

**The Lessons Appointed for
Use on the
Fifth Sunday in Lent**



Year C

RCL

Philippians 3:4b-14

Psalm 126

John 12:1-8

The Collect

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

Qui habitat

1 He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, *
abides under the shadow of the Almighty.

2 He shall say to the LORD,
“You are my refuge and my stronghold, *
my God in whom I put my trust.”

9 Because you have made the LORD your refuge, *
and the Most High your habitation,

10 There shall no evil happen to you, *
neither shall any plague come near your dwelling.

11 For he shall give his angels charge over you, *
to keep you in all your ways.

12 They shall bear you in their hands, *
lest you dash your foot against a stone.

13 You shall tread upon the lion and adder; *
you shall trample the young lion and the serpent
under your feet.

14 Because he is bound to me in love,
therefore will I deliver him; *
I will protect him, because he knows my Name.

15 He shall call upon me, and I will answer him; *

I am with him in trouble;

I will rescue him and bring him to honor.

16 With long life will I satisfy him, *
and show him my salvation.

Philippians 3:4b-14

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know

Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have

the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

SERMON

It's the fifth Sunday of Lent. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday. The story we have lived through every spring is nearing its climax. The question I would pose is this: do we engage this story intentionally, or habitually? Is Lent a well-loved seasonal welcome to more agreeable weather, or is Lent, as I assert it must be, a time for us to re-orient ourselves to the Most Holy, a time to re-assess and recommit ourselves to our task as Christians?

Some years ago, I told you that the story of Jesus has to be read back to front. Everything Jesus did must be understood as steps in pursuit of His purpose. Nothing "happened" to Jesus. There was no interruption of His purpose. His mission wasn't crushed by the powers and principalities which opposed him. Jesus was lifted up above humanity on a cross of sin's creation from which

he absorbed the full brunt of the demonic forces that keep subverting our purposes and exhausted them. This is why He came. It is this indisputable fact to which we must re-orient ourselves during Lent. Jesus was born, spoke, traveled and confronted the representatives of secular power for this reason: to show that ultimate power resides with God, not with the impulses which drive us to rationalize away our sinful actions. There is no more important task for a Christian than to find and pursue his or her purpose, for we each were born to a purpose. We are not random clods of earth, but the rich soil, tilled by God, from which the Kingdom grows and spreads.

Our Jewish brethren remind themselves of their relationship to the Most High daily. Twice daily, in fact. In the same way that Christians have the Pater Noster, the Lord's Prayer, Jews also have a great prayer, called the

Shema, which is recited morning and night so that it shall always be before each person's consciousness. It begins

Sh'ma Yis'ra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.

Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one.

**Barukh sheim k'vod malkhuto l'olam va'ed.
Blessed be the Name of His glorious kingdom
for ever and ever.**

The first job of the morning is to proclaim to all the people of God their proper relationship to God, and the consequences of such a relationship:

And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

And these words that I command you today shall be in your heart.

And you shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall speak of them when you sit at home, and when you walk along the

way, and when you lie down and when you rise up.

And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes.

And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Jews recite the Shema morning and evening to remind themselves of their proper relationship with God because they recognize that living in the world presents endless temptations to compromise God's purposes. We cannot give in to these temptations without being false to God's intentions for us. We're too soon old and too late smart, unless we constantly remind ourselves.

We have a good example of how easily we can compromise our purpose in our Gospel passage. We're reading from John. John is both the latest and the most symbolic of the Gospels. To read John requires commitment.

Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

Of course, Judas' concerns weren't really for the poor, but look at Judas' words. He phrases his argument in terms of an act of kindness for the poor. Who could object to that? Surely we must first look after those who suffer? Jesus, however, has but one focus – his purpose.

Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.

In the words of the Shema, "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." The purpose for which

you were created is your reason for being. To be false to your purpose is to be false to your very existence.

WOW! Is it any wonder we find it easier to think about bunnies and candy? It's for the children, we tell ourselves. But, reading Jesus' story back to front means we must view all of His activities, all of His travels, His parables, His sermons, His private moments with His disciples as steps to Golgotha. In the same way, our mission is to find and follow that purpose for which we were created. It's well and good if we do decent and righteous things on our way, but that is not the task which defines our existence, necessarily. Paul wrote to his friends at Philippi, in present-day Turkey, of claims he could make for his own righteousness.

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jamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

That's an impressive list. He says that if you wanted to brag about your good works, he'd have the better claim. He was circumcised on the eighth day following his birth, as Torah prescribed. He was, of course, a Jew but also of the tribe of Benjamin, one of the two tribes that didn't revolt against Solomon's successor, He was born of Hebrews, that is, he did not adopt the faith, but was born to it. He was a Pharisee, a strict interpreter of not only the Torah, but of the "oral Torah" and he describes himself as "blameless" in his adherence to the Law. From a Jewish perspective he has a lot to boast about

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing

value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

Nothing you can do, no righteous act you can perform will substitute for your task, the single-minded pursuit of your purpose. And so we're back where we started – with the Shema.

Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one

Blessed be the Name of His glorious kingdom for ever and ever.

And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

And these words that I command you today shall be in your heart.

And you shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall speak of them when you sit at home, and when you walk along the way, and when you lie down and when you rise up.

Read MY story back to front, oh Lord, and may each step I take be in pursuit of my purpose.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

The qualities of a United States soldier are codified in the Soldier's Creed. In the middle of it are four qualities that apply to us as Christians:

I will always place the mission first.

I will never accept defeat.

I will never quit.

I will never leave a fallen comrade.

Read back to front, our lives should reflect that every step on our way placed the mission first, that we never accepted defeat even though defeat did come our way, that we never quit, and that we never left a fallen comrade.

When we offer the Gospel to the world, it simply has to mean something in the here and now. Our stories must be told back to front, and in recognition that back of it all is the will of God to which we are called.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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