
Small Group Participant's Booklet
Lent Cycle B
Adapted for the Deaf Community



DISCIPLES IN MISSION

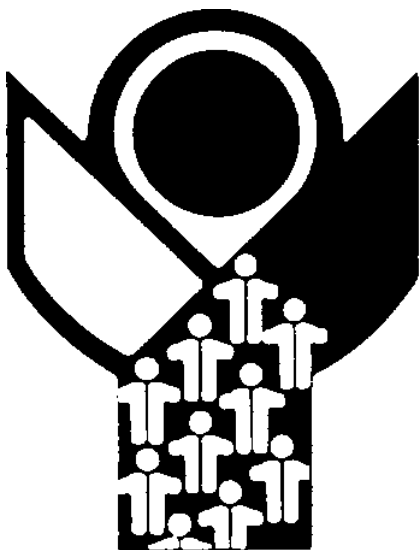
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Welcome to Disciples in Mission.....	4
The First Sunday of Lent.....	6
The Second Sunday of Lent.....	10
The Third Sunday of Lent.....	16
The Fourth Sunday of Lent.....	22
The Fifth Sunday of Lent.....	27
Passion (Palm) Sunday.....	32



Adapted for the Deaf Community by
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WELCOME TO DISCIPLES IN MISSION

WELCOME TO THE DISCIPLES IN MISSION SMALL GROUP EXPERIENCE. GOD HAS WONDERFUL BLESSINGS WAITING FOR YOU DURING THIS LENTEN TIME.

The Schedule for the Meetings

Each small group meeting lasts 90 minutes and follows this schedule:

- 5 min Welcome and opening prayer.
- 10 min Report on personal and group actions chosen at the last meeting.
- 10 min Read Scripture. Have a short time of private prayer after each reading.
- 45 min Faith sharing, with questions provided.
- 10 min Discuss and decide on individual and group actions for the week.
- 10 min Closing prayer and ritual.

Refreshments and social time after the meeting.
(Your group will decide whether or not to do this.)

Getting the Most Out of Your Small Group Experience

As you enter into the holy season of Lent, consider the following suggestions as ways to participate fully in the small group.

Before the Meeting

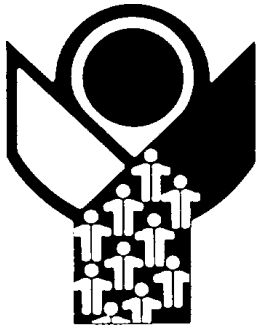
Schedule some personal prayer time to read and reflect on the materials before you go to the meeting. Try this five-step plan and see if it helps you. Or find a plan that works best for you.

First, read the theme and the Opening Prayer. Place your mind and heart in God's presence.

Second, prayerfully read the Scripture passages for the next Sunday. Focus on the images in the readings. Look for ideas or phrases that touch your heart.

Third, strengthened by the word of God, read the explanation and the story of the Disciple in Mission. Let these sections deepen your understanding of God's word and Catholic evangelization. Take time to reflect on the Questions for Faith Sharing.

Fourth, read the Ways to Take Action. Listen carefully to what Jesus is calling you to do as his disciple. Consider sharing these thoughts at the meeting.



**“I SENSE THAT THE
MOMENT HAS COME
TO COMMIT ALL OF
THE CHURCH’S EN-
ERGIES TO A NEW
EVANGELIZATION.”**

- POPE JOHN PAUL II,
*MISSION OF THE
REDEEMER*

Finally, read the closing Prayer and Ritual. Get an idea of what your group will experience as you praise and worship God together.

During the Meeting

Participate fully in the conversation. Realize that some people, because of their personality, are comfortable saying more; others are comfortable saying less. Be yourself, participate in the way that is right for you, and enjoy the experience.

Keep the focus on faith sharing. Think of your group as a community of disciples growing in faith. Faith sharing is not a test of how much each person knows about the topic. Instead, it invites each person to think about the question: “What does this mean to me as I try to follow Jesus today?” Each person will express his or her faith differently, and all will be inspired by the sharing.

After the Meeting

Pay attention to the Holy Spirit. Lent is a special time when the Spirit leads us to turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel. The sharing in these group meetings can lead you to conversion, an invitation to new life in Jesus Christ. Your response to the Gospel during Lent will help you celebrate Easter with a renewed mind and heart.

Take your chosen action seriously. During each meeting, you are invited to consider both individual and group actions. Listen carefully to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and choose an action that you really want to do, and can do. Also, think of something that will help you and other people. That way you will succeed in doing your action as part of your Lenten commitment to follow the way of Jesus as his disciple.

Say the *Disciples in Mission* prayer daily. This prayer provides a way to pray for the needs of your group and for God’s blessings on your Community.



READINGS FOR THE
FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Genesis 9:8-15

Then God said to Noah and his sons, "I now make my promise to you and to your people who will live after you. I make my promise to all the birds, and to all the cattle, and to all the animals that came out of the boat with you. I make my promise to every living thing on earth. This is my promise to you: all life on the earth was destroyed by the flood. But that will never happen again. A flood will never again destroy all the life on the earth."

And God said, "And I will give you something to prove that I made this promise to you. This proof will show that I have made an agreement with you and every living thing on earth. This agreement will continue for all times to come. This is the proof: I have made a rainbow in the clouds. That rainbow is proof of the agreement between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth, you will see the rainbow in the clouds. When I see this rainbow, I will remember the agreement between me and you and every living thing on the earth. That agreement says that a flood will never again destroy all life on the earth."

1 Peter 3:18-22

Christ himself died for you. And that one death paid for your sins. He was not guilty, but he died for people who are guilty. He did this to bring you all to God. His body was killed, but he was made alive in the spirit. And in the spirit he went and preached to the spirits who refused to obey God long ago in the

time of Noah. God was waiting patiently for them while Noah was building the boat. Only a few -- eight in all -- were saved in that boat. Those people were saved by water. That water is like baptism that now saves you. Baptism is not the washing of dirt from the body. Baptism is asking God for a pure heart. It saves you because Jesus Christ was raised from death. Now Jesus has gone into heaven. He is at God's right side. He rules over angels, authorities, and powers.

Mark 1:12-15

The Spirit sent Jesus into the desert for 40 days. He was there with the wild animals. While Jesus was in the desert, he was tempted by Satan (the devil). Then angels came and helped Jesus.

After this, John was put into prison. Jesus went into Galilee and told people the Good News from God. Jesus said, "The right time is now here. The kingdom of God is near. Change your hearts and lives and believe the Good News!"

1

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

TODAY, THE CHURCH WANTS US TO PAY-ATTENTION TO THE FIRST WORDS JESUS SAYS IN MARK'S GOSPEL: "THE RIGHT TIME IS NOW HERE. THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS NEAR. CHANGE YOUR HEARTS AND LIVES AND BELIEVE THE GOOD NEWS." JESUS CALLS US TO HOPE, TO CHANGE, AND TO BELIEVE.

Opening Prayer

God, your ways are truth and love. We are sinners, but we want to walk in your ways. Help us answer your call to change and believe the good news. You want us to live in goodness and love. Thank you for telling us how to live as your people. Open our hearts. Help us welcome your word and live in your saving love. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Right Time

Jesus begins his ministry by announcing, "The right time is now here." This means people must be expecting something. What were they expecting that is now going to happen?

To understand, we must think back and remember God's covenant (agreement and promise) of love.

In the story of Noah, God is making a covenant with Noah and his future family: God will never again destroy the world by flood. The story of Noah is one of several sin stories (Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the tower of Babel) in the first chapters of Genesis. Sin has spread so much that there is no hope for people. Only God can act to save them. In the story of Noah, God saves by telling Noah to make an ark. Noah, his family, and the animals he takes with him will survive. The waters of the flood wash away the sin of the human race, giving Noah and his family a new beginning.

After the flood, God makes a covenant with Noah and his future family. The rainbow becomes a sign of God's covenant love: God wants to save, not to destroy. "A flood will never again destroy all life on earth." God promises to love and protect, and God's people promise to obey.

Because of this covenant love, God's people always expected God to protect them. There would be a *day of the Lord*, when God would show his power. On this day of the Lord, Israel's enemies would be defeated. When Jesus says, "The right time is now here," he is announcing that this expected day of the Lord has arrived. Jesus will show God's power to save. But the

people must change their hearts and lives if they want to enter the kingdom of God.

Saved through Water

Our reading from the First Letter of Peter is for a group of people who already know they are saved by Jesus. They are already baptized. Their new life in Christ brings them suffering. Still, they are called to be faithful. The writer says Christ himself suffered. Why? ... “... to bring you all to God.”

The writer talks about the story of Noah and connects it with baptism. The waters of the flood washed away sin and helped Noah pass to safety. This is a sign of the waters of baptism, washing away sin and helping Christians pass to salvation.

The Kingdom of God is Near

Our readings tell us that all of creation is saved by the actions of Jesus. This is the good news -- the establishment of God’s kingdom -- that Jesus proclaims at the beginning of his ministry. The kingdom that Jesus is announcing is not a kingdom on earth. Jesus did not come to destroy the Romans’ oppressive rule in Israel. Instead Jesus’ kingdom is spiritual, and Jesus destroys evil so all people can belong to God.

He invites us into the kingdom with the words *Change your hearts and lives, and believe*. The Church gathers to change and believe during Lent, preparing for our celebration of Christ’s victory over sin and death on Easter Sunday.

DISCIPLE IN MISSION: ST. FRANCIS XAVIER CABRINI

In 1946 Francis Xavier Cabrini became the first U.S. citizen to become a saint. Four years later she was named the patron saint of immigrants.

Francesca Cabrini was born in Italy in 1850, the youngest of thirteen children. She always wanted to be a missionary. After graduating from school, she applied to three religious communities but was turned away because of her poor health. She taught, worked in an orphanage, and then started the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart. She took the name of the great missionary to the East, Francis Xavier.

Mother Cabrini opened schools in Italy, but she still hoped to do mission work in the Orient. She met with Pope Leo XIII, who said, “Not to the East, but the West.” So in 1889 she and six of her sisters went to America to work with the many poor, uneducated Italian immigrants there. These people often could not speak English, and had difficulty finding housing and jobs. They really needed her help.

When Mother Cabrini and her sisters arrived in New York to open an orphanage, the archbishop told them to return because the project had been

cancelled. Mother Cabrini answered, “The pope sent me here. We must stay.” Through her hard work and her trust in God, the orphanage was built. She established more than fifty schools, hospitals, and orphanages.

She saw that most immigrants did not understand their faith or go to Mass. To respond to this need, Mother Cabrini focused on schools and adult classes in Christian faith.

In 1909 Mother Cabrini became a citizen of the United States. She died in 1917. Her feast day is November 13.

Questions for Faith Sharing

1. When we pray the Our Father we say, "Your kingdom come." What do these words mean to you? What do you think "God's Kingdom" is like?
2. The reading from Peter says we are saved by the waters of baptism. When were you baptized? How has it influenced your life?
3. The readers of the letter from Peter were suffering. Living their new Christian life meant they would suffer for their faith. Does your belief in Christ cause problems for you at work? -- at home? -- in the neighborhood? How do you handle this?

Ways to Take Action

1. Jesus says to you: "Change, and believe in the good news." Think of one thing in your life that God is asking you to change. Ask God for the grace you need to make a new beginning during this Lent.
2. Every time you wash your hands, remember the waters of baptism bring you God's continued care. While you wash, pray, "Show me your ways, O Lord."
3. Think of one situation of sin in your life. Pray the Our Father, asking God's kingdom to come into that situation.

Closing Prayer and Ritual



Gather in front of a bowl of water.

First reader: Long ago Noah was saved from the waters of the flood. The waters of baptism save us now. We ask God to bless this water here, and help us be faithful to our loving promise with God.

All raise a hand over the water while the leader Signs:

We ask you, Lord God, to make this water a symbol of your saving love. We will bless ourselves with the Sign of the Cross, using this water. Help us follow the way of life Jesus shows us.

Second reader: Noah made an ark so he and his family could live through the flood. The ark kept them safe. Think of something you need to do to keep yourself safe from evil in the world. When you are ready to ask God to help you do it, use this water to make the Sign of the Cross on yourself. Then, Sign, "Lord, keep me faithful to my promise."

Each person comes to the bowl, dips a finger into the water, and makes the Sign of the Cross. Everyone prays silently for each person as they do this. After all are finished, pray together:

Guide us, Lord in your truth and love.

Then, Sign the Our Father together.



READINGS FOR THE
SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

Genesis 22

God decided to test Abraham's faith.
God said to him, "Abraham!"

And Abraham said, "Yes!"

Then God said, "Take your son to the land of Moriah. At Moriah kill your son as a sacrifice for me. This must be Isaac, your only son -- the son you love. Use him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains there. I will tell you which mountain."

They came to the place where God told them to go. There, Abraham built an altar. Then Abraham took his knife and prepared to kill his son.

But then the Angel of the Lord stopped Abraham. The angel called from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!"

Abraham answered, "Yes."

The angel said, "Don't kill your son or hurt him in any way. Now I can see that you do respect and obey God. I see that you are ready to kill your son, your only son, for me."

Then Abraham saw a ram. The ram's horns were caught in a bush. So Abraham went and got the ram and killed it. Abraham used the ram as a sacrifice to God. Abraham's son was saved.

The Angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time. The angel said, "You were ready to kill your son for me. This was your only son. Because you did this for me, I make you this promise: I, the Lord promise that I will truly bless you. I will give your many, many descendants as many as the stars in the sky. There will be as many people as sand on the seashore. And

your people will live in cities that they take from their enemies. Every nation on the earth will be blessed through your descendants. I will do this because you obeyed me."

The Lord said to Abram, "Leave your country and your people. Leave your father's family and go to the country I will show you. I will build a great nation from you. I will bless you and make your name famous. People will use your name to bless other people. I will bless people who bless you, and I will curse people who curse you. I will use you to bless all the people on earth."

So Abram left Haran just like the Lord said. And Lot went with him. Abram was 75 years old when he left Haran.

Psalm 116

I will walk with the Lord, and live forever.
I will walk with the Lord, and live forever.

I almost died!
Death's ropes were wrapped around me,
I was scared and worried.
Then I called the Lord's name.
I said, "Lord, save me!"

I will walk with the Lord, and live forever.

God, you saved my soul from death.
You stopped my tears.
You kept me from falling.
I continued believing
even during suffering.

I will walk with the Lord, and live forever.

What can I give the Lord?
The Lord gave me everything I have!
He saved me, so I will offer him thanks
And I will call the Lord's name.

I will walk with the Lord, and live forever.

Mark 9:2-10

Jesus took Peter, James and John and went up on a high mountain. They were all alone there. While these followers watched him, Jesus was changed. Jesus' clothes became shining white. The clothes were whiter than any person could make them. Then two men were there, talking with Jesus. The men were Elijah and Moses.

Peter said to Jesus, "Teacher, it is good that we are here. We will put three tents here -- one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Peter did not know what to say, because he and the other two followers were very afraid.

Then a cloud came and covered them. A voice came from the cloud and said, "This (*Jesus*) is my son and I love him. Obey him!"

Then Peter, James and John looked, but they saw only Jesus there alone with them.

Jesus and the followers were walking back down the mountain. Jesus commanded the followers, "Don't tell any person about the things you saw on the mountain. Wait until after the Son of Man rises from death. Then you can tell people what you saw."

So the followers obeyed Jesus and said nothing about what they saw. But they discussed what Jesus meant about rising from death.

2 THE SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

EVERY PERSON HAS EXPERIENCED SUFFERING: SOMEONE WE LOVE DIES, WE LOSE OUR JOB OR OUR HEALTH, OR OUR IMPORTANT RELATIONSHIPS ARE BROKEN. OUR READINGS TALK ABOUT SUFFERING AND GIVE US REASONS TO HOPE AND TO CONTINUE.

Opening Prayer

Loving God, when we have pain or suffering, it is difficult for us to walk with faith. You seem far away or not concerned. But we want to be faithful. We come here now to think and pray about how suffering helps us grow. Bless us and guide our sharing. We want to have trust and find strength during suffering. We pray through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

They Were Frightened

All of Mark's Gospel focuses on the question, "Why should we suffer?" Mark is writing to people facing persecution (suffering / dying for their faith). They think to themselves, "Should we stay faithful to Jesus and possibly be eaten by a lion, or should we reject Jesus and have a longer life on earth?" This is a tough choice. Mark responds to this question by using Jesus as an example. Jesus was in a similar situation. He had to ask himself whether he should continue to be faithful to the work he was sent to do, or stop his ministry to avoid persecution (suffering and death). Jesus chose to be faithful. Jesus' choice did not end in death. Instead, Jesus' death became the path to resurrection and eternal life.

The people Mark taught lived after the resurrection. This means Mark and the first Christians understood more than the apostles did when we see them in today's gospel. Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a mountain and becomes changed while they watch. A voice from heaven says, "This is my Son and I love him. Obey him." The apostles are frightened. While they are coming down from the mountain, Jesus commands them: "Don't tell any person about the things you saw on the mountain. Wait until after the Son of Man rises from death." They can't understand Jesus' words because they do not know what *rising from death* means.

The apostles will listen to Jesus, and they will be led to the cross. They don't understand that Jesus must suffer before he receives his glory. They think if Jesus is the Son of Man they were

expecting he should not be talking about dying. He should talk about receiving power from God to conquer the Romans.

Jesus knows his followers do not understand the kind of Messiah (savior) he is and the kind of kingdom he is establishing. This is why he tells them not to talk about what they saw until after the Resurrection. If they do, they will spread their own misunderstandings. Both Jesus and the apostles will suffer a lot before the apostles will begin to understand the truth. Until then, they must walk together in faith.

”Here I am,” Answered Abraham

The story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac gives us another picture of how much a person can suffer during their walk in faith with God. During Abraham’s life, child sacrifice was accepted in some cultures. All firstborn children and animals were expected to be offered to the gods. But Abraham had a personal experience of God that gave him a special understanding. Abraham understands there is only one God, and this God has a relationship of covenant love with him. God is too loving; he does not want child sacrifice. The story we read today is the story about how Abraham learned this.

Isaac is the firstborn son of Abraham’s wife, Sarah. He is a sign of God’s covenant love. God promised Abraham that his wife, Sarah, would have a child, even though she was very old. How can it be true that Abraham was asked to kill the child who will make God’s covenant promise come true?

During this whole story Abraham walks in faith, trusting God’s love. Abraham’s faithful response is “Here I am.” He is willing to do everything a loving God asks him. Because Abraham knows God is love, Abraham believes in God’s saving power, even if he doesn’t understand.

I Believed, even during Suffering

Our psalm writer, too, continued to believe in God’s love even when he was suffering. This psalm of giving thanks shows when the writer was near death, God saved him. Looking back on that experience, he says, “I continued believing even during suffering.” Because his faith helped him and he experienced God’s saving power, he wants to continue to be faithful, keeping his promises and offering sacrifice. He is the Lord’s servant, willing to do what God wants. He believes if he is faithful he “will walk in the Lord’s presence and live forever”.

We, like all people who walked before us in faith, will suffer. But we know our suffering will not end in death. Like Jesus, we will go through death to life. Because we know this, we say, “I believe, even during suffering.” Our belief in the Resurrection will give us hope and strength to continue.

DISCIPLE IN MISSION: ST. JOHN NEWMANN

John Neumann was born in 1811, in the present-day Czech Republic. By age twenty-five, he knew six languages and completed studies to become a priest. Then his bishop decided not to ordain new priests. But Neumann was eager to be a priest and a missionary in American. He made a forty-day voyage to New York on his own, and arrived with one suit of clothes and one dollar.

Three weeks later the bishop of New York ordained him as a priest and sent him as a missionary to the German immigrants. For four years,

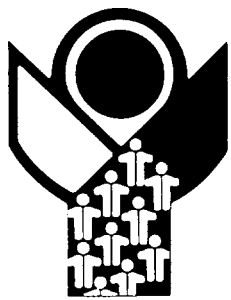
Neumann served in an area that covered nine hundred square miles, traveling on horseback. People laughed at the clumsy way the short priest rode.

In 1840 Neumann asked to join the Redemptorist community. In 1842, he was the first Redemptorist to make vows in the United States. Five years later, he became head of the American Redemptorists.

In 1852, John Neumann became bishop of Philadelphia. With his leadership, the Catholic schools in the dio-

cese grew from two schools to almost one hundred. Neumann also started the Sisters of the Third Order of St. Francis, published two catechisms and many articles, and cared for the poor. He began the Forty Hours Devotion in the United States. His people called him, "Our Little Bishop."

Bishop John Neumann died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of forty-eight. All his life he worked hard for God. In 1977 he became the first male saint from the United States.



DISCIPLES IN MISSION

Questions for Faith Sharing

1. Does belief in life after death make any real difference in your life? Explain.
2. Have you or someone you know well, grown, matured, become more loving, because of suffering? Explain.
3. What is the most wonderful or helpful thing another person did for you when you were suffering?
4. What reason do you have to hope and continue to be faithful during suffering?

Ways to Take Action

1. Help someone who is suffering and feels alone. Do something that shows you care for that person.
2. Think about your reasons for living with hope while it is difficult to trust God's care, or while God seems to abandon you. Ask God to continue making you strong with hope.
3. Remember one of your experiences of suffering / difficult struggles. How did God help you through? Thank God in prayer for helping you.

Closing Prayer and Ritual



Gather around a crucifix. Sign together:

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you. With your holy cross you saved the world.

First reader: The night before Jesus died he went to a place named Gethsemane. He prayed he would not have to suffer. He said, "Father, all things are possible for you. Take this cup of suffering away from me, but do what you want, not what I want."

Prayer gave Jesus the strength he needed to be faithful.

Second reader: Jesus suffered, and we also suffer in our lives. Jesus prayed, and we pray. We recognize God's power and ask to be saved from our suffering. Often it seems our prayer is not answered. We need to ask for the grace to accept what God wants. Let us ask Jesus, who died and rose from the dead, to help us live with hope in times of suffering.

Each member Signs a special prayer for some person or group who is suffering. All respond:

Lord, give us hope during suffering.

After all have prayed, the leader Signs: Lord with your death and Resurrection you give us hope. We trust you and Sign the prayer you taught us ...

All Sign together the Our Father.



READINGS FOR THE
THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

Exodus 20:1-17

Then God said, "I am the Lord your God. I led you out of the land of Egypt where you were slaves. So you must obey these commands:

"You must not worship any other gods except me.

"You must not make any idols (false gods). Don't make any statues or pictures of anything up in the sky or of anything on the earth or of anything down in the water. Don't worship or serve idols of any kind. Why? Because I, the Lord, am your God. I hate my people worshiping other gods. People who sin against me become my enemies. And I will punish those people. And I will punish their children, their grandchildren, and even their great-grandchildren. But I will be very kind to people who love me and obey my commands. I will be kind to their families for thousands of generations!

"You must not use the name of the Lord your God in a wrong way. If a person uses the Lord's name in a wrong way, then that person is guilty. And the Lord will not make him innocent.

"You must remember to keep the Sabbath a special day. Work at your job six days a week. But the seventh day is a day of rest in honor of the Lord your God. So on that day no person should work -- not you, your sons and daughters, or your men and women slaves. Even your animals and the foreigners living in your cities must not work! Why? Because the Lord worked six days and made the sky, the earth, the sea, and everything in them. And on the seventh

day, God rested. In this way, the Lord blessed the Sabbath - the day of rest. The Lord made that a very special day.

"You must honor (*respect*) your father and your mother. Do this so you will have a full life in the land that the Lord your God gives you.

"You must not murder anyone.

"You must not do the sin of adultery.

"You must not steal anything.

"You must not tell lies about other people.

"You must not want to take your neighbor's house. You must not want his wife. And you must not want his men and women servants, or his cattle, or his donkeys. You must not want to take anything that belongs to another person!"

Psalm 19

Lord, your words give life everlasting.
Lord, your words give life everlasting.

The Lord's teachings are perfect;
God's words give strength to all people.
The Lord's command is clear;
God's law we trust.

Lord, your words give life everlasting.

The Lord's laws are right.
Commands from the Lord are good;
God's commands give wisdom to humble people.

Lord, your words give life everlasting.

Honor the Lord always.
God's law is true.
Lord, I love and obey your law.

Lord, your words give life everlasting.

John 2:13-25

It was almost time for the Jewish Passover. So Jesus went to Jerusalem. Jesus went to the temple. In the temple area Jesus saw men selling cattle, sheep, and doves. Jesus saw other men sitting at tables. These men were exchanging and trading people's money. Jesus made a whip with some pieces of rope. Then Jesus forced all these men and the sheep and cattle to leave the temple area. Jesus turned over the tables and scattered the money of the men that exchange money. Then Jesus said to the men that were selling pigeons, "Take these things out of here! Don't make my Father's house a place for buying and selling!"

When this happened the followers of Jesus remembered what was written in the Scriptures:

"My enthusiasm for your house will make me strong." Psalm 69:9

Some Jews said to Jesus, "Show us a miracle for a sign. Prove that you have the right to do these things."

Jesus answered, "Destroy this temple and I will build it again in three days."

The Jews answered, "People worked 46 years to build this temple! Do you really believe you can build it again in three days?"

(But the temple Jesus meant was his own body. After Jesus was raised from death, his followers remembered that Jesus had said this. So his followers believed the Scripture about him, and they believed the words Jesus said.)

Jesus was in Jerusalem for the Passover festival. Many people believed in Jesus because they saw the miracles he did. But Jesus did not trust them. Why? Because Jesus knew the things people were thinking.

Jesus did not need any person to tell him about people. Jesus knew what was in a person's mind.

3 THE THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

SOME JEWS SAID TO JESUS, “SHOW US A MIRACLE FOR A SIGN”. SOMETIMES WE ARE LIKE THIS. WE NEED SIGNS, TOO. TODAY’S READINGS REMIND US WE HAVE RECEIVED MANY SIGNS FROM GOD, BUT THE GREATEST SIGN OF ALL IS THE RESURRECTION.

Opening Prayer

We gather today, Lord to pray about your words. We want to understand suffering and death the same way you do. Your words show us the way to everlasting life. Fill us with your Spirit. Help us recognize the signs of your loving presence in the crosses of life. Help us understand what we need to do to live in right relationship with you and other people. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Language of Signs

More than any other group, Deaf people value signs. The Deaf are “visual people,” and we need to see so we can learn and understand. Deaf persons cherish SIGN LANGUAGE (ASL) as the most important part of Deaf culture. Because of Signs we can see and believe.

Today’s readings talk about a different kind of signs that people wanted and needed. These signs from God would also help people see and believe. They would prove God’s promise and God’s power by making them “visual.”

John’s Audience Wants a Sign

This story about Jesus and “the Jews” is from the Gospel of John. To understand why John tells this story and what it means, we need to understand the people John is teaching.

John is writing near the end of the first century. Jesus’ first followers expected him to return in glory during their lifetime. Now, the early Christians are starting to understand that Jesus is not going to return as soon as they expected. Where was Jesus? They needed a sign.

Two more facts from the time of John are important for this story. Those Jews who believed Jesus was God’s Son were in conflict with those Jews who did not believe this. In fact, Jews who believed Jesus was divine were being rejected from the synagogue (church). Also, when John is writing, the Jewish temple has been destroyed. It was destroyed in 70 A.D. by the Romans.

What were the Christian Jews – rejected from the synagogue and without a temple – supposed to do? They needed a sign.

Jesus Was Speaking About the Temple of his Body

With his Gospel, John is trying to help disappointed, persecuted, Jewish Christians see the sign that was already given to them. Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. Jesus was talking about his own body when he said, “Destroy this temple and I will build it again in three days.”

When John is writing, the words *body of Christ* meant the Church. We are Christ’s body. John is teaching the Jewish Christians that because of the Resurrection, Jesus is still alive. The brick temple is now replaced by the risen body of Christ, the Church. This is the sign they need, the sign of Christ’s presence with his people.

God Brought You out of Egypt

The Resurrection is the most important sign in the New Testament. The Exodus is the most important sign in the Old Testament. This was when God helped the Israelites escape from slavery in Egypt. The Israelites always remembered this Exodus experience. It became the perfect sign that God was faithful to covenant love, to the promise he made to Abraham and his descendants to love and protect them.

Loving relationships are mutual. This means God has promises to keep, and the people have promises, too. The people are supposed to trust God and obey. In the reading from Exodus we find the commandments. They explain how God expects the people to obey.

Notice how the law is given. First, God reminds the people of their relationship of covenant love by saying, “I, the Lord, am your God.” Then God reminds them he has been faithful to covenant love by protecting them: “I ... brought you out of the land of Egypt ...” The law explains what behaviors keep us in right relationship with God and with each other. People who are faithful to covenant love will obey the law.

The Law is more Precious than Gold

Our psalm writer has a heart full of thanks: God shows us the path to walk, so we can be in right relationship with God and each other. The writer is talking about the Law. The Law is a gift because it gives wisdom and understanding, it helps a person act with justice, and it gives new life to the soul.

The response – “Lord, your words give life everlasting” -- is from John’s Gospel (6:68). In the Gospel, these words are spoken to Jesus. Here we see the relationship between the old law and Jesus. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law, the Promised One from God. He shows us how to be in right relationship with God and other people, and how to live faithfully in covenant love. Jesus rose from the dead, and has the words of everlasting life.

Jesus, the Perfect Sign

It is normal for us to want and need signs. The sign given to us is the Resurrection. Because of the Resurrection, we -- like Jesus’ disciples in John’s Gospel -- can believe the Scripture and the words that Jesus spoke. Jesus has the words that lead to everlasting life. He is the most perfect sign of God’s love.

DISCIPLE IN MISSION: PIERRE TOUSSAINT

Pierre Toussaint, once the slave of a planter in Haiti, became one of the most famous Catholics in New York City. Many people knew about his holiness, strong character, and charity.

Toussaint was born in Haiti in 1766. He was a house servant of Jean Berard and was treated as a member of the family. During a slave revolt in 1787, the Berards fled to New York, taking Toussaint and his sister with them. Toussaint learned to be a hairdresser and, while he was still a slave, was able to set up a business. He worked in homes of the wealthiest women in the city and was very successful. His work was a ministry; he listened to his

customers and became their friend. He spoke to them about God and faith.

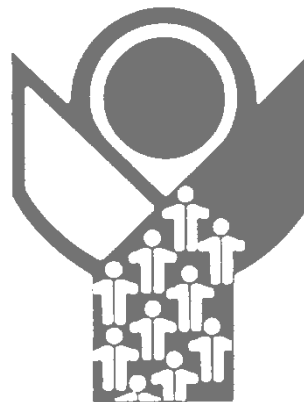
After Berard died and his plantation in Haiti was taken, Toussaint supported Berard's widow. He could have become free, but instead he stayed with Madame Berard, even when she remarried. Before she died in 1809 she gave Toussaint his freedom. He continued to support her daughter for several years.

With money he earned Toussaint bought freedom for his sister, his future wife, and his niece.

Toussaint was very generous to the Church. He and his

wife, Juliette, took orphans into their home. He supported the city's first Catholic orphanage, encouraging customers and friends to donate, too. He was the first to give money for building a Catholic church for people who spoke French. He helped poor priests and privately sent money to educate seminarians. He paid for other slaves to become free, and helped white refugees from Haiti. He also cared for the sick and dying.

When Toussaint died in 1853 at the age of 87, he was loved and respected by many people in New York City.



Questions for Faith Sharing

1. How is Sign Language important in your understanding and belief in God? Do you Sign to God when you pray?
2. Have you ever asked God for a sign? What was the situation? What happened? Why do you think we need signs from God?
3. Why do you think Jesus suffered crucifixion? Is Jesus' death on the cross important in your spiritual life? Explain.
4. Is Jesus' Resurrection important in your spiritual life? Explain.
5. Some Jews persecuted other Jewish people who became Christian. Do we ever persecute others because they have different religious beliefs? Can you think of any examples? How should we treat people of other religions?

Ways to Take Action

1. Read the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:1-17. Choose one thing you need to do to obey God's law more.
2. Remember a time in your life when God didn't act the way you expected a loving, caring God to act. Talk with God about it in prayer.
3. Show your thanks to a person who is a sign for you that God is present in the Church today.
4. Go to church this weekend, and thank God for the opportunity to worship in Sign Language.

Closing Prayer and Ritual



Gather around a table that has a crucifix (a sign of death) and a plant (a sign of life).

First reader: Your cross, Lord Jesus, is a sign for us, showing the power and wisdom of God. In the terrible sufferings of your death on the cross, you felt you were abandoned by your heavenly Father. But your rising from death proclaimed God's power and wisdom, a wisdom that is hard for us to understand and accept.

All: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you. With your holy cross you saved the world.

Second reader: God, our Father, we want to trust and obey you. We want to be faithful during difficult times. We want to recognize the cross of Jesus as a sign of your faithful love. Help us accept this sign, knowing that your death led to Resurrection.

One person takes the crucifix, and holds it while praying silently. Then another person takes it. When all are finished, continue:

First reader: God, we ask for grace to be signs of the risen Christ, shown in your Church. Let us pray together:

All: Our Father . . .

End with the Sign of the Cross.



READINGS FOR THE
FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Ephesians 2: 4-10

God's mercy is very great, and God loved us very much. We were spiritually dead. We were dead because of the things we did wrong against God. But God gave us new life with Christ. You have been saved by God's grace. And God raised us up with Christ and gave us a seat with him in the heavenly places. God did this for us who are in Christ Jesus. God did this so that for all future time he could show the great riches of his grace. God shows that grace by being kind to us in Christ Jesus. I mean that you are saved by grace. And you got that grace by believing. You did not save yourselves. It was a gift from God. No! You are not saved by the things you have done. So no person can boast that he saved himself. God has made us what we are. In Christ Jesus, God made us new people so that we would do good things. God had already planned those good things for us. God had planned for us to live our lives doing those good things.

John 3: 14-21

"Moses lifted up the snake in the desert.

It is the same with the Son of Man. The Son of Man must be lifted up too. Then every person that believes in the Son of Man can have life forever."

Yes, God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son. God gave his Son so that every person that believes in him would not be lost, but have life forever. God sent his Son into the world. God did not send his Son to judge the world guilty. God sent his Son so that the world could be saved through his Son.

The person that believes in God's Son is not judged (*condemned*). But the person that does not believe is already judged. Why? Because that person has not believed in God's only Son. People are judged by this fact: The Light (*goodness*) has come into the world. But people did not want light. They wanted darkness (*sin*). Why? Because they were doing evil things. Every person that does evil hates the light. That person will not come to the light. Why? Because then the light will show all the bad things he had done. But the person who follows the true way comes to the light. Then the light will show that the things that person has done were done through God.

4 THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

OUR READINGS GIVE US TWO TRUTHS THAT SEEM TO CONFLICT WITH EACH OTHER. THE FIRST TRUTH IS CHRIST CAME TO SAVE US, NOT TO CONDEMN US (JUDGE US GUILTY). THE SECOND TRUTH IS IF WE CHOOSE SIN WE GO AGAINST GOD’S WILL, AND WILL BE PUNISHED BECAUSE OF OUR ACTIONS. DURING LENT WE MUST DECIDE: WILL WE CHOOSE GOD’S LOVE, OR WILL WE CHOOSE SIN?

Opening Prayer

Loving God, we thank you for sending Jesus into the world so we can enjoy life with you forever. Bless us now. Help us see the times we turn away from your love. We want our relationship with you to be most important. We want to live as your people. Guide our thoughts and our sharing, and help us accept your wonderful gifts. Amen.

Is Anyone Judged Guilty?

Our Gospel reading is from John again. Remember that the people he is teaching are disappointed that the Son of Man has not yet returned in glory, and some Jews are persecuting the Jews who believe in Jesus.

John wants all the Jews to believe Jesus is God’s way of saving the world. John is angry and sad that some Jews are rejecting Christ and are persecuting their fellow Jews, making them suffer and die for their faith. John talks about people who prefer darkness instead of light. These people are condemning themselves (judging themselves guilty). John is talking about those people who persecuted the first Christians: “The person that does not believe is already judged.” We should not use these words today against Jewish people, or members of other world religions.

The Son of Man Must Be Lifted Up

In this Gospel Jesus says, “Moses lifted up the snake in the desert. It is the same with the Son of Man. The Son of Man must be lifted up, too. Then every person that believes in the Son of Man can have life forever.”

John compares the serpent (snake) lifted up to the Son of Man (Jesus) lifted up. In the Exodus story the people complained about God and Moses leading them into the desert. After they complained, they were bitten by snakes. They went to Moses, admitted their sin, and asked Moses to pray to God for them. Moses made a bronze serpent and put it on a pole. When anyone who was bitten by a snake looked at Moses' bronze serpent, he was healed. John uses the bronze serpent as a symbol of Jesus. People who looked at the bronze serpent, raised up, received physical life. In the same way, people who look to Christ, raised up, receive spiritual life.

John also wants the reader to understand two levels of meaning: one is about Jesus' human life on earth; the other is about the risen Christ. When John says, "The Son of Man must be lifted up," he wants people to think about both the Crucifixion (Jesus' being lifted up on the cross) and the Resurrection (Jesus' being lifted up from the grave). John wants his people to see the Resurrection as a "second coming." Through the Resurrection the Son of Man returned and is living with his people. All who believe in Christ will have life forever. Those who reject Christ will not.

You Were Saved By Grace

The writer of the Letter to the Ephesians makes it clear that none of us earns our own salvation through good works. While we were all sinners, God's great love and mercy brought us to life with Christ. The salvation we received is a free gift. "You are saved by grace (through faith). And you got that

grace by believing. You did not save yourselves. It was a gift from God. You are not saved by things you have done. So no person can boast that he saved himself." If anyone asks us, "Have you been born again?" The answer is definitely "Yes!"

This letter shows the importance of God's love and God's gifts. But we still must respond in faith. Good works will flow from our being united with Christ and his body, the church. By grace we "are saved through *faith*." This is the same message we saw in our reading from John. "God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that every person who believes in him would not be lost, but have life forever."

The gift of being saved from our sins is given freely. We did not and cannot earn it. The question the church asks us during Lent is: will we accept this gift of salvation, turn away from sin, and choose to live in covenant love with God? No matter what we did in our past, it is not too late to say yes.

DISCIPLE IN MISSION: ISAAC HECKER, C.S.P.

Isaac Hecker was the most active Catholic evangelizer in nineteenth-century America. His dream was for a Catholic America and then a Catholic world. Hecker wanted to convince Protestants and unbelievers that Catholicism matched well with American democracy and ideals.

Hecker was a convert to the Catholic faith. He was born of German Protestant immigrants in New York in 1819. In 1842 he had a spiritual experience that changed his life.

Hecker used prayer and sacrifice, trusting in the Spirit to lead him. He spent time in

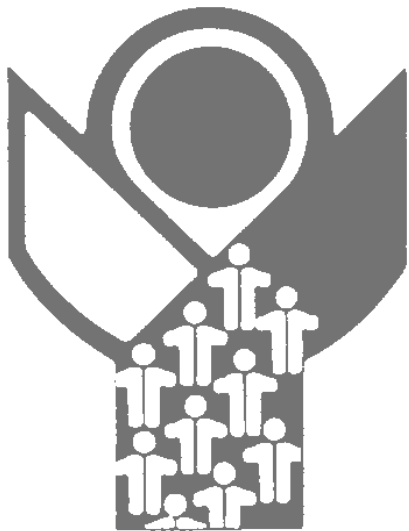
several different religions. Then he joined the Catholic Church. Soon he became a Redemptorist priest. This German religious community focused on ministry to Catholic immigrants. Hecker and a few other Redemptorist priests wanted to live in an English-speaking house. When Hecker went to Germany to ask for this, he broke a rule forbidding overseas travel. The Redemptorists said he must leave their community.

Then he established the first community for men in the United States, the Paulist

Fathers. He became the Paulists' leader and the pastor of their church in New York.

Hecker wrote books about faith and was also a popular speaker. He encouraged every Catholic to be involved in evangelization. He and the Paulists began a monthly magazine and the Catholic Publication Society.

Hecker was the leader of the Paulists until he died in 1888. Although he never saw his dream come true, Hecker's ideas and work shaped the Catholic religion in America and helped integrate Catholics into America.



Questions for Faith Sharing

1. Are you comfortable or uncomfortable speaking about your spiritual life and your faith in Jesus with other people? Do you know why or why not?
2. Do you think sin always leads to suffering? Explain.
3. Do you think when you sin, God takes away his love from you? Why or why not? Do you think you take away your love from God?
4. What do you think our attitude and feeling about non-Christian people should be?

Ways to Take Action

1. Find two sticks and a string. Tie the two sticks together to make a cross. Put it where you can see it often in your home. Whenever you see it, tell God, "I love You." Bring it to the next meeting to show if you wish.
2. Think about ways you feel separated from God. Ask God to help you make your relationship with him most important in your life.
3. Pray a Prayer for Forgiveness each evening before going to bed. (An example is given in the closing prayer.)

Closing Prayer and Ritual



Gather around a Bible and a crucifix.

The leader signs: The Son of Man was lifted up - why?? - so every person who believes in him can have life forever. Let us thank God for this gift.

The leader lifts up the crucifix. Each member of the group comes to the crucifix and silently thanks God for the gift of salvation through Jesus. Each person kisses or touches the crucifix. When everyone is finished, Sign together: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you. With your holy cross you saved the world.

Leader: Sometimes we chose darkness instead of living in the light of Christ. Let us think about our sin and then pray to Jesus and say we are sorry.

All pray silently about how you have chosen to live in darkness (sin), instead of living in the light Christ brings. If some people want, they can Sign a prayer asking for forgiveness. For example: For times we ignore the pain of other people. Lord, forgive us.

After each person prays, all Sign together: Lord, forgive us.

After all the prayers, Sign together this Prayer for Forgiveness: My God, I am sorry for my sins. When I do wrong and fail to do good, I sin against You. I love You very much. With Your help, I want to show I'm sorry, sin no more, and avoid evil. Our Lord Jesus Christ suffered and died for us. In his name, my God, forgive me. Amen.