

Readings for April 7, 2019 -- Fifth Sunday in Lent

'I Am Doing Something New'

Today's readings assure us of God's continued presence, and especially of God's forgiveness. What is made new may well be us -- we are reminded that God's love springs forth like a river, moving us always forward, and away from the past -- refreshing and renewing us, and bringing us hope instead of fear.

Opening Prayer:

Grant me, O Lord, to see everything now with new eyes,
to discern and test the spirits that help me to read the signs of the time,
to relish the things that are yours, and to communicate them to others.
Give me the clarity of understanding that you gave Ignatius. —Fr. Pedro Arrupe, SJ

Reading 1 IS 43:16-21

Thus says the LORD, who opens a way in the sea and a path in the mighty waters,
who leads out chariots and horsemen, a powerful army,
till they lie prostrate together, never to rise, snuffed out and quenched like a wick.
Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not;
see, I am doing something new!
Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? In the desert I make a way, in the wasteland, rivers.
Wild beasts honor me, jackals and ostriches,
for I put water in the desert and rivers in the wasteland for my chosen people to drink,
the people whom I formed for myself, that they might announce my praise.

Responsorial Psalm PS 126:1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 6.

R. (3) The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.

When the LORD brought back the captives of Zion,
we were like men dreaming.

Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with rejoicing.

R. The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.

Then they said among the nations,

“The LORD has done great things for them.”

The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad indeed.

R. The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.

Restore our fortunes, O LORD,

like the torrents in the southern desert.

Those that sow in tears shall reap rejoicing.

R. The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.

Although they go forth weeping, carrying the seed to be sown,

They shall come back rejoicing, carrying their sheaves.

R. The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.

Reading 2 PHIL 3:8-14

Brothers and sisters: I consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things and I consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having any righteousness of my own based on the law but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God, depending on faith to know him and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by being conformed to his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. It is not that I have already taken hold of it or have already attained perfect maturity, but I continue my pursuit in hope that I may possess it, since I have indeed been taken possession of by Christ Jesus. Brothers and sisters, I for my part do not consider myself to have taken possession. Just one thing: forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize of God's upward calling, in Christ Jesus.

Gospel JN 8:1-11

Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. But early in the morning he arrived again in the temple area, and all the people started coming to him, and he sat down and taught them. Then the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and made her stand in the middle. They said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they could have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger. But when they continued asking him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he bent down and wrote on the ground. And in response, they went away one by one, beginning with the elders. So he was left alone with the woman before him. Then Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She replied, "No one, sir." Then Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin any more."

Related Reflections

“Are we open to ‘God’s surprises’? Or are we closed and fearful before the newness of the Holy Spirit? Do we have the courage to strike out along the new paths which God’s newness sets before us, or do we resist, barricaded in transient structures which have lost their capacity for openness to what is new?”

(Pope Francis at Pentecost: May 19, 2013)

God is even now making all things new; the Holy Spirit is truly transforming us, and through us he also wants to transform the world in which we live. Let us open the doors to the Spirit, let ourselves be guided by him and allow God’s constant help to make us new men and women. —from the book [Believe in Love: Inspiring Words from Pope Francis](#) (reprinted in Minute Meditations - Franciscan Media)

There are no monsters, villains or bad guys. There are only folks who carry unspeakable pain. There are among us the profoundly traumatized who deal in the currency of damage. And there are those whose minds are ill, whose sickness chases them every day. But there are no bad guys. Jesus seems to suggest that there are no exceptions to this. Yet it’s hard for us to believe him. At her sentencing to life without the possibility of parole, a young woman states simply, “I did what they say I did, but I’m not who they say I am.”

(Fr. Gregory Boyle, Founder of Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, from *Barking to the Choir*, Simon & Schuster, 2017)

The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them...

“Caught-brought-made to stand there.” These are verbs of power, control and dominance. In two short sentences the scribes and Pharisees are characterized clearly. What they are about is finding people in sin and holding them there... They are staring at her. The stare is a special tool of the self-righteous. The stare fixates the person, turns them into an object, tries to hold them in the mistake they have been caught in. .. But they have no sin to hold Jesus in. So they devise a trap to catch Jesus in sin. Then they will hold him in this sin, too. They are single-minded in their pursuit. Jesus is their target.

Holding people in sin is not the “special gift” of the scribes and Pharisees. In fact, it is so common it is taken for granted. We do not consciously choose to do it, we just mindlessly engage in it. We just assume the obituary of a lawyer who died at 82 will prominently feature the scandal he was involved in when he was 35. We unreflectively remark that someone is doing quite well for an ex-addict, thereby using the addiction as a permanent reference point for her life. Jail sentences are never over. Sin sticks. Ask anyone who has been caught, brought and made to stand there. Perhaps that is why the resurrected Christ in John’s Gospel brings the “glue of sin” to the attention of his disciples. The resurrected Christ breathes on them and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained (John 20: 22).”

This is the condition that characterizes our communal life. We can hold each other in our mistakes or let each other go. We can be a prison to one another or the source of release.... The

opposite of “holding in sin” is “forgiving for life.” ...The focus is on the next free step into the future... In this vision, the most profound word of forgiveness is the word Jesus speaks to the woman, “Go!”

(John Shea, *Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels*, Liturgical Press)

Stone Catching

One of the most famous people involved in juvenile justice these days is Bryan Stevenson, a dedicated attorney from Montgomery, Alabama, who has argued and won cases related to life without parole for youth before the U.S. Supreme Court. In a recent article, he recalls that an elderly black woman once called him a stone catcher in relation to this same Biblical passage (today’s Gospel). What an Ignatian thing to do! To imagine Mr. Stevenson in that story, running left and right, catching stones, gathering bruises as he misses some, using his whole effort and his whole body to stop the injustice before him. Here was a whole new way to look at the story, one that calls us to positive action... Stevenson says, “There is no such thing as being a Christian and not being a stone catcher. But that is exhausting. You’re not going to catch them all. And it hurts.”

Without taking too much pride, I feel that my year with JVC (Jesuit Volunteer Corps) has been, like Stevenson’s work, an act of stone catching. Sometimes I feel like I am catching stones for those without a voice: the young inmates behind bars, the poor families that don’t have time to really fight for their loved ones between 10-hour work shifts. But other times I feel that I am catching stones for me. Stevenson is right - this stone catching business is hard. And it hurts... Sometimes I want to take that rock and throw it back at the people or the world that threw it first. But to be Christian is to catch the stone, and then drop it. This is perhaps the hardest thing of all - to not fight back...I feel that I’m called to keep catching rocks as I shout words of love at the stone throwers themselves, all with the hope that they will choose to put down their weapons and start catching too.

(Emily Dillon, Univ. of Maryland, Jesuit Volunteer Corps, published on jesuitvolunteers.org.)

From Sr. Miriam James Heidland, S.O.L.T.

This story takes place early in the morning as Jesus begins a day of teaching in the temple area. A group of Pharisees, the legalists of the day, bring to him a woman “caught in the very act of committing adultery” (Jn 8:4). Their concern isn’t for the state of her soul or for her temporal well-being (and they do not bring the other person caught in this act, the man). The Pharisees aim to use this woman (a use not so different from that of the man who was committing adultery with her) to catch Jesus in a legal trap so they can collect some concrete evidence to use against him. But Jesus won’t be trapped by anyone.

You can imagine the scene, full of people coming and going about their daily morning business. Many people are gathered around Jesus to hear him teach, and there are also some curious onlookers present. The Pharisees interrupt Jesus, shoving the humiliated woman into his presence and proclaiming her sin. They challenge Jesus to find a way out of the quandary of either stoning her, a violation of Roman law, or letting her go free, a violation of the Mosaic Law.

Notice that Jesus doesn’t rush to respond. I imagine him being stopped mid-sentence, listening to the charge against the woman, looking deeply at her, and then silently bending down, crouching low

to write in the dirt. Can you almost feel the weight of the silence while everyone watches Jesus with anticipation to see what he will do? The silence doesn't last long, as the Pharisees begin to press Jesus again for an immediate answer. Undaunted, Jesus stands up. I can picture him brushing off his hands, looking squarely at the men and telling them, "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Jesus then bends back down and continues writing in the dirt with his finger. This moment, too is pregnant with silence. No one knows what Jesus was writing in the dirt – John doesn't tell us. Some people say that Jesus may have been writing the sins of these men in the dirt. Whatever he wrote had a profound impact. They began to walk away from the situation one by one.

Then Jesus tells the woman, "neither do I condemn you." Imagine the freedom these words bring to the heart of this woman. How often do we fear that God condemns us for our mistakes and sins? We often hide from him out of our own shame and fear. Jesus speaks to the depth of this fear... I hear Jesus saying, "I know you long for more than a life of sin... You are made for more. Go and live a life of freedom." People are meant to be loved, not fixed.

(Loved As I Am, Sr. Miriam James Heidland, S.O.L.T. , Ave Maria Press,
2014)

Suggested Meditation Activity:

Take a few minutes to think about the Gospel story. Read it over and imagine the scene. What stood out for you? What stirred in your heart as you pictured the woman? What do I think Jesus might be saying to me through these words?

You may want to ask yourself, how do I see Jesus looking at me? Do I think about him looking at my darker side? My sinfulness? Does he look at me with condemnation? With compassion?

Discussion Questions

- Reflect on Emily Dillon’s statement: “to be a Christian is to catch (the stone) and then drop it. How does this relate to God’s promise to Isaiah, and to us, in the first reading?
- When in my life have I thrown stones at other? When have I caught them?
- What are some possible barriers in our lives that keep us from seeing or experiencing something new?
- How can we break down the barriers that divide us as people as Christ did?
- How can we be Christ for someone on the outside looking in?
- In the Gospel, Jesus spoke to a woman (a sinful woman), which would have astonished those who witnessed it. What do these actions say to you about Jesus’ desire for reaching out? What do they say about God’s desire to reach out to you?

Closing Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds, help us to stretch and make room for new experiences.

Help us to move past our preconceived notions to be open to your invitation in our lives.

May we grow in our relationship with you and with our world. Amen. —*The Jesuit Prayer team*

Suggested Music

Carry Me (Audrey Assad)