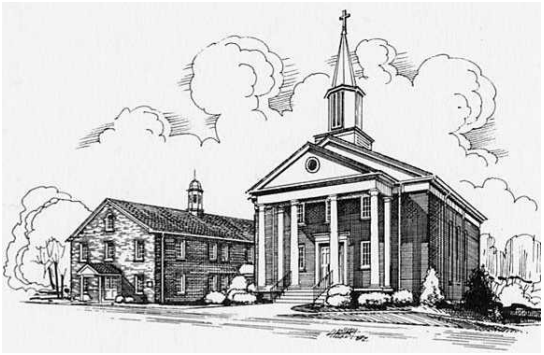
The Lessons Appointed for Use on the



Fifth Sunday in Lent

Year A

RCL

Romans 8:6-11
John 11:1-45
Psalm 130

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 130

De profundis

1 Out of the depths have I called to you, O LORD;
LORD, hear my voice; *
let your ears consider well the voice of my supplication.

2 If you, LORD, were to note what is done amiss, *
O Lord, who could stand?

3 For there is forgiveness with you; *
therefore you shall be feared.

4 I wait for the LORD; my soul waits for him; *
in his word is my hope.

5 My soul waits for the LORD,
more than watchmen for the morning, *
more than watchmen for the morning.

6 O Israel, wait for the LORD, *
for with the LORD there is mercy;

7 With him there is plenteous redemption, *
and he shall redeem Israel from all their sins.

Romans 8:6-11

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law-- indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ

from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

John 11:1-45

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” But when Jesus heard it, he said, “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go

to Judea again.” The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.” After saying this, he told them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.” Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you

may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrec-

tion on the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They fol-

lowed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against

it. Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

SERMON

Lent is a time of reflection and repentance. That does NOT mean it is a time to find something to feel bad about yourself over. Lent is the time we reflect on the direction we have been heading, measure it against the direction God is calling for us to go, then make a fresh start of it. That's hard! One of the wisest mottoes I know is this: "No man knows what he does not know." No man knows the extent of his own ignorance. I see the sun rise in the east and set in the west. If I know nothing about the earth's rotation, I will conclude that it is the sun, not the earth, which is moving. Such an explanation fits well with my observations. It's totally and completely wrong, but I'll cling to it

fiercely for I am unaware of the extent of my own ignorance. Such is the human condition. So accustomed are we to trust the evidence of our imperfect understanding that we satisfy ourselves with our ignorance. We blindside ourselves and are then surprised by the outcome. Lent is the time we set aside to correct our course.

Years ago, I heard the neatest story about a little fish with a large ambition. He had read extensively of The Great Ocean, and he understood that only the most righteous and courageous fish could hope to find it. And so, gathering his courage, the brave little fish struck out on his own to find the ocean. After many days' swimming, and frightful struggles, he found a larger, older fish and addressed

him directly.

“Sir”, he said. “I have read all about The Great Ocean, and have spoken to many wise fish. Some say it is just a myth. Others tell me it is the greatest thing in the world. I have struggled and swum this far and mean to keep on until I find it or die. What can you tell me about the ocean?”

“The OCEAN?”, asked the older fish. “You’re in it! This is the ocean you are swimming in!”

The little fish looked back at the larger fish with scorn. Lifting one fin he said, “This? This is just water. I’m looking for the ocean! You clearly don’t know anything of importance.” We swim in the ocean of God’s love for us. There is nowhere He is not, but so accustomed are we to trust the evidence

of our imperfect understanding that we satisfy ourselves with our ignorance. No man knows what he does not know.

The Gospel of John takes on this unfortunate human weakness in four stories. First is the story of Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus had come to Jesus, secretly, by night, seeking … something.

> "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

That's a nice bit of flattery, but does Nicodemus even know what has drawn him to Jesus? Perhaps not. John was written at a time of great stress between the synagogues and the followers of Christ. Perhaps he wasn't sure it was quite proper to be

seen consulting with Jesus, so he came by night, but was still driven to do so by an itch he couldn't otherwise scratch.

The next story is that of the Samaritan woman at a well. This time, Jesus initiated the conversation by asking for a drink, as the cultural strictures of the time would not allow her to approach him. That was a big step for Jesus to take, yet because he took it he and the woman were able to have a conversation.

Nicodemus was unsure. The woman at the well was walled off by her culture. Jesus speaks to each of them of a mystery, something present and available to them, but unseen by them – the great ocean they had mistaken for just water.

Last Sunday, Jesus came upon a man born blind from birth, a person who had lived his whole life not in darkness, for one must have some concept of light to recognize darkness, but in actual innocence of light. He wasn't living his life conscious of something lost, but in complete ignorance of that which could be.

This Sunday, Jesus receives word that his friend, Lazarus, is sick unto death. Instead of running to the aid of His friend,

> ...he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

After the two days Jesus told His disciples,

> "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

As I prayed over this series of stories, I kept thinking of the phrase "a thing revealed". In the first two stories, John tells us of something available and present which those to whom he is speaking cannot perceive. In the third story, Jesus opens the eyes of a man born blind and thus ignorant of his own darkness. This Sunday, these stories come to a climax when Lazarus is raised from the dead. Raising a man in the tomb for four days is startling enough, but I think John is showing us that the thing revealed, though we live in ignorance of it, has power we can't imagine. I hear the texts re-

mind us that God's creation is more than we can perceive, and that it is important that we understand that we do not live in a meaningless world, but in a world soaked in meaning and mystery. I hear the texts say that we're like the man born blind — we don't have any idea of the darkness in which we live because we have not yet seen light. Darkness isn't a thing unto itself. It is an absence of light and until you have perceived light, you have no conception of darkness of the darkness within which you dwell.

The problem then, and now, is that we don't perceive God's presence and without the light of God we default to believing that our world is limited by the bounds of our understanding. The cultural

forces which forbade the woman at the well from having any conversation with a Jewish man are the same forces which insist in our time that we live in a random, meaningless universe. If it were really so, it would break my heart.

We, poor fish, blinded by our very certain ideas of who God is and what God is not, cannot see Him. We see an act of compassion, and we say, “Oh! What a nice person to have done that.” We don’t see the hand of God in the compassionate act. Yet, John is telling us, there was a time when the Son of God walked among us to teach us that we must be spirit-born to see the story unfolding, to open our eyes, to acquaint us with eternity, to shout, “Lazarus! Come out.” Many, many little fish

swam past Jesus looking for the ocean, seeing nothing but water.

My life, and I'm sure yours, is filled with people who are so confident of their own abilities and righteousness that they explain away the presence of God, even when it is displayed in front of their very eyes. Until your eyes are suddenly opened and you hear a voice commanding "Lazarus, come out!" you will not realize that there is a real Moral Law, and a Power behind the law, and that you have broken that law and put yourself wrong with that Power. Little fish, the ocean is all around you and it matters how you swim in it. Lent is the time for course correction.

Those who are baffled by our conviction that the

world is a meaningful place, the creation and joy of God Himself, are not our enemies. Neither are those who conceive of God differently than we do. Our enemy is the forces of the world which insist that death is the way of the world, that darkness is a thing unto itself, that there is no hope beyond mindless randomness.

The culture in which we live will tell you that the world in which we live is an “easy come, easy go, little high, little low, anyway the wind blows doesn't really matter to me” sort of world. The culture in which we live tries to make God’s very existence a matter of opinion. It will call you superstitious and old fashioned for your belief that the world swims in the ocean of God’s love. Swim

anyway, little fish. Don’t just say a prayer. Make your life a prayer.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

"Oh God, save me from myself, save me from myself … this masterful self which manipulates your creation … this self which throws the thick shadow of its own purposes and desires in every direction in which I try to look, so that I cannot see what it is that you, my Lord and God, are showing to me. Teach me to stand out of my own light, and let your daylight shine."[1]

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.

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1 Austin Farrer, Warden of Keble College, Oxford, 1960-1968, quoted in Absolute Truths, Susan Howatch

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

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