

HOMILY FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT
6 APRIL 2025

Fr. Jim Fredericks

Part One: the readings for the day
Part Two: reflections on the readings
Part Three: guidelines for *lectio divina*

PART ONE: READINGS FOR THE DAY
Lectionary: 36

Reading I Isaiah 43:16-21

Thus says the LORD,
who opens a way in the sea
and a path in the mighty waters,
who leads out chariots and horsemen, a powerful army,
till they lie prostrate together, never to rise,
snuffed out and quenched like a wick.
Remember not the events of the past,
the things of long ago consider not;
see, I am doing something new!
Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
In the desert I make a way, in the wasteland, rivers.
Wild beasts honor me, jackals and ostriches,
for I put water in the desert and rivers in the wasteland
for my chosen people to drink,
the people whom I formed for myself,
that they might announce my praise.

Responsorial Psalm Psalm 126:1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 6.

R. The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.

When the LORD brought back the captives of Zion,
we were like men dreaming.

Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with rejoicing.

R. The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.

Then they said among the nations,
"The LORD has done great things for them."
The LORD has done great things for us;
we are glad indeed.

R. The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.

Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the torrents in the southern desert.

Those that sow in tears
shall reap rejoicing.

R. The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.

Although they go forth weeping,
carrying the seed to be sown,
They shall come back rejoicing,
carrying their sheaves.

R. The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.

Reading II Philippians 3:8-14

Brothers and sisters:

I consider everything as a loss
because of the supreme good of knowing
Christ Jesus my Lord.

For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things
and I consider them so much rubbish,
that I may gain Christ and be found in him,
not having any righteousness of my own based on the law
but that which comes through faith in Christ,
the righteousness from God,
depending on faith to know him
and the power of his resurrection
and the sharing of his sufferings
by being conformed to his death,
if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

It is not that I have already taken hold of it
or have already attained perfect maturity,
but I continue my pursuit in hope that I may possess it,
since I have indeed been taken possession of
by Christ Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, I for my part
do not consider myself to have taken possession.
Just one thing: forgetting what lies behind
but straining forward to what lies ahead,

I continue my pursuit toward the goal,
the prize of God's upward calling, in Christ Jesus.

Verse before the Gospel Joel 2:12-13

Even now, says the Lord,
return to me with your whole heart;
for I am gracious and merciful.

Gospel John 8:1-11

Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.
But early in the morning
he arrived again in the temple area,
and all the people started coming to him,
and he sat down and taught them.
Then the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman
who had been caught in adultery
and made her stand in the middle.
They said to him,
"Teacher, this woman was caught
in the very act of committing adultery.
Now in the law,
Moses commanded us to stone such women.
So what do you say?"
They said this to test him,
so that they could have some charge to bring against him.
Jesus bent down and began to write
on the ground with his finger.
But when they continued asking him,
he straightened up and said to them,
"Let the one among you who is without sin
be the first to throw a stone at her."
Again he bent down and wrote on the ground.
And in response, they went away one by one,
beginning with the elders.
So he was left alone with the woman before him.
Then Jesus straightened up and said to her,
"Woman, where are they?
Has no one condemned you?"
She replied, "No one, sir."
Then Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you.
Go, and from now on do not sin any more."

PART TWO: REFLECTION ON THE READING

In the Gospel reading, John is telling a story that speaks directly to Americans today. On the surface, the story is about adultery. I think the story is really about scapegoating. And this is why John's story confronts Americans. Increasingly, Americans are looking for scapegoats to solve their problems. The Gospel demands that we resist this.

John's story is certainly about adultery. The scribes and Pharisees have dragged a woman before Jesus in order to accuse her.

Teacher, this woman was caught
in the very act of committing adultery.
Now in the law,
Moses commanded us to stone such women.
So what do you say?

They're right: in the Law of Moses, the punishment for adultery is death. But John is telling his story carefully. The woman has been caught *in flagrante delecto* – in the act itself. And on this, the Torah is clear:

If a man is discovered lying with a woman who is
married to another, they both shall die, the man who
was lying with the woman as well as the woman.
Thus shall you purge the evil from Israel (Dt 22:22).

"Both shall die." The scribes and Pharisees know who the man is but have dragged only the woman before Jesus. So, where's lover-boy? Where is this poor wretched Juliet's Romeo? The Law of Moses is clear: it takes two to tango.

The scribes and the Pharisees are not following the Law of Moses. Instead, they are using the Law to make a scapegoat out of this woman.

Even today we use the law to make scapegoats out of people who are too weak and marginalized to protect themselves.

Back in the days of Jim Crow, the great jazz musician, Quincy Jones, was touring with the Lionel Hampton Band.

Their bus pulled into a town in the South and the one white guy in the band went into a grocery store to buy sandwiches. All the black musicians stayed on the bus. The grocery store was exercising its legal right to refuse service to black people. Jim Crow meant that we were using the law to scapegoat black people.

As he waited in the bus, Quincy Jones looked out the window and saw a church. Someone had hung a dummy of a black man from the belfry of the church at the end of a noose. Sometimes we use the law to scapegoat the defenseless. Other times, we use the Gospel.

When we scapegoat someone, we accomplish two things. First, we can say that we have restored order to society by getting rid of an evildoer. Second, by going after a scapegoat, we are allowed to feel righteous about ourselves. Certainly, this is what the scribes and the Pharisees were doing in John's story.

Today, Americans are scapegoating immigrants, forgetting that, like adultery, it takes two to tango. We all benefit from their cheap labor and then we feel righteous about ourselves when we use the law to show them the door.

Why do we look for people to scapegoat? We are certainly afraid of chaos. We also have a need to feel righteous about ourselves.

There is one more element in John's story about the woman caught in adultery that needs our attention. The scribes and Pharisees were trying to entrap Jesus.

They said this to test him, so that they could have some charge to bring against him.

The scribes and Pharisees intend to make Jesus into a scapegoat as well.

So, what should I say to you about Jesus the scapegoat?

We are drawing close to Easter. We will read Luke's Passion Narrative on Palm Sunday and John's Passion Narrative on Good Friday. I want you all to enter deeply

into the Mystery of the death and resurrection of the Messiah. God the Father sent his only Son to be our Savior. He healed us of our afflictions and cast out our demons. He loved us tenderly. And we thanked him by hanging him on a cross so he might die for our sins. We made him into a scapegoat.

We sinful human beings have made a scapegoat of the Messiah. And, in a mysterious way, this scapegoat has become the Lamb of God for the Passover supper that we celebrate here at the altar during mass.

Do you understand this great teaching of our faith? Scapegoating the weak and defenseless is our meanest and most shameful obsession. We love stoning women caught in the act of adultery. This makes us feel righteous. And God, in his mysterious mercy, has utterly transformed this horrible obsession. Through the cross of Jesus, He has made this sin into the great Sacrament of our redemption.

Who can understand what God has done for us? Easter is drawing near. But before we sing praises to the resurrected Messiah on Easter Sunday, we have to stand together at the foot of the cross of the Messiah and reflect on our obsession with scapegoats.

PART THREE: INSTRUCTIONS FOR *LECTIO DIVINA*

I suggest that you use the readings and my reflections as an opportunity for practicing *lectio divina* ("divine reading"). This is an ancient spiritual practice that started with the great monks in the Syrian and Egyptian desert back in the early days of the Church. It is really quite simple.

Step one: calm your mind (my Buddhist friends describe the mind as "a mango-tree full of chattering monkeys"). I find that paying attention to your breath for a few minutes is a practical and effective way to do this.

Step two: read the readings slowly and attentively. Savor the words as if you were tasting a great Pinot Noir. Don't rush. You are not looking for information or instructions. You are making friends with a sacred text which will bless

you abundantly if you will only open your heart to it and let it speak to you. In *lectio divina*, we are not actually “reading” the Bible. Rather, we are “listening” to the Bible as the sacred words speak to us.

Step three: repeat step two.

Step four: read the homily on the readings.

Step five: Ask yourself a few questions:

- What particular words in the readings call out to me most forcefully?
- What is going on in my life such that these words call to me so forthrightly?
- How am I being asked to change, both interiorly and exteriorly?
- In light of this *lectio divina*, how am I being invited to be of service to the world today?