

Fifth Sunday of Lent "A" – Part 14

As we enter the fifth week of Lent, we begin to realize the events of Holy Week and Easter are right around the corner. Soon the elect will be baptized, and the candidates confirmed, and receive communion. There is great anticipation. Many say: "Can you believe it will be Easter already?" They feel caught off guard. Our sentiment should be: "I have been preparing, and I am ready."

As we approach Passion Sunday, the Church focuses on what is ultimate – namely, death – and what will happen to us when we die. While we hear about death all the time on the news, it is mostly in a negative fashion. Death has no meaning other than human tragedy. Most times our culture tries to deny death. The Church, however, looks at death and confronts it. The Church is not a death denying church, but a death defying church.

In the Gospel narrative (John 11:1–45), we hear about the raising (resuscitation) of Lazarus. He had been dead for four days. It was thought that the soul of the deceased stayed in the proximity of the body for three days. After that brief amount of time, the soul departed for good. The fact Jesus came to him after four days was proof that Lazarus was really dead. Jesus performed the ultimate miracle. He raised up a man from the throes of death. Jesus was demonstrating that he had power even over death.

After Jesus resuscitated Lazarus, the chief priests wanted to put Lazarus to death because, on account of him, many came to believe in Jesus. (John 12:10–11). Can you picture Lazarus shaking his head and saying: "Go ahead and kill me. Jesus will just raise me up again."

In the Gospel of John, Jesus performs "signs." He turned water into wine, healed a paralytic, gave sight to a blind man, walked on water, fed 5000 men with a few loaves and fishes, and here confronted the ultimate – death itself. His victory over the grip of death is the ultimate sign. Death is something we all must face and grapple with. When we were very young, we learned that we must die. While, in a way, death is a normal part of life, it is enshrouded in mystery. The question remains – what will happen when we die?

The biblical notion of death is that death is an enemy. Paul writes that death is the final enemy to be destroyed (1 Corinthians 15:26). God did not create death; it came through the envy of the devil. (Wisdom 2:24). The book of Hebrews tells us that the fear of death plagues us throughout life. (Hebrews 2:15). We all know that fear so well. The fear of death is the root cause of all other fears.

Many lie awake at night wondering: "When will I die? How will it happen? What will it be like?" We are afraid because death is mysterious, and we fear being snuffed out. We question: "Will I lose self-awareness and consciousness?" We have an inbuilt natural instinct to survive, and we want to live. Although we have the comforting promise from the first reading of Ezekiel: "I will open your graves and have you rise from them," we still feel fear. When it comes to death, there is the terrifying unknown.

Death is not the end, but rather, a new beginning. In the funeral Mass of resurrection, we pray for the deceased: "Life has changed, not ended." Paul wrote: "For me death is gain" (Philippians 1:21) because he knew he would be with the Lord. He also penned: "Not even death can separate us from the love of God in Jesus." (Romans 8:38). Death is not the end, but a passing over from this consciousness to a new way of being with God. St. Francis of Assisi called death "the final healing." Francis' feast day is October 4th. The night before, Franciscans celebrate Francis' transitus, or death. Francis saw death as a passing over or transition from this life to the next. Francis was a very austere saint, yet right before he died, he asked for a sweet Italian cookie. He wanted a taste of what was to come.

Death is our enemy. We all want to live. But in Christ, God has transformed our demise into a passageway back to him.

In the Creed - see Part 8 - we proclaim: I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Christianity is a faith that proclaims a glorious afterlife. Paul said it best: "If for this life only we have hope in Christ, we are the most pitiable of all people. But the truth is, Christ has been raised from the dead." (1 Corinthians 15:19–20). We have a true living hope.

What a new reality will dawn in heaven. Imagine the glory, the atmosphere, and the tranquility we will enjoy. There will be no more problems. Here are some biblical images: God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. There will be no more death, pain, suffering, or sadness. Peace will flow like a river. The abundance and wealth of the nations will be poured out like an overflowing torrent. We will be comforted as a child on her mother's lap. We will draw water from the springs of salvation with joy. We have a destiny of abundant life, health, and overflowing prosperity. Our bodies will be young, pain-free, and agile. We will glow with stunning beauty. We will know God and explore the unlimited experiences of the universe. Our life with God in heaven will last forever.

In the church right near the empty tomb of Lazarus in Bethany, some two miles from Jerusalem, there is a striking tribute to the truth of the resurrection. Inside the church, above the altar, the words of Jesus in dazzling mosaics proclaim: "I am the resurrection and the life." These words of Jesus come from his dialogue with Martha. He continued: "the one who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die." (John 11:25–26). This unprecedented claim by God's Son assures us that there is life after death. But, these words of Jesus tells us something else. There is life before death.

Realized Eschatology

The writer of the Gospel of John uses what theologians call a "realized eschatology." Eschatology is a theological word referring to those things having to do with the end times – namely, death, judgment, and the new life to come. The words of Jesus tells us these things have already dawned. For example, in John 3:19, Jesus teaches the judgment is now. We do not have to wait until the final judgment before the throne of God; our decisions and choices for or against the light, made now, are the judgment. It is not so much that God will judge us as we are determining the criteria of our judgment now by our choices and deeds. It is our decisions, deeds, words, and motives in our lives that is the judgment that determines our ultimate judgment.

John has Martha announce something revealing: "I know Lazarus will rise again on the resurrection at the last day." This is what most Jews and we Christians believe. At the end of time, God will summon all who have ever lived to a massive resurrection and then final judgment. But Jesus' words give us a dramatic nuance. Jesus says: "I am (present tense) the resurrection. Whoever lives and believes in me will never die." John is telling us that even now we can experience the vivifying, quickening, abundant life that is defined as eternal life in his Gospel. Eternal life is that new quality of life that begins, not when we die, but when we come to faith in Jesus as the Son of God.

The second reading for this Sunday, from Romans, attests to this new life: "The Spirit will give life to your mortal bodies." If you want to know more about the new life in the Holy Spirit and what it brings, please read Romans chapter 8. The focus of Lent is the Holy Spirit. It was the Spirit who thrust Jesus into the desert at the beginning of Lent. The living water of the Spirit was offered to the woman at the well on the third Sunday of Lent. To live Lent well, we do not just need willpower – we require the revolution of the Spirit. Remember, the combination of Lent and the Easter season is Pentecost.

The Spirit brings us rebirth, revival, regeneration and new life are all part of the resurrected life Jesus brings to believer even now. The Holy Spirit comes with power to effect change where we need it most. We can experience a tranquil new calmness and inner strength in emotions that previously only new turmoil.

God is constantly breathing new life into people. Jesus described this as bringing us life and life abundantly. (John 10:10). Those suffering and struggling with some form of addiction, come to realize that when they come to admit their inclinations and, entrust themselves to the care of God, find a whole new sense of self. Recovery is yet another form of realized eschatology.

Marriages are being healed. Family members are forgiving each other. God is bringing good out of the evil in our lives. Addictions are being faced. People are turning away from sin. Those who seek God are being reborn in the Spirit. These are all signs of the resurrection, even now.

A wonderful sign of this new life is the emergence of the elect seeking baptism and the candidates seeking full incorporation into The Church. God's Spirit has been at work in their lives, and they have made quality decisions to commit their lives to Jesus Christ in a formal way. We hear about the resurrection because these people are experiencing new life spiritually. On the fifth Sunday of Lent the third scrutiny, the exorcism prayer is prayed:

"Father of life and God not of the dead, but of the living, you sent your Son to proclaim life, to snatch us from the realm of death, and to lead us to the resurrection.

Free these elect from the death-dealing power of the spirit of evil, so that they may bear witness to their new life in the risen Christ, for he lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen.

Lord Jesus, by raising Lazarus from the dead you showed that you came that we might have life and have it more abundantly.

Free from the grasp of death those who await your life-giving sacraments and deliver them from the spirit of corruption.

Through your Spirit, who gives life, filled them with faith, hope, and charity, that they may live with you always in the glory of your resurrection, for you are Lord for ever and ever. Amen."

In the first reading from the prophet Ezekiel, we hear God tell us: "I will put my Spirit in you and you shall live." Immediately before this, in the same chapter, Ezekiel had a vision of a valley of dry, dead bones. He was told those bones were the house of Israel who say: "Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, and we are cut off." He was told to prophesy over the bones and, as he did, there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together. As he continued to prophesy, breath came upon the bones and they lived. (Ezekiel 37:1–10).

The purpose of Lent is to bring us new life. This can happen spiritually, physically, psychologically, and attitudinally. Hope is not lost; you are not cut off. Come filled with expectation. Even if you have not been faithful in Lent and feel dry and like dead bones, you can still come to new life. You can break from your addictions and habitual sins. You can overcome fear, shame, and worry. New peace and tranquility can be yours. You can receive new impulses and refreshment in your spiritual life. You can sense how deeply God loves you. Marriages and familial relationships will be restored.

The resurrection is not only for after our death. The resurrection is for right now.

Lenten Lessons:

- Our death is but a new beginning
- We have a glorious living hope
- Our decisions now determine our judgment
- We can experience a vivifying resurrection now
- The Holy Spirit comes to raise us up in every area of our lives

Lenten Action:

- Identify an area where you need to Rise. Visualize the Spirit healing you

Presentation of the "Our Father"

After the first scrutiny on the third Sunday of Lent, the creed is presented to the elect. (see part 8). Now, after the third scrutiny of the fifth week, there is the presentation of the "Our Father." One of the foundational pillars of Lent is prayer. The church presents this prayer of Jesus to the elect because, like our creed, prayer is what really matters.

All throughout the ages there have been various concepts of God and who God is. Countless religions have emerged that are either monotheistic or polytheistic. Examples of monotheistic religions are Christianity, Judaism, and the Islamic faith. Those who believe in many gods include adherents of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. The ancient Greeks believed in many gods. The Egyptians thought their pharaohs were gods. The Romans believed their emperors were divine. These nations tried to influence the beliefs of the Jews, but the Jews remained monotheistic. The erroneous beliefs of Greeks and Egyptians have even saturated our own culture.

"God" is a loaded word in our culture and society. The word "God" has a multiplicity of meanings for some. There are scores of individuals who are burnt out on religion, while others cannot profess faith in God who allows evil to exist in the world. That a supposedly "good God" would allow evil in the world is a theological concept called "the problem of evil." Others cannot believe in a God who would send people to hell. Many think God is harsh and punitive and want nothing to do with such a God.

Still others challenge the traditional notion of God as male. They named God as "she" or "her." God is much more than our masculine or feminine adjectives. God revealed God-self as "I am," or being itself.

The great Shema prayer of the Jews tells us God is one. Some critique the Trinitarian concept of Christianity as being polytheistic. Actually, Christianity proclaims one God having three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Spirit. Just as a beam of light contains heat, light, and energy and yet is one, so it is with God. There are three distinct aspects (persons) in God, yet one being.

Others see nature as God and try to commune with God by going to mountains and synching with crystals. The Book of Wisdom discounts this false notion with this idea: "If through delight in the beauty of nature people assumed them to be gods, let them know how much better than these is their Lord." (Wisdom 13:3). For some, nature is their church. Unfortunately, those who say this do not spend much time outside worshipping. The question remains: "Who is God and what is God really like?"

Some call God "the source of energy." Reference is being made that the "universe" is alive, guiding our life. This "New Age" concept of God is popular because there are few demands. Some call God their "higher power." While many may come to know God using these descriptions, others simply think that there is some power that they ought to get in touch with. Other terms used for God today include "the man upstairs," the Great or Infinite Spirit, the universal mind, the universe, the All, and the great one. Star Wars talks about the "force." Many use the concept of God solely for their own purposes. Extremist groups use the name of God for their violent and political purposes. Others think God will bring them power and wealth. Depending on your culture, religious, and educational background, there are many concepts and philosophies regarding God.

Most of these concepts and reasoning's are all too impersonal and erroneous. The new age notions of God depict him as an impersonal being that tinkles like wind chimes when the wind blows. God has revealed himself repeatedly as the One, true God. His mighty deeds have been revealed in creation and in antiquity. His nature is compassionate, kind, and merciful.

As with notions about God, there are many ideas about the Bible in general and what it means. Think what you may, but Jesus studied the Old Testament and referenced it often in his preaching. The Torah and the prophets were formative for him and brought him much wisdom and understanding.

In the Scriptures, God reveals himself as a God who is compassionate, merciful, and slow to anger. God demonstrates his love. God is depicted and characterized in anthropomorphic terms. In other words, God is described in human terms using human emotions and attributes. Let us recall that we are made in God's image, and not the other way around. God is not seen as some nebulous, impersonal power. God has a face and a name. God is knowable. God is concerned for people and exercises his power on their behalf. The universe did not and cannot create and won't judge us one day. God created us through an intentional act, and one day every one of us will have to give an account of our lives before God. "Source energy" does not redeem people; it is Jesus who saves us.

Since God is compassionate, He shows himself as a person who "suffers with" his creation. Remember God is a person. God is a Trinity of persons. The Holy Spirit has a mind, intercedes for us, and can be grieved. Jesus wept and was moved with compassion. God's intelligence is unparalleled and God feels for his people. One example of the personhood of God was his revelation to Moses as being "compassionate." God told Moses: "I have seen the affliction of my people; I have heard their cry and I am concerned about their suffering." (Exodus 3:7). God hears the cry of the poor. God took it upon himself to suffer with us by assuming our nature and going through what we must endure. Our culture would make God out to be some vague energy that somehow brings good fortune to people. While God does bestow blessings, God is so much more than some nebulous force or energy. God is extremely intelligent, displays feelings such as anger, and is deeply personal. We can relate to God and come to a deeper and genuine intimacy with each of the persons of God.

Jesus was thoroughly Jewish. He was educated in the faith of his ancestors and developed their understanding of God. He learned about the one God who created heaven and earth and liberated the Hebrews from Egypt. He had the Jewish scriptures to read, and these sacred writings help form his faith. He frequented the synagogue and made yearly pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem. Distinct from the Roman gods and many gods of the surrounding nations, Jesus knew and believed there was only One true God. He was well acquainted with the Jewish Shema prayer prayed many times daily: "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one." Not only was God one and true, but Creator and Redeemer as well. 5

In the midst of so many philosophies, notions, and names for God, Jesus went a step further. This wisdom came from his own piety. His language gives us profound insight into the relationship Jesus had with God. He taught us to pray "Father." In fact, Jesus often used the word Abba for God. Abba is an Aramaic word for poppa or daddy. It is a term of endearment. Imagine! Jesus was surrounded by the gods of the Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians. There were many idols in his day. People were confused, and even some of the Jews adopted the notion of several gods in their piety. Instead of a nebulous, fuzzy, impersonal idea about God as a supreme being or source energy, Jesus not only personalized God but made the creator God of the Old Testament intimate.

We all have father's, for better or worse. We all have some type of relationship with our father. Jesus taught us to begin there and develop this notion regarding God. For better or for worse, our earthly father gave us life and hopefully, was generous towards us. "God," Jesus taught, "is my father and your father. My God and your God." (John 20:17). Perhaps when Jesus said "our" Father, he did not just mean everyone collectively. When Jesus said "our," he meant his and ours.

This teaching of Jesus is radical and eye-opening. Amid all of the confusion of the nations, Jesus clarified just who God is. There is only One God. God is our father who loves us, cares for us, and can be known. Prayer is all about communication with and relationship to this one and only God.

When we hand over the "Our Father" to the elect in Lent, we are not just giving them another document to learn, memorize, and recite. In fact, all too often when we pray the "Our Father" we are reciting words without thinking of what we are saying. Rather, we are handing to the elect, the revelation of the relationship with our living God. God is infinitely personal, approachable, and knowable. Through prayer, we can develop something real and alive.

Confidence

The "Our Father" prayer is given to the elect right after the fifth Sunday of Lent. We just heard about the raising of Lazarus from death by Jesus. When Jesus prayed, he prayed with confidence, a positive conviction borne from his history with God. We, too, can have such a relational confidence. We are invited to come "boldly" before the throne of grace to receive mercy and help in our time of need. (Hebrews 4:16).

We can come boldly because we come not in our own power or good works – we come in the name of Jesus. As Christians, we are "in Christ." We stand innocent, upright, and holy because we are baptized into Jesus. (See 1 Corinthians 1:30). We pray not in our own name, but in the name above all names. Jesus' name brings healing and salvation. Jesus' name is not something we just tack on to at the end of our prayer. His name is our posture and right standing before God. Because of the Lord, come to God confidently and boldly in Jesus' name.

The giving of the prayer of Jesus is connected with the prior presentation of the creed because authentic prayer requires faith. The act of praying is in and of itself an act of believing. Prayer starts with simple faith but must progress. "Ask of God, but ask in faith" James tells us in 1:5–6. When you pray, be confident of a reply and believe God hears you.

Jesus prayed: "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I know that you always hear me." (John 11:41–42). What a way to pray! Imagine approaching God each time you pray with those words first. Instead of wondering if God hears you, or even cares, try starting: "I thank you that you hear me and always hear me." All throughout his life and ministry, Jesus walked in this confident assurance and called us to greater faith. When he was calming storms, multiplying loaves and fishes, changing water into wine, or 6

healing people, Jesus walked by faith, not by what he saw. He taught "all things are possible through the one who believes." (Mark 9:23). When you believe in God and his promises, then will you receive salvation.

In our prayer life we are told to come boldly before God in prayer (Hebrew 4:6). In a reading during Thursday of the first week of Lent we hear about Queen Esther. She was married to the King of Persia and her Jewish nation was in peril of being wiped out. She boldly prayed and because of her daring prayer and actions, saved her nation. The feast of Purim commemorates her bold actions. Like the Queen we are a royal priesthood offering our prayers and petitions with confidence, boldness and daring. When we pray, we honor God. We acknowledge and recognize God's almighty presence and power. We believe that God is able. When we believe, we will come to know God. When we believe, we will realize our potential.

Paul writes that we are put right with God through faith and for faith (Romans 1:17). Saving faith comes in the context of a relationship. Again, we are not simply praying to a powerful distant deity hoping to usurp some of his ability. We are praying to a father who loves us.

When Jesus spoke of prayer, He taught us to make seeking God the priority. This teaching of Jesus is vibrant and life-changing: "Ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be opened." (Matthew 7:7). This verse recited before we pray will help us to pray more intently and trusting that God hears us and helps us to increase our faith. It may also help us to attract others to the faith as stated in the verse that soon as our faith grows it becomes a mighty tree, and the birds of the air came to rest in my branches. (Matthew 13:32). Your growth in faith attracts others to faith.

Prayer is one of the foundational pillars of Lent. Prayer is not just asking for things. The prayer Jesus taught us is relational. God is our Father. Faith can increase. As we believe and grow in confidence, our relationship with God improves. We present this well-known prayer to the elect because the "Our Father" contains valuable wisdom. Prayer is our lifeblood as Christians.

Lenten Lessons:

- God is one and is our Father
- Jesus taught prayer is relational
- Be confident when you come before God
- Dare mighty things! Believe big and you will receive big

Lenten Action:

- Pray the "Our Father" slowly and reverently now

