

Lent 2021

5 Weeks with God's Word

Practical Guidelines for Group Faith Sharing

Since the goal of your group's time together is not "study" but sharing your faith experience, no one needs to be an expert on the Bible or on doctrine. We are each an expert on how we live our Christian faith. So we learn from one another as we share our own unique Christian journey and how our Christian beliefs and values influence our daily lives. The point is not just to learn about our faith (the "what") but to find ways to make that faith effective in our lives (the "so what"). All of our learning is ultimately for developing a better relationship with God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit at work within us.

Sharing Our Discipleship Journey

A faith-sharing group provides a simple way to gather with others, read scripture, reflect on its meaning and share our insights with one another. One way to grow as followers of Jesus is to read and pray the scriptures with others. To encourage you to get involved in sharing your faith with others this Lent, these 5 sessions encourage you to explore each Sunday's Mass readings with a small group. Gathering a group for faith sharing does not require any special permission or elaborate materials. Your group can simply begin by gathering together for reading, reflection, discussion and prayer about the Sunday readings.

Using a Eucharistic Format

A good way to structure your time together is to follow the basic eucharistic format: **Take, Bless, Break, Share.**

Take: Each week, choose a convenient time and gather the group members, recalling that when we hear God's Word it is as if God were present talking directly to us.

Bless: After gathering, begin with a prayer to the Holy Spirit to guide your sharing or pray the Opening Prayer from the Sunday Mass or another prayer of your choosing.

Break: Read the Lectionary readings from the Sunday Mass out loud, pausing in between each reading for some brief time for quiet personal reflection.

Share: After the reading and group reflection time, invite each group member to share his or her answer to the suggested questions for sharing provided for each weekly session. End with ideas about what you might do in the coming week as individuals and as a group to make the message of the readings more applicable to your lives.

Closing Prayer: End your sharing time by exchanging a sign of peace and praying the Lord's Prayer together.

The 10 Commandments of Faith Sharing

1. Everyone shares in the wisdom.

In faith-sharing, participants share their experience of living in relation to God and others—which no one knows better than that person. Each person's relation to God holds some truth about the variety of ways God works in us. The goal is to grow in our relationship with God and one another.

2. Everyone gets a chance to share.

Some people need encouragement to share and nothing helps this more than providing a respectful and supportive group atmosphere in which everyone is accepted.

3. Focus on a problem if it arises.

Sometimes it helps to get problems out in the open. What problems do you all share? Family or health concerns? Fear of death? Loneliness or depression? Lack of faith? Focus on sin?

4. Find a solution using Jesus' example.

Jesus' example often offers the best way to approach the problems you face. Consider how Jesus acted to solve problems by bringing peace and blessings to others?

5. No one should dominate the dialog.

If one person's views or problems begin to take up too much time, the group needs to recognize and remedy this.

6. Be open to new perspectives.

People in any group might find different meanings in the same scripture text depending on their interest, experience or point of view. For life's challenges and human relationships there is seldom a single solution that suits everyone.

7. If you disagree, do so with respect and care.

If you wish to disagree, make sure that you first affirm the other person, then understand what the other has said, and finally respectfully offer your own perspective.

8. Welcome Jesus in your midst.

Faith sharing can also be a time to pause, relax, close the eyes and welcome the presence of Jesus. Invite Jesus to sit with you and hear your stories.

9. Rely on feelings, images, scripture and tradition.

According to each person's own comfort level, share feelings and express them in image and metaphor. Perhaps a certain image will remind you of a favorite parable or scriptural passage. Maybe your images relate to the rich tradition of our Church's doctors and saints.

10. Don't be afraid to pray together.

Faith sharing can also be an opportunity for praising God so sometimes pray by reading a psalm together.

5 Weeks with God's Word

The 1st Sunday of Lent (February 21, 2021)

Lent is an opportunity to renew our commitment to our covenant relationship with God through Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit. In today's readings we are reminded of God's desire to be in a covenant relationship with us. As creator, God fashioned the world for us to live in (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], #279–301). As covenant-maker, God entered into a special relationship with humanity (CCC, #302–314). And when humanity frustrated God's desire for a relationship, God used a flood to punish sinful humanity, excepting Noah and his family, with whom a covenant was established. God's desire for the right kind of relationship with us demonstrates God's faithfulness and loving care (CCC, #410–12, 422–29, 1647). The author of 1 Peter explains that we are saved through the cleansing water of baptism. In today's Gospel, Jesus' 40 days of temptation in the wilderness end with the proclamation of God's "Good News" that God has now drawn near once again in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

First Reading: Genesis 9:8-15

Both Jewish and Christian tradition attribute the writing of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible also called the *Torah*, to Moses. Modern scholars now recognize that the Pentateuch is composed of several strands of tradition preserved and edited over centuries of Jewish history. The story of the flood is itself an ancient one, shared by several Near Eastern cultures, but the biblical account has its own unique theological perspective.

Through Noah and his family, God makes the first covenant with all humans and all creation. The sign of the covenant, the rainbow, is a sign of peace, showing that God's wrath was done and the stability of the natural order was guaranteed. This first covenant demonstrates the eagerness of God to be in relationship with us and the trustworthiness of God who makes promises and keeps them.

Second Reading: 1 Peter 3:18-22

For many scholars, this letter's excellent Greek style, its use of the *Septuagint* (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) and the lack of direct reference to Jesus' teaching suggest that the letter was not written directly by Peter, a Galilean fisherman, but perhaps by a missionary companion, a disciple or a scribe acting as secretary.

In today's reading, the author seems to have used parts of a hymn to frame statements about Jesus' authority and

the meaning of baptism. Christ died "once," not only as a model to be followed but also to bring new access to God.

The author draws parallels between the destructive, but cleansing, waters of the flood and the cleansing, saving waters of baptism. Verse 21b is translated more literally, "a pledge to God from (or of) a good conscience." Thus, the believer's baptism is effective not as a physical washing, but as a sign of one's new life in Christ.

Gospel: Mark 1:12-15

Today's Gospel describes Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Jesus' baptismal empowerment by the Holy Spirit (1:9-11) immediately leads into a general time of testing. Jesus' 40 days recall the Hebrews' 40 years of wandering in the wilderness (Dt 8:2), Moses' 40 days with God on the mountain (Ex 24:18; 34:28) and Elijah's 40 days journey (1 Kgs 19:8). Exposure to testing as God's Son and messiah is a continuing theme of Jesus' ministry, in the desire of the crowds for a sign (8:11), in Peter's rebuke (8:32-33) and in the jeers of the crowds at his crucifixion (15:29-32).

Apparently Jesus was prompted to begin his own public work when John the Baptist's active ministry ends. Jesus now proclaims that "this is the time of fulfillment." The work of the prophets, including John the Baptist, prepared for God's kingly rule—which Jesus declares is now here.

In Jesus, however, all God's prophetic words find their fulfillment. The prophets were called to speak God's message, while Jesus *is* God's message. "The kingdom of God is at hand" (v. 15), that is, God's anticipated rule over the world and the eradication of evil is more than merely nearby, it is present here and now in Jesus himself.

Questions for Sharing

- What do you hope for most during this coming Lent?
- What can you recall about your "call" or invitation to follow Jesus in a more conscious and adult way?
- What lured you or made you want to turn to Jesus?
- Where and to what degree has God been most present and active in your life?
- How did your baptism enter you into a covenant relationship with God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit?
- What obligations do you have toward God because of your baptismal covenant?
- What temptations most challenge you not to follow the ways of Jesus now? How can you resist them?

5 Weeks with God's Word

The 2nd Sunday of Lent (February 28, 2021)

Today we learn how God tested the fidelity of Abram (Abraham). Having been promised covenant blessings through his only son Isaac, Abraham is now told to sacrifice Isaac. Against all natural human love for his son (CCC, #2214–2233) and legal prohibitions against murder (CCC, #2258–2330), he undertakes the awful process of killing his son to show his willingness to do whatever God asks. God responds by saving Isaac and promising again that blessings will come from the covenant relationship. Our fidelity to God's demands will "transfigure" our lives as it does that of Abraham and Jesus. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, assures us that God is totally and absolutely "for us." In the Gospel account of Jesus' transfiguration, Elijah, Moses—and the voice of God—all endorse the completeness of God's revelation in Jesus as God's beloved son.

First Reading: Genesis 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18

The account of Isaac's offering is the climax of the story of Abraham's relationship with God. At God's command, Abraham has already cut himself off from his past, from his land and family, and must rely only on the promise of future blessings. Now God commands him to cut off his future, the heir of the promise, his beloved son Isaac—and no new replacement promise is given.

The story is simply told, without direct expression of the thoughts or feelings of the participants. Its power comes from the events and relationships themselves. The story centers upon the exemplary faith of Abraham and the God-tested strength of the bond between God and Abraham. Abraham demonstrates his faithfulness by his readiness to act in obedience, trusting in God's faithfulness to God's promises instead of futilely trying to take matters into his own hands to make God's promises work out.

Second Reading: Romans 8:31b-34

Today's reading, cast in the form of a public debate, uses ironic questions and parallel phrases. Paul assures the Christians in Rome that they have nothing to fear, for the crucifixion shows the extent of God's love toward all believers. God and Christ are "for us" (v. 31) so no other authority or force can separate the Christian from God.

In verse 31, Paul alludes to Psalm 118:6 and then applies the example of Abraham's offering of Isaac to God the Father's offering of his son Jesus. For Paul, Psalm 44:22 (v. 36), applied by the rabbis to Jewish martyrs, indicates that

suffering is part of every Christian's life.

Gospel: Mark 9:2-10

Commentators have interpreted the account of the transfiguration differently, as either a straightforward narrative of a vision or as a mystical experience elaborated by symbolism. The account is strongly shaped by allusions to God's appearance to Moses on Mount Sinai, which likewise occurred in a cloud on a mountain after "six days" (Ex 24:15-18). And Moses' appearance was also transfigured (Ex 34:29-35).

The voice from the cloud (who else but God!) repeats the statement made at Jesus' baptism (1:11) now with the additional command "Listen to him" (v. 7). As Moses represents the tradition of the *Torah*, the law, so Elijah represents the prophetic tradition. Both appear with Jesus and then disappear, leaving "Jesus alone with them" (v. 8).

The "tents" Peter proposes building would be like those built in the vineyards at the harvest festival of *Succoth*, the Israelite Feast of Booths or Tabernacles also associated in Jesus' time with the annual covenant renewal. On the day of salvation the Lord would again dwell in the midst of the people, but this time has not yet come, so Jesus enjoins the disciples to silence. The disciples have seen Jesus for a moment in the dazzling light in which they will also see him after the resurrection, but the Son of Man's true nature would be misunderstood if he were seen only as a divinely acclaimed wonder worker. Only his crucifixion and resurrection will reveal his true identity and saving work.

Questions for Sharing

- What did Abraham believe about God before this event?
- What did Abraham learn about God? about himself?
- What sacrifices does God ask of us? What has happened when we have made such sacrifices?
- How does Paul's description of God compare to the God of Abraham in Genesis 22?
- What contemporary realities seem to sever us most from the love of God?
- Like Peter, how have you experienced faith as a process of having to change your bright ideas for Christ's ways?
- Describe your experience of spiritual transformation because of God's presence in yourself and your life.
- Which verses from today's readings are most helpful for your Lenten renewal?

5 Weeks with God's Word

The 3rd Sunday of Lent (March 7, 2021)

Today we are reminded that our covenant relationship with God entails obligations for both ourselves and God. Our obligations are spelled out in the commandments revealed to Moses on Sinai (CCC, #2052–82). These ten guidelines for behavior that is pleasing to God still serve as our fundamental source of moral behavior. When our human practices deviate from these norms, as exemplified in the Gospel that describes how Jesus' passionate love for God ignites his anger against those who treat God's house with disrespect, we must be willing to reexamine our lives and change them (CCC, #1430–39) to be more in keeping with these divinely given guidelines (CCC, #1145–62, 2655). Paul assures the Corinthians that their commitment to Christ, though appearing foolish to the world, is really the powerful core of all Christian faith.

First Reading: Exodus 20:1-17

The Ten Commandments set forth the Israelites' duties first to God and then to those within the covenant community. These covenant demands guide their special relationship to God and specify the ways that right relationships are endangered or violated. The commandments concerning human interrelationships have parallels in other ancient cultures, but those concerning the people's relationship to God are unique to the Old Testament.

Verses 4-6 probably originally forbade physical representations of Yahweh, confirmed by the absence of such artifacts in excavations of Israelite sites even when idols of other gods are found. Verse 7 is not a prohibition against God's name in oaths, but against swearing falsely or misusing God's name for spells and incantations. This led eventually to a refusal among pious Jews to pronounce the sacred name of Yahweh at all. Verse 12 is directed more toward the responsibilities of grown children for the support of and respect for aged parents than toward the behavior of young children. Verse 13 prohibits murder, not capital punishment or warfare. "Covet" (v. 17) probably implies an attempt to acquire unlawfully ("defraud," Mark 10:19).

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:22-25

Paul sets forth the general principle that the wisdom of God, as manifested in "the message about the cross" (1:18), appears to be folly to those wise in worldly terms, while to those in the process of salvation, it reveals God's power. Human-centered wisdom, which is itself closely related to

our efforts, will be overturned by God.

Knowledge of God is possible through natural revelation, but the certainty sought for by submitting God to the world's criteria of proof, either pragmatically in "signs" (v. 22) or intellectually in "wisdom" (v. 22) is not possible. God's act of "foolishness" and "weakness" (v. 25) confounds both Jewish messianic expectations of the messiah and Greek beliefs about a changeless divinity.

This principle of reversal is illustrated by the Corinthian community itself. Most of its members were not from the intellectual, political or social elite. (Indeed, the gospel message appealed greatly to slaves, women and children!) Surprisingly, God chooses what the world counts as worthless to overturn the world's expectations.

Gospel: John 2:13-25

Today's reading tells of Jesus' disruption of the ordinary daily Temple business and the questioning of his authority to do it. His actions are an illustrative parable similar to the prophetic actions performed by Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

In the Temple courtyard, unblemished animals were sold for sacrifice, and pagan coins were exchanged for Jewish ones to pay the Temple tax. The merchants had set up shop in the Temple's outer courts, the only area open to Gentiles who came to pray and seek Israel's God. Thus Jesus attacks not only the religiously unsuitable Temple trade but also its very existence.

Jesus' death and resurrection are the ultimate sign of his authority. As the water of the old covenant has been replaced with the wine of the new (2:1-11), so Jesus replaces the Temple now as the focus of worship for Christians.

Questions for Sharing

- What values do the commandments uphold?
- What contemporary values—either in the Church or society—do they not uphold? How would you write new commandments to express these values?
- Like Paul, in what weakness have I found God's power?
- In what folly have I discovered God's wisdom?
- What does Jesus' action reveal about his priorities? How might I share these priorities with the same zeal he does?
- What makes it most difficult to prioritize between my business life and my prayer life?
- Which verses from today's readings are most helpful for your Lenten renewal?

5 Weeks with God's Word

The 4th Sunday of Lent (March 14, 2021)

Today's readings remind us that our entry into Christian covenant community came with our baptism. In the early Church, baptism was especially important as the sign of entry into the community. Going down into the waters of baptism symbolized entering into the death of Jesus by our own "drowning." Coming up from the water symbolized our being born again into a new life with Christ (CCC, #1213-28, 1262-66). Thus all Christians are "born again," in Nicodemus' words, at our baptism. But just as in our natural life we do not stay infants forever but need to grow up, so also being born again is just the first moment in our long process of growing up through life-long conversion (CCC, #2006-11). Our Lenten journey confronts us with the Christian challenge to grow up in our relationship with God and others. 2 Chronicles explains how God, moved with compassion, restores the people of Israel, despite their unfaithfulness. Paul reminds the Ephesians that God has graciously lifted us out of sin's grave and prepared us to do good works. John tells us that Jesus is God's gift to us, the ultimate expression of God's mercy and love.

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

The books 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah were composed in the late fifth century BC by one or more court-sponsored historians. This chronicler wrote with the concerns of the restored post-exilic Jewish community in view. After their return from exile, they struggled to figure out the meaning of the destruction of their Temple, the exile and the end of the Davidic monarchy. At stake was whether God was still faithful to the covenant with David.

The chronicler sees the rebuilding of the Temple as the primary sign of God's continuing relationship with Israel. The role of the monarchy is subjugated in importance to the law and the Temple service. The chronicler thus tries to present a pattern to guide the religious life of his own time.

Today's reading is based upon 2 Kings 25:1-21, but the events described are put into theological perspective. Whereas 2 Kings primarily blames the kings for Jerusalem's downfall, the chronicler holds the priesthood and the people likewise accountable. In accordance with Jeremiah's prophecies, the land will lie desolate and keep sabbath rest. Nevertheless, there is also an expectation of restoration.

Second Reading: Ephesians 2:4-10

This letter was probably written as a circular letter to be

shared by several communities in the Roman Province of Asia. Chapter 1 centers upon the privileges of the believer's new life in Christ. Today's reading focuses on the process of restoration in which God alone takes the initiative.

In verses 8-10, there is a double aspect to salvation. It begins with "grace" (v. 5) and results in good "works" (v. 10). Faith is here a gift from God, not something we do. Good works are not a prerequisite but follow from faith. Living a Christian life is not the cause of salvation, but its effect since faith must always lead to good works.

Gospel: John 3:14-21

Today's reading is taken from the first of John's lengthy expositions of Jesus' teachings. This discourse as a whole (3:1-21) moves from the work of the Spirit (3:3-8) to that of the Son (3:11-15) to that of the Father (3:16-21). Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night because of his interest in the signs Jesus has performed. Jesus seeks to lead him from focusing on these outward manifestations to a recognition of their deeper inward significance.

The "lifting up" of the Son of Man points first to his exaltation on the cross and then in his resurrection and ascension. For John, these are a single act of glorification, offering believers eternal life by participation in God's life.

Verse 16, one of the most familiar verses of scripture, succinctly describes God's goal—to offer eternal life, God's motivation—love for the world, and God's strategy—giving the Son. Those who reject Jesus live now in darkness and fear and will face condemnation on judgment day. Those who believe "in the name of the only Son of God" (v. 18) now enjoy the promise and reality of eternal life, live in light and truth, and will escape future condemnation.

Questions for Sharing

- In what ways are we undergoing an exile experience today? Who, like Cyrus, might God be using to call us out of this exile to a restored homeland?
- How does Paul help us to understand both Christ's role and our role in God's action for salvation?
- What in Jesus' words to Nicodemus most surprises you?
- What evidence do you see on the evening news that people still prefer darkness to light?
- What in yourself is hardest to expose to the light? Why?
- Which verses from today's readings are most helpful for your Lenten renewal?

5 Weeks with God's Word

The 5th Sunday of Lent (March 21, 2021)

Today we are reminded that God's desire for a covenant community according to God's guidelines was finally inaugurated in Jesus. He described this as the kingdom of God. The promise of a new covenant by the prophet Jeremiah—a relationship of intimacy, forgiveness and faithfulness—is fulfilled in the community of disciples that Jesus gathers (CCC, #62–64, 1965–74), including ourselves who now share in Jesus' mission to draw all creation back into right relationship with God (CCC, #774–76, 849–56) by continuing the prophetic, priestly and kingly work that Jesus began while on earth (CCC, #897–913). The author of Hebrews describes God's action that makes this relationship possible: through his suffering and submission, Jesus becomes the source of our salvation. The Gospel describes Jesus' awareness that his death is fast approaching and his determination to face it as part of God's plan for salvation.

First Reading: Jeremiah 31:31-34

Jeremiah's prophetic ministry to Judah (627–580 BC) spans the period leading up to Judah's final defeat by the Babylonians (587 BC), the destruction of the Temple and the exile of much of the population. Today's reading comes from a section called the "book of consolation" (ch. 30–31) in which are gathered Jeremiah's oracles of hope for Israel's eventual renewal and restoration.

Jeremiah looks forward to a "new covenant" (v. 31) that will be written on the heart, which is the source of the distinctively human activities of feeling, thinking and deciding (our "self"). This covenant is not new in content, for the *Torah*, the written law, is not replaced. It is new, however, in the means of its realization. The internalization of the covenant will enable people to keep it. The will of the individual shall become one with the will of God. There will be no need of teachers, for all will know the Lord, not just in intellectual terms but in the Hebrew sense of a close, intense and intimate personal relationship.

Second Reading: Hebrews 5:7-9

The letter to the Hebrews is a tightly-woven theological essay stressing that Christianity has fulfilled the ancient promises to Judaism. The author's purpose is to demonstrate the superiority of: (1) Jesus to the prophets, the angels and Moses (1:3–4:13); (2) Jesus' priesthood to the Levitical priesthood (4:14–7:28); and (3) Jesus' one sacrifice to the many Levitical sacrifices (8:1–10:18).

According to Israelite tradition, Jesus could not be a priest because he was from the tribe of Judah not Levi. But the author of Hebrews argues that in fact Jesus is the real High Priest because he, like Aaron and Melchizedek, was not self-appointed but chosen by God for his priestly ministry on our behalf. His unique priesthood is modeled upon that of Melchizedek (Gen 14:18-20), whom the author later claims to be superior to Abraham and thus to Abraham's descendant Levi and the Levitical priests.

For his lifelong submission to God, Jesus was saved not *from* death but *through* death. Whereas human beings learn to be obedient because they suffer for disobedience, Jesus, through his suffering, learned that obedience exacts a price in human life. Through his obedient suffering, Jesus is "made perfect" (v. 9) to become our source of salvation.

Gospel: John 12:20-33

The appearance of "some Greeks" (v. 20, probably those called "God-fearers"—who were attracted to Judaism but did not receive circumcision nor fully observe the *Torah*) indicates that Jesus' ministry to Israel is now complete.

Jesus announces that his "hour has come" (v. 23), the time for his glorification in death, resurrection and return to God. As Jesus' mission bears fruit only through his death, so Christians bear fruit only through their death to self. The term *hate* (v. 25) reinforces the challenge to separate oneself from what this life offers. It does not express an emotion so much as an action requiring separation.

Jesus freely accepts his destiny in a plea that God's plan be carried out as the expression of God's name, that is, of God's essential character. The victory over Satan is won through Jesus' "lifting up" (v. 32), a dual term for both his crucifixion and his exaltation), but its working out in this life is the ongoing task of Christians.

Questions for Sharing

- What makes Jeremiah's promised covenant "new"?
- What does this covenant offer that the old one did not?
- Hebrews claims that suffering teaches obedience (meaning submission to another's will)? In your own experience, how does this happen?
- In what ways is Christ's death a judgment on the world?
- What is it about the cross that draws people to Christ?
- Which verses from today's readings are most helpful for your Lenten renewal?