

**Arc of the Covenant
From Ashes to Tongues of Fire
Week 2**

Monday



In her powerful reflection on the readings for the 2nd Sunday of Lent, Mary Gallagher asked the question, “Have you ever struggled with a life situation that stresses the image of God you have grown into from your lived experience?” Is it true that we try to make those life struggles “fit” the image of God we have, rather than let our image of God expand through those experiences?

Many of us grew up with an image of God who demands perfection. God is always testing us, and we feel we have to prove our goodness and self-worth. In the extreme, this image of God induces fear in us. We know we can never live up to God's expectations because of our sinfulness and we cry out over and over for God to have "mercy" on us.

If you are old enough to remember the traditional "Act of Contrition," this image of God come across loud and clear.

"O My God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee. And I detest all my sins because I dread the loss of heaven and the pains of hell. But most of all because they offend Thee, my God, who art all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve with the help of Thy grace, to confess my sins, to do penance and to amend my life. Amen"

"Contrition" in its original meaning is "what has been ground down or worn away from rubbing together" This "Act of Contrition" asks us to believe that God, for some reason, wants us to be "ground down, worn out, crushed in spirit because we have "rubbed God the wrong way." And if we don't confess and own our sinfulness, we are liable to God's wrath and punishment.

And yet, the image of God that Jesus reveals in today's Gospel is so much more expansive and inclusive than the one that many of us may still have.

The image of God that Jesus shares with us is One who is "extra, extra large-hearted." Jesus, who knows by heart the scriptures of Israel, reveals the "hesed", loving kindness of God in a way that won't allow for God to be "small-minded." So, is God "offended" by our sinfulness? Is God's mercy transactional? "If you're not really "sorry," forget about it!" Is God's way a "quid pro quo?"

Jesus said to his disciples:

"Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

"Stop judging and you will not be judged.

Stop condemning and you will not be condemned.

Forgive and you will be forgiven.

Give and gifts will be given to you;
a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing,
will be poured into your lap.
For the measure with which you measure
will in return be measured out to you.”

Suggestions for Prayer:

As you pray with this text, how can you image God in a way that expands and lets God be XXXXX-Large hearted? How can God who is the creator of such a beautiful sunrise as you see in the photo above be anything but Beauty and Mercy?

Tuesday





Though your sins be like scarlet,
they may become white as snow;
Though they be crimson red,
they may become white as wool.

God's mercy can radically transform us. We may have to "dye" to ourselves so that this will happen but it's good news to know that it's possible. The dramatic change from scarlet/crimson to snow/wooly white reminds us that even the most "dyed in the wool" sinner or skeptic can find healing and hope.

Suggestions for Prayer:

Notice the dramatic difference between the scarlet sky and the white snow, the crimson color and the white wool in the photos below. Such a dramatic contrast! Do you trust that God not only desires to transform you through divine love and mercy but will bring that about in you? Ask for the grace to know how deeply you are loved, as deep as the scarlet and crimson red and how “pristine” God’s love for you is, as “pristine as snow and white wool.”





Wednesday

The Gospel today is all about “getting ahead” in the sense of having the best seats in the house, being at the front of the line, jockeying for power, prestige and position. In Matthew’s version of the story, the mother of the sons of Zebedee is the “stage mom,” who wants her sons spring ahead of all the rest and be invested with power and notoriety. It’s interesting to note that Mark’s version of the story has the brothers themselves asking for the places of prestige. In Matthew, it’s their mother who speaks for them. I’m pretty sure that this is an example of how the Gospel writers, Matthew and Luke downplay the human flaws of the disciples. Mark is very comfortable with the disciples coming across as flawed and “clueless” when it comes to what Jesus is really about.

What Jesus is really about comes across very clearly after he finds his disciples arguing about who is the "greatest."

But Jesus summoned them and said,

"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them,
and the great ones make their authority over them felt.

But it shall not be so among you.

Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant;
whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave.

Just so, the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve
and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Getting ahead and getting the best for oneself is not what Jesus wants for those who call themselves his disciples. It is interesting that the mother of the sons of Zebedee makes an appearance in today's Gospel. Was she one of Jesus' followers? Where did she come from if she were not? And what about their father whom they left? Here's a poem about the call that James and John received when they were mending their nets, minding their own business until Jesus came along

Mind Meld

Keep mending
not minding
the one milling
about the shore
watching us
working our trade.
Our nets worth,
wages and daily bread,
we must be about
our father's business.

John the younger
jostles James
the elder
Listen!
His voice across the waters
My mind
melding with his.
Mending me?
Am I my net worth?

Listen!
He's speaking to us
Trade trades,
Fish for folk,
Come after me,
Be the nets.
Untie the knots
Help them go free
with Me.

Zebedees do
Jump ship
Cast themselves into
deeper waters
Trusting the One
who mends minds,
mends hearts,
molds lives,
to Him.

The photo below was taken last Holy Thursday but seems appropriate for today's gospel, especially the symbol of the cup and the pitcher of water used for the washing of the feet.

Suggestions for Prayer:

Where do you find yourself in today's Gospel? Can you hear Jesus's question, asking if you can drink of the cup that he is to drink? What does it mean to mold your mind and heart to his? Speak to Jesus as one friend speaks to another. Ask him to help you understand how you can serve without counting the cost and without expectation of acclaim and position. How is Jesus molding you, minding you, mending you?



Thursday

Today's Gospel is Luke's version of Matthew 25. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus, like the "sheep and the goats," is all about not seeing the person in need who is right in front of your eyes. The rich man is a "somebody". He is special with his wealth, his feasting, his self-satisfaction. Lazarus is "nobody special." He is just a poor beggar. The rich man does not even notice Lazarus at the gates as those "on the left of the king" do not see Jesus in the hungry, the naked, the imprisoned. In both stories, those who do not see receive an eternal punishment, the special somebody is now a nobody! The tables are turned as Lazarus, nobody special is now a special somebody in the "bosom of Abraham."

As you know, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus is not as much about eternal reward or punishment but how we live in the here and now. Do you know what it feels like to be a "somebody" with power and prestige like the rich man? Do you know what it feels like to be a "nobody," someone who is ignored and forgotten? Believe me, it's easy to go from being a "somebody" to a "nobody!" But isn't the real point of the Gospel that the "nobody" is precious in the eyes of God? Each of us is a "special somebody" in God's eyes. I'm thinking about Isaiah 43, a passage that is so popular with spiritual directors.

"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name; you are mine.

²When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.

When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.

³For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior;

I give Egypt for your ransom,
Cush^[a] and Seba in your stead.

⁴Since you are precious and honored in my sight,
and because I love you,

Suggestions for Prayer: Is there a "Lazarus" in you that sees yourself as a "nobody?" Do you ever feel yourself as insignificant and not worthy of note? In

the light of the focus on God's covenant love and an expanding consciousness of God who is Love and Mercy, can you pray with the Isaiah text and claim it as your own?



Friday

Schemes abound in the scripture stories of the Lenten season. This past Wednesday we heard the people of Jerusalem plotting against Jeremiah, scheming with each other to find ways of stifling his voice. In their opinion, he is always the bearer of bad news and they wanted to rid themselves of him. The brothers of Joseph in today's scripture are scheming against him because he is Israel's favorite. Their jealousy blinds them to the ties of brotherhood that should bind them together. And in the Gospel, the adversaries of Jesus are plotting and scheming ways in which they can destroy him.

What is it about us human beings that prefers schemes to schemas that create friends rather than enemies? The schema of God's kingdom that Jesus reveals has no place for scheming and plotting, pitting one against the other. God's design for the world as Jesus reveal it is one that refuses to give hatred, vengeance and violence ultimate power. God's schema, the plot that began with a bang that put all in motion is a cosmic drama of love in the face of destructive forces. We hear and see it played out over and over again through history. Do we believe that God's dreams for the world are more powerful than any human scheme or plot? The Genesis reading today names Joseph, "master dreamer." Isn't God the "first and foremost dreamer" and isn't Jesus the "dream come true?"

And how is it that we so easily forget that we are made in the image of God who is "good." Here's an alternative to the Act of Contrition called "God's Active Condition." Does this give us a schema for how we are called to live?

God's Active Condition...God's Infinite Love and Mercy!

O my God
I am heartily starry
For having befriended thee.
And I attest to all my sins
So I can spread the hope of Heaven and the joys as well.
But most of all because you befriend me, my God
Who are all Good and unswerving in all your love.
I firmly resolve with the help of your grace
To profess your infinite mercy, to do justice to your Goodness
And to Amen my life. Amen!

Suggestion for Prayer: Pray "God's Active Condition" slowly and thoughtfully. Are you open to imaging the Good God as one who desires to "befriend" you?

Are you able to say, even in the midst of the suffering of these days, “God is Good, All the Time, All the Time, God is Good.”



Saturday

The story of the Prodigal, today's Gospel, illustrates this unconditional love better than any words I can find. I have always been moved by the father's response to the younger son. He doesn't want a "formulaic" expression of sorrow. He doesn't scold or punish the son for squandering his inheritance.

He is so happy to have him home that he plans a party!

While he was still a long way off,
his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion.
He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him.
His son said to him,
'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you;
I no longer deserve to be called your son.'
But his father ordered his servants,
'Quickly, bring the finest robe and put it on him;
put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.
Take the fattened calf and slaughter it.
Then let us celebrate with a feast,
because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again;
he was lost, and has been found.'

**Here's a link to a telling of the Prodigal story with some "alterations."
It's from "For the Greater Glory of God," a theater/dance presentation inspired
by the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius.**

<https://vimeo.com/265442500#t=813s>