

*This is the last in a series of three articles on the Gospel of Luke.*

**Salvation for the poor**

Sharing wealth with the poor leads to the final theme to be considered in Luke’s Gospel. Drawing upon a belief that derives from the Hebrew Scriptures, Luke consistently emphasizes God’s will to save the poor. By the poor, Luke envisions not only those who are economically deprived, but all those who have failed or been rejected by society. The poor includes sinners, the lost and the outcast. Early in the Gospel, Mary praises God in the home of Elizabeth. She identifies herself as a lowly handmaid and then emphasizes God’s intention to lift up the poor: “He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly. The hungry he has filled with good things; the rich he has sent away empty” (1:52-53). In Luke’s Gospel, those who have nothing, those who are lost, have reason to rejoice. God will take their side. God will lift them up.

Luke carefully situates the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in the synagogue of Nazareth. Jesus finds the passage in the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and reads it: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord. (4:18-19)

After reading Jesus sits down and says, “Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.” (4:21) Luke uses this scene as an overture to Jesus’ mission, informing the reader that Jesus will announce the kingdom in a special way to the poor, captives, blind and oppressed.

Throughout Jesus’ ministry Luke includes scenes emphasizing God’s care for the poor and outcast. Although Luke shares the parable of the lost sheep with Matthew, he uses it to respond specifically to those who criticize Jesus for welcoming sinners: I tell you, in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance. (15:7) Luke follows this parable with another which is unique to him. A woman searches and finds a lost coin (15:8-10). Luke wants us to associate the woman’s search for her coin with God’s desire to find and restore those who are lost. Luke’s most famous parable, the prodigal son (15:11-32), expands the theme of salvation for the sinner. When the unworthy son returns, he is welcomed by his father’s embrace. When the elder son protests his father’s exuberant forgiveness to his younger brother, the father responds in words perfectly expressing Luke’s viewpoint: “But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found” (15:32).

The parable of the poor beggar Lazarus follows that of the prodigal son (16:19-31). Here a beggar who possessed

nothing in this life is raised up to glory in the bosom of Abraham. Jesus’ encounter with Zacchaeus (19:1-10) is frequently seen as a story of repentance. It is just as much a story of vindication. Jesus insists that he is going to stay at Zacchaeus’ house. As a despised tax collector, Zacchaeus is rejected by his community. But the outcast is welcomed by Jesus.

In Luke’s passion narrative, Jesus is consistently presented as innocent. His innocence only highlights the sinfulness of those who execute him. Yet throughout the passion, Jesus continues to offer salvation to those who have no right to expect it. At Jesus’ arrest, only Luke tells us that Jesus healed the man whose ear was severed (22:51). Jesus cures a man who would send him to the cross. Although both Pilate and Herod conspire in Jesus’ execution, Luke tells us that their contact with Jesus had salvific results. They became friends, even though previously they had been enemies (23:12). On Golgotha, Jesus continues to offer God’s love to those who have brought him to the cross. He forgives those who crucify him (23:34).

But there is no character in Luke’s Gospel who more perfectly captures the theme of God’s salvation to the poor than the good thief who is crucified next to Jesus. Only Luke gives us this story (23:39-43). We know almost nothing about this man. We do not know his name. We do not know his age. We do not know whether he was married or single. The one thing we know is that he was unworthy. From his own lips, he admits that he had committed crimes for which he is justly being punished. It would be difficult to find a more hopeless character. He has committed crimes worthy of death. He has made a mess of his life, and now his life is coming to an end. We meet this criminal literally in the last minutes of his life, and it seems almost certain that there is no hope left. It is too late to turn things around, too late to ask for forgiveness, too late to make amends and learn to love. Yet in his desperation, he sees one last chance.

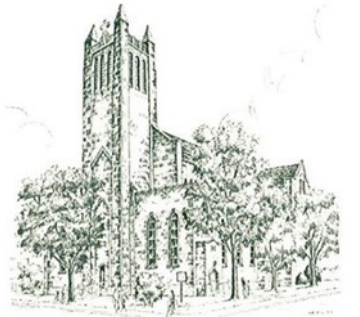
It is a long shot to be sure, but he takes it. With his dying breath he asks Jesus to bless him. We do not know if this man knew anything about Jesus, whether he ever heard him preach, whether he even had faith in him. But as his life draws to a close, he says, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (23:42). Then, with graciousness beyond all expectation, Jesus says to him, “Today you will be with me in paradise” (23:43). We hear from the very lips of Jesus who will be the first saint, who will be the first person to enter with Jesus into eternal glory. It is not whom we expect. It is not St. Peter. It is not Jesus’ mother, Mary. It is not even someone like Zacchaeus who turns his life around. It is this convicted criminal who turns to Jesus only as his last hope. Luke could not be clearer; our salvation does not depend on our goodness—only on God’s love.

*George Sigma, Celebration Resources*

*A new heart I will give you, and a*

**NEW SPIRIT**

*I will put within you. Ez. 36:26a*



**LENT**

**ASH WEDNESDAY**

**MARCH 6**

**12 Noon and 7:30 pm**

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of six weeks of preparation for the celebration of Easter. In the early Christian community, this time of preparation was a time of rejoicing in communion with the elect who were preparing to celebrate the sacraments of initiation at the Easter Vigil. The focus was on prayer and support for the elect, not on penance and repentance as we understand Lent today. It was a time of thanksgiving and rejoicing.

Changes in the practice of Lent began in the 5th and 6th Centuries, when the focus has shifted from adult baptisms to infant baptism. The shift in baptismal practice began after the Christian Church was legalized by the Emperor Constantine and the Church gradually became the dominant religion throughout the Roman Empire.

Having the custom of this time of prayer in preparation for Easter, but no longer having elect to accompany towards initiation the penitential practices of Lent gradually became the norm. As members of the community journeyed toward Easter, they were encouraged to prepare to renew their baptismal commitment through prayer, fasting, penance, the celebration of Reconciliation and almsgiving.

Over the centuries, even the understanding of Lent as a time of preparation for renewing baptismal commitment at Easter was obscured and we were left with the legalistic understanding and requirements of Lent that continued until Vatican II.

The Council called for the restoration of the Catechuminate, and along with it, as renewal of Lenten observance. Our Lenten practices help us prepare to renew our baptismal promises and accompany those preparing for initiation.

**LET’S TALK**

In the late fall, we had four gatherings to reflect on various topics using the sexual abuse crisis in the US church as a jumping off point. Those who participated during those gatherings expressed an interest in have ongoing opportunities to come together to discuss various issues around church, life, faith, etc. The last in our winter series of evenings to talk will be:

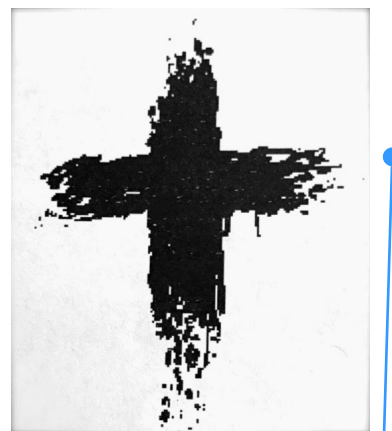
**March 21**

**from 7:00 pm—8:30 pm**

Bring your questions, your topics for discussion, your ideas for our community and Let’s Talk!

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## LISTENING TO GOD'S WORD IN LENT

During this six-week period of Lent, the Old Testament and Gospel readings are chosen according to the following principles.

First, when it comes to the Old Testament, we're no longer going to be using a principle of harmony, where the Old Testament reading is chosen to go with the Gospel, in a sense of like typology or to point forward to it. That's not the rationale now. During Lent, the Church picks Old Testament passages according to major events in salvation history. So what you'll find during the Lenten season, is that if you read through the Old Testament readings in order, from one week to the next to the next, they're usually either going to begin in Genesis or the book of Exodus, and just take us through major events in salvation history. Such as Adam and Eve, the fall of Adam and Eve, or the account of Abraham journeying to the promised land, or Abraham's vision, or whatever. They'll be different events in salvation history from the Old Testament. And the reason the Church does it this way is that, since ancient times, Lent was always a period where catechumens, people who were preparing to receive the sacraments of initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist, were being instructed in the basics of the faith. So what they would like to do during the Lenten season, was take people back and teach them the history of salvation, the major stories of the Old Testament, so that when the Gospel came they would understand it. So that's the principle for Old Testament readings: history of salvation, key events in Old Testament salvation.

When it comes to the Gospel, the Gospels are not going to be chosen anymore according to continual reading. We're going to stop reading through the public ministry of Jesus, say in the Gospel of Luke or the Gospel of Matthew, and instead the Church is going to pick key passages from the life of Jesus that are going to be important for initiation, in

other words, for people who are becoming new Christians. And so both tracks, Old Testament and New, are a kind of journey, heading us toward the New Covenant, that's going to be brought to its climax with Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection on Easter Sunday.

So just a couple of examples. Every year during Lent, the first Sunday is going to be the story of Jesus' temptations in the desert, 40 days. You'll see why that that's the case when we look at that reading. And the second Sunday is always going to be the account of Jesus' Transfiguration, which is where he starts heading to the cross. And then the rest of the Sundays are going to be chosen from gospel passages that usually have something to do with sin and repentance and conversion. Because Lent is a time of repentance, it's a time for turning our hearts away from sin, away from the things of the world, and preparing them for Christ, and for the great event of his passion, death, and resurrection, by which our sin will be atoned for, by which we will be redeemed and set free from slavery to sin and slavery to death, and then led to the glory of the resurrection.

So as you're listening to the Sunday readings during Lent keep that in mind. The Old Testament and New Testament readings don't go together like they used to in the Sundays in ordinary time. And the same thing will be true with regard to the epistles. So finally for the second reading throughout the Sundays of Lent, the New Testament epistle will be chosen according to a particular theme, usually repentance or sin, that'll help you to kind of bridge the gap between the events of Old Testament salvation history, and then the good news of redemption from sin, that Jesus Christ will ultimately accomplish through the mystery of his passion and death, and then through the Easter celebration on Easter Sunday.

## RECONCILIATION SERVICES IN LENT

We will have two Reconciliation celebrations in Lent. As we did during Advent, we will celebrate the Sacrament in the context of the Liturgy of Hours. Our celebrations will be held on:

**TUESDAY, APRIL 2, 12 noon**

**MONDAY, APRIL 8, 7:00 pm**

Celebrating Reconciliation communally, in the context of a liturgy, brings to the fore the social and communal aspects of sin and forgiveness. We are reminded in a particular way that we journey together as members of a Christian community and of society in general.



## DIALOGUE CIRCLE FOR RENewed RELATIONS

Over the past two years, we have had various kinds of events to help us respond to the "Calls to Action" that emerged from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report.

During Lent, we will have two events:

### DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY AND TERRA NULLIUS Ecumenical Conversation

**March 19, Feast of St. Joseph Patron of Canada**  
7-9 pm in the Parish Hall

You are invited to an ecumenical conversation on key concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous lands and peoples. Two years ago, in response to the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, four major organizations of Indigenous Catholics, bishops, religious, lay justice and peace advocates issued **The Doctrine of Discovery and Terra Nullius: A Catholic Response**. Why would we be concerned with something about which most Canadians and most Catholics have no knowledge? Where are the concepts, which originated in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, embedded in our relations with Indigenous nations and with the land itself? Where is God's liberating Action leading us in light of this history? The evening will include a brief film excerpt, an ecumenical panel sharing and a facilitated conversation.



### RECONCILIATION AND HEALING CELEBRATION

**March 26, 7-8:30 pm in the Church**

Through prayer, meditation, music and symbolic action, we want to focus on reconciliation and healing what is broken in our relationships with one another and creation. This celebration will flow from and build on what was experienced in the gathering on March 19. It will **not** be the Lenten sacramental reconciliation service, but a step on the journey towards renewed relations with our Indigenous sisters and brothers and the earth.

## FOCUS ON THE KINGDOM

*The words of Jesus "Set your hearts on God's kingdom first . . . and all other things will be given you as well" summarize best the way we are called to live our lives. With our hearts set on God's kingdom. That kingdom is not some faraway land that we hope to reach, nor is it life after death or an ideal state of affairs. No. God's Kingdom is, first of all, the active presence of God's Spirit within us, offering us the freedom we truly desire.*

*And so the main question becomes: how do we set our hearts on the Kingdom first when our hearts are preoccupied with so many things? Somehow a radical change of heart is required, a change that allows us to experience the reality of our existence from God's place.*

*-Henri Nouwen*

Life is busy! Everyone will tell you that. Henri Nouwen reminds us that Jesus calls us to set our hearts on God's kingdom, but we know from experience that it is so easy to focus on all the other things that occupy us along the journey.

Lent is a perfect time to do some of the work needed to bring about a change of heart and set our hearts on God's kingdom. I remember that when I was a child Lent did not ever make any sense, except that in some way it was a punishment. Punishment for what, I couldn't say, but being told we had to stop doing so many things didn't have any positive aspects to it.

With the renewed understanding of Lent as a time to prepare for Easter and to renew our baptismal commitment (and welcome new members if there are any being baptized at the Easter Vigil), we are not being punished but rather are called to grow. Our prayer, fasting and almsgiving can be opportunities to reflect on attitudes, actions, relationships and priorities helping us to continue on a journey of conversion. Jesus call to put God's kingdom first in our hearts is one to heed during Lent. This is a good time to pick up the bible and read through the Gospels. As we contemplate Jesus' teaching and actions in the Gospels, we are really given a roadmap for our own faith journey. For each passage that we read, we can ask ourselves "How does this apply to my life today? What do I need to change in order to make this a living reality in my daily life?" Whether it is the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the account of the feeding of the multitudes, the forgiveness of a sinner or any other passage, Lent is an invitation to dwell on God's Word and allow it to transform our hearts. *Richard Beaudette, OMI*