

## [Scripture for Life](#)



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Jesus' Father has a habit of choosing to work through the most inauspicious people and circumstances. Looking at God's lack of highly qualified agents, one might suspect that the Creator is downright poor. Perhaps that is why so many people attempt to change God's message to conform to their own plans; the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob just isn't ambitious or vengeful enough to cut the ice in a competitive world.

Moses is a case in point. Michelangelo sculpted him as a muscular giant, seated like a sage with the tablets in hand, gazing into the beyond. The Book of Exodus tells us he was a runaway criminal who relied on his father-in-law for a job as a shepherd. Instead of appearing to him via angels or awesome heavenly visions, God got Moses' attention by setting a flame in a bush near a mountain that bore the name "desolate" or Horeb.

When Moses went to take a look at the strange bush, God started with a simple theology lesson: "I am ... the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob." Then God told Moses what it is like to be God: "I have witnessed the affliction of my people ... have heard their cry ... I know well what they are suffering." Luring Moses in closer than ever, God revealed a divine plan: "I have come down to rescue them ... and lead them into a good and spacious land."

Today's Lectionary selection skips over the part of the story in which Moses protested that he couldn't carry out that plan in God's name. Moses claimed incompetence: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" But his protests were in vain. God just told him to take off his sandals and recognize that the earth beneath his feet was holier than he could have imagined.

Moses scored a point in their interchange when he explained, in so many words, that he needed a good calling card with which to approach the Israelites: "Would you please reveal a name that I can use to convince them?" Moses' tiny bit of willingness to serve opened the path for God to enter into a relationship with him that would leave Moses burning with more passion than the fiery bush with which God first lured him.

Perhaps what captured Moses for good was God's revelation of a name that seemed to be both a riddle and a promise: "I will be who I am/I am who I will be." God's name seemed to mean everything at once. That name explained that God claimed to be the author and owner of the verb "to be." This name disclosed that God is involved in everything and is the essence of integrity. That, combined with the God's history with the patriarchs and attention to Israel's suffering, told Moses and everyone who comes after him what God is really like.

The God of Israel was different from other gods. The gods of Egypt, Rome, Greece and contemporary political/economic systems enslave people and demand blood to appease them. The God of Israel reveals that the one true divinity watches over people and listens to their cries to the point of suffering with them. This God did not often seek servants among the powerful because they are too sure of themselves, too quick to dominate. The God of Israel chooses servants from among the lowly, people who are innately prepared to share divine compassion for suffering and dominated creatures. Because these servants know their disabilities, they learn to rely on grace more than on themselves.

God lured Moses with the burning bush and told him the divine name so that he might get caught up in the mystery of who God is. The more Moses knew of God, the more deeply he became caught up in a lifetime cycle of loving God and God's people and of sharing the joys and sorrows of both, becoming as on fire as the bush that first got his attention — and freeing his people in the bargain.

God continues to act among us, seeking people willing to wonder, to fall in love and then to act. Whether we are drawn to God through the name that is an ever-mysterious form of the verb “to be,” or through the wonders of creation, God tries to attract us with a universe full of burning bushes and a multitude of names. God’s attention-getting behavior aims at bringing us into a Moses-like cycle of loving God in and through creation, sharing people’s joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties until not only we, but all the world is on fire with the unquenchable love of God. Though we may claim incompetence, that happens to be the first quality God is seeking. When we admit that much, God can do the rest.

### **EXODUS 3:1-8a, 13-15**

For all its fame, Moses’ first encounter with God began rather unimpressively. When God appeared to him, Moses was a refugee whose profession was to shepherd his father-in-law’s flocks. The “mountain of God” to which he was led was called “Horeb,” which means “wasteland.” When God appeared, it was not with thunder and lightning or an earthquake but through a bush that caught Moses’ attention because there seemed to be a fire in it that didn’t destroy the bush.

Moses’ curiosity about that phenomenon moved him to take the first step toward becoming as on fire with God as that bush. As Moses approached the bush, God warned him to remove his sandals because that desolate place, which had neither a temple nor even a holy well, was holy ground. Perhaps the realization that God could appear in any land, under any circumstances, was what helped Moses accept the fact that even he, a frail man of questionable reputation, could serve as God’s messenger.

But the real subject of this passage is God, not Moses. Moses was simply the messenger, the one willing to investigate what he didn’t understand, whether it was the fire in the bush or the identity of the God who was calling him. Thus, God told Moses, “I am the God of your fathers ... of Abraham ... Isaac ... [and] Jacob.” That information identified God with the tradition Moses shared with the Hebrews enslaved in Egypt. The next statement explained God’s active compassion. Moses learned that God listens to prayer, that God understands what people are going through, and that God is determined to act on behalf of those who suffer.

Today’s Lectionary passage omits a key part of God’s strategy for freedom by skipping over the all-important revelation that God intended to act through Moses in

order to bring about Israel's liberation. The Lectionary also leaves out the fact that when Moses objected, saying he was incompetent to carry out God's plan, God simply promised to be with him — as if that would be enough to relieve Moses' multifaceted concerns.

Certain that he was inadequate to the task, Moses explained that the Israelites might not be quick to believe that he was really approaching them with a divine mission. Therefore, he asked to know God's name. In reply, God responded, not with a proper name, but with a verb form. According to Scripture scholar Terrence E. Fretheim in his commentary, *Exodus*, the best English translation of the mysterious name God revealed to Moses is, "I will be who I am/I am who I will be." When combined with the fact that God had already claimed to be the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, this name indicated that God would be faithful to Israel forever. (This name would also give rabbis and Christian theologians something to puzzle over for thousands of years, while mystics simply revel in the name like people who delight silently in a sunset, the sight of the mountains or the vastness of the ocean.)

Although God revealed a name that would last for all eternity, God's concern was and always is the present moment. God revealed the name to Moses so that Moses could act in that name on behalf of the people. God's name was a promise to Moses and would become a vocational call to the Israelites who had to trust in God and Moses in order for their prayers to be answered.

What Moses learned that day in the desert was that God listens and always wants to work through creation, including through frail human beings, to further the divine plan. This revelation was also a call to faith and action. God calls people to the conversion of faith so that God can then transform them and their history, setting the universe on fire.

### **PSALM 103:1-2, 3-4, 6-7, 8, 11**

When we sing the refrain for this psalm, we are emphasizing the active quality of God's mercy as revealed in God's call to Moses to free Israel. The more we understand about who God is, the more we are impelled to bless God's name. The first verse emphasizes this, saying: "Bless the Lord, O my soul." That is tantamount to saying let all that I am bless God. The word soul, *nephesh* in Hebrew, tries to encompass essentially the who of who we are. (In Genesis 2:7, Adam became a living *nephesh*, when God blew the breath of life into him.) To bless God from our

nephesh is to summon all that we are into one great act of praise.

As the psalm continues, we sing of God's actions on our behalf, of God's justice, of God's self-revelation, and of the qualities that express God's love. The third verse rejoices over God's self-revelation in and through Moses. As we pray this psalm, we begin with the very personal, then allow our praise and thanks to sing on behalf of all of history.

### **1 CORINTHIANS 10:1-6, 10-12**

In this passage, Paul uses the experience of the Israelites' unfaithfulness during the Exodus as a warning to Christians to avoid overconfidence or a sense of magic in their religiosity. If the Corinthians think they have become perfected because of their baptism and communion, they would do well to look back at what happened to presumptuous Israel. The people following Moses received their own type of baptism by going through the Red Sea and following the cloud, but they still failed to remain faithful to God. The Israelites were nourished by the manna that prefigured the Eucharist and the spiritual drink, but that was not enough to save them from themselves.

One of the subtler messages in this passage is Paul's assumption that Christians, be they Jewish or Gentile, are the heirs of Judaism. Although he is speaking to a mixed nationality audience, Paul speaks of "our ancestors," indicating that being children of Abraham and heirs of the promise is not a question of blood, but of faith. That point is extraordinary in itself and adds emphasis to what Paul is saying about presumption. We are as graced and as fallible as our ancestors.

By writing this way, Paul offers us all of Scripture as what he calls "an example." Like St. Ignatius of Loyola who taught his followers to enter into the Scriptures through contemplation, Paul invites us to know the Scriptures so that we may learn from both the holiness and the mistakes of the people who have gone before us.

### **LUKE 13:1-9**

The first part of this Gospel may be an ancient example of fake news or the sort of story the grocery store tabloids headline. Some people came to Jesus with one of the most gruesome tales found in Scripture. They were passing on the rumor that Pilate arranged the murder of some Galileans while they were in the Temple, and that their blood flowed with the blood of the Temple sacrifices. This story, unique to Luke's

Gospel, is not corroborated by any other historical source but neither does it seem out of character for Pilate, the Roman prefect of Judaea. He was famous for being callously insensitive to Jewish concerns and was eventually recalled to Rome for murdering a group of Samaritan prisoners.

The storytellers in this incident may have been attempting to trap Jesus in a no-win dilemma. If Jesus condemned Pilate, particularly if the story were an exaggeration, he would have been inciting Rome's ire. But if he did not register prophetic protest at such a sacrilege, he would appear to condone Rome's oppression and Pilate's murderous ways. Jesus chose a third option.

Rather than fall into the trap of judging the incident, Jesus responded to the unasked question of where God might have been in such a happening: "Was this a divine punishment?" By asking that, Jesus refocused the discussion. He took on his questioners with the implied question: "Were those people better or worse than the rest of you?"

As they squirmed, he added a second turn to the conversation: "The real issue here is whether you are ready to meet God. If not, your death will be as tragic as theirs." Then, to make sure that they understood, he added the example of an accident in which a part of a tower fell and killed 18 people. Again, Jesus asked, "Were they more guilty than everyone else who lived in Jerusalem?" Of course, nobody could answer in the affirmative. Jerusalem's abundance of scoundrels precluded the possibility that the members of that particular deceased group outperformed all other contemporary competitors for top ratings in wickedness.

To follow up and reframe the theme, Jesus wove a parable about an unfruitful fig tree. Everyone in his audience knew the prodigious potential of fig trees: A new plant should bear fruit in two years, and then can often be harvested twice a year. The plant that was unproductive for three years was a real horticultural slacker. The owner seemingly had every reason to decide it should no longer be allowed to slurp up scarce underground water.

Enter the gardener who says, "Let me work on it, dig around it and give it some dung." Pointedly, the word for dung, *kopria*, shares some meaning with the word for troubles (*kopos*), which is what the widow gives to the unjust judge and the person seeking bread for the hungry gives to the sleeper who has food to spare (Luke 18:5; 11:7). Jesus' gardener, like the widow and the seeker, wants to spur the production

of fruit, another way of speaking of the activity that flows from conversion.

Jesus' parable is a commentary on the tale the people brought to him. He turned their trap into a call to transformation. If the people were asking the ancient question of theodicy, why God allows bad things to happen to good people, Jesus redirected the debate by focusing on each one's life and relationship with God. Jesus' life story was a sign that God does not prevent the suffering of the innocent. His life demonstrated how human beings can live in communion with God, no matter what circumstances befall them. In fact, Jesus' purposeful use of the vocabulary of troubles and dung seems to suggest that difficult circumstances are a helpful, even essential, part of the journey toward union with God.

For those who had ears to hear, Jesus was presenting himself as the gardener who was digging at and dunging his people to get them to produce fruit. He used the stories of tragedy to remind them that no one knows which will be their last chance at conversion. So they had better do what they can while they feel safe and sound, or at least have some possibility of being fruitful.

## **Planning: Third Sunday of Lent**

By Lawrence Mick

Though we read the same readings every time we cycle through the three-year Lectionary, our lives and our world are not the same each time. As I'm writing this column, California is still struggling with the worst wildfires in its history. Wildfires have also devastated other parts of the world, including within the Arctic Circle, where temperatures hit 90 degrees Fahrenheit. when the normal temperature is 50 F.

I wonder how the story of the burning bush will be heard this year by those who have suffered the ravages of such fires. Will they be able to see that bush as a sign of God's presence, despite the contrast posed by the frequency and intensity of wildfires directly tied to climate change brought on by human greed and sinfulness?

In his encyclical "Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home," Pope Francis urges us to practice an "awe-filled contemplation" of creation. That is the basic practice that can lead us to a holy appreciation for any part of creation, whether a burning

bush or a tranquil forest glade, a rushing stream or a weeping person. Lent is a good time to repent of our sins against God's creation and to renew our ability to see God's presence all around us.

This is the day for the first scrutiny if you have elect preparing for baptism at Easter. Because the ritual prayers and imagery corresponds to the Gospel readings, use the Cycle A readings at least for the Mass(es) when celebrating the scrutiny. They may also be used at all the Masses this weekend, even if there are no elect. Be sure that the lectors and musicians know which readings will be used far enough in advance to prepare properly.

This is a good week for a Lenten penance service, and the readings today could become the basis of such a service. If using the Cycle A readings, the story of the woman at the well calls us to conversion. If the Cycle C readings are used, the Gospel parable of the fig tree does the same. Build on whichever readings are utilized Sunday or perhaps use the opposite set for the penance service.

In any case, there is surely a need to encourage people to take part in such a service. Too many Catholics find no use for this sacrament in their spiritual lives. The call to repentance is not a call to wallow in guilt but an invitation to enter more fully into a joyful life in covenant with God and one another. Can you find ways, in preaching, in petitions, in songs, and/or in the bulletin or on your parish social media channels to make that invitation come alive in your parish?

Monday is the Solemnity of the Annunciation. Consider an evening Mass or vespers. Invite the community to gather to celebrate the beginning of our redemption through Christ.

## **Prayers: Third Sunday of Lent**

By Sue Robb\_

### **Introduction**

As we enter the midpoint of Lent, our readings become more uncompromising and candid about how we are to live our lives. Through our Lenten practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, we must continue to cultivate good habits that will last long



after Lent has ended. How is your Lenten journey going?

## **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you call us to live and love as you did: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, we perish when we cut ourselves off from you: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, continue to call us back to your ways of mercy and kindness: Lord, have mercy.

## **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** We are nurtured through God's word and sacrament. Let us unite our minds and hearts with those of the angels and saints to pray for the needs of our world, our church and our community.

**Minister** That we as church might be faithful witnesses who respond generously to the needs of the world; for equality and inclusion of women's voices in the magisterium; for religious leaders to be transparent and accountable for their actions; for an ecumenical response to the issues plaguing our world today, we pray:

- For our world, in thanksgiving for the renewed hope and beauty brought by each new season; for increased awareness of our effect on the Earth's ecological health and stability; for more mindful ecological practices in our homes and businesses, we pray:
- For compassionate hearts especially when we grumble and judge others; for the tenacity to reach out to the marginalized and work tirelessly for the equality and dignity of every human being, we pray:
- For full and active participation in our faith; for the ability to live and find joy in the present moment; for the cultivation of spiritual practices that will endure after the Lenten season, we pray:
- For a spirit of true repentance and reconciliation; for an ability to see ourselves as God sees us; for the spiritual insight to change those parts of us that do not bear good fruit, we pray:
- For the sick and suffering, the homeless, orphan and widow, the forgotten; for all who die from war and violence; for all who die alone without hope, we pray:

**Presider** God of our ancestors, hear our prayer. Saints, intercede for us. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

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