspect of Matthew’s Passion story, Scripture scholar Sr. Barbara Reid writes:

“... in Matthew, Jesus’ death is not framed as a sacrifice of atonement but rather the result of living a life of forgiving love and teaching others his way of forgiveness (5:38-48; 9:2-8; 6:12, 14-15; 18:23-35). Unique to Matthew is the fuller account of the treachery of Jesus’ friend and disciple Judas, and his tragic end. A question is set before us, whether we, like Judas, will be incapable of accepting forgiveness or, like

Peter, will be open to the forgiveness, Jesus freely offers when we fail. Further, can believing communities embrace those who have sinned grievously?"

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FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. Which part of the Passion story speaks to you most this year? Why?
3. How hard is it for you to pray: "Not my will but yours be done?" Can you think of one example of when you had to pray that prayer?
4. What happened to Peter (to deny Jesus) and to Judas (to betray him)? What is the difference between both failures? How can we deny or betray Jesus?
5. What helps you the most to cope with the suffering or cross dimension of life, be it your own or someone else's?
6. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God's Word and listened to others' reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

FACILITATOR: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, share with me a little bit of your patience, courage and strength in the face of suffering.*

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestions: Be patient with the sufferings in your life; join them to the sufferings of Christ and offer them up for some cause in the world. Pray for people carrying a heavy cross at this time. Pray that morning after morning, the Lord may open the ears of your heart to hear God's Word.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: especially pray for those who are suffering in body, mind, and spirit, and for their caregivers. Pray that many people will participate in our Holy Week services. Pray for the *Elect* who will be baptized and the *Candidates* who will be received into full communion with our Church at the Easter vigil.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Lord, as we enter this most sacred week
of our Church year,
give us new eyes to see what great love
you have for us.
May your example of laying down your life
inspire us to lay down our lives
for all we are called to serve.
Amen.*