

## 4 Lent Year B readings and commentary

**Summary by Dale J. Sieverding:** There is no other symbol so associated with the followers of Jesus Christ as the cross. You have the cross in your homes, you have seen it in hospitals, and we have seen suffering people clutch the cross. This is one powerful meaning Jesus gave us when he was “lifted up” on the cross. It gives us the consolation that no suffering — physical or psychological — no loneliness, no despair, no temptation could be greater than the physical suffering, the mental anguish and even the depression of the Lord. He even at one point asks, “O God, why have you forsaken me?” No one could be more alone and desolate and in greater suffering. The crucifix assures us that however much pain, suffering, loneliness, and isolation we experience, Christ has been through this experience, too. He, too, has shared the depth of misery. Jesus the Christ has gone before us. He is our salvation. While we were still in sin, Christ came to bring life to “we who were once in death.” We begin our life by the sign of the cross. We begin our worship by the sign of the cross. We live by the sign of the cross. We die by this sign.

“Behold, behold, the wood of the cross, on which is hung our salvation, o come let us adore.”

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### **First Reading: 2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23**

#### **A reading from the second Book of Chronicles**

In those days, all the princes of Judah, the priests, and the people  
added infidelity to infidelity,  
practicing all the abominations of the nations  
and polluting the LORD's temple  
which he had consecrated in Jerusalem.

Early and often did the LORD, the God of their fathers,  
send his messengers to them,  
for he had compassion on his people and his dwelling place.  
But they mocked the messengers of God,  
despised his warnings, and scoffed at his prophets,  
until the anger of the LORD against his people was so inflamed  
that there was no remedy.  
Their enemies burnt the house of God,  
tore down the walls of Jerusalem,  
set all its palaces afire,  
and destroyed all its precious objects.

Those who escaped the sword were carried captive to Babylon, where they became servants of the king of the Chaldeans and his sons until the kingdom of the Persians came to power.

All this was to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah:

"Until the land has retrieved its lost sabbaths, during all the time it lies waste it shall have rest while seventy years are fulfilled."

In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD inspired King Cyrus of Persia to issue this proclamation throughout his kingdom, both by word of mouth and in writing:

"Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia:

All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD, the God of heaven, has given to me, and he has also charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

Whoever, therefore, among you belongs to any part of his people, let him go up, and may his God be with him!"

### **The word of the Lord.**

**Commentary 2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23: by Maribeth Howell, OP:** Today's first reading from the final chapter of this book, is part of a larger section of 2 Chronicles that details the infidelity of the people. Specifically, the first thirteen verses of this chapter identify several kings of Judah and their behavior. Three of the four kings are given this evaluation: "He did evil in the eyes of the Lord." The chronicler's history makes clear that the exile is the product of human infidelity, it is not result of God being short tempered or having a bad day. There are a number of places within this and other chapters where the author indicates that more than one king had failed to heed the voice of God's prophets. In particular, the words found in 2 Chr 7:14 tell of God's designs: "If my people, upon whom my name has been pronounced, humble themselves and pray, and seek my presence and turn from their evil ways, I will hear them from heaven and pardon their sins and revive their land."

Although these verses do not give voice to a repentant people, they do tell us that the exile in Babylon is nearing its end. God will use king Cyrus of Persia to overturn Babylonian rule and once again, God's people will be liberated from a foreign land. Jerusalem will be restored. All this will come about because of the gracious love of God.

The concluding verses of this book, which are also found at the beginning of the book of Ezra, are reminiscent of the message found in the opening

verses of Isaiah 40, which so beautifully announce Israel's homecoming. Most definitely, exile and death are not the final words.

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**Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 137:1-2, 3, 4-5, 6**

✠(6ab) Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!

By the streams of Babylon  
we sat and wept  
when we remembered Zion.  
On the aspens of that land  
we hung up our harps.

For there our captors asked of us  
the lyrics of our songs,  
and our despoilers urged us to be joyous:  
"Sing for us the songs of Zion!"

How could we sing a song of the LORD  
in a foreign land?  
If I forget you, Jerusalem,  
may my right hand be forgotten!

May my tongue cleave to my palate  
if I remember you not,  
if I place not Jerusalem  
ahead of my joy.

**Commentary Psalm 137:1-2, 3, 4-5, 6 by Tom Conry:** Tip O'Neill famously declared that "all politics is local." In much the same way, all religion was local in the ancient world, or at least much more localized than it is now. This insistence on the importance of place is the context of the question that stabs at the heart of the psalm: how can we sing a song of the Lord in a foreign land? The retort is a response to the sarcastic demands of the conqueror, a manner of speech that little Israel knew all too well. It expresses itself in the bitterness of the curses of verses 7-9, which here are left out of what is sung in the liturgy.

Poor Psalm 137 may never recover in the popular imagination from its romanticization in Godspell. Its roots probably lie in the memory of communal lamentation rites in Babylon, along alluvial streams between the Tigris and the Euphrates that served to remind the community of how far removed they were from the Jordan and their own identity.

## Second Reading Ephesians 2:4-10

### A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Ephesians

Brothers and sisters:

God, who is rich in mercy,  
because of the great love he had for us,  
even when we were dead in our transgressions,  
brought us to life with Christ — by grace you have been saved —,  
raised us up with him,  
and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus,  
that in the ages to come  
he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace  
in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

For by grace you have been saved through faith,  
and this is not from you; it is the gift of God;  
it is not from works, so no one may boast.

For we are his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the good works  
that God has prepared in advance,  
that we should live in them.

### The word of the Lord.

**Commentary Ephesians 2:4-10 by John Paul Heil:** Main Theme: By GRACE we have been SAVED through FAITH in Christ Jesus.

Because our sinfulness destines us not just for physical death but for eternal death, damnation, and separation from God, we were “dead” in our transgressions. But God, out of his rich mercy and great love, brought us to “life”—the risen, eternal life—with Christ. It is purely by God’s freely given grace, then, that we have been saved from eternal death. God gave us a share not only in the risen life of Christ but in his exaltation, as God “seated us with him in the heavens.” This means that we have been seated with Christ at the right hand of God, “far above every principality, authority, power, and dominion, and every name that is named not only in this age but also in the one to come” (1:21). God did this for our future hope, that in ages to come God “might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.”

That by God’s grace we are saved through faith means that we are not saved by doing the “works” of the Mosaic Law, so that we might “boast” or rely upon them in the final judgment. Rather, we have been saved by the freely given gift of God, so that we might do “good works” as part of our living the risen life of Christ.

### **Gospel Acclamation John 3:16**

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,  
so everyone who believes in him might have eternal life.

### **Gospel John 3:14-21**

#### **A reading from the holy Gospel according to John**

Jesus said to Nicodemus:

"Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert,  
so must the Son of Man be lifted up,  
so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,  
so that everyone who believes in him might not perish  
but might have eternal life.

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world,  
but that the world might be saved through him.

Whoever believes in him will not be condemned,  
but whoever does not believe has already been condemned,  
because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

And this is the verdict,  
that the light came into the world,  
but people preferred darkness to light,  
because their works were evil.

For everyone who does wicked things hates the light  
and does not come toward the light,  
so that his works might not be exposed.

But whoever lives the truth comes to the light,  
so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God.

#### **The Gospel of the Lord.**

**Commentary John 3:14-21 by Tom Conry:** With characteristic irony, the anonymous author of John describes Jesus' crucifixion as being "lifted up." This reference to the story of Moses and the effigy of the serpent (Num 21:8-9) captures the idea of Jesus as a contradictory "sign" (an important concept in John) that saves. Just as the sign of the serpent is ordinarily dangerous and deadly, so also is the image of Jesus when he is "lifted up" (i.e. crucified). Only those who have the courage to steadfastly decode the meaning of the sign (i.e. those who are in the interpretive community) will have "life" – another important part of the Johannine language, one which focuses not on an afterlife but on the quality of our life together in the here

and now. The cross itself, the instrument of imperial humiliation, has now become the instrument of exaltation. It is the way that Jesus returns to his true home, the source of his authority and identity.

John spends considerable time on the symbols of light and darkness. It is a way of drawing the boundaries as clearly as possible, a rhetorical "line in the sand." This is all the more effective in the Mediterranean world of the first and second centuries, in which the values that are most respected are external, not internal. In our society, we try to judge others and ourselves by what we think is in the heart, the internal self. Jesus' society was significantly different. People judged themselves and others by how well they conformed to the ethics of the group. Thus, special value was attached to doing everything openly. For example, the windows and doors of houses were customarily left open during the day so that every passer-by could see that nothing dishonorable was going on. Everything that was open was "of the light," while things that were hidden in Johannine society were "of the darkness." Thus John emphasizes that, for those who follow the way of Jesus – who are "lifted up" like him – everything will be clearly seen.

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