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| **The Lessons Appointed for Use on** | **http://www.lectionarypage.net/Art/Newshield.gif** |
| Ash Wednesday |
| **All Years** |

Joel 2:1-2,12-17

*or* Isaiah 58:1-12

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

Psalm 103 or 103:8-14

**The Collect**

Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent: Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

**Old Testament**

**Isaiah 58:1-12**

Shout out, do not hold back!
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!

Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.

Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,

as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;

they ask of me righteous judgments,
they delight to draw near to God.

"Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.

Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.

Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.

Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?

Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?

Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;

when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;

your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,

then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.

The Lord will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;

and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.

Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;

you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.

**The Response**

**Psalm 103 or 103:8-14**

***Benedic, anima mea***

1 Bless the Lord, O my soul, \*
and all that is within me, bless his holy Name.

2 Bless the Lord, O my soul, \*
and forget not all his benefits.

3 He forgives all your sins \*
and heals all your infirmities;

4 He redeems your life from the grave \*
and crowns you with mercy and loving-kindness;

5 He satisfies you with good things, \*
and your youth is renewed like an eagle's.

6 The Lord executes righteousness \*
and judgment for all who are oppressed.

7 He made his ways known to Moses \*
and his works to the children of Israel.]

8 The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, \*
slow to anger and of great kindness.

9 He will not always accuse us, \*
nor will he keep his anger for ever.

10 He has not dealt with us according to our sins, \*
nor rewarded us according to our wickedness.

11 For as the heavens are high above the earth, \*
so is his mercy great upon those who fear him.

12 As far as the east is from the west, \*
so far has he removed our sins from us.

13 As a father cares for his children, \*
so does the Lord care for those who fear him.

14 For he himself knows whereof we are made; \*
he remembers that we are but dust.

[15 Our days are like the grass; \*
we flourish like a flower of the field;

16 When the wind goes over it, it is gone, \*
and its place shall know it no more.

17 But the merciful goodness of the Lord endures for ever on those who fear him, \*
and his righteousness on children's children;

18 On those who keep his covenant \*
and remember his commandments and do them.

19 The Lord has set his throne in heaven, \*
and his kingship has dominion over all.

20 Bless the Lord, you angels of his,
you mighty ones who do his bidding, \*
and hearken to the voice of his word.

21 Bless the Lord, all you his hosts, \*
you ministers of his who do his will.

22 Bless the Lord, all you works of his,
in all places of his dominion; \*
bless the Lord, O my soul.]

**The Epistle**

**2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10**

We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says,

"At an acceptable time I have listened to you,
and on a day of salvation I have helped you."

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see-- we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

**The Gospel**

**Matthew 6:1-6,16-21**

Jesus said, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

"So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

In many ways, each individual life is like a book or movie. We all know the beginning, how we were conceived and were born. A midwife or hospital obstetrics ward will teach you that there is not much difference among births. Some births may be a little more harrowing than others, but they are within the range of expected events or even expected complications. Likewise the passing of life to death has small permutations, but as the dying body shuts down there are physical signs as life ebbs away and death is reached. We are dust and to dust we shall return.

Clearly in the middle of our lives we have our stories. Still we cannot recollect all of the stories or events. For instance, I am sure some day on a playground in elementary school I slighted someone. That person may hold that hurt to this day and I have absolutely no recollection. And yet, I may remember when someone slighted me.

How we mark this middle part is very much inside our heads, in our interiority— our lives are marked by what events we think are important, what matters to us. It’s almost like a number line, events marked at different intervals along our lives. Although we may not remember all the events, or mark the time of all the events, we have some assurance from scripture that God does, which is not necessarily a comforting thought.

As a church and as an individual, practicing Christian, we do or can set aside time, mark the time as significant, and look more closely at our relationship with God. Lent has long been a time set aside for repentance. From early on, an in fact still, the preferred time for Baptism was, and is, at the Easter Vigil and so people would prepare by learning what it meant to be Christian all year and really focus on it in Lent.

When we consider the long arc of time since Christianity began, it is only relatively recently that Lent was not a time for the reprobate, those truly exceptional sinners, who would make some amends, some correction of their former life, repentance with actions proscribed for penitence. In our time today, the priest may occasionally hear an individual confession or two, but more often than not we instead recite Psalm 51, a psalm which details how we have overwhelmingly messed up, and the congregation makes a general confession for its sins.

Still knowledge of ourselves only matters so much, for we know quite well that we also serve our own interests and if we are honest we know that we fail even at remembering what we did wrong or how we erred… so it has to be God’s knowledge that matters. We hear this in stark relief when we read Psalm 51, “And my sins are ever before me” Isaiah likewise rebukes each and every one of us… “Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers.” We, as sinners, do not even have the bird’s eye view of our lives. Lent might be understood as a time when we acknowledge systematically all the ways we sin, and come to an acknowledgment that we don’t even have the full grasp of our lives – and the fact that we think we do is probably hubris (Thus, remember you are dust…..)

Liturgical time gives planned windows in which to go deeper into looking at our shortcomings. When we do this in this planned way, it is particularly poignant because we are aware that God already has the knowledge of our short comings. And so we try to figure out what purpose does it serve? There is rarely a priest passing out individual tasks a person needs to complete to be let back in the fold of God. We know that God knows what we have done, what could be the purpose of examining our lives closely on this day or the during the rest of Lent?

So think a minute about your conversation wuth God, … well I can only speak for myself, but after I have repented for all I know I have done sinful, all my uncharitable thoughts, and then added a clause to cover a hoped for forgivness of what I can’t remember. Then is that point in the conversation, I’m sure you have experienced this.. .. you are talking with a friend, and you realize you’ve been talking for half an hour and you have embarassingly done all the talking?

God always wants relationship, and is always open to listening to us. But if we know anything from scripture, it is that God, like a friend, wants to be heard too. (And I’m not talking about, what some have referred to, as the “Jesus is my boyfriend songs.”) What I am saying is that a conversation with God should be at least as intimate as with a friend, not an afterthought and not always as something/ somebody unapproachable. And so, once you have listed your sins, and made that statement to cover what you don’t remember, then is the time to listen to God. Listen to God in your life.

The prophets are forever leading the people to behavior that God desires. The important part to God is for us to have mercy on others as God has mercy on us. We see this message in Isaiah. He tells us to fast from doing things that God doesn’t want us to do. God wants us to be merciful to others as God is merciful to us. Listen to God here, Listen to God in Scripture, listen to God in quiet. Quit talking.

We recognize we cannot attain righteousness on our own; Paul writes in the second letter to Corinth that it is Jesus who has rectified the slate anyway, who has made us righteous. but we can plan to live better. Listen to God here, Listen to God in Scripture, listen to God in quiet. Quit talking.

With the understanding that God already knows what we have done, it then frees us to lay our short comings before God and that laying bare the shortcomings has purpose in itself, it brings a knowledge of our utter dependence on God’s grace, as particularly manifest through Jesus, which then simultaneously encourages us to plan to live better.

And so there is this window of liturgical time, a window which is open, to start one of many conversations with God, knowing that God never tires of listening, and still wants to be heard.

Listen to God here, Listen to God in Scripture, listen to God in quiet. Quit talking.