

***GOOD NEWS***  
***Sunday after Sunday***

**The Season of LENT**

## SURPRISED BY GOD'S GOOD NEWS

I'm amazed at the surprises God keeps throwing at me. The undeserved blessings that fill my life, the grace that hides behind the problems and difficulties and pains in life, the promises of mercy that fill his message in the Bible. Above all I enjoy gathering on Sundays when God's surprises are announced and proclaimed – and celebrated. The way he acts, the way he thinks, the forgiveness and grace and mercy he reveals – all this astounds me, dumbfounds me. And it has a profound effect on my life, as I try to cope with the almost-unbelievable surprises of his grace and mercy.

Often these surprises at Sunday worship hit me quite out of the blue. I don't expect them, I'm unprepared for them, and I'm not ready for the damage they do to the mould of my thinking. I also know I can limit these wonderful surprises, and their impact on me, if I just sit back and wait for them to happen.

But I can get myself ready to be surprised. I can look through the readings for the coming Sunday and listen for the surprising mercy and grace of God that those readings proclaim. It doesn't lessen or weaken or destroy the surprise if I know exactly what the surprise is going to be. No, it increases the surprise – the anticipation adds to it. And there's always the added surprise when that Sunday's surprise doesn't turn out to be the one I expected and prepared for.

These pages contain something of the gracious and merciful surprises that fill the Good News that's there to be proclaimed Sunday by Sunday in the readings for the day. I've tried to find a theme for each Sunday of the Church year – a theme that summarizes that Sunday's Good News in Jesus. The surprising mercy and grace highlighted here is just some of what I've heard – and heard so far.

It wouldn't surprise me at all if in your worship and your preparation for worship you hear stacks more. If only I could hear all that you hear.

In this attempt I admit to working with the following presuppositions or assumptions:

- The readings for each Sunday of the church year were chosen because they share some common threads or themes.
- The dominant reading as far as the Sunday's theme is concerned is the Gospel reading. The other readings were chosen because they have some tie-in with the Gospel. (So I have started the listening process with the Gospel reading, and then moved to the other readings.)
- I think it is helpful for the worship experience to know how the readings relate to each other; and, when taken together, what specific aspect of God's good news they proclaim.

Neil Stiller (v. 2018)

*For a long time I've been puzzled about the precise relationship between Lent and the Sundays in Lent. Not because it's a specially complicated matter, it just takes me a long time to figure things out. I know that while the Sundays in Lent are within the 40 days of Lent they are not actually part of those 40 days (that's why they are not called the Sundays of Lent, and that's why Lenten services are held mid-week). These Sunday are not part of Lent because no Sunday can be anything less than a celebration of the resurrection. And resurrection joy would be damaged if lumbered with the traditional penitential and spiritual-denial mood of Lent. None of the reading for the Sundays in Lent promotes this Lenten mood either – except for the relatively recent change making Palm Sunday into Palm/Passion Sunday (and I suspect the trend of abandoning Lenten Services has been one reason for this change).*

*So it seems to me that while Lent focuses on the suffering/passion of Jesus, the Sundays enveloped by those 40 days focus on his death and the blessings his death gives.*

# Ash Wednesday

*A quick glance at these readings brings to my mind those old-fashioned practices of prayer-and-fasting and repentance. Lent also brings to my mind many other practices of the past meant to make this time somewhat penitential, severe, self-denying, and maybe even joyless. Many of these have gone by the board now. Even (midweek) Lenten services are being held in fewer congregations. It makes me wonder if something is wrong with our traditional Lenten customs, or with the way our world is going. Is there still a place for Lent – or maybe some modern equivalent – in our faith life?*

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## ABC Listening for the Good News Year A,B,C

FRa: Joel 2:1-2,12-17  
FRb: Is.58:1-12  
Ps: Ps.51:1-17  
SR: 2 Cor.5:20b - 6:10  
G: Mat.6:1-6,16-21

The G is part of the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus proclaims how the new life, which God gives, will show in our daily behaviour. In this section he contrasts this new life with popular 'religion'. God's gift of new life does not put on a great display of obedience to God, seeking the notice and praise of others. Rather, any action of obedience to God (such as almsgiving, prayer and fasting) is done secretly, without anyone being aware of it. This gift of new life is focused on God not on self. Because of the focus on God, the desire to gain more and more riches is also abandoned. The treasure of God's mercy and grace is all that matters.

In the SR Paul explains how this new life is showing in the way he carries out his ministry. He is able to ignore his personal pains and distress because God's mercy has fixed his attention on all the blessings and riches that are his in Jesus. In Jesus, he, and all Christians, are as righteous as Jesus. The treasure of God's grace in Jesus is all that matters.

The FRa presents us with God's call to his people (during a locust plague) for a time of deep repentance. This return to God could well avert his anger and bring an end to the plague. For God is gracious and merciful. He offers his people the treasure of his grace.

In the FRb God explains why his people's 'fasting' and 'repentance' is not moving him to show mercy. They are not really fasting or repenting at all. They are carrying on as usual with their sinful, rebellious, unmerciful lives. The fasting he wants is not self-centered indulgence, but a life of obedience to him, and of justice and compassion to one another. The life he offers is one so full of his grace and mercy that it overflows in grace and mercy.

The Ps is an honest and open confession of sin, with no self-justification. It pleads both for God's forgiveness and mercy, and for God to work his changes in this person's heart.

We humans make life so egocentric, we pander so much to ourselves, and we are so busy doing all this that life is full of stress. But the life God gives is so simple – because only one thing is necessary – the treasure of God's grace. This life of grace needs times of fasting and repentance and confession of sin. These are times of blessing because they bring release from stressful, egocentric, selfish living. They bring us back to the treasure of God's grace. Ash Wednesday announces to us the blessedness of prayer-and-fasting and repentance.

That's good news for people who are trapped in pandering to themselves.

**God's grace makes fasting and repentance a time of blessing as he turns us from self to Jesus.**

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# First Sunday in Lent

*The Gospel readings for this First Sunday in Lent look at Jesus' confrontation with the devil at the start of his ministry. I hear the other readings drawing out different aspects of temptation, giving each of these Sundays a slightly different theme.*

*I find myself wondering how I relate with temptation, and how that's changed over the years. Is it something to be avoided at all cost, or is it an unavoidable fact of life? Is it something I can even welcome – because of the benefits that flow through to my faith life and my trust in God? Do I really need temptation?*

*And how do I fight it? Do I use God's resources to make me strong enough to face the devil (when I know I'm still going to rely on me rather than God)? Or have I no option but to run from the temptation, hide behind Jesus, and let him deal with the devil for me?*

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## **A** Listening for the Good News Year A

FR: Gen.2:15-17, 3:1-7  
Ps: Ps.32  
SR: Rom.5:12-19  
G: Mat.4:1-11

It seems to me that the most significant aspects of Matthew's account of the temptation of Jesus (G) are these. The Spirit 'leads' Jesus into the wilderness where he fasts for 40 days. Then the devil 'comes' for the first temptation. For the other two the devil 'takes' him to two other locations. At the end the devil leaves and angels wait on Jesus. Jesus gains the victory by acting on the word and promises of God from the Scripture.

The FR takes us to the story of the first temptation recorded in the Bible – in the garden of Eden. It describes the Fall of Adam and Eve, as they yielded to the devil's temptation by going against the command of God. As a result, they brought upon themselves guilt, shame, and death. And they brought sin into God's perfect world.

Paul, in the SR, contrasts the temptations of Adam and Jesus. Adam failed to obey God's command when faced with the devil's temptation; Jesus gained the victory over the devil by trusting the promises of God. Adam's disobedience brought sin, death, and condemnation to all. Jesus brought to all the grace of justification, righteousness and life.

The Ps acknowledges God's grace in his offer of forgiveness. So he proves to be a great protection and hiding place for his people.

God's gift of grace became concrete in the life and actions of Jesus who faced the devil as a representative of the human race and reversed the state of affairs that Adam brought upon humankind.

That's good news for people who are helpless when faced by the power of the devil.

**Jesus' victory over the devil breaks the devil's hold on the human race.**

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## **B** Listening for the Good News Year B

FR: Gen.9:8-17  
Ps: Ps.25:1-10  
SR: 1 Pet.3:18-22  
G: Mk.1:9-15

Mark's account of the temptation of Jesus (G) is very brief. He mentions that the Spirit 'drives' Jesus into the wilderness for 40 days of temptation (without mentioning the 3 specific temptations listed by the other Gospels, or his trust in God's word), that the wild animals were there with him, and that the angels waited on him. These latter aspects indicate some cosmic (worldwide) significance to Jesus and his temptation. With this short account the reading also includes the account of the Baptism of Jesus prior to his temptation, and after the temptation (and John the Baptist's arrest) the beginning of Jesus' ministry of proclaiming the God's good news.

The reference to the presence of wild animals at this temptation seems to provide a connection with the FR. This is the story of God's covenant with Noah after the flood. God promises never again to send a flood to destroy life on the earth, and sets his sign of the rainbow in the clouds to seal this promise. This is a covenant God makes with all humankind – the survivors of the flood and their descendants – and with every animal on earth (the survivors in the ark and all those who will follow). God binds himself in his majestic freedom to the covenant he makes with all life on this earth. The cosmic significance of this covenant is clear.

The SR is a passage from Peter's first letter in which he makes reference to God's saving of Noah and his family in

the ark. They were saved from the water through the water (on which the ark floated). Peter sees this as a symbol of baptism, which gathers up present believers into the salvation that the resurrection of Jesus (the ultimate defeat of the devil) brings about. The resurrection of Jesus, and his subsequent ascension, also establishes Jesus in a position of cosmic authority over every power in heaven and on earth.

The Ps is one of trust in God – trust in his power over all enemies, and in the forgiveness and salvation he brings. It includes a call to God to remember his great mercy in the past, and a prayer for his ongoing protection and guidance in the future.

There is no power in the whole universe that is not subjected to the resurrected and ascended Jesus Christ. His life on this earth demonstrated this power before the whole cosmos. And this power brings salvation (forgiveness and life) and freedom to a world held in bondage to sin and evil.

That's good news for people who suffer at the hands of so many powers in this world.

**Jesus' victory over the devil points to the cosmic power he has over all evil.**

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## C Listening for the Good News Year C

FR: Deut.26:1-11  
Ps: Ps.91:1-2,9-16  
SR: Rom.10:8b-13  
G: Lk.4:1-13

The aspects of Luke's account of the temptation of Jesus (G) that interest me are these. The Spirit 'leads' Jesus into the wilderness and for 40 days he suffers temptation by the devil. Then three specific temptations are listed, one there in the wilderness, and the other two at other locations to which the devil 'leads' him. Jesus gains the victory by acting on the word and promises of God from the Scripture. At the end the devil makes just a temporary retreat watching for another opportunity.

The SR proclaims that trust in the word and promises of God brings salvation. Such is the power that belongs to the word of the Lord.

Trust in God is also evident in the Ps. God is portrayed as the one who guards, protects, and rescues his people – and can be depended on to act like that. (In Jesus' temptation the devil uses a verse from this psalm as a motivation for Jesus to obey him.)

The FR gives instructions for Israel's observation of their harvest festival. It recites God's actions of choosing Abraham, rescuing his people from Egypt, and giving them a land. This recital of God's history with his people would serve as a reminder that all they have is the result of his gracious giving. So there is reason for their praise of him and their trust in him.

The Bible is the account of God's faithfulness (as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) to his people – to all people. I suppose that's one big difference between him and us. Fancy having a God who is faithful to us!

That's good news for people whose faithfulness only serves their own self-interest.

**Jesus' victory over the devil proclaims that God can be depended on and trusted.**

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# Second Sunday in Lent

Following the focus on Jesus' temptation last Sunday, the rest of the Sundays in Lent get our attention on his death, and the gifts and blessings that his sacrificial death won for us.

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## A Listening for the Good News Year A

FR: Gen.12:1-4a  
Ps: Ps.121  
SR: Rom.4:1-5,13-17  
G: Jn.3:1-17

*Today's readings get me thinking about situations in which I need to reach out to God for reassurance, comfort, answers to questions – things like that. I wish I could avoid these situations. But God usually reveals the blessings he gives me in that reaching out to him.*

The G is the story of Nicodemus' visit to Jesus. He comes at night (this word in John's Gospel stands for the darkness and ignorance and opposition to God, to which Jesus brings his light). He comes in order to find out something about who Jesus is and what he stands for. What he hears flabbergasts him and turns Nicodemus' part in the conversation into no more than a series of questions. Jesus lets him know about God's gift of a birth that is new and from-above (the word means both). This birth opens up a relationship with God. And being a birth, it does not happen through one's own efforts. It happens only because the death of God's Son is the sacrifice that makes possible the birth and the new eternal life that follows.

The FR is the account of God stepping into Abram's life. He calls him to leave his home and family because, in mercy and grace, God offers him the gift of a new land, of many descendants, and a unique blessing which will make him a blessing to all other nations.

In the SR Paul considers Abraham's faith relationship with God. He asserts that this relationship was based on God's promise, gift, and grace. As such it was not something he deserved or earned. Like any gift it was offered freely. What is more, that gift, or promise, was made to and included all of Abraham's descendants. But since it is a faith relationship, these descendants are not Abraham's racial descendants, but descendants who share his faith.

The Ps expresses a faith (just like the faith Abraham had) that looks to God for the help he gives and the constant protection he offers wherever you are.

In Lent we are moving towards the death and resurrection of Jesus. Already the significance of the life and death of Jesus – and the magnitude of God's love for, and free grace towards, the human race – is becoming clear.

That's good news for people who in their pride constantly want to feel they have to do something to deserve God's love and acceptance.

**The death of Jesus makes possible a faith relationship with God based on the grace of his giving.**

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## B Listening for the Good News Year B

FR: Gen.17:1-7,15-16  
Ps: Ps.22:23-31  
SR: Rom.4:13-25  
G: Mk.8:31-38

*The cost of living is a constantly rising price that all of us keep on paying – sometimes happily. Today's readings tell me that there is also a cost involved in living the life of faith in Jesus.*

In the G Jesus speaks about his coming suffering, death, and resurrection. Peter (I guess the other disciples too) can't understand that Jesus could ever be put to death. So he rebukes Jesus. Patiently, and with great emphasis, Jesus explains that suffering and death is the way he HAS to go. His life is one of self-denial and the cross. And it is the same for anyone who has been called to follow him. The new life God gives is one of losing your own life – but saving your soul.

If anyone knew at least something about this it was Abraham. The FR and the SR focus on the way his life was turned around. Abram (as he was called then) was promised the gift of a new land, of many descendants, and a blessing that will make him a blessing to all nations. But he was now almost 100 years old and his wife 90, beyond child-bearing age – so these promises took some believing! God helped him by regularly confirming those promises.

The FR records one such confirmation, stressing that the child would indeed be his and Sarah's. And he changes both their names to reflect, and remind them of, their coming parenthood.

In the SR Paul speaks about the 'deadness' of Abraham and Sarah as far as beginning a great nation was

concerned. Yet from this deadness came life, a son. It was all God's doing. God was keeping his promise. Abraham had only to hope against hope. It's the same, Paul concludes, with Jesus: out of his death came resurrected life. And it's the same with us: out of our sin and death comes, through Jesus, our gift of new life. It's all God's grace and giving.

The Ps is one of praise of God who doesn't hide himself from suffering. Nations will bow down to him, for he rules over all.

Jesus' death, like Abraham's as-good-as-dead-ness, is no bar to God bringing life and salvation to the world. In fact, in God's hands of grace, situations in which a person is forced to hope against hope only produce a deeper faith and trust in his promises of life.

That's good news for people whose nature is to rebuke God when life doesn't go as they want it, and to doubt the impossible promises he makes.

**The death of Jesus makes possible a faith relationship with God based on his gift of life through death.**

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## **C Listening for the Good News Year C**

FR: Gen.15:1-12,17-18  
Ps: Ps.27  
SR: Phil.3:17 - 4:1  
G: Lk.13:31-35

*Now and then I dream what it would have been like if I had parents who were able to pass on something very significant as an inheritance – and the difference that would have made to my life. Now and then I remember the inheritance I have received from God, and what my life would have been like without that.*

In the G some Pharisees warn Jesus that Herod is seeking to kill him. But despite Herod's intentions Jesus says he will not be sidetracked. He will, he must, carry out God's plan – the plan that includes dying in Jerusalem. Then Jesus laments the fact that time after time Jerusalem rejects God's overtures to be a protective hen for his people. They keep rejecting and killing those he sends with messages of love and protection. This reading sets our eyes on the end of our Lenten journey – our Saviour's death. It announces the necessity of his death, and points to his people's rejection of his grace and love as the reason for this necessity. Or more accurately, it's God faithfulness to his faithless people that makes the death of his Son necessary. The lengths God goes to – to show his love for his people!

The FR points to another example of God's faithfulness to his people and the promises he makes to them – the example of Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation. Even though Abraham can't see how it is possible that he can father a nation, he CAN see it happening IF he adopts a son. But God reaffirms that the covenant he has made, including the promise of a land and descendants, will happen! It will happen through the birth of Abraham's own child. God even goes through a covenant rite with Abraham (one that seems very strange to us) to reinforce the fact that he will keep his promises to Abraham. The lengths God goes to make his people believe him!

The Ps is one of joyous praise and confidence in God's care and rescue. It sounds as if a person who has experienced God's faithfulness to his promises wrote it. It concludes with the exhortation: even in troubles and forsakenness, trust God and wait on him.

Paul, in the SR, announces that as Christians, our attention and citizenship IS in heaven. And (as the person who wrote the Ps also suggests) we ARE waiting on God. We are awaiting our Saviour who will use his power (his power over death) to transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body.

Lent is a journey through the sufferings of Jesus to his death. This Sunday announces God's faithfulness to us, his unfaithful people. It proclaims the lengths God goes to, again and again, to convince us of his grace and love which offers us the glorified life in heaven.

That's good news for people who find themselves doubting, even rejecting, God and the promises he makes.

**The death of Jesus makes possible a faith relationship with God based on his promises to us.**

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# Third Sunday in Lent

*The readings for this Sunday tell me how undeserving I am to receive the tremendous blessings and gifts that come to me through the death of Jesus.*

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## A Listening for the Good News Year A

FR: Ex.17:1-7  
Ps: Ps.95  
SR: Rom.5:1-11  
G: Jn.4:5-42

*When I'm going through a difficult time in my life it's not unusual to feel that God is quiet and inactive. So I wonder if he's really with me. At those times do I need some proof that he is, or are his promises enough?*

The conversation of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (G) is about water – living water that wells up to eternal life – which Jesus gives. This conversation leads to Jesus revealing himself to the woman as the promised Messiah. She then goes into the town to tell the residents about the person at their well. Some believe her, so he is invited to stay with them. At the end of two days many more believe, because they, like the woman, have heard for themselves from the Saviour of the world.

The Children of Israel on their Exodus journey out of Egypt complain that God has abandoned them because of the lack of water in the wilderness (FR). God uses Moses to bring water out of a rock to slake their thirst.

The Ps is one of praise to God for his great creating power. Recalling the story in the FR, it addresses God as the 'Rock of our Salvation', and warns about a hardening of heart that doubts the promises of God. It calls on the people to trust the word of God.

The SR announces God's great and amazing grace in sending Jesus to die for people who are sinners, and therefore his enemies. Having died for people who are sinners, Paul proclaims the 'how-much-more-ness' of the sureness of salvation through Jesus' reconciling life. Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus we are given peace with God and the hope of glory, a hope that remains even in times of suffering.

The FR is related to the G through the reference to water – water God provides for this people. In the FR it is water that flows from a rock and which sustains the bodily life of his people, proving that God has not abandoned them. In the G the water is the living water that gives eternal life. And this incident centering on water provides proof that Jesus is the Saviour of the world. The reference in the Ps to God as the Rock of Salvation also relates to the theme of the gift of water. The SR announces the blessings believers receive through Jesus, and the sureness of those blessings. The death of Jesus offers a new life now, and eternal life on the other side of death.

That's good news for people who are thirsty for all kinds of things, and are not sure if, or how, those thirsts are satisfied.

**The death of Jesus brings gifts to satisfy our human longings.**

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## B Listening for the Good News Year B

FR: Ex.20:1-17  
Ps: Ps.19  
SR: 1 Cor.1:18-25  
G: Jn.2:13-22

*Every now and then I have a big clean-up of my desk, my shed, my yard. Sometimes during Lent I even wonder about a clean-up of my life. This gets me asking myself if, and why, these clean-ups are really needed, and what is it that motivates me to carry them out.*

The G is the account of Jesus clearing the Jerusalem temple courts of buyers, sellers, and animals. He is upset that part of the temple, which he calls his Father's house, is being turned into a market. When challenged about his action he makes a cryptic prophecy about his resurrection three days after his death. This action of Jesus probably confirmed for the religious authorities the need for his death. Perhaps this reading is also pointing to the culmination of Lent so that we don't forget the purpose of this season.

The FR contains a listing of the ten commandments God gave his people through Moses. The introductory statement (that they come from the One who brought his people out of slavery in Egypt) surely makes it inappropriate to regard these commands as anything but a gift of God's love offered to help his people to live as his chosen and rescued people. Lent proclaims how God in his love reacts when his people spurn his gift and fail to act as his people.

The Ps is one that praises the power of God's voice and proclaims the value of his laws.

Paul proclaims (SR) that the message of salvation through the cross of Jesus, which seems such a foolish message, shows up the foolishness of the world's wisdom and reveals the wisdom and power of God.

It's awe-inspiring to see the extent and the greatness of God's love. His love also seems a pretty foolish and expensive waste of time. He is prepared to offer up his Son in death. He's prepared to do that for people who continue to let him down and fail him and rebel against him – and even willfully kill his Son. I don't know any human who would do that. But that's why God is love! That's why Paul speaks of God's foolish wisdom and weak power.

That's good news for people who are good at rejoicing in God's rescue of them, but then go on to live as if they have not been rescued at all.

**The death of Jesus is God's reaction of grace to those who fail to live as his people.**

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## **C Listening for the Good News Year C**

FR: Is.55:1-9  
Ps: Ps.63:1-8  
SR: 1 Cor.10:1-13  
G: Lk.13:1-9

*I can't help feeling that sometimes there is an unfair gap between what I deserve and what I get. This can work both ways – either I get less than I deserve, or more. When I consider what God does for me, the unfairness only flows in one direction.*

In the G Jesus confronts the belief that bad things happen to bad people. He argues that this belief is wrong (but without offering a corrective belief). Instead he suggests that these bad things call all of us to repentance – obviously because there are bad aspects in our living for which we deserve something bad. Then he goes on to tell a parable announcing that the 'bad things happen to bad people' principle is broken by God's mercy. He doesn't punish us as we deserve. He patiently waits, giving us time and tender care, pouring over us the nourishment that produces change, and holding out to us his gift of forgiveness and love and mercy.

The FR ties in very closely with the G. Through Isaiah God offers his disobedient people amazing gifts, free gifts: nourishment that really satisfies, promises that can be relied upon, and opportunities to experience God's mercy. All this comes from a God who has far higher ways and thoughts than we humans.

The Ps expresses praise and a longing for the love of God who offers so much help for living life to the full.

In the SR Paul reminds the Corinthian congregation of the closeness with God that Israel experienced in their Exodus journey – their 'baptism into Moses', the spiritual food and drink they shared, and the presence of Rock-Christ with them. Yet despite all that they disobeyed God and ended up being punished with bad things. So, Paul says, learn from them. God's mercy is there, his 'way out' when temptations come is always there. He offers himself as the One you can trust. You don't need to rely on yourself.

All these readings proclaim the undeserved, bountiful, amazing, lavish, giving of God. No matter what is going on in our lives, those gifts are always there for us. He is always holding them out to us.

That's good news for people who are so easily drawn away (by so many things) from the love God has for them.

**The grace of God is so amazingly lavish and constant in its giving.**

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# Fourth Sunday in Lent

*The readings for this fourth Sunday in Lent tell me something about the magnitude of the gifts that Jesus' death makes available. In doing so they proclaim the magnitude of God's mercy and grace.*

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## **A** Listening for the Good News Year A

FR: 1 Sam.16:1-13  
Ps: Ps.23  
SR: Eph.5:8-14  
G: Jn.9:1-41

*I'm struck by the necessity of light for life here in this world – and by the richness of the use of light as a symbol for significant aspects of living.*

In the G Jesus speaks about light and darkness, faith and unbelief. The chapter begins with Jesus healing a blind man. This miracle raises questions about the status and the authority of the miracle worker – especially since the healing involved the breaking of Sabbath rules. There is hesitation by the Pharisees to acknowledge that a miracle has in fact been performed, so they question the witnesses and the claims of the healed man. The account climaxes with the healed man's confession of faith in Jesus as the Son of Man (both the sunlight and the Light from God floods into his life). According to Jesus, the Pharisees, however, remain in unbelief, still living in the darkness of guilt and judgment.

The SR proclaims the gift of light that Jesus brings – a gift that drives the darkness of sin from a person's life.

The FR is the story of God's choice of David, the youngest and least imposing of Jesse's eight sons, to be the king of Israel. God makes it clear to Samuel that David is chosen because (to use the language of the G) the Lord shines his light into a person's heart and from what he sees there he makes his judgment about a person's abilities.

The Ps is one of trust in God, who has a shepherd-care for his people.

The readings for this Sunday revolve around the images of sight and light. God is able to do what we humans cannot do – look into the hearts of people (FR). Jesus, his Son, shines the light of God into people's hearts so they can see who Jesus is (G). This releases them from the darkness of unbelief and enlightens them as to the forgiveness that Jesus brings. This gift of light is also a power that works to dispel the darkness in a person's heart and life – thus bringing the freedom of walking in and living the light of God (SR).

That's good news for people who find themselves caught up in the manifestations of the darkness that imprison people in this world.

**Jesus brings the Light of God into this world of darkness.**

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## **B** Listening for the Good News Year B

FR: Num.21:4-9  
Ps: Ps.107:1-3,17-22  
SR: Eph.2:1-10  
G: Jn.3:14-21

*I think of occasions when I have been 'lifted up'. It seems that usually other people have done the lifting, as I have been unable to help myself. So I appreciate their actions on my behalf.*

The Son of Man lifted up on the cross. That, proclaims the G, is God's gift of grace to a world under condemnation. The condemnation is there because Jesus came to this world as the Light; but he was rejected by a world that preferred darkness and sin. God's gift of faith in Jesus brings salvation and eternal life. Such is the power of the lifting up of Jesus on the cross!

The FR is the account of a previous 'lifting up'. It's the lifting up of the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness. Moses was told by God to do this to provide rescue from the venomous snakes that invaded the Israelite camp. The snakes were sent in reaction to the people's rebellion against God and their complaining about the food he had been miraculously providing. Just looking at the snake brought deliverance from their bites.

The Ps refers to this event in the wilderness, calling on God's people to join in praise and thanks because of the loving and merciful deliverance that God brings.

The SR announces the amazing grace of God, who in Jesus makes alive those who are dead in sin. He raises them with Jesus and seats them with Jesus in the heavenly realms. All this displays the amazing richness of his grace, given as a free gift.

In so many ways God steps into the history of his people to bring them deliverance and rescue in times of danger and death. But the climax of all these acts of deliverance, the climax to which all these acts point and anticipate, is the deliverance through the death of Jesus. This deliverance is not one that ignores death, or side-steps death. Rather it is a deliverance that comes in and through death itself. That's true for Jesus who went through death, and there transformed death into a resurrected life. It's also true for us. Right there in our death Jesus himself is present to turn our death into the resurrection life that he gained once for all.

That's good news for people who can do nothing to avoid death.

**The death of Jesus brings rescue from sin and death.**

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## **C Listening for the Good News Year C**

FR: Josh.5:9-12

Ps: Ps.32

SR: 2 Cor.5:16-21

G: Lk.15:1-3,11b-32

*Being on the verge of something new. I find that scary. I find that exciting. Sometimes at the same time. But either way I know there is going to be some change in store for me.*

The G is the parable of the Prodigal Son. Really the parable is about the father (he's even been called the prodigal father, and with justification!). He shows an amazing and forgiving love in welcoming back his wayward son – and in inviting his ungrateful and arrogant son to take part in the welcome-home party. The theme of the parable is the new start, the gift of being found, the gift of new life, which the grace of God offers to all.

Being a new creation is the theme of the SR. Paul's role as an ambassador for Christ means that he can announce to the Corinthians that Jesus' work of reconciling the world to God means that they are now 'in Christ' and therefore each one of them IS a new creation.

The people of Israel (FR) are about to enter the promised land – they just need to cross the Jordan River. God announces that this day marks the rolling away for his people of the reproach of Egypt. The Passover is celebrated, they eat of the produce of the land, and the manna stops. A new era is beginning for Israel.

The Ps speaks about the blessedness of being forgiven. It rejoices in the fact that God's forgiveness brings a new start; life is changed.

All the readings proclaim the new life that God in his grace holds out to all people. Each reading describes a different aspect of this new start from God. In the G it's a new life of close and joyful fellowship with God, who with amazing mercy offers a party where his welcome of us flows out in a joyous welcome of all the others whom he also welcomes. In the SR it's a new life where being 'in Christ' makes us all God's new creations. In the FR it's a new life where God is celebrated for all that he provides for his people. In the Ps it's a new life that revolves around the forgiveness that he mercifully holds out to all.

That's good news for people who suffer from all the disappointments and troubles and sin that life in this world brings.

**Jesus' gift of a new life with God, made possible through his death.**

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# Fifth Sunday in Lent

*The benefits of the death of Jesus continue to be proclaimed in the readings for this Sunday. Maybe I'm seeing things that aren't there – but it does seem to me that the closer we get to Easter the more significant and extravagant these blessings are becoming.*

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## **A** Listening for the Good News Year A

FR: Ezek.37:1-14  
Ps: Ps.130  
SR: Rom.8:6-11  
G: Jn.11:1-45

*I hear in the readings for today the strongest indication so far that the ultimate purpose of the death of Jesus is resurrection – a resurrection even greater than we could ever imagine. Whenever and wherever God is active life threatens to break the hold of death.*

The G is the account of the raising of Lazarus from the dead (still only a temporary stay of death). It's an account full of drama. There's Thomas' statement 'let us also go, that we may die with him'. Both Mary and Martha express what seems to be disappointment that Jesus didn't come earlier. There's the announcement by Jesus that he is the resurrection and the life. There's the statement 'Jesus wept'. There's the shout 'Lazarus, come out'. And the verses that follow this story show that what happened here sets in motion serious plotting to kill Jesus.

The FR is about a resurrection, too – the vision of a resurrection. Ezekiel is 'set in' a valley of dry bones. He is commanded to prophesy to those bones – and they come together to form bodies. He is commanded to prophesy to the wind-breath-spirit (the word means all three) – and the bodies breathe and live. This is a vision of God's people, dead through a loss of hope and of a future. Into this nation God will put his Spirit to give them hope and bring them back from their land of exile.

In the SR Paul proclaims that the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead is a gift to sinful, dead humans, resulting in life being given to their mortal bodies.

The Ps is a prayer for God's mercy and forgiveness, and at the same time it expresses a confident waiting on God to act in rescue.

These readings speak of some of our human death experiences: Our sense of guilt and distance from God (Ps). Our loss of hope and purpose in life (FR). Our experience of sin and the impossibility of any hope for a relationship with our holy God (SR). The death of our mortal bodies (G). No matter what form of death his people may face, Jesus comes to bring life.

That's good news for people who have to live in this world with death and with the great effects it has.

**Jesus brings to us God's victory over death.**

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## **B** Listening for the Good News Year B

FR: Jer.31:31-34  
Psa: Ps.51:1-12  
Psb: Ps.119:9-16  
SR: Heb.5:5-10  
G: Jn.12:20-33

*It's glory time! – that's the announcement that strikes me in today's gospel. I know what kind of situation would get me to announce: It's glory time! But it looks like God's idea of glory time is very different from mine.*

The death of Jesus is the theme of the G. This talk about his death arises (strangely) because of a request from some Greeks to see Jesus. At least four different pictures are used by Jesus to highlight different aspects of the purpose and results of his death. It is spoken about as the hour of Jesus' glorification (these verses [v.27-28] are generally seen as John's version of the Garden of Gethsemane story). It's spoken about as an event, like the planting of a seed, which will bring life to many other people. It's spoken about as the occasion of the devil's defeat. It's spoken about as a drawing of all people to Jesus. So many ways to present the significance of Jesus' death.

The SR uses a reference to Melchizedek to explain that the death of Jesus was part of his suffering through which he submitted to his Father. Through this obedience he is able to be the Saviour of the world.

The FR is God's promise of a new covenant with his people. This covenant will not be one that can be broken by his people's disobedience. Rather it will be based on God's forgiveness and a personal relationship with God in which he will bring about obedience in a person's heart.

The Psa is a prayer for forgiveness and for God to work a change in the heart of the person praying.

The other option for the Psalm (Psb) is one that appeals to God to use his word to bring about knowledge of God and obedience to him.

The death of Jesus is such an amazing event that many pictures are needed so that its full significance may be appreciated and proclaimed. Today's readings proclaim to us, using a variety of word images and pictures, what Jesus offers us through his death. They allow us to bask in God's amazing love for us all.

That's good news for people who need to keep on hearing God speak to them in grace and mercy.

**The amazing blessings we are given through the death of Jesus.**

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## **C Listening for the Good News Year C**

FR: Is.43:16-21  
Ps: Ps.126  
SR: Phil.3:4b-14  
G: Jn.12:1-8

*When I witness an action of extravagant giving, I can't help wondering what's behind this act of stupidity, of waste. There must be something going on there that eludes me.*

The G is the account of the anointing of the feet of Jesus by Mary. This happens in her home, with her brother Lazarus (whom Jesus raised from the dead) present. This provides a significant (even ironic) background for this incident. Judas complains about such a waste of money (a year's wages) on perfume when there are so many poor around. But Jesus defends her extravagant action, seeing it as an anointing prior to his burial. Mary certainly believes that Jesus is worth the cost.

Paul, in the SR, asserts that all the religious highlights in his life are no more than 'crap' in comparison with the righteousness that Jesus gives. In fact, any highlighting of his own achievements, only conspires to lead him away from God. He wants to achieve the 'prize' of eternal life, offered to him freely in Jesus. He wants to grow in his knowledge of Jesus and of the power of his resurrection – even if it means sharing in his suffering and death. Even that cost would be a pleasure, knowing he has a Saviour.

The FR is a great promise from God. As great as the crossing of the Red Sea and the Exodus was for Israel, he is going to do something even greater for his people in the future – a new Exodus, new provision of water, a new reason for his people to praise him.

The Ps also looks back to God's bringing his people home from Exile. But it focuses on the joy and praise they are now feeling because of his actions on their behalf.

All these readings speak about God's mighty actions of rescue and salvation. And most of them are expressing deep joy and thanks and praise to him. Individuals have been caught up in God's grace and mercy to such an extent that they know there is nothing that matches the treasure that is theirs in Jesus and his death. Their whole life has been affected by what God has done for them. They are overjoyed and don't really know how they can express their thanks, so great is the treasure they have in Jesus.

That's good news for people who have so many 'treasures', and want so many 'treasures' – yet realize that in the last analysis these treasures don't mean a thing.

**The all-surpassing treasure of the death of Jesus.**

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# Palm / Passion Sunday

I quote from the LCA's Worship resources:

*It is important to note that the readings . . . are intended to be used in the following way:*

- \* *The Palm Sunday gospel and psalm are used for the palm procession and/or entry into the church*
- \* *The Passion Sunday readings, psalm and gospel are for use in the service itself.*

*It is possible to omit the palm procession, and to use the Palm Sunday psalm and gospel in the service itself instead of the Passion psalm and gospel, but this may result in a rather odd mixture of triumphant jubilation and sorrowful reflection. When we observe the separation of the two themes, the day appropriately begins in shouts of joy, but ends in silence.*

## Year A

### Palm

G: Mat.21:1-11

Ps: 118:1-2,19-29

### Passion

FR: Is.50:4-9a

Ps: Ps.31:9-16

SR: Phil.2:5-11

Ga: Mat.26:14 - 27:66

Gb: Mat.27:11-54

## Year B

### Palm

Ga: Mk.11:1-11

Gb: Jn.12:12-16

Ps: 118:1-2,19-29

### Passion

FR: Is.50:4-9a

Ps: Ps.31:9-16

SR: Phil.2:5-11

Ga: Mk.14:1 - 15:57

Gb: Mk.15:1-39(40-47)

## Year C

### Palm

G: Lk.19:28-40

Ps: 118:1-2,19-29

### Passion

FR: Is.50:4-9a

Ps: Ps.31:9-16

SR: Phil.2:5-11

Ga: Lk.22:14 - 23:56

Gb: Lk.23:1-49

*For congregations not observing Lent in weekly mid-week services, here's Lent in one service.*

## ABC Listening for the Good News Year A,B,C

The readings for this Sunday in all 3 years are either identical or the same account from a different Gospel book.

The Palm G is the account of the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on the day we call Palm Sunday. Jesus' action of riding the donkey is in effect an announcing that he is the one prophesied in Zech.9:9 – Israel's humble king bringing peace to the nations. His welcome by the crowds outside the city walls shouting out their hosanna's certainly sets a jubilant beginning to the last week of Jesus' earthly life.

The Palm Ps, too, is a jubilant song of praise to God for the victorious salvation he brings.

The Passion G gives two options – the reading of the entire passion story, or a shorter reading of just his trial before Pilate and his crucifixion. Evident throughout the narrative is a comment every so often that what took place happens in order to fulfill the Scripture. So, in everything God is in control.

The Passion SR proclaims the humility of Jesus in stooping to become a human, even in submitting to crucifixion. But then God steps in to exalt him to a position of supreme authority.

In the Passion FR Isaiah asserts his obedience to God, despite what he had to suffer in the process, and expresses confidence in vindication by God. This is usually regarded as a prophecy of Jesus as he submits to his passion and death.

The Passion Ps is similar to the FR. If anything, the agony this person is going through seems more severe. But his confidence in God remains.

What a rich start to Holy Week this Sunday gives. We may find ourselves drawn into the joyful Palm Sunday welcome of the King at the beginning of the service. Then as the mood of worship changes we may also be drawn into the incidents of our Lord's Passion. Perhaps we can't help but see ourselves acting in our lives like many of the participants in the story. Jesus' friends and disciples desert him or are pushed aside by the events until finally Jesus faces death alone, even with a sense of being deserted by God himself. But in it all God's plan for Jesus, for the world, for you and me, is being carried out and being brought to fruition.

That's good news for people who may feel they are falling away from God, or that God seems to be deserting them.

**The Passion of Jesus is all according to God's plan – for Jesus and for us.**

# Maundy Thursday

*Since Maundy Thursday is the celebration of the institution of the Lord's Supper, it's surprising (though not at all disappointing) that the Gospel reading comes from John – the only Gospel that doesn't include an account of Jesus instituting this Supper with his disciples. Since the institution is covered in the SR, I think using John's version of the Thursday evening in Holy Week as the Gospel broadens and enriches the celebration of this day.*

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## ABC Listening for the Good News Year A,B,C

FR: Ex.12:1-4 (5-10) 11-14  
Ps: Ps.116:1-2,12-19  
SR: 1 Cor.11:23-26  
G: Jn.13:1-17, 31b-35

The G reading contains the account of Jesus washing the disciples' feet, with the reminder that his followers are called to be servants. Then the reading goes on to record Jesus' warning that he will be leaving them, and his admonition to them to love each other as he has loved them. Gifts we receive in Holy Communion are certainly described in this reading. There is the gift Jesus himself – the servant Son of God.

There is the gift of a self-giving and servant love. And there is the gift of a vision of the glory of God.

Paul, in the SR, reminds the Corinthians of the institution of the Lord's Supper and proclaims that this meal is a love feast – a feast that, in offering the body and blood of Jesus, also bestows God's gift of love. This love is going to show in the way the participants of the meal treat each another, and in the way they live their lives.

The FR is the account of the institution the Passover. This meal can be seen as a pre-cursor and as a pointer to the Lord's Supper. Both meals proclaim rescue and salvation, and the shedding of blood to make these great gifts possible.

The Ps praises God's mercy and rescue, and ponders what can be done to really show that praise and thanks in one's daily life.

The death of Jesus forms the backdrop whenever the Lord's Supper is celebrated – it certainly did at its institution. The death of Jesus is at the very centre of this meal since his Body and Blood are given and received. The death of Jesus is at the centre of this meal since his servant love, his self-giving love, is given to the participants to bring them salvation and rescue and forgiveness. The death of Jesus is at the centre of this meal since this same servant love, this same self-giving love, is given and bestowed so that his people are empowered to live that love in their lives.

That's good news for people who are ashamed of the kind of love (if that's what it can be called in comparison with God's love) that usually shows in their lives.

**The Lord's Supper is a meal celebrating the death of Jesus and giving the kind of love that lies behind that death.**

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# Good Friday

*Good Friday strikes me as the day on which we have the privilege of seeing God in pain. God not only knows about the pains of living in this world, he has experienced them first hand in his Son – that's an amazing thing to say about God. What's even more amazing is that through the pains Jesus suffered he provides the means of overcoming them for us. And then to think that all this pain comes from our rebellion, our sin, our self-centeredness. We caused God's pain – we whom he loves with an unfathomable love. God certainly suffers pain.*

*But to let us see that pain – why, that's almost improper, it's not a thing God should do. But he does it. He reveals his heart to us.*

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## ABC Listening for the Good News Year A,B,C

FR: Is.52:13 - 53:12  
Ps: Ps.22  
SRa: Heb.10:16-25  
SRb: Heb.4:14-16, 5:7-9  
G: Jn.18:1 - 19:42

The G is John's account of the death of Jesus. Characteristic of this account is the stress on Jesus as the king, and as the sacrificial lamb. John's Gospel also presents the crucifixion of Jesus as the enthronement of this king. This gives a special character to our worship today, and confronts us with a unique proclamation about the purpose of his death.

In the SRa the writer announces that by means of his death, and the forgiveness he won for us, Jesus has opened up the way for us to enter into the very presence of God. This means that now we can live boldly, aware of the reality of that presence. And we can confidently anticipate living with, and in, that presence in eternity.

The SRb proclaims that Jesus' life in this world, characterized by his obedience to his Father and his submission to suffering, means that Jesus understands and empathizes with our weaknesses. So we can be confident that he will be merciful and loving to us, and will give us a share in his gift of eternal life.

The FR is regarded as the greatest prophecy about the suffering of God's chosen one. It proclaims that God handed over his Son to a life of suffering and death in order that all the blessings and benefits of that suffering and death might be given to us. He suffered and died in our place, suffering our punishment, in order to free us from it all.

The Ps is a cry of deep God-forsakenness. Much of it can be regarded as a prophecy of what was in store for the One who suffered God-forsakenness to the extreme. Jesus took upon himself all the world's forsakenness. But the psalm ends up expressing a trust in God who brings deliverance. We know of the even greater deliverance that Jesus won – for himself and for us all.

I regard it a privilege to listen and to watch – dumbfounded, silent, sad, awe-struck – while in his surpassing mercy and love, God suffers his forgiveness-giving pain.

Together with all the sadness that is part of this day, it's a day of really good news!!

**Jesus gave his life for the human race.**

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