The following series is free, downloadable small-group materials based on each week’s Mass readings and the seasons of the liturgical year. Each study provides an introductory reflection on some aspect of the readings or on personal spirituality. Each of the readings is provided along with a few questions designed to engage the heart and stimulate the group’s discussion. These small-group materials will be provided on a continuing basis in monthly segments.

We would suggest the following 60-to-90 minute format for the small group:

1. Open with a moment of quiet reflection and prayer.

2. Discuss the introductory reflection with a question or comment like, “What do you feel is important for us to grasp in this introduction?” or “What stood out to you from these opening paragraphs?” As the facilitator of the discussion be ready to share one or two things which were important to you from the introduction.

3. Have someone read the First Reading and ask several people to share their answers to the reflection questions. *Effective group-dynamic techniques should be used to further stimulate the discussion and affirm the participation.* (The booklet *A Facilitator’s Guide* is available from Emmaus Journey to provide additional practical training for leading lively and informative small-group discussions.)

4. The Responsorial Psalm provides a reflective transition from the First Reading to the Gospel Reading, so have the Psalm read aloud. You may do this without additional comment, or you may want to draw their attention to something you feel is pertinent.

5. You can either read this week’s Second Reading next and ask several people to share their answers to the reflection questions, or cover the Second Reading after you cover the Gospel Reading. The Second Reading does not always have a clear connection to the other Sunday Mass readings, so do not feel like you need to force a connection. However, you can provide an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to draw a connection by asking, “How do you see that this passage ties into the theme of the readings?”

6. Move on to the Gospel Reading, repeating the process by asking several people to share their answers to the reflection questions.

7. Approximately equal time for discussion should be given to each of the sections: Introduction, First Reading, Second Reading and the Gospel Reading. Obviously, if one section is especially stimulating, you should give some additional time to discussing it.

8. Close the discussion with group prayer, using various prayer formats.

We trust that God will use these materials to make His Word more meaningful to you, both within the small group environment and during Mass as you hear Scripture read and taught. We would appreciate knowing if you are using the Reflecting on Sunday’s Readings, and would welcome your feedback, either through the Emmaus Journey web page form, or by direct e-mail.

Sincerely,

Richard A. Cleveland
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Introduction: Lent, the forty days and nights proceeding Easter, should be a meaningful time of preparation which we look forward to with anticipation. The early church saw these days as preparation not only for candidates presenting themselves for baptism, but also for the entire church.

Lent can be a time of both sorrow and joy as we reflect on our humanity and on him who is the redeemer of our humanity. During Lent, as we read, pray, and reflect we often sadly recognize our hardness of heart, willful disobedience, and lukewarm devotion. This very recognition of our stained humanity should give us hope. As C.S. Lewis said, “It is when we notice the dirt that God is most present in us, it is the very sign of his presence.”

St. Francis de Sales tells of St. Catherine of Siena’s struggle with temptation. “This temptation continued for a long time until our Lord one day appeared to her and she said to him, ‘Where were you, my sweet Lord, when my heart was filled with such a great darkness and filth?’ He answered, ‘My daughter, I was within your heart.’ But how could you dwell within my heart where there was so much impurity?’ she asked, ‘Is it possible that you could dwell in so foul a place?’ Our Lord replied to her, ‘Tell me, did the filthy thought within your heart bring you pleasure or gloom, grief or delight?’ and she said, ‘The very greatest grief and gloom.’ He replied, ‘Who placed this great grief and gloom in your heart but me whom he had formed? My daughter, believe me, if I had not been present there those thoughts which beset your will and which you could not drive away would certainly have conquered and entered into it. Once accepted with pleasure by your free will, they would have brought death to your soul. Since I was present within you, I put that displeasure and resistance in your heart and thus enabled it to reject the temptation as far as it could. When unable to do as much as it wanted to it felt still greater displeasure and dislike for both the temptation and for itself. Thus, these trials have been a great source of merit and profit for you and have greatly increased your strength and virtue’”

This Sunday’s Gospel reading gives us immense insight into the nature of temptation and the source of strength to overcome temptation. Someone, speaking of temptation has said, “We can’t prevent the birds from flying overhead but we can prevent them from building a nest in our hair.” So, it is with temptation. We cannot prevent our soul from being subjected to temptation, it is part of the human drama. However, we don’t need to surrender to it.

Even Jesus, the Son of God was put to the test by Satan. Satan pulled out all the stops and appealed to all of man’s senses and inner desires for self-preservation and glorification to tempt Jesus to step outside of the Father’s will. But Jesus did not succumb. In his experience overcoming temptation Jesus provides the key elements we need for overcoming temptation also. As a Jewish man Jesus was schooled in sacred Scripture to understand both the nature of the Father, and his expectations of us for living a holy life and Jesus was already determined that he would submit to the Father’s will, regardless. So, when a tempting situation was offered to him he knew the Father’s will as revealed in the Scripture, and willingly surrendered his will to the Father’s.

Jesus’ experience and St. Francis de Sales’ advice have one thing in common, the Word of God. Jesus who is the Living Word used the written Word to safely lead him out of temptation’s trap. St. Francis de Sales rightly identified the indwelling Word of God as the one who safely turns our dark days of temptation into stepping stones of strength and virtue. As we enter these days of Lent, let’s not primarily fasten our eyes on our stained humanity but rather upon him who is the answer to that stain, the Word of God, the indwelling presence of Jesus.

1From Introduction to the Dovet Life.

First Reading — Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7
7 Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. 8 And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. 9 And out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. …

31 Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree of the garden’?” 2 And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; 3 but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” 4 But the serpent said to the
woman, “You will not die. 5 For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” 6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate. 7 Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons.

1. What do you learn about humanity, temptation, and sin from this passage in Genesis?

Responsorial Reading — Psalm 51:1-4, 10-12, 15 (3-6,12-14,17 NAB)

1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love; according to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. 2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! 3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. 4 Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in thy sight, so that thou art justified in thy sentence and blameless in thy judgment. 

10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. 11 Cast me not away from thy presence, and take not thy holy Spirit from me.

Second Reading — Romans 5:12-19

12 Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned — 13 sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. 14 Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.

15 But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man’s trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. 16 And the free gift is not like the effect of that one man’s sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. 17 If, because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

18 Then as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. 19 For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man’s obedience many will be made righteous.

2. Compare and contrast the characteristics and effects of the “trespass” with the “free gift?”.

3. How would you summarize the Good News in light of this passage?

Gospel Reading — Matthew 4:1-11

1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 And he fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was hungry. 3 And the tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” 4 But he answered, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.’” 5 Then the devil took him to the holy city, and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will give his angels charge of you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.’” 7 Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘You shall not tempt the Lord your God.’” 8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; 9 and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” 10 Then Jesus said to him, “Begone, Satan! for it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.’” 11 Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and ministered to him.

4. In what ways did Jesus’ response to temptation differ from Adam and Eve’s as seen in the first reading?

5. What can we learn about dealing with temptation from this passage?

**Introduction:** Have you ever stopped to wonder, “What makes the holy, holy?” What is it that makes a person holy? Is it some inner goodness or merit they achieved? Most godly people would be appalled by this suggestion; rather, they are unusually conscious of their own unworthiness. And this sense of unworthiness is often offset by an unusual consciousness of being a recipient of God’s mercy and grace.

A story is told of a young girl, who when visiting a great cathedral, saw the figures depicted in the beautiful stained-glass windows. It was explained to her that these were the “saints” of the Church. Later, when asked by someone, “What is a saint?” she answered, “A saint is someone who lets the light shine through.”

Isn’t that really what makes us holy, the extent to which we allow Jesus, “the Light,” to shine through us? We are set apart and made spiritually beautiful, or holy, not because we reflect our own merit but because we reflect his merit. Pope John XXIII, in the biography *The Journey of a Soul*, uses two wonderful expressions to capture this same thought. The first is from St. Augustine: “When you crown our merit, you are crowning your own gifts.” The second is his own thought on this concept: “My merit, your mercy.” Both men understood that the goodness and essence of their spirituality was simply, “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” (Colossians 1:27)

This week’s Gospel reading relates the story of Jesus and his three disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration. For a few short minutes these disciples visually saw that of which John the Baptist testified, the holiness of Jesus the Lamb of God. John the Baptist said, “among you stands one whom you do not know, even he who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.” This holy light which transfigured Jesus’ face and caused it to shine like the sun, was just a glimpse of his glory and holiness. This glory and holiness of Jesus Christ is the source of mercy of which Pope John XXIII spoke.

As we proceed through these days of Lent, and reflect on our spiritual condition and perhaps the disarray of our relationship with Christ, it is easy to see ourselves as unholy. Often when we perceive our spiritual shortcomings we try to compensate and offset our shortcomings by renewed spiritual vigor and devout promises in an attempt to feel better about ourselves. When we respond this way, we are getting the cart before the horse. The place of change and spiritual transformation begins with the recognition that we are holy, in spite of our sins, because the holiness of Jesus has been applied to our lives. God sees us as righteous through the righteousness of his Son. Pope John Paul II says in *Mission of the Redeemer*, “… we must first clearly affirm our faith in Christ, the one Savior of humanity, a faith we have received as a gift from on high, not as a result of any merit of our own. We say with St. Paul, ‘I am not ashamed of the Gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith’ (Rom 1:16).” When we are able by faith to grasp that concept, we respond back to God in love, as St. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:14, “the love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore, all have died. And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.”

This is how transformation takes place. With this understanding of Christ’s love for us, our resolve to live for him with renewed spiritual vigor comes not from a desire to offset our previous sins, but out of gratitude that our sins have been forgiven.

That which makes the holy, holy, is simply the presence of Jesus, the “Light of the World,” dwelling within us. His merit, his gifts shining through us, transforms our attitudes and behavior.

**First Reading — Genesis 12:1-4**

1. How would you respond if you were called from your family, friends, and country to follow God?

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1. Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. 2. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves.”

4. So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.
Responsorial Reading — Psalm 33:4-5, 18-20, 22

4 For the word of the LORD is upright; and all his work is done in faithfulness. 5 He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD. …

18 Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, 19 that he may deliver their soul from death, and keep them alive in famine. 20 Our soul waits for the LORD; he is our help and shield. …

22 Let thy steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us, even as we hope in thee.

Second Reading — 2 Timothy 1:8-10

8 Do not be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel in the power of God, 9 who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works but in virtue of his own purpose and the grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus ages ago, 10 and now has manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

2. In this explanation of our calling, which actions are God’s, and which actions are ours?

3. What do you think sometimes causes timidity and embarrassment within us when we have an opportunity to speak to someone about Christ?

Gospel Reading — Matthew 17:1-9

1 And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain apart. 2 And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light. 3 And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4 And Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is well that we are here; if you wish, I will make three booths here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” 5 He was still speaking, when lo, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces, and were filled with awe. 7 But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Rise, and have no fear.” 8And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

9 And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “Tell no one the vision, until the Son of man is raised from the dead.”

4. How do you think you would have responded in this situation if you were there with the disciples?

5. What are the messages of this transfiguration experience, and what are their meanings?

6. To what extent do you believe that Jesus is calling you to come apart from your busy activities to behold him?

Introduction: “Water, water everywhere, nor any drop to drink,” was the lament of the Ancient Mariner as he sat idle in the doldrums of the sea. We, like him, live in a world with over a million, million gallons of water per cubic mile. But alas, only 3% is drinkable, fresh water, and 3/4 of that is frozen solid, according to The World Book Encyclopedia.

We must have water to live. We can perhaps go a month without food, but probably no more than a week without any water. When our body is really dehydrated, craving water, a little water on our lips and in our throat will cause the craving to go away, briefly. But if our deep inner organs are not refreshed, the craving thirst will quickly return. Like the Ancient Mariner many of us are dehydrated, dying of thirst—not a thirst for H2O, but a spiritual thirst for Living Water.

As in this week’s first reading, sometimes our thirst is expressed negatively like the people of Israel when they were in the dessert. We grumble and complain about our situation in life rather than being thankful for all God is doing to sustain us. At other times we often try to satiate our thirst by merely wetting our lips with things spiritual rather than drinking deeply at the Wellspring of Life. Or in the worst-case scenario, like the woman at the well, we try to quench our spiritual thirst by artificial means, drinking of that which never can satisfy our inner thirst. And all the time the Living Water from which we could drink deeply, and satisfyingly is right at our fingertips. As Romano Guardini assures us in The Lord, “He is the stream of living water from the eternal source of the Father’s love to the thirsting world.”

In Isaiah 55:1-3 the Lord extends to us a question, and an invitation: “All you who are thirsty, come to the water! You who have no money, come, receive grain and eat; Come, without paying and without cost, drink wine and milk! Why spend your money for what is not bread; your wages for what fails to satisfy? Heed me, and you shall eat well, you shall delight in rich fare. Come to me heedfully; listen, that you may have life.”

How do we drink of the Living Water? This week’s Responsorial Psalm gives us some insight. The Psalmist tell us to “sing to the Lord,” to “come into his presence with thanksgiving,” to “worship and bow down,” and to “hearken to his voice.” Each of these actions describe interactive communication wherein we take the time to express our love and appreciation, and take time to stop and listen as he speaks to us in sacred Scripture and in prayer. At first, we may feel somewhat ill at ease as we participate in something new, but as we develop our ability to think and to listen and to express our love, we will find our soul refreshed with Jesus, the Living Water. Pope John Paul II has reminded us that “Christ is always in our midst and wants to speak to our hearts, we can listen to him by meditating with faith on Sacred Scripture, recollecting ourselves in private and communal prayer, pausing in silence before the tabernacle, from which he speaks to us of his love.”

This week we are reaching the midpoint of Lent. Let’s respond to our Savior and make a lifetime commitment to drink deeply of him through private and public worship. Let’s put a halt to trying to quench our thirst through artificial means and turn to Christ, who is the thirst-quenching Living Water we really need and desire. He is free for the asking.

First Reading — Exodus 17:3-7

3 But the people thirsted there for water, and the people murmured against Moses, and said, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?” 4 So Moses cried to the LORD, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” 5 And the LORD said to Moses, “Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel; and take in your hand the rod with which you struck the Nile, and go. 6 Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, that the people may drink.” And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel.

7And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the faultfinding of the children of Israel, and because they put the LORD to the proof by saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

1. The Israelites expressed their discontent by complaining. What are the real roots of discontent?
Respomosorial Reading — Psalm 95:1-2, 6-9
1 O come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! 2 Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! …
6 O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker! 7 For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. O that today you would hearken to his voice!
8 Harden not your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, 9 when your fathers tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.

Second Reading — Romans 5:1-2, 5-8
1 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. …
5 and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.
6 While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man—though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die. 8 But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.

2. Contrast the reasons for the positive atmosphere of this passage with the reasons for the negative atmosphere of the First Reading.

3. Which of these reasons are most important to you? Why?

Gospel Reading — John 4:5-42
5 So he came to a city of Samaria, called Sycamore, near the field that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. 6 Jacob’s well was there, and so Jesus, wearied as he was with his journey, sat down beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.
7 There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” 8 For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. 9 The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. 10 Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” 11 The woman said to him, “Sir, you have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep; where do you get that living water? 12 Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, and his sons, and his cattle?” 13 Jesus said to her, “Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” 15 The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw.” 16 Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.” 17 The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; 18 for you have had five husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband; this you said truly.” 19 The woman said to him, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. 20 Our fathers worshipped on this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship.” 21 Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. 22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” 25 The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ); when he comes, he will show us all things.” 26 Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you am he.” 27 Just then his disciples came. They marvelled that he was talking with a woman, but none said, “What do you wish?” or, “Why are you talking with her?” 28 So the woman left her water jar, and went away into the city, and said to the people, 29 “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” 30 They went out of the city and were coming to him.
31 Meanwhile the disciples besought him, saying, “Rabbi, eat.” 32 But he said to them, “I have food to eat of which you do not know.” 33 So the disciples said to one another, “Has any one brought him food?” 34 Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work. 35 Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months, then comes the harvest?’ I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see how the fields are already white for harvest. 36 He who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. 37 For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’” 38 I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor; others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”
Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me all that I ever did.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of your words that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world.”

4. How would you define “spiritual thirst”?

5. What does the Samaritan woman’s response tell about her search for truth?

6. Which characteristic of Jesus most appeals to you from this encounter?

7. What can we learn from Jesus’ example about sharing the thirst-quenching Living Water with others?
Reflecting On Sunday’s Readings

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT—March 22, 2020

Introduction: Many of us know people who have become either completely or partially blind due to accident or disease. Few of us know blind people who have received the ability to see for the first time. In both cases, the contrast between darkness and light is startling. Light opens to us a world of possibilities, freedom of movement, and an ability to comprehend our world. Darkness, on the other hand, limits our options, restricts our freedom to move around freely, and obscures our world.

All of us realize that we live in a real, concrete, physical world, but are we equally aware that we concurrently live in a real spiritual world? One reality we can see, hear, and feel; the other is more elusive to our comprehension, however, its effects can be readily recognized. Some of us see well in the earthly realm, even with 20/20 vision, but in the realm of the Spirit we are practically blind. Which is the worst tragedy, to be physically blind, or to be spiritually blind?

Like Samuel in this week’s first reading it is easy for us to mistakenly make spiritual judgments based on physical appearances. This is unfortunate, for one’s physical appearance, good looks, charismatic personality, and fashionable bearing can often mask a person’s less attractive spiritual condition. To primarily view people on outward appearances is a form of spiritual blindness which we should abandon.

The Lord, on the other hand, looks through people’s outward shell to view the spiritual quality of their inner life. This kind of spiritual vision and insight must come from the Lord, and from having our mind transformed to think in light of the truths of sacred Scripture and the values found in the Word of God.

Fanny Crosby, the prolific Christian hymn writer, lost her physical sight as a young child. However, it is obvious through her hymns that she was a person who could wonderfully see with the spiritual eyes of her heart. We get a glimpse of her spiritual insight in the following poem:

“Oh, what a happy soul am I! Although I cannot see,
I am resolved that in this world, contented I will be.
How many blessings I enjoy that other people don’t,
To weep and sigh because I’m blind,
I cannot and I won’t.”

Like the blind man in this week’s Gospel reading, there is no shame in recognizing our blindness, rather there is wisdom in doing so. For only when we recognize our blindness can we appeal to Jesus for healing and new sight. Jesus stands ready to make the “sightless see.” The only question is, are we ready to admit our need, believe that he does and will give us spiritual insight, and ask him for healing?

First Reading — 1 Samuel 16:1, 6-7, 10-13

1 The LORD said to Samuel, “How long will you grieve over Saul, seeing I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil, and go; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.” …

6 When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, “Surely the LORD’S anointed is before him.” 7 But the LORD said to Samuel, ”Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”… 10 And Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. And Samuel said to Jesse, ”The LORD has not chosen these.” 11 And Samuel said to Jesse, ”Are all your sons here?” And he said, ”There remains yet the youngest, but behold, he is keeping the sheep.” And Samuel said to Jesse, ”Send and fetch him; for we will not sit down till he comes here.” 12 And he sent, and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. And the LORD said, ”Arise, anoint him; for this is he.” 13 Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. And Samuel rose up, and went to Ramah.

1. Explain what it means to be blind spiritually and to see spiritually.

2. How can we, like Samuel, avoid the mistake of judging people on their outward appearance?
Responsorial Reading — Psalm 23:1-6

1 The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want; 2 he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; 3 he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. 4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

5 Thou prepar’est a table before me in the presence of my enemies; thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Second Reading — Ephesians 5:8-14

8 For once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light 9 (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), 10 and try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. 11 Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. 12 For it is a shame even to speak of the things that they do in secret; 13 but when anything is exposed by the light it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. 14 Therefore it is said, “Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light.”

3. Contrast the options for living expressed in this passage, that are available for every Christian.

4. Why should someone choose living life in the light over living life in the darkness?

Gospel Reading — John 9:1-41

1 As he passed by, he saw a man blind from his birth. 2 And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” 3 Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him. 4 We must work the works of him who sent me, while it is day; night comes, when no one can work. 5 As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” 6 As he said this, he spat on the ground and made clay of the spittle and anointed the man’s eyes with the clay, 7 saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing. 8 The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar, said, “Is not this the man who used to sit and beg?” 9 Some said, “It is he”; others said, “No, but he is like him.” He said, “I am the man.” 10 They said to him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” 11 He answered, “The man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash’; so I went and washed and received my sight.” 12 They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.”

13 They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. 14 Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes. 15 The Pharisees again asked him how he had received his sight. And he said to them, “He put clay on my eyes, and I washed, and I see.” 16 Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not keep the sabbath.” But others said, “How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?” There was a division among them. 17 So they again said to the blind man, “What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?” He said, “He is a prophet.”

18 The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight, until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight, 19 and asked them, “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” 20 His parents answered, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; 21 but how he now sees we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age, he will speak for himself.” 22 His parents said this because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if any one should confess him to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue. 23 Therefore his parents said, “He is of age, ask him.”

24 So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and said to him, “Give God the praise; we know that this man is a sinner.” 25 He answered, “Whether he is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I know, that though I was blind, now I see.” 26 They said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” 27 He answered them, “I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you too want to become his disciples?” 28 And they reviled him, saying, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. 29 We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” 30 The man answered, “Why, this is a marvel! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. 31 We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if any one is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. 32 Never since the world began has it been heard that any one opened the eyes of a man born blind. 33 If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” 34 They answered him, “You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?” And they cast him out.
Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said, “Do you believe in the Son of man?” He answered, “And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?” Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and it is he who speaks to you.” He said, “Lord, I believe”; and he worshiped him. Jesus said, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind.” Some of the Pharisees near him heard this, and they said to him, “Are we also blind?” Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains.

5. With whom do you most identify in this story?

6. How do you think one feels who is spiritually blind?

7. What are the various ways people can respond when confronted with a work of Christ in another’s life?

8. What truths did Jesus reveal about spiritual blindness?

Reflected on Sunday’s Readings

THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT—March 29, 2020

Introduction: “Don’t miss that call!” seems to be the prevailing sentiment of U.S. society these days. Who of us hasn’t had a telephone conversation, even a long-distance call, interrupted by someone needing to answer a “call waiting” signal? The assumption being that the incoming call may be more important than the current call. We use all kind of devices for people to get through to us and often walk around with a cell phone in our hand, or a gadget in our ear, so that we don’t miss that all important call.

Wouldn’t it be wonderful to have a spiritual cell phone so that God could reach us at any time day or night by simply calling our spiritual cell phone number? I wonder how many of us would walk around with the cell phone turned off, or even worse allow God’s call to be interrupted by a seemingly more important “call waiting” signal from our world.

In this week’s Gospel reading, we see Martha and Mary being linked by faith to Jesus and his message of resurrection and life. “When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him.” Mary heard Jesus’ call through Martha, “The Master is here and calls for you.” And as soon as she heard that Jesus called for her, “she rose quickly and went to him.” In this fifth week of Lent, do we hear Jesus’ call or are we disconnected? Are we rising in faith to respond to his call or are we distracted by the many cares of our world? Imagine what would have happened, or should we say what would not have happened, if Martha and Mary had not responded in faith to Jesus. What a glorious experience and message they would have missed.

Jesus chose to punctuate the message of resurrection and life by raising Lazarus bodily from death. This is the third time Jesus raised someone from the dead, demonstrating each time that he holds the keys to life. But it was in this instance, a precursor of his own death and resurrection, that he chose to clearly articulate the promise of resurrection and life for those who believe. “Thus, the human being linked in faith to Christ possesses a life that will outlive death and that already here on earth reaches into eternity. It is as Christ himself once expressed it: ‘Amen, amen, I say to you, he who hears my word, and believes him who sent me, has life everlasting, and will raise you from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you into the land of Israel. ’”

We read the story of Lazarus and marvel, one who was dead for four days had risen alive. But there is a more marvelous truth hidden in this week’s readings. Ezekiel foretells the promise that God will put his Spirit within us and we will live, really live, not just physically but eternally. The indwelling of us by God does not happen after we die but begins here and now. “For every believer regenerated in Christ, no matter what part of the whole world he may be, breaks with that ancient way of life that derives from original sin, and by rebirth is transformed into a new man [or woman]. Henceforth he is reckoned to be of the stock, not of his earthly father, but of Christ, who became Son of Man precisely that men could become sons of God; for unless in humility he had come down to us, none of us by our merits could ever go up to him.

“Therefore the greatness of the gift which he has bestowed on us demands an appreciation proportioned to its excellence; for blessed St. Paul the Apostle truly teaches: ‘we have received not the spirit of this world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God’”

How different must have been the lives of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary after this experience. Not simply because Lazarus lived again after being dead for four days, but because they came to experience a life “that already here on earth reaches into eternity.” Martha’s words to Mary echo in our ears, “The Master is here and calls for you.”

Jesus still calls to us, offering this resurrection life to us as well. How will you respond?

1 From The Lord, by Romano Guardini.
2 From a sermon by Saint Leo the Great, in The Liturgy of the Hours-I, page 471.

First Reading — Ezekiel 37:12-14

12 Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you home into the land of Israel. 13 And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. 14 And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken, and I have done it, says the LORD.”
1. Which of these promises are most meaningful to you? Why?

Responsorial Reading — Psalm 130:1-8
1 Out of the depths I cry to thee, O LORD! 2 Lord, hear my voice! Let thy ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications! 3 If thou, O LORD, shouldst mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? 4 But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared.
5 I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; 6 my soul waits for the LORD more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning.
7 O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is plenteous redemption. 8 And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

Second Reading — Romans 8:8-11
…5 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 9 But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.
10 But if Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness. 11 If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit whom he has made you.

Gospel Reading — John 11:1-45
1 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. 3 So the sisters sent to him, saying, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” 4 But when Jesus heard it he said, “This illness is not unto death; it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it.”
5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 So when he heard that he was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. 7 Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go into Judea again.” 8 The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were but now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?”
9 Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours in the day? If any one walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. 10 But if any one walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.” 11 Thus he spoke, and then he said to them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awake him out of sleep.” 12 The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.” 13 Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking him out of sleep. 14 Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead; 15 and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” 16 Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”
17 Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. 18 Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, 19 and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. 20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary sat in the house. 21 Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” 22 And even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.” 23 Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” 24 Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” 25 Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, 26 and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” 27 She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world.”
28 When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying quietly, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” 29 And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. 30 Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. 31 When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 32 Then Mary, when she came where Jesus was and saw him, fell at his feet, saying to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” 33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled; 34 and he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” 35 Jesus wept. 36 So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” 37 But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” 38 Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb; it was a cave, and a stone lay upon it. 39 Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days.” 40 Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?” 41 So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, “Father, I thank thee
that thou hast heard me. 42 I knew that thou hearest me always, but I have said this on account of the people standing by, that they may believe that thou didst send me.” 43 When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.” 44 The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bandages, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”
 45 Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him; …

3. With which of the people in this incident do you most identify?

4. How have you experienced comfort in the loss of a loved one?

5. How would you answer Jesus’ question in verse 26?

6. What is the stone that needs to be rolled away so that you can experience new life?

7. How can we help roll away the stone for others?