

Abundant LENT

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

CYCLE A

Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

GATHERING

(A table draped with a purple cloth is placed in the midst of the gathering. On the table is a lighted purple candle, a glass dish with ashes and another with water. Simply prepared Lenten "journals," one for each member, rest on the table. A supply of pens is on reserve for those who may need one. The facilitator will need to pace the meeting to allow for the extra time needed for journaling during the closing prayer.)

It's that time again: Repent and believe the good news! Great Lent is upon us. It is time to test conversion and to enter more deeply into the mystery of Jesus' dying and rising.

(The session begins with some conversation about how members made connections between life and faith this past week.)

OPENING PRAYER

(The facilitator for the session calls the group to several minutes of silence. After some time he/she takes up the dish of ashes and moves around the group sprinkling a bit of the ashes over the head of each

the passion



member and into the cupped hands which the members extend before them. Some further time of silence is observed after the sprinkling of ashes.)

Leader: Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

All: Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

Leader: Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness; in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense.

All: Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

Leader: Thoroughly wash me from my guilt and of my sin cleanse me.

All: Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

Leader: For I acknowledge my offense, and my sin is before me always: "Against you only have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight."

All: Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

Leader: A clean heart create for me, O God, and a steadfast spirit renew within me. Cast me not out from your presence, and your holy spirit take not from me.

All: Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

Leader: Give me back the joy of your salvation, and a willing spirit sustain in me. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.

All: Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.

Focus Question

When have you felt like the center of the universe?

SCRIPTURE SHARING AND REFLECTION

(The scriptures are proclaimed aloud with a pause between readings.)

Commentary

Along with our sisters and brothers, the catechumens and candidates for reception into the church, we enter this week into the intensive retreat of Lent in preparation for the celebration of Easter. As we pray for and support them in their final preparation for baptism or reception, we confront again for ourselves the call to ever deeper incorporation into the body of Christ given for the sake of the world.

Lent reminds us of our unrealized, unexplored potential. Lent challenges us to face the evil in our hearts and lives, our sin, and the world's need for transformation and redemption. These scriptures touch directly on these themes. But more than that, they touch on the abundant love of God, the overflowing grace and gift of justice in Jesus Lord.

If Lent confronts us with the challenge of facing our insufficiency, it summons us even more to embrace the bounty of our God. The Genesis reading proclaims the goodness of *God-for-us* in creation. The reading from Romans heralds the goodness of *God-with-us* in redemption. We can afford to confront our evil, our sin, because forgiveness is abundantly available. Grace, then, not sin, is our point of departure, not only for Lent, but for the whole relationship of God with humankind.

The fall, and each one's continuing sin, are located in succumbing to the temptation to be God rather than to be in right relation to God. Jesus confronts a fundamental choice in this week's gospel. Taken together his three responses from Deuteronomy focus not on himself, but on God, his father, as the center of his life:

Not on bread alone is one to live but on every utterance that comes from the mouth of God. (Deut. 8:3)

You shall not put the Lord your God to the test. (Deut. 6:16)

You shall do homage to the Lord your God. (Deut. 6:13)

God-at-the-center, not oneself, not even one's own insufficiency, is the centerpiece for Lenten reflection: God at the center of one's heart, one's family, one's work, our church, the world.

Out of his confrontation of the temptation to put himself at the center, there comes for Jesus an experience of the overwhelming gift of God's presence to him. Matthew expresses this experience of God's presence by telling us ". . . angels came and waited on him." Lent begins; desert emptiness beckons; the bounty of our gracious God awaits us.

FAITH SHARING AND INTEGRATION

(The community pauses in silence for several minutes to ponder the scriptures and the questions which follow. Some time may be allowed for members to speak for a while to one or two others before sharing as a whole group.)

1. How do these scriptures console you? How do these scriptures challenge you?
2. What do you need to do to enter fruitfully into the observance of Lent?
3. What gets in the way of your acknowledging *God-at-the-center* of your life?
4. When might an angel have come and waited on you?
5. How keen is your sense that God's bounty (grace) outweighs your own self-centeredness (sin)?

RESPONSE IN ACTION

Suggestions:

1. Decide this week on some concrete personal discipline you will undertake to draw you into an attentive observance of Lent.

2. Take some time this week to journal. Jot some thoughts about where you feel God seeking to express himself in your life these days. Write some words of prayer to God and write some words that you think God might wish to say to you in response to your prayer.
3. Have you ever made a Lenten Retreat? Contact your diocesan office to inquire about places/opportunities to make a Lenten retreat near you. Take advantage of such an opportunity.

SENDING FORTH AND CLOSING PRAYER

(Members join in singing, "Amazing Grace". The song may be found on the Internet..

The facilitator distributes the journals to the members of the community.

- a. *Members are invited to select something that was said in this session that was especially meaningful. About ten minutes is allowed for people to write a few thoughts on the applicability of what was selected to their own lives.*
- b. *As the writing time draws to a close, the facilitator invites members to write a few words of prayer in response to what they have been writing.*

*Time is allowed for members to offer prayers of praise, thanksgiving and petition to which all respond, **Lord, hear our prayer.***

The glass dish of water is passed around the group. As it is presented to a person, he/she places a hand in the water and signs him/herself with the sign of the cross.

*The facilitator invites members to extend their hands and pray the **Lord's Prayer.**)*