

To everything, there is a season . . . turn, turn, turn . . .

Msgr. John Zenz' Reflections for Prayer According to the Sunday Scriptures of Lent



Week One: Turning Away from Myself toward God and Others

Genesis 9:8-15 • Psalm 25:4-9 • 1 Peter 3:18-22 • Mark 1:12-15

The Scriptures for this week focus on our call to conversion—a call to change our patterns of thinking and acting. In theory, our Baptism was the moment when we committed our lives to God but for most of us, Baptism was not our own choice. So it is that each Lent we already baptized join adults preparing for Baptism; we renew our commitment to the Lord and strive to see that our loving relationship with Him also necessarily includes an ever-deepening bond of loving and generous concern for neighbor.

Baptism imagery is the ultimate reason we have the story of Noah and the Ark and St. Peter's commentary and application of the story for our lives: Death and Resurrection. Christ spends forty days in the barrenness of the desert, alone with wild animals, His own time of clarifying His mission; his inaugural preaching and call for conversion immediately follows His "retreat."

Suggestions for Prayer:

1. Wrestle with the image of the Ark from various angles. The Ark held life to be saved "from the water." The Church is often thought of as an ark; we are saved together and not in isolation. Consider all of your relationships. Who is "in the ark" with you? Is anyone excluded?
2. Enjoy the image of the rainbow – victory over the forces of the water. The promise of a brighter and peaceful future for all; the rainbow is all-encompassing! Do I have a sense of joy and gratitude for God's salvation for all people? The rainbow is a sign of God's covenant love for all people written into the cycles of nature, reminding us that we all share one same planet; we are members of the one human family. Do I live in such a way that accords with all that the rainbow symbolizes?

3. Take some time to enjoy water – fresh, flowing water to drink, to wash, for recreation. Do I appreciate the beauty and wonder of water in all its forms and all its power and majesty? Do I remember it is a common gift for all? Imagine your Baptism into the same waters with all people and coming up and out of the water together.

Question of the Week: For most of us our greatest temptation is to become indifferent. How could I grow in compassion?

Week Two: Obedience to the Mysteries of Life

Genesis 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18 • Psalm 116:10, 15-19 • Romans 8:31b-34 • Mark 9:2-10

Every year on the second Sunday of Lent we climb the mountain with Jesus and his three closest disciples; there we glimpse the Transfigured Glory of the Lord, standing beside Elijah the prophet and Moses, the giver of the Law.

This year our first reading is the most compelling passage of the Hebrew Scriptures—Genesis 22—the story of Abraham taking his only son, his whole life and future up a mountain to sacrifice him to God as he thought God was asking. Abraham did not understand but was obedient. Isaac too was obedient and even carried the wood on which he would be placed for the sacrifice. Thank God—literally, “Thank God” – Abraham was told not to sacrifice his son and God provided a ram instead. The main point for our consideration seems to be obedience. Even in the Gospel, The Transfiguration happened to Jesus; He obediently allowed it. The related point is this: God did not require Abraham to give up his son but God did not spare His own Son; He gave Him up for us all! (see second reading from Romans)

Suggestions for Prayer:

1. Think about climbing up and down a mountain. Beautiful panoramic views but somewhat scary; the whole thing literally “takes your breath away!” Not in control. Gift and mystery; a glimpse of glory. Vulnerability; total trust in the Lord our guide. What would you say to the Lord on such a privileged journey? What might He say to you?
2. Identify with Abraham: what is your “Isaac” that God might be asking you to give back to Him, to live without? Can I live with ambiguity?
3. Contemplate Christ suffering and yet glorious at the same moment. How is He with you and you with Him in the strange juxtaposition of victory/defeat, success/failure in your own life?

Question of the Week: We have been saved by Christ’s perfect obedience that went far beyond the obedience of Abraham or Isaac or any other humans. He submitted freely to suffering in our place as the perfect expression of His love for us and for the Father.

What obedience is God asking of me at this time

(for example: sickness, difficulties in family relationships, challenges in the workplace)?

Week Three: Knowing by Heart

Exodus 20:1-17 • Psalm 19:8-11 • 1 Corinthians 1:22-25 • John 2:13-25

With the ready access of Google and Internet, people do not feel the same urgency about memorization and yet it is an important part of learning. What do you know “by heart”? Probably the Ten Commandments—right? Well, honestly, maybe not. Used to know them! Do they really still apply? With Jesus, isn’t it all about love?

Today’s Scriptures challenge us to go to our core and to listen to our heart: there we will hear the voice of the Lord and our conscience will both challenge and console us. In the Gospel from John 2, as one of His first great “signs” symbolizing His up-coming ministry, Jesus cleanses the Temple of all animals and money changers people thought were ritually necessary. Jesus seems to be saying God wants a different kind of worship: go to the heart, to the core. Do not just go through the motions of worship!

The first reading from Exodus 20 offers us the proclamation of the Ten Commandments, the law by which God bound Himself to Jewish people and through them to us. The law was understood as a gift, not a burden, a sign of God’s love.

St. Paul also speaks about “Sign Language” - ways we try to express our relationship with God and each other and the way God tries to communicate with us. He suggests that the ultimate sign is the cross—a sign of apparent failure yet the extreme expression of perfect self-less love.

Suggestions for Prayer:

1. Think about the dynamic action of Jesus cleansing the Temple: what in my life is unnecessary, spiritual “clutter” that needs to be removed?
2. Christ did something that really upset people; He acted not out of anger but out of zeal to purify. He was also implying that all the things they thought essential would have to be given up; the Temple would ultimately be destroyed and replaced. We are that Temple as Christ’s Body – all of us together. Do I pray for the salvation of others? Do I believe I will not be saved without them?
3. Consider the Commandments; review them and think about when and where you are falling short of a heart that is pure. Many commentators say the last two Commandments about “coveting” or having false desires are the most challenging in our culture! Do you agree?

**Question of the Week: What desire is deepest in your heart?
Are you letting it take you to God?**

Week Four: “Re-membering”

2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23 • Psalm 137:1-6 • Ephesians 2:4-10 • John 3:14-21

On this Laetare Sunday, we rejoice for Easter draws near; we “remember the future” with hope and confidence. Our ultimate goal is not so much a date on the calendar but complete communion with the Lord and all other people in the communion of saints. Our earthly prayer and good works are intended to help us “re-member” the people and things we have forgotten, to let the Lord help us put things back together again in our own brokenness.

In the Psalm for today, Psalm 137, the Jews are refugees in Babylon, trying to remember Jerusalem and to sing about their faith in God, even in a foreign land, even as they admit all their suffering is the result of their own folly, their failure to listen to the Lord and trust Him.

Jesus reminds Nicodemus, a leading Pharisee searching for deeper truth that he should “remember” what Moses did in the desert: the serpent that brought suffering was mounted on a pole for people to look at; facing their sin, they could be healed! We today need to do something similar – to “re-member” the cross to see it in a brand new way. We are challenged to see our loneliness and fears, failures and physical and psychological problems as windows to greater union with God. When accepted with love our “problems” can actually open up for us a way of freedom. Joy comes precisely in the surprise of accepting all reality with love.

Suggestions for Prayer:

1. Hold a cross. Think about Christ’s pain – physically and psychologically stretched to the utmost; consider why He allowed all this to happen: for me and for you! Stretch out your own arms in the form of a cross. Hold that position for as long as you can. As you do so, think of how you would like to stretch and reach out to/for others and how they do the same for you. Our bodies are “cruciform”: how am I “living” the cross right now in my life? Can I “lift it up” with the cross of Christ?
2. Spend some time thinking about memory. We need others to help us remember. Our community “re-members” itself when we forget or exclude people or experiences. Pray for the grace to “re-member” every person, every experience – so that nothing or no one will be forgotten, lost or overlooked!

Question of the Week: What or who have I forgotten?

Week Five: A Grain of Truth

Jeremiah 31:31-34 • Psalm 51:3-4, 12-15 • Hebrews 5:7-9 • John 12:20-33

In today’s gospel as Jesus wrestles with His own impending death, He uses a simple but powerful image/example: a grain of wheat is worthless unless it is buried in the ground. Only then can it fulfill its purpose and bear a right harvest. Everything and everyone is a “grain of wheat” waiting for that “burial” or death-to-self so that we may rise into a new, transformed life with and for all others. We reach our fullest potential by letting go and becoming part of a great harvest.

Jesus speaks of His “hour” and being “glorified”. The “hour” meant His time to leave this world, the time to complete His mission. His “glory” is not recognition and acclamation but rather the manifestation or showing forth of the presence of His love for the Father and for all. Ironically, His glory will be made known in His own personal diminishment.

Hebrews 5 – the second reading – speaks of the obedience of Christ and how He became “perfect” – that is “complete” – by His free act of suffering with and for all. Like the Gospel for today from John 12, this reading always refers to a conversation of Christ with His Father: His prayer was “heard” even though He suffered. So often that is true for us!

Suggestions for Prayer:

1. Our deepest prayer/desire is for communion with the Lord. Sometimes we ask for things far less; we “sell ourselves short.” Examine your prayer. Can you join Christ in praying for God’s glory – not your own?
2. Consider the grain of wheat. Think about burying it in the ground and waiting for harvest. Remember that a grain is usually buried/planted with many other grains for the sake of harvest. I die to myself and become part of a greater, larger harvest. What needs to die in me?
3. How do I handle change and letting go? Do I trust that in transformation everything will be given back to me but now in a new form?

**Question for the Week: Christ knew His own mission and vocation, to be a grain of wheat, to begin a process of a harvest that would involve all people of all times and places. I am a small – but significant – part of that harvest. Am I willing to die for the sake of the harvest? How is that already happening as I sacrifice for family and friends and others in need?
Am I grateful for their suffering for me?**

Contemplate this icon of the Baptism of Jesus and experience His choice to be fully immersed in our human condition so as to save us, renew us and transform us from within.

Our journey of Lent to Easter to Pentecost is our opportunity to renew our sharing in this mystery with all members of the Body of Christ.

