

LENT

Lent is a preparation for the celebration of Easter. The Lenten liturgy disposes both catechumens and the faithful to celebrate the paschal mystery: catechumens, through the several stages of Christian initiation; the faithful, through reminders of their own baptism and through penitential practices.

(General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar, #27)

The season of Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and ends prior to the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday. The word Lent is derived from the Anglo-Saxon *lencten* or springtime. In Christian spirituality, the season of Lent is intended to be a spiritual springtime for the unbaptized (called *Elect*) and also for the baptized. On Ash Wednesday, when our Lenten journey begins, the prophet Joel says to us: "*Rend your hearts, not your garments.*" Commenting on these words from the first reading, Thomas Merton writes: "*Rending only your garments lets in nothing but air, rending our hearts lets out sin and lets in the clean air of God's spring.*"

Baptismal focus

In the early centuries of the Church when the catechumenate developed, Lent was the final period of preparation for the unbaptized who were discerned to be ready for full initiation into the Church on Easter Vigil. For the already baptized, Lent was an opportunity to deepen their baptismal commitment to Christ. The baptismal focus has been restored in our own time.

Living Lent

If we embrace the baptismal focus of Lent, it will most likely change the way we approach the season. The emphasis will not be primarily on giving up something but rather our doing whatever will deepen our baptismal commitment to Christ.

Lent rooted in Baptism will mean taking a serious look at where there is sin in our lives, where there is need for repentance and conversion, where there is need to weed out, with God's help, sinful attitudes and behaviors that hinder us from being more effective witnesses to Christ and his message.

Practicing the three traditional spiritual exercises of *prayer, fasting and almsgiving* (Mt 6:1-13) can be a big help as we seek to prepare for Baptism or for renewal of our baptismal commitment to Christ. Properly approached and utilized, prayer, fasting and almsgiving will facilitate a change of heart and behavior in our lives.

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT Cycle C

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 also have turned from you and your ways. During this Lenten season of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, you call us back to you 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: One way to connect this week's readings is to see them as an invitation to be *faithful* to God's call or divine election. In the desert, both Israel and Jesus were *called* to be *faithful* to God. In the first reading, Moses reminds Israel of God's *faithfulness* to them and their call to be *faithful* to him. In the Gospel, Jesus shows *fidelity* to God by saying 'no' to Satan's temptations. In the second reading, Paul challenges his readers to show *faithfulness* to God by *living* what they profess with their lips.

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: Deuteronomy 26:4-10

The Book of Deuteronomy is a series of instructions or homilies given by Moses to the Israelites before they enter the Promised Land.

In this week's reading, Moses tells the people that after their first harvest, they are to take the *first fruits* of the various products of the soil, put them in a basket and offer them to God as an act of thanksgiving. Then during their Harvest Festival, they are to tell

the story of God's saving presence in their lives and in the lives of their ancestors. What follows is an important *creedal statement* which identifies three significant events in Israel's salvation history. *First*, there is a reference to a "wandering Armean" who ends up in Egypt. This is probably a reference to Jacob and his sons who went down to Egypt while Joseph was chancellor in Pharaoh's court. *Second*, the *Exodus* is memorialized as God hearing the cry of an enslaved people. *Third*, the giving of the *land* "flowing with milk and honey" is brought to mind. Moses reminds the

people that their good and faithful God who entered into the history of their ancestors blessing them, *continues* to be a saving presence in their lives, blessing them *now* with a bountiful harvest.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 91

This psalm affirms the nation's reliance on God who delivers them out of slavery. He comes to them in time of trouble.

SECOND READING: Romans 10:8-13

These verses also contain a *creedal statement* of faith by the first Christians: "*Jesus is Lord; he died for our sins and was raised up for our justification.*" This faith involves "*confession on the lips*" and "*belief in one's heart*" – two aspects of the same act of faith. It is the equivalent of saying that faith has to be a "lived reality" in which the words one professes are backed up by the witness of one's life. A faith *confessed* and *lived* enables one to appropriate for oneself the gift of salvation offered by Jesus. Salvation is God's *free* gift to undeserving sinners. Our task is to graciously *receive* God's gift and then to *act* like saved people.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: Luke 4:1-13

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: Luke 4:1-13

When Jesus goes to the desert, Luke reminds us that he is "*filled with the Holy Spirit*" who will empower him to say 'No' to the three temptations of Satan. Each temptation is an attempt by Satan to have Jesus *misuse* his power, to use it to serve himself rather than to serve others. In each temptation, Jesus quotes Scripture as a way to fight Satan.

- In the *first temptation*, Jesus is tempted to use his power to feed himself rather than to feed the people hungry for God's Word. Jesus *trusts* that *God* will care or provide for him in his time of need. Likewise, we are called to do the same.
- In the *second temptation*, Satan tempts Jesus to use his power for political and materialistic means. Chasing after material riches and self-centered power is a temptation for most if not all of us.
- In the *third temptation*, Satan tempts Jesus to use his power for show – to do something spectacular. Satan has the audacity to use Scripture as a way to snare Jesus. But Jesus rebuffs Satan with a third quote from Deuteronomy. Note that the Gospel ends on an ominous note: Satan departs "for a time." He will return, especially in Gethsemane.

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. How has your faith in God been tested? What helped you get through your time of testing? In other words, what are or have been deserts in your faith life?

3. Deep attachments can and often do get between us and our call to be attached to Jesus. Can you name one attachment that you would like to work on this Lent, e.g., less TV so you can have more quiet time?

4. How hard is it for you to believe that Jesus was really tempted to not follow God's path for his life? What makes it hard for you to follow God's path?

5. "*One does not live on bread alone.*" What spiritual practices help to nurture your faith life?

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

Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestions:

Jesus, give me the courage to name and take on one attachment in my life that hinders me from allowing you to be the center of my life.

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today's readings. Suggestion: Tackle with prayer and determination one attachment that tends to pull you away from making Jesus the center of your life.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we wish to pray? Suggestion: Pray for all who are being tempted in any way at this time, that the Holy Spirit give them the grace to overcome.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

Lord Jesus, as you had the help of the Spirit to turn aside from the temptations that came to you during the time in the desert and the years of your ministry, help us to turn to this same Spirit to help us in our efforts to grow in faith, hope and charity this Lent.

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT Cycle C

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: *Good and gracious God, in today's readings you give Abraham, Peter, James and John a glimpse of your awesome nature. Open our minds and hearts to the Word you want us to hear and act upon as we gather together to pray and share your Word. 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 first reading, God makes a fiery appearance to Abraham as a way to renew his covenant with him. In the Gospel, three Apostles are blessed with a glimpse of the glorified Christ. In the second reading, Paul exhorts his worldly centered readers to keep their focus on the world that is to come.

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 15:5-12, 17-18

This covenant-making reading opens with God promising Abram *descendants* and *land*. Considering that both Abram and Sara are nomads and beyond childbearing years, God's promise seems entirely impossible to fulfill. Nevertheless, Abram places his *trust* and *faith* in God. When Abram wonders *how* God can fulfill such outlandish promises, God responds by creating a covenant ritual. Several animals are sliced in two parts. In ancient times, the contracting parties would walk between the divided animal, understanding that if they failed to keep their piece of the contract, they would accept their fate like that of the animal. "Birds of prey swooping down on the carcasses" symbolize forces hostile to Israel.

Abram is induced into a deep sleep suitable for divine communication. But note that only God, symbolized by a "smoking fire" and a "flaming torch," walks between the divided animals. By acting thus, God is entering into a unilateral covenant of unconditional love with Abram and his descendants. Even if Abram or his descendants fail to trust, God will still continue to love them. The covenant enacted in this reading leads to the covenant at Sinai and culminates in the new and eternal covenant which Jesus sealed in his own blood on Calvary.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 27

This psalm speaks of trust in God. Abram, against all odds, lives this call to trust God.

SECOND READING: Philippians 3:17-4:1

Paul expresses concern that his beloved Philippians might be misled by the bad example of some people in their midst who are “enemies of the Christ” and whose “god is their belly.” Paul tells his readers not to imitate such people. Rather, they should imitate him who is dedicated to following the true teachings of Christ. Paul reminds the Philippians that they are pilgrims here on earth and that their true home is in heaven. Their involvement in the world must be tempered by the realization that everything here on earth is of a temporary nature, as natural disasters bring home to us so clearly.

**PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:
Luke 9:28-36**

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: Luke 9:28-36

The Transfiguration of Jesus is an epiphany story. In epiphany stories, the veil which separates the invisible world from the visible, and the future from the present, is removed temporarily and the divine is revealed. In the Transfiguration story, Peter, James and John catch a glimpse of Jesus in his glory.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus goes with his inner circle to *pray*. Some scholars suggest that at this point in Jesus’ ministry, he wonders if he should stay in Galilee to continue preaching the Gospel or to go to Jerusalem where he would most likely be killed. During his prayer on the mountain, Jesus has a mystical experience. God’s presence is revealed to him in a very powerful way. *“While he was praying, his face changed in appearance.”*

Then the two giants of Israel’s religion appear: Moses (symbolizing the Law) and Elijah (symbolizing the Prophets). They *“spoke of his Exodus that he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem”* – a reference to Jesus’ passage through death to new life. Jesus now knows he must go to Jerusalem even if it means death. (This is not unlike great leaders who know they must go to places that may well cost them their lives.)

Luke tells us how this story is also a “mountaintop” or awe-filled experience for Peter, James and John. They are so overcome with what is going on that Peter suggests they set up camp and never leave the place (just like how we might feel after a wonderful retreat experience). But Peter is “in over his head.” He does not know what he is saying. He does not yet realize that before the glory comes the Cross.

A heavenly voice speaks: *“This is my Chosen One; listen to him.”* These words are a wonderful act of affirmation of Jesus by his Father. For the Apostles, it is a moment of great revelation. The One in their midst is truly God’s Chosen One! They must *listen* to him and *follow* him. They will of course only recognize the full meaning of this awe-filled event after Jesus has passed through death

into new life. This event is a glimpse of what is ahead for Jesus and his inner circle.

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 second reading, Paul says that some people “conduct themselves as enemies of the Cross” (they don’t want to deal with the tough stuff of life). How easy or hard is it for you to negotiate the tough challenges of life, e.g., loss, aging, relational conflicts, etc.? What helps you to face and deal with life’s tough challenges?

3. Jesus took Peter, James and John up to a mountain. Where do you like to pray? What do you like about praying alone and with others?

4. In the Gospel, Peter, James and John have a powerful, unforgettable and indescribable experience of God. Have you ever had an experience of God that transformed your life? If not, share a time when you felt especially close to God.

5. Also in the Gospel, the three apostles are told to *listen to Jesus*. How do you go about listening to Jesus?

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

Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestions:

Holy Spirit, help me to grow in my ability to listen to Jesus.

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today’s readings. Suggestion: Say ‘no’ to the ‘desires of the belly’ by fasting one day this week.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we wish to pray? Suggestion: Pray especially for spiritual directors.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

Lord, enlighten the eyes of our hearts, providing a glimpse of the glory promised us because of your saving death and Resurrection. As we move toward renewing the promise made at Baptism, make our hearts ever more confident in the Father’s fidelity and the ongoing strength that comes from the Spirit.

When I Ask You to Listen

When I ask you to listen to me
and you start giving advice,
you have not done what I asked.

When I ask you to listen to me,
and you begin to tell me
that I shouldn't feel that way,
you are trampling on my feelings.

When I ask you to listen to me,
and you feel that you have something
to solve my problem,
then you have failed me,
strange as that may seem.

Listen! All I ask is that you listen,
not talk, not do; just hear me.

Advice is cheap,
and I can do things for myself.
I'm not helpless,
you contribute to my fear and weakness.

But when you accept as a simple fact
that I do feel what I feel,
no matter how irrational,
then I can stop trying to convince you,
and get on with the business of
understanding
what's behind my feelings.

Perhaps that's why prayer works,
sometime, for some people,
because God is quiet,

and He doesn't give advice or try to
fix things.
He just listens and lets you work it out
for yourself.

So please listen and just hear me.
And if you want to talk,
wait a minute for your turn,
and I'll listen to you.

Anonymous

This week we celebrate St. Patrick's Day.

AN IRISH TOAST

May you have many friends
and may they be as mature in taste
and health and color
and sought after as the contents of this glass.

May you have warm words on cold
evenings,
a full moon on a dark night,
and the road downhill all the way to
your door.

May every hair on your head turn into
a candle
to light your way to heaven.

And may God and his holy Mother
take the harm of the years away from you.

And...may you have no frost on your spuds,
no worms on your cabbage;
may your goat give plenty of milk,
and if you buy a donkey,
please, God, she be pregnant!



THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT Cycle C

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: *Liberating God, thank you for gathering us together as your people to share life and your Word. Just as you revealed yourself to Moses, reveal yourself to us as we listen to your Word. 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: Lent is a time for conversion, a turning toward God and away from anything that separates us from him. Today, we hear the story of Moses turning toward a burning bush and finding the living and saving God. In the second reading and the Gospel, there is a call to repentance, a call to turn towards 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: Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15

When God appears to Moses in the burning bush, Moses is a fugitive, having murdered a man in Egypt some years previously. Now he is married and is a shepherd of his father-in-law's flock. God identifies himself as the God of Moses' ancestors: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God also tells Moses that he has heard the cry of his suffering people in Egypt and that he intends to free them. (Unfortunately omitted from today's passage is Moses' actual call: "*Come now! I will send you...*" [v.10] and God's reassurance to Moses that he will be with him during his mission [v.12]). Moses asks God his name. God answers: "*I Am, Who Am*"—a name that defies accurate definition. A possible translation is: *I am One who will be with you and for you no matter what.*

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 103

This psalm of thanksgiving recounts God's goodness to Moses and the Israelites, and God's desire to deliver the oppressed.

SECOND READING:

1Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12

Paul warns the Corinthians (and us) not to equate election (being chosen) with salvation. Their ancestors received many blessings from God, yet most did not follow his ways. Then Paul, in a daring and remarkable act of creative interpretation, reads back into Israel's history the presence of Christ, the Rock, and sees in the waters of the Red Sea and the desert manna prefigurements of the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist. While traveling through the desert, the Israelites received many spiritual blessings (sacraments in a way) and yet they

fell away from God. Paul reminds the Corinthians that despite the salvation they have received through the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, *they must work at continuous conversion lest they perish* like their ancestors. Failure to heed God's call to ongoing conversion will bring dire consequences.

**PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:
Luke 13:1-9**

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: Luke 13:1-9

Today's Gospel makes reference to two disasters which the people ask Jesus to comment on. They seem to believe that bad things have befallen the victims because they are sinners. The absence of bad things in the questioners' lives implies that they are righteous and not in need of repentance.

Jesus quickly sets his questioners straight on this issue: "Bad things didn't happen to the victims in either incident because they were unrighteous or bad people. And the absence of bad things in your lives does not mean that you are not in need of repentance. Indeed you are." Jesus admonishes them: "*You are all in need of repentance and if you do not repent, you will perish.*" The unrepentant will suffer a fate worse than the victims of the disaster.

Jesus uses the two terrible events as a metaphor for the catastrophic ending that awaits those who refuse to repent. Jesus is saying that the big tragedy in life is not being abused or killed accidentally. Rather, true tragedy rests in the hearts of each of us and our choice to reject God's call to repentance and change of heart.

Jesus exhorts his audience (and us) to not be preoccupied with why bad things happen to people, but rather to be concerned about the condition of their own soul. It is indeed tragic when a person is killed, but for Jesus, there is no tragedy worse than a mind and heart closed to God. *No one* can afford to be spiritually complacent.

In Jesus' parable of the *Fig Tree*, sometimes called "*The Parable of the Second Chance*," the owner, noticing that his fig tree is not bearing any fruit, wants to cut it down. The vinedresser asks that it be given one more chance: "*Sir, leave it for another year.*" The fig tree represents Israel; the Vinedresser represents God. Just as the gardener is patient with the fig tree, so is God patient with sinners. In his youth, Moses kills a man but God does not write him off. God sees immense potential in this former murderer and calls him to carry out a great mission. Church history is full of examples of barren fig trees that, in time, became fruitful, e.g., Paul, Augustine, and Thomas Merton. However, the parable also makes it clear that time may run out on the unrepentant. If people refuse chance after chance to turn their lives around, God will not quit on them, but they will, by deliberate choice, shut themselves out of God's Kingdom. This parable calls us to be fruitful trees in God's vineyard.

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. Moses' burning bush experience dramatically changed the course of his life. Have you had a 'burning bush' event or an experience of God's closeness that changed the course of your life? If so, how was that experience?

3. The second reading is a call to continuous conversion. In the Gospel, there is an urgent call to conversion. Name examples of what continuous conversion may involve. What helps you from falling into the trap of "spiritual smugness?"

4. "He came looking for fruit but found none." What kind of fruit do you think Jesus expects disciples to bear? Share one example of "fruit" that you seek to bear daily.

5. The Gospel is a clear call to repentance "lest we perish". What can help you to see what conversion may still be needed in your life?

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

Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestions: *Jesus, help me to see how I can be a fruit-bearing Christian this week. Help me to see where conversion is needed in my life.*

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today's readings. Suggestions: Seek to be attentive to the inbreakings of God in your life. Be aware of how you could be a "fruit-bearing" Catholic this week.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we wish to pray? Suggestion: Pray especially for the grace of true contrition and repentance for yourself and for all who are away from God and Church. Pray for all who are preparing for Baptism and entry into our church.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

I am grateful that you are kind and merciful, dear Lord. Too often, I am more aware of my sins than my goodness. Help me to see all people the way that you see us. As you led your people out of slavery, lead me out of my slavery to sin. Through Jesus, your kindness and mercy have been given flesh. Open my arms to receive it and give thanks by being kind and merciful to all, one person at a time.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT Cycle C

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 compassion, we rejoice in your holy Word, Jesus, who again and again offers us mercy for our sins and helps us to forgive one another. As we continue our journey to Easter, may heaven grant us the courage to change what needs to be changed in our lives and fill us with the joy that comes from experiencing you as a God of mercy. 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: All three readings express the *homecoming* that we experience when we repent of sin and allow God to remove our guilt and shame. This Sunday is also called Laetare (“Let us rejoice!”) Sunday. A mood of joy in God’s mercy underlies our readings.

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: Joshua 5:9-12

Joshua is Moses’ successor. He is the one who leads the Israelites into the Promised Land.

The reading begins with God saying: *“Today I have removed the reproach of Egypt from you.”* In Egypt, the Israelites were an enslaved people who felt totally alienated from God. Those days are over. Also over are the years of journeying through the desert where they often rebelled against God and only ate manna.

Israel’s entrance into Canaan, the Promised Land, is a fulfillment of God’s promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God is faithful to

his promises even when the people rebel against him.

The people celebrate the *Passover* for the first time since leaving Egypt. The Passover celebrates God’s mighty deeds in freeing the Israelites from the slavery of Egypt. After the Passover celebration, the people eat new food signifying that the time of “desert dinners” is over.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 34

This psalm of joy celebrates a God who blesses his people with good things.

**SECOND READING: 2 Corinthians
5:17-21**

The reading begins with the words: “...Whoever is in Christ is a new creation.” The sacrament of Baptism brings about in the soul a total transformation. All sin is wiped away and we are filled with the life of Christ. The daily challenge of the Christian life is to let go of old sinful ways and live as Christ-filled children of God. *Living as a ‘new creation,’ we would have “the face of love, the touch of tenderness, the strength of compassion, the vigor of service and the unstoppable force of forgiveness”* (Alice Camille).

Paul goes on to talk about the reconciling work of God achieved through Christ. He uses the concept of “replacement sacrifice” to explain how Christ restored humanity to friendship with God. Though Christ was innocent, he became a sin offering for guilty humanity. Joined to Christ, believers are restored to friendship with him.

Having been reconciled with Christ, Paul speaks of how he shares in God’s reconciliation work. He becomes an agent through whom God works in the lives of others.

“*Christ was made to be sin.*” This perplexing statement implies that Christ, in becoming man, was born in weakened “flesh” and took on our sinful humanity so that we might take on his righteousness.

**PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32**

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: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

This parable is told as a response to the Pharisees and Scribes who were criticizing Jesus for showing friendship to sinners. The parable is a call to conversion for self-righteous and judgmental people.

Initially, the parable shows that the younger son is a big sinner showing no respect for his father. In asking for a share of his inheritance, he is wishing his father were dead. As Jesus talks about the younger son wasting his life, the Pharisees would have felt superior thinking that they are nothing like that irresponsible sinner.

When the younger son “comes to his senses” and decides to come home, the father runs out to meet him, embraces him and has a great feast for him. Two comments on this part of the story.

- The parable should more aptly be renamed *The Parable of the Forgiving Father* since it is *not so much* about the son and his sin, but rather about the father and his mercy.
- The son returning to a feast is symbolic of people who return to the Eucharist after being away for years.

Jesus' outreach to the older son and the Pharisees. When the older son hears about the celebration for his brother, he becomes very angry and lashes out at his father: "Look all these years." The Pharisees would have felt very much like this son. Like him, they too have obeyed the rules. Just as the older son resents the father for welcoming back the younger son, so too the Pharisees would have resented Jesus' attitude towards sinners like the tax collectors and prostitutes.

As the story continues, we see that the older son is also a sinner for being incapable of loving his own brother and for his refusal to share in his father's joy. As one commentator says: "The older son is lawless within the law." The father loves *both* sons and *goes out* to meet *both* of them.

The younger son allows himself to be loved by his father and gladly receives his mercy. The older son closes his heart to his father. He is so self-righteous and judgmental that he cannot *see* his own sin and therefore his need for mercy.

Through this parable, Jesus not only teaches about God's great mercy, but he also hopes to reach the hearts of the Pharisees. If they would open their hearts to him, they too would be welcome to sit at God's table. But if they remain self-righteous, judgmental and hard-hearted, they will exclude themselves from the Kingdom of God.

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 experience a huge *transition* moment in their lives. They are transformed from being an *enslaved* and *desert* people to citizens in their own land. What is the biggest transition you have had to negotiate in your life? What helped you to successfully move through that time?

3. A part of being a "new creation" is learning to be an "ambassador of reconciliation." How have you been such an ambassador? How can you be a minister of reconciliation?

4. Have you ever been like the younger son? What transformed you?

5. How can we be like the older son in the story? What kind of conversion is asked of us?

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

Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestions:

Lord, may we never lose sight of your mercy.

Lord, may we have the courage to look inside and see where conversion is needed in our lives.

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today's readings. Suggestions: Is there someone you need to welcome back into your life? If so, pray and work to make it happen. If there is no one, work at being an ambassador of Christ for someone who is away from the Church.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we wish to pray? Suggestion: Especially pray for reconciliation within your family and where you know division currently dominates.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

Loving Lord, when we look at the Cross, we see the love of the Father embodied in your saving death for our salvation. Because of your death and Resurrection, we are part of a new creation, reconciled to the Father. Make us your worthy ambassadors, able to embody your merciful love.

On the lighter side...

The Sunday school teacher asked her 3rd grade students: "Who most regretted the return of the prodigal son?" After a long pause, Johnny raised his hand and said: "The fatted calf."

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Cycle C

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 mercy, this week we listen to readings that powerfully speak to us of your mercy and, at the same time, call us to turn away from sin. Help us to make this message our own. Help us to always remember that while you hate and condemn sin, you always love the sinner. 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: The Gospel story is one of the most dramatic in the New Testament: one man standing against a crowd surrounding a woman they want to stone. The Gospel is also a fulfillment of the "new thing" that Isaiah speaks about in the first reading: God is doing a new thing for the exiles, showing them mercy and love. Paul is also a recipient of God's mercy.

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 46:16-21

Today's first reading is from what is called in Isaiah the *Book of Consolation* (chs 40-55). These chapters were written to encourage the Israelites while they were living in exile in Babylon and in danger of losing hope in God's love for them. With imagery that hearkens back to the Exodus story, as well as the creation story of Genesis, the author exhorts his fellow Jews to trust that God will have mercy on them and come to their aid. The prophet assures them that God is about to do a "new thing" for them. They will experience a new Exodus. The mighty God who created the world and freed their ancestors from Egypt is about to perform another mighty saving event on their behalf.

PSALM 126

These verses reflect the exiles' joy after their liberation from captivity.

SECOND READING: Philippians 3:8-14

When Paul encounters Christ on the road to Damascus, he becomes the recipient of God's mercy and unconditional love. In today's verses, Paul shares with us what this new life in Christ means to him. "*I consider everything as loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus.*" His new life is a total gift. Prior to his Damascus experience (Acts 9), Paul believed himself to be a "self-made" man who saved himself by his observance of the law. Now he has a totally new mindset. He knows that all that

he is, is a total gift from God. He is a “graced sinner.” The imprisoned Paul says that his present sufferings are a way for him to conform himself a little more to his Savior who suffered so much for him.

**PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:
John 8:1-11**

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: John 8:1-11

While this story appears to be an honest attempt by some of the scribes and Pharisees to pursue justice, it is really another trap set by Jesus’ enemies. If Jesus let them throw stones at the woman, his reputation as one who spoke very eloquently of God’s mercy would have been severely damaged. On the other hand, if Jesus told them to let her go, his credibility as a Rabbi would be at stake. Jesus’ opponents must have felt very secure about their trap.

But Jesus outsmarts them by turning the focus on *them* and *their* sins. “*Let the one among you without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.*” Then Jesus writes on the ground. Some have suggested that he wrote the sins of the accusers. “*They went away,*

one by one, beginning with the elders.” Jesus turns the tables on the accusers, and they become the accused. They came to Jesus only aware of the *woman’s* sins; they go away aware of *their own* sins. As in last week’s Gospel, Jesus seeks to get the Pharisees to become aware of their own sin and their need for repentance.

Finally, Jesus is left with the woman. Commenting on this story, St. Augustine says, “*Only two are left: misery and mercy.*” Jesus communicates to the shame-filled woman God’s mercy and unconditional love. She experiences the “new thing” (God’s mercy and love) which Isaiah spoke about in the first reading. Jesus upholds the Mosaic Law by telling the woman to “*go and sin no more.*” Jesus condemns the sin, pardons the sinner, and calls her to repentance. He also calls the woman’s accusers to conversion. They are called to let go of their sin of condemnation of the woman.

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. Isaiah speaks about God doing a “new thing”. What “new thing” do you see God doing in our church or your life today?
3. Isaiah tells us in the first reading to “*remember not the events of the past.*” In the second reading, Paul tells us that “*he gives no thought to what lies behind.*” What

has helped or could help you to let go of painful memories or some past serious sin?

4. What is the darkness or sin in *us* that gives us satisfaction in pointing out the sins of *others*?

5. Is it easy or hard for you to condemn the sin but not the sinner? Or do you tend to condemn sin *and* sinner?

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

Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestions:

Jesus, help me to always remember that your mercy is always greater than my greatest sin.

Jesus, help me to live your message of mercy by my willingness to show mercy to all who have judged me.

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today's readings. Suggestions: *Pray for the grace to let go of some bad thing in your past if you tend to hang on to a bad memory. Pray for the grace to see what "new thing" God*

may now be doing in your life. If you have a tendency to judge others and name their sins, try to focus on your own sins and seek the grace of true repentance for them.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we wish to pray? Suggestion: Pray especially for the grace of true repentance of sin and the grace to totally accept God's mercy. Pray that the Parish Penance Services may be grace-filled events for all who come. Pray for all preparing for Baptism and entry into our Church this Easter.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

Lord Jesus, if we did not know you, where would we be? What would we be like? What would we become? What would we be seeking, pursuing, hungering for? What would we hope for? You came as a light into the darkness of the world, a light that the darkness has not overcome.

Note to facilitator:

The Gospel for next Sunday, Palm Sunday, will be the long passion story. As a group, you can decide if you want the participants to read the passion story *prior* to the meeting or *during* your gathering.

Likewise, since the *commentary* on Luke's passion is long, you may need to decide if you wish to read it before your next meeting.

Perhaps, you may decide to read the 12 bullet points on the characteristics of Luke's passion.

PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION Cycle C

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: *Lord Jesus, you emptied yourself of your divinity to take on the form of a human person, humbling yourself even to death on the Cross. May this Cross be a sign for all generations of your triumph over evil, suffering, sin and death. Unite us with your passion that we may truly recognize you in our own suffering. 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: This is the holiest week of the entire liturgical year. The Triduum is the peak event of the week. Jesus' passion, suffering and death are the focus of all three readings.

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

The mysterious servant spoken of in this reading is a faithful disciple who can speak a dynamic word to his people because he has a "well-trained ear" that listens to what God has to say to him. Unlike Israel, he is not rebellious and, with the help of God, he is able to bear his sufferings. It is easy to see why the early Christians saw in this suffering servant the figure of the suffering Christ.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 22

This is a psalm of lament that tells about the writer's affliction. It also speaks of trust in God in the midst of trial.

SECOND READING: Philippians 2:6-11

Writing from prison, Paul addresses people whose proud and independent ways often lead to bickering and disharmony among them. To this community, Paul offers, as a model of humility, the suffering figure of Christ. He *empties* himself of his divinity (i.e., the privilege of divinity) by becoming one with sinful humanity. He experiences total *humiliation* by dying a criminal's death. His obedience makes up for humanity's disobedience. Then God rewards his obedience by *exalting* him and restoring to him his glory. And now, Jesus is Lord of the universe. Paul encourages us and the Philippians to empty ourselves of all that is not of God so that we may be filled with God and his love.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: 22:14-23:56

Each group decides what to do at this point. Did the group read the Gospel before meeting or did the group decide to read the Passion story *one* time during the meeting?

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.

THE PASSION ACCORDING TO LUKE (22:14-23:56)

While Matthew, Mark, Luke and John have lots in common in their account of Jesus' passion, each evangelist has his own unique characteristics.

Following are some of the unique characteristics of Luke's Passion account:

- Luke repeatedly speaks of the *innocence* of Jesus, suffering unjustly for his beliefs and lifestyle (23:4, 14, 15, 22, 41, 47). Only in Luke's narrative does Pilate pronounce Jesus' innocence three times (24:4, 14-16, 22). Only Luke has Herod also declaring Jesus's innocence (23:6). Luke emphasizes the innocence of Jesus in order to connect him with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah whose innocent suffering was redemptive. The innocent martyrdom of Jesus would

also have been an important motive for the early Christians who themselves were facing persecution and death for their belief in Jesus.

- Jesus is the Savior of *all* people, Jew and Gentile, outcast and sinner. We see this when Jesus reaches out to the high priest's servant and heals his ear (22:51) and also to the good thief on the cross who was a total outcast (23:39-43).

- Luke shows Jesus as one filled with God's mercy and forgiveness. We see this when Jesus forgives his executioners: "*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do*" (23:34) and again when he forgives the repentant criminal.

- The devil that departed from Jesus after the temptations now returns, "entering Judas" (22:3).

- Luke's Passion features women more than the other passion narratives. In his Passion narrative, Jesus comforts the weeping women of Jerusalem (23:27-32).

- Like the Old Testament prophets who suffered and died for righteousness, Jesus is presented by Luke as a model for the disciples who will also suffer and die because of their faith in him.

- In Luke's Passion, we often find Jesus in prayer and recommending prayer as the only sure defense against temptation and trouble (22:22, 32, 34, 40, 46).

- The disciples are presented in a more positive light. Unlike the other evangelists, Luke does not mention the disciples fleeing from Jesus.

- Jesus is presented as one with total trust in God. His final words are, “*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit*” (23:46).
- Writing primarily for people with a Greek back-ground, Luke presents Jesus as a heroic figure. The ideal of the Greek hero confronting death is embodied by Socrates who, though innocent, is condemned to death. Though he could have avoided death by renouncing his teaching, he chooses not to. Up to the very moment of his death, he is shown teaching his disciples. He faces execution with courage and serenity, willingly taking the cup, drinking the poison, lying down and dying peacefully.
- Finally, Luke stresses *discipleship* as following the way of the Master who freely takes up his Cross (9:23, 14:27), just as Simon the Cyrenean did. Jesus died as he had lived—healing, reconciling, forgiving, reaching out to the outcast, and trusting totally in his Father.

AN EXTENDED COMMENTARY ON THE VARIOUS SCENES IN LUKE’S PASSION

21:14-20: Last Supper, Institution of the Eucharist, Passover Meal

It is the night before Jesus will sacrifice himself for humanity, the night before his body will be broken and his blood poured out. On this holy evening, now called Holy Thursday, Jesus dramatizes during the Passover Meal what will happen the next day, the offering of himself as the new Paschal Lamb. During the meal, Jesus interrupts the ritual to offer himself to his disciples in the form of bread and wine. This signifies the making of the New Covenant between God and humanity. The Old

Covenant was sealed with the sprinkling of a lamb (Ex. 24:5-8); the New Covenant is sealed with the Blood of the One John calls the Lamb of God. The Old Covenant was based on the law and keeping it; the New Covenant is based on faith in Christ which empowers us to keep his law of love.

22:21-38: Unseemly Behavior at Eucharist

Don’t we sometimes wonder today how people can say and do bad things and yet partake of the Eucharist? Well, it’s not surprising to know that such behavior which is very contrary to the spirit of the Eucharist, has existed since its institution. In verses 21-38, we hear of Judas partaking of the Eucharist even as he plots to betray Jesus. We hear the other Apostles engaging in a conversation as to who is going to be ‘top dog’ in Jesus’ new Kingdom. We hear how Peter will deny the Master and we hear talk about wielding swords. Bottom line: one can sit at the table with Jesus and yet betray him in some big or small way. Needless to say, we should always seek to present ourselves at Eucharist with clear hearts. In verses 35-37, Jesus seeks to prepare his Apostles for the rough days ahead.

When Jesus speaks about taking up swords, he is speaking figuratively to alert his Apostles to the seriousness of the struggle ahead. They take him literally and produce two swords. In the difficult times ahead, swords will be of no use—but prayer will, as we shall see in the next scene.

22:39-53: Agony in the Garden and Arrest of Jesus

The main emphasis in Luke’s Gethsemane scene is Jesus’ *prayer*. Repeatedly, Luke

presents Jesus as a man of prayer and as a teacher of prayer. Now his prayer to his Father sustains him in the face of a Satanic attack in his hour of severe darkness. In contrast, the three disciples fall asleep. But we should note the struggle is not easy. Jesus prays that the upcoming cup of suffering will pass, but only if it is God's will. The consuming passion of Jesus' life is doing the will of his Father.

Then the betrayer, soldiers, chief priests (the clergy) and temple guards come to get Jesus. Their arrival at night symbolizes the darkness of their actions. Jesus rejects violence as a way to stop what is about to happen. He heals the servant's ear.

22:24-62: Peter's threefold denial of Jesus

In verse 31, Jesus tells Peter that Satan will attack him. This happens in the courtyard. Peter shows a mixture of courage and cowardice. It takes courage to follow Jesus into the courtyard. He is the only disciple there, but then he loses courage when two women and a man accuse him of being an associate of Jesus. After his third denial, Peter encounters Christ who looks upon him with mercy. Peter is so aware that he has sinned against the Lord, that he weeps bitter tears of repentance.

22:66-23:25: Jesus' Trial and Death Sentence

Jesus is brought before the Jewish authorities, Herod and Pilate. Various accusations are made. One important thing to note in these verses is Luke's emphasis on the *innocence* of Jesus. Pilate pronounces Jesus innocent three times, but his fear of the people prevents him from setting him

free. The people cry out for the blood of Jesus. They say he is dangerous, but ironically they choose to set Barabbas free even though he is an insurrectionist and a murderer. In all this, Satan has his hour of triumph. In emphasizing Jesus' innocence, Luke is telling his audience several decades later that they too, though innocent, may also be interrogated, persecuted, jailed and executed. During such times of trial, prayer will be their strength.

23:26-49: Journey to Calvary, the Crucifixion and Death of Jesus

We note the following in these verses:

- Simon carrying the Cross "*behind*" Jesus comes to be seen as the symbol of true discipleship—one walking behind the Master, sharing his sufferings.
- When Jesus encounters the weeping women, he tells them that they should be weeping for their city and their children who will have to suffer through the destruction of Jerusalem.
- The taunting and mockery of Jesus by those at the foot of the Cross and by one of the criminals crucified with Jesus, is sometimes seen as the "last temptation" of Jesus, namely, to come down from the Cross by using his divine power for his own self-preservation. "*He saved others, let him save himself*" (v.35). "*If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself*" (v.37).
- Darkness covering the earth symbolizes the cosmic struggle between light and darkness, between the forces of good and evil.
- The curtain of the temple torn in two means that the way to God through Jesus' work of redemption is now available to all.

- Jesus' innocence is noted by the repentant thief (vv 40-42) and the centurion (v.47), and the crowd beating their breasts (v.48).
- Jesus expresses forgiveness for his executioners (v.34) and for the repentant criminal (v.3).
- Jesus' obedience and total surrender to God's will: "*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit*" (v.46). Scripture scholar, Charles Talbert, writes: "*In his horizontal relations with others, Jesus' innocence is accepted. In his vertical relationship with the Father, Jesus' obedience is highlighted.*" Jesus dies quietly, full of trust, a model for Christian martyrs to follow (Acts 7:59).

23:50-56: Burial of Jesus

We note two things:

- Joseph of Arimathea, though a member of the Sanhedrin, is an upright man like Simeon who looks forward to the coming of the Messiah. He also believes in the *innocence* of Jesus.
- Luke wants all to know that Jesus' body was buried. (Our Creed states: "*He died and was buried.*") Jesus' death was real.

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. The first reading is certainly one we could and should pray frequently. What spoke to you most? Do you exercise a well-trained

tongue; open your ears to hear; turn away from physical abuse?

3. Judas is a tragic figure in the Passion story. What do you think went wrong for him? How can we be like Judas?

4. "*Whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care lest he fall*" (final verse of second reading, third Sunday of Lent). It seems Peter feels he is standing secure when he said in an earlier encounter with Jesus: "*Though all may have their faith in you shaken, mine will never be.*" In the Passion story, Peter denies Jesus three times. Do you ever have a sense that even though you think your faith in Jesus is very strong, it may in another way be very fragile?

5. Which of the 14 Stations of the Cross speaks to you most?

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

Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestions:

Jesus, help me this week to spend some time sitting at your feet pondering your great suffering on my behalf.

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today's readings. Suggestions: Spend some time reflecting on where the *Stations of the Cross* are happening in your community or global world. Participate in your parish's Holy Week services.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we wish to pray? Suggestion: Pray especially for those carrying a big cross at this time. Pray that many will participate in the celebration of the Triduum. Pray for the elect who will be baptized and the candidates who will be received into full communion with our Church during the Easter Vigil.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

Passionate God, your unconditional love and concern for us is made clear in the birth, death, and Resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ. Help me walk the way of the Cross with him this week. Teach me to pray with renewed sincerity and depth, "Thy will be done."

EASTER SUNDAY

Cycle C

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: *O Light of Lights, Risen Jesus, enter our hearts with your Good News. Enlighten our minds to understand that you have overcome death by your own dying and rising. Melt our frozen hearts with this Easter fire, that in our hearts of flesh we might come to believe that you forgive even our sins. Help us to see your presence everywhere as the first light of dawn beams upon our clouded vision. O Radiant Light, be in our midst as we gather to more clearly hear your Word of Life. 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: All three readings focus on Jesus' Resurrection from the dead and its meaning for our lives. In the first reading from Acts, Peter states that all who come to believe in the Risen Christ will have their sins forgiven. In both of the alternative second readings, Paul stresses the moral dimension of the Resurrection. In the Gospel, Peter and John go on an 'Easter trip' to the tomb. Even though Peter gets there first, John is the first to believe that Christ is risen.

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: Acts 10:34, 37-43

This is an excerpt from the last of several sermons of Peter found in Acts. What makes this sermon unique is that it comes right after the vision Peter has during which God reveals that Jesus has come not only to offer salvation to the Jews, but also to the Gentiles – to all people.

In this sermon, we hear about the scope and spread of the Gospel. The story of Jesus' baptism, his public ministry, death and Resurrection has been reported all over the land. The power of Jesus' ministry flows

from him being anointed by God with the Holy Spirit. Peter lists himself as a witness to all these wondrous events, and he believes that *all* people—through faith and repentance—now have access to the salvation that Jesus has come to bring.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 118

This thanksgiving psalm points to all the great things God has done in Christ, especially raising him from the dead. *“This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad.”*

**SECOND READING: Colossians 3:1-4;
1Corinthians 5:6-8**

The two alternative second readings declare that the Resurrection is the foundation of new life for those who believe. In the Colossians reading, Paul reminds his readers that through baptism, they have died and have been raised up, and that they should live accordingly. In the Corinthians reading, Paul, using the imagery of yeast, states that because of our new life in Christ, we can make no accommodation to sin.

**PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:
John 20:1-9**

Each group decides what to do at this point. Did the group read the Gospel before meeting or did the group decide to read the Passion story *one* time during the meeting?

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 20:1-9

Commenting on today's Gospel, Terence Keegan writes:

In the prologue of John's Gospel one reads, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (1:5). This image of darkness and light, as also the

images death/life and falsehood/truth, recur throughout the Gospel and lie behind the story of today's reading. Mary Magdalene comes "while it is still dark" and mistakenly thinks that "the Lord has been taken from the tomb" (20:2). Simon Peter saw the piece of cloth rolled up (20:7); hardly something that anyone stealing the body would have done, but apparently did not know what to make of this strange clue. The other disciple, when he entered, not only saw but also believed. This belief is the first instance of Resurrection faith in John's Gospel. In the language of the fourth Gospel, faith is the way in which an individual passes from darkness into light, from death to life, from falsehood to truth. Faith does not result from deduction but is a gift from God bestowed in virtue of the triumphant death/Resurrection of Jesus.

The author is careful to emphasize the extraordinary nature of this faith in the final verse of today's reading. Only when this gift is received, only when one has entered into the light, does the full meaning of the words of the Old Testament and the mysterious words and deeds of Jesus become clear. Only then does the significance of the rolled up cloth become clear.

Today's story is not about the disciples interpreting the empty tomb, but rather about the initial gift of faith by which one enters into the light, the truth and the life of Jesus' Resurrection.

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 apostles were called to witness to Christ. So too are we. How can you be better in your witness to God's presence and redemption in your life?

3. The Apostles were surely surprised by the events of Easter morning. Can you recall a time when God surprised you?

4. Easter is the victory of life over death, of light over darkness, of goodness over evil. Can you recall a Good Friday event in your life from which good and blessing came?

5. What is the challenge of Easter for 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

Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestions:

"Dear Jesus, again this Easter you give me another opportunity to cast off all that is of darkness and live more freely in the light of your life and love. Please grant me the grace to resolve to do so and more fully live so."

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today's readings. Suggestions: Seek to be more aware that God's plan is to always draw goodness out of the painful experiences of life. Seek to be an Easter presence for someone going through a Good Friday experience.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we wish to pray? Suggestion: Pray for those going through a Good Friday experience. Pray that you can be a sign of hope for people dealing with pain. Pray that our Risen Lord may touch the hearts of Catholics who only go to Church at Easter and draw them back to the Lord's Table.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Blessed are you, Father,
for raising your beloved Son, Jesus,
from the dead
and bringing us to faith
in his saving death and Resurrection.*

*Give us a taste of the joy
that filled the hearts of the first disciples,
and help us to trust in the life
that is promised through faith in him.
Amen.*