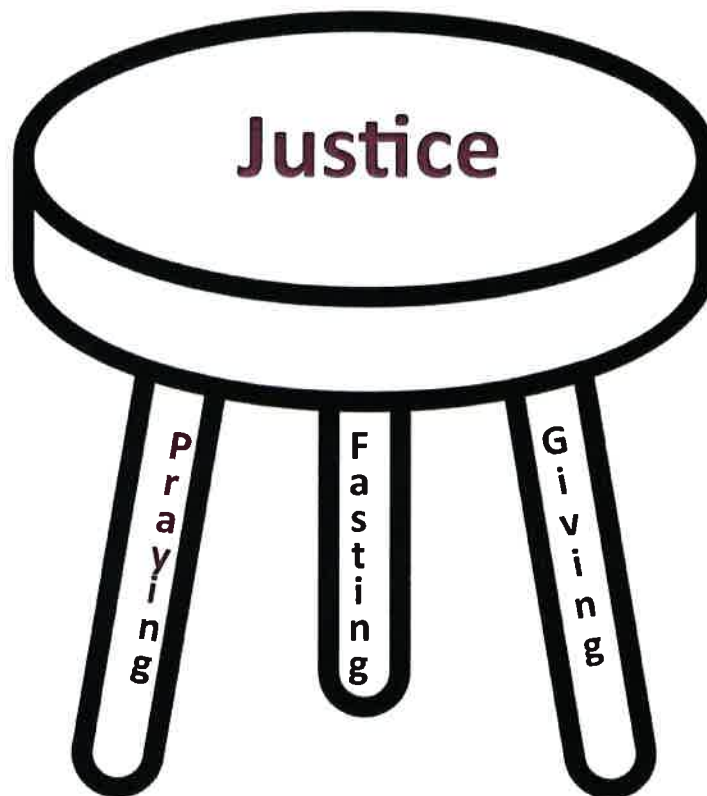




St. Cronan Church

Lent, 2024

Praying, Fasting and Giving
Awaken Our Sense of Social Justice



*Let us observe our Lent thus, giving our sufferings, our bloodshed, our sorrow
the same value that Christ gave to his own condition
of poverty, oppression, abandonment, and injustice*

St. Oscar Romero

This year, let us unpack the three symbols of Lent – prayer, fasting and giving – and apply them to our work for justice as we look to reexamine and change ourselves for our role in God’s creation.

“It is time to act, and in Lent, to act also means to pause. To pause in prayer, to receive the word of God, to pause like the Samaritan in the presence of a wounded brother or sister. Love of God and love of neighbor are one love. Not to have other gods is to pause in the presence of God beside the flesh of our neighbor. For this reason, prayer, giving and fasting are not three unrelated acts, but a single movement of openness and self-emptying, in which we cast out the idols that weigh us down, the attachments that imprison us. Then the atrophied and isolated heart will revive. Slow down, then, and pause! The contemplative dimension of life that Lent helps us to rediscover will release new energies. In the presence of God, we become brothers and sisters, more sensitive to one another: in place of threats and enemies, we discover companions and fellow travelers. This is God’s dream, the promised land to which we journey once we have left our slavery behind.”

Pope Francis, Message for Lent, 2024

The last time we heard the Lent Year B readings (2021), the world was one year into a global pandemic. It felt like everything outside spelled danger.

Nevertheless, then and now, **we have God’s covenant**. Times of turmoil and even destruction will come (and are here), but **God’s covenant cannot be broken**. Covenants do not bind precepts or ideas, but (rather) the covenant makers, one to another.

Our role in the covenant, then, cannot be to sail along, waiting out the storm, but rather to **learn how to live with and love those God has bound us to**. The rainbows (1st Reading, 1st Sunday of Lent) – as well as the clouds – remind us that God is near.

Questions to ponder and discuss:

- **Lent is a time for entering more deeply into the profound mysteries of Christ’s life through the Gospels. The Word of God is meant to be an encounter. How does our participation in prayer, fasting and giving during Lent crystalize the mission of Christ in our hearts? What is holding you back from doing these things?**
- **Prayer takes us outside of our individual lives. How does prayer allow you to see yourself in a different way? What propels you forward?**

First Sunday of Lent

Fasting makes sense if it really chips away at our security and, as a consequence, benefits someone else, if it helps us cultivate the style of the good Samaritan, who bent down to his brother in need and took care of him.

Pope Francis

Prayer and fasting offer us an opportunity to journey into the barren wilderness where we can see both the harshness and splendor of creation. In the "desert" we can see the impact of our good deeds and feel the pain of our misdeeds. Prayer and fasting offer us an opportunity for at-one-ment, and invites us to give up what makes us comfortable to show that we are devoted to change and open to mercy (metanoia). To repent is not just to be sorry for sin but to completely change our minds and lives.

As God did in his covenant with Noah, God takes the initiative in creating covenant with us at our Baptism. This covenant is a relationship of mutual belonging. We live out our lives in response to God's covenant. The season of Lent is our opportunity to review our relationship with God and all God's people. There is a key Hebrew word which sums up this mutual relationship and it is HESED, which stands for God's unconditional and everlasting love, a love that seeks justice on behalf of the least of God's people.

"Recalling the Exodus of the Hebrew people from Egypt, the Holy Father explains that our journey through the desert can be a season of grace – not an abstract journey, but a concrete path that involves seeing the world as it is and hearing the cries of our oppressed brothers and sisters." (Christopher Wells, *"Pope Francis: Lent is a time of conversion and freedom"*, (2024)

"Our Lenten journey will be concrete if ...we realize that even today we remain under the rule of Pharaoh. A rule that makes us weary and indifferent. A model of growth that divides and robs us of a future. Earth, air and water are polluted, but so are our souls. True, Baptism has begun our process of liberation, yet there remains in us an inexplicable longing for slavery. A kind of attraction to the security of familiar things, to the detriment of our freedom." (Pope Francis Lenten Message, 2024)

Lent is a season of conversion, a time of freedom. Jesus himself, as we recall each year on the first Sunday of Lent, was driven into the desert by the Spirit in order to be tempted in freedom....The desert is the place where our freedom can mature in a personal decision not to fall back into slavery. In Lent, we find new criteria of justice and a community with which we can press forward on a road not yet taken. (Pope Francis Lenten Message, 2024)

Questions to ponder and discuss:

- What do you see differently in the barren wilderness?
- What is holding you back from completely changing your minds and lives through at-one-ment (atonement)
- What does it mean to love someone unconditionally?

Second Sunday of Lent

"We suffer these things and they fade from memory, but daily, hourly, to give up our own possessions and especially to subordinate our own impulses and wishes to others – these are hard, hard things, and I don't think they ever get any easier."

Dorothy Day

God's call to Abraham is a metaphor that shocks. Today we hear the theme of the covenant with Abraham. Abraham was willing to give up what he loved most, even more than his own life, in his obedience to God. God says: "...because you acted as you did in not withholding from me your beloved son, I will bless you abundantly and make your descendants as countless as the stars and the sands of the seashore."

God gives up everything for us. Isaac, Jesus, and we are God's beloved children. Dorothy Day once stated that "we must love to the point of folly." She explains: "We don't want to pay the cost of love. We don't want to exercise our capacity to love. Our faith is more precious than gold. The bread you retain belongs to the hungry, the dress you lock up is the property of the naked. What is superfluous for one's need is to be regarded as plunder if one retains it for one's self. Love must be tried and tested and proved. It must be tried as though by fire." This is the kind of love that we are called to give back to God.

Love of God and love of neighbor are one love. Not to have other gods is to pause in the presence of God beside the flesh of our neighbor....The contemplative dimension of life that Lent helps us to rediscover will release new energies. In the presence of God, we become brothers and sisters, more sensitive to one another: in place of threats and enemies, we journey once we have left our slavery behind.

Questions to ponder and discuss:

- What or whom do you serve, and in what or whom do you put your faith?
- What are you willing to give up, and how far will you go in our service and devotion?
- How did God not withhold God's beloved Son but sent Jesus to us to show us God's love?
- Knowing God's infinite love for me, how obedient am I to God's Word?
- Do you love to the point of folly? What motivates us to take this risk?

Third Sunday of Lent

"Disturb us, O Lord when we are too well-pleased with ourselves and when our dreams have come true because we dreamed too little, because we sailed too close to the shore."

Sir Francis Drake

Today we hear the theme of covenant with Moses. In the Hebrew Book of the Scriptures, Exodus, the writer shows how God gives us a blueprint for living out our covenant with God. This blueprint is the Ten Commandments. In the New Testament Jesus summarizes the Ten Commandments into two laws: Love God and Love your neighbor as yourself.

"When our God reveals Godself, the message is always one of freedom: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Ex 20:2). These are the first words of the Decalogue given to Moses on Mount Sinai. Those who heard them were quite familiar with the exodus of which God spoke: the experience of their bondage still weighed heavily upon them. In the desert, they received the "Ten Words" as a thoroughfare to freedom. We call them "commandments", to emphasize the strength of the love by which God shapes his people. The call to freedom is a demanding one. It is not answered straightaway; it has to mature as part of a journey. Just as Israel in the desert still clung to Egypt – often longing for the past and grumbling against the Lord and Moses – today too, God's people can cling to an oppressive bondage that it is called to leave behind. We realize how true this is at those moments when we feel hopeless, wandering through life like a desert and lacking a promised land as our destination. Lent is the season of grace in which the desert can become once more – in the words of the prophet Hosea – the place of our first love" (cf. Hos 2:16-17) (Pope Francis, Lenten Message, 2024)

"The desert is the place where our freedom can mature in a personal decision not to fall back into slavery. In Lent, we find new criteria of justice and a community with which we can press forward on a road not yet taken. This, however, entails a struggle We can become attached to money, to certain projects, ideas or goals, to our position, to a tradition, even to certain individuals. Instead of making us move forward, they paralyze us. Instead of encounter, they create conflict. Yet there is also a new humanity, a people of the little ones and of the humble who have not yielded to the allure of the lie. Whereas those who serve idols become like them, mute, blind, deaf and immobile (cf. Ps 114:4), the poor of spirit are open and ready: a silent force of good that heals and sustains the world." (Pope Francis, Lenten Message, 2024)

Questions to ponder and discuss:

- **Paul built his life around Christ crucified, whose body became the temple itself. Around what, or whom do you build your life today?**
- **God loves us so much that we are provided with a way to love God, our neighbors, and ourselves. How am I living God's law of love?**
- **What are my idols?**

Fourth Sunday of Lent

It is an act of justice for the rich to help the poor.

Sr. Josephine Bakhita

Ephesians 2:8-10 (4th Sunday of Lent) states that salvation is by grace through faith, and that these two lead to **good works**. Grace and faith are the very foundations of salvation, and with the favor of a compassionate God, we also have a responsibility to perform the **good works** God ordained beforehand for us to do.

Paul uses "grace" as a collective term to encompass many aspects of God's freely given kindnesses.

Giving our time, energy, and attention, or resources to others helps us take the final step outside of ourselves to turn the message of Lent into action. Just as Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice for humanity,

Grace is a gift:

1. It teaches how and in what attitude we must conduct our lives.
2. It teaches us to live in anticipation of Christ's return.
3. It teaches us about iniquity [**injustice**] and redemption.
4. It teaches that we must zealously do **good works**.

giving ourselves to others centers the Christian faith in humility and service.

Today we hear the theme of covenant broken while the Israelites were in exile. Yet through Cyrus, King of Persia, God invites all peoples to return to Judah and to be with God in the house in Jerusalem which Cyrus will have erected.

"The witness of many of my brother bishops and a great number of those who work for peace and justice has increasingly convinced me that we need to combat a deficit of hope that stifles dreams and the silent cry that reaches to heaven and moves the heart of God. This "deficit of hope" is not unlike the nostalgia for slavery that paralyzed Israel in the desert and prevented it from moving forward. An exodus can be interrupted: how else can we explain the fact that humanity has arrived at the threshold of universal fraternity and at levels of scientific, technical, cultural, and juridical development capable of guaranteeing dignity to all, yet gropes about in the darkness of inequality and conflict." (Pope Francis, Lenten Message, 2024)

Questions to ponder and discuss

- Even if I have strayed from my covenant with God, how is our compassionate God calling me back?
- Paul uses "grace" as a collective term to encompass many aspects of God's freely given kindnesses. Grace is God's freely given gift. How do you embrace and return God's gift of grace?

Fifth Sunday of Lent

*With the work of my hands I shall always earn what is necessary
and what is left over I'll give to my relatives and to the poor.*

St. Kateri Tekakwitha

Today we hear the theme of covenant renewed during the time of the Prophet Jeremiah. God says: "I will place my law within them and write it upon their hearts. I will be their God and they shall be my people." (Jeremiah 31:33)

"To the extent that this Lent becomes a time of conversion, an anxious humanity will notice a burst of creativity, a flash of new hope. Allow me to repeat what I told the young people whom I met in Lisbon last summer: 'Keep seeking and be ready to take risks. At this moment in time, we face enormous risks; we hear the painful plea of so many people. Indeed, we are experiencing a third world war fought piece-meal. Yet let us find the courage to see our world, not as being in its death throes but in a process of giving birth, not at the end but at the beginning of a great new chapter of history. We need courage to think like this' (Address to University Students, 3 August 2023). Such is the courage of conversion, born of coming up from slavery. For faith and charity take hold, this small child, by the hand. They teach her to walk, and at the same time, she leads them forward. " (Pope Francis, Lenten Message, 2024)

"The Church's synodal form, which in these years we are rediscovering and cultivating, suggests that Lent is also a time of communitarian decisions, of decisions, small and large, that are countercurrent. Decisions capable of altering the daily lives of individuals and entire neighborhoods, such as the ways we acquire goods, care for creation, and strive to include those who go unseen or are looked down upon. I invite every Christian community to do just this: to offer its members moments set aside to rethink their lifestyles, times to examine their presence in society and the contribution they make to its betterment." (Pope Francis, Lenten Message, 2024)

Questions to ponder and discuss

- **The suffering Jesus reminds us that God is in solidarity with the suffering Christ and with our suffering brothers and sisters. Are you willing to "die to yourself," to die to self-absorption and narrow thinking, in order to be resurrected?**
- **Ponder the ways your life is like a grain of wheat.**
- **In what ways have I experienced God's unconditional love?**
- **How have I reached out to others with unconditional love?**

In Lent, we find new criteria of justice and a community with which we can press forward on a road not yet taken

-Pope Francis

