



Homilies for the Second Sunday of Lent:

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Second Sunday of Lent, cycle C

By [Don L. Fischer](#)

**SCRIPTURE: Genesis 15:5-12,17-18; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 9:28b-36**

The season of Lent has some very strong themes: Focus, commitment, and the ability to see. You may already know that in the early Church, this season was considered the time when those who were seeking to enter into the faith community were given their final teachings. The gospels selected for the five Sundays before Palm Sunday (before the holiest week of the Church year) are very carefully chosen. I want to remind you of the themes covered in these five Sundays. The basic image we have in the Sundays is a call for people, first and foremost, to focus. This was the way of Jesus' work in the desert: He was tempted to use the power of God in so many different ways. Jesus' response was, "No, I am not going to get distracted by so many other tugs and pulls of my human ego and human spirit. I am going to focus on the Word — the way in which God has called me to live." The first week is all about getting focused. This week is about being committed. Committed to something we absolutely believe in. Next Sunday, when we talk about the woman at the well and this wonderful image of God being the one who feeds and nourishes, and gives drink to those who thirst, we have images of being fed. Then, we move into the whole notion of seeing, with a look at the blind man who is healed. Finally, we go to the raising of Lazarus, which signifies resurrection. New life.

We need to be focused. We need to be committed. We need to be fed with the Spirit that enables us to really see. When we really see, we are reborn. This Second Sunday of Lent, we look at the whole issue of commitment. It begins with a beautiful story from the Old Testament, the call of Abram. There are so many things about the story; we could talk about it for the entire homily. As you know, Abram was not a young boy when he was called by God to do the extraordinary thing of leaving everything he was familiar with and going on a journey with this God. He was seventy-five years old. In many ways, we would say his life was finished. Actually, Abram's life was just beginning. What happens is that God describes to Abram that he who was childless — let's just say that his life was not as fulfilled as he would like it to be — was awakened to the fact that he wanted something more. The story represents God awakening in the human spirit, in Abram's spirit, a feeling of wanting something more. We all know that feeling of, "This isn't enough. There has to be something more to all of this." Abram is in touch with that longing deep inside of him. God says to Abram, "Trust me. Come with me. I want you to be committed to me." Abram seems excited about this. God then puts Abram in a kind of trance. We go into a deeper level of this man's consciousness. Abram goes deep down inside of himself. Now in the culture Abram lived in, there was a way of celebrating a covenant between two people. It was more than just a contract: "You do what you say you

will do, and if you don't do it, I can get out of it." It wasn't that kind of contract. The covenant between God and Abram was deeper than that. It was based on the word and the intention of the one you were in the covenant with. One of the ceremonies in this culture was that the people would take an animal and split it in half. As a symbol that this was a covenant until death, each individual making the covenant would walk between the two parts of the animal. This signified that if they broke the covenant, they would die. The fate of the animal, cut in half, would be their fate. It would split them apart. If they did not keep their word, they would be torn apart.

What is so interesting about the covenant God makes with Abram is that God, in the form of a smoking brazier and a torch, passes through the middle of this split animal. Abram doesn't do it. What this symbolizes is that God is saying, "I will die if I don't keep this covenant with you. I am going to make a covenant so strong, so intense, that my covenant with you can never and will never be broken. I will promise you abundance. Life. Descendants as numerous as the stars." We have to understand that Abram is seventy-five years old. His wife Sarah, whom he loves very much, has never, ever produced a child. She is close to seventy-five. This is not a simple thing that Abram is asked to believe in; it is extraordinary. For Abram the question is: "How can I do this? How can this happen?" Well, we would think that keeping a covenant would mean that God promises us something — and then we would sit down and wait for God to fulfill it. We would say, "Okay, now I will get what God has promised me." In Abram's case, it didn't happen right away. The story goes on to indicate that Abram, who still didn't feel he would have any children even though God had promised, went ahead and had a child with one of his servants. This was considered alright at the time. If your wife was barren, you could have a relationship with a servant to create a child. Then lo and behold, after all of this, Sarah gets pregnant. Sarah laughs. Abram laughs. God laughs. The child is called, "God laughs," Isaac. That is what the word "Isaac" means: "God laughs." God had the last laugh on that one.

We see that the promise is fulfilled. In the reading from Paul to the Philippians, we have an insight into the very mysterious ways in which God's will unfolds. Paul encourages his brothers and sisters to stand firm. To trust. To wait. To wait for the things to happen. I am sure that Paul prayed so many times that he would be doing God's will. As he was participating in persecuting Christians, Paul really believed he was doing God's will. Through a mysterious unfolding of events, Paul is knocked off of his horse. He becomes a completely new man in terms of the way he sees things. Paul then begins to serve God as God wanted. Paul must have been aware that his ego and his will were so far away from what God wanted. But God, in his goodness, worked in Paul's life and turned him around. God didn't make Paul into this perfect minister from the time he was old enough to get up and do the work. No, Paul was first working against the work; then he came to work for God. There must have been something in Paul saying, "Wait. Be steadfast. Don't give up too soon. God has made a promise to take care of all of us and to get us into the truth. We may spend years, months, hours, whatever, really confused and in darkness and not knowing what is there. But God makes a promise to show us, to bring us into the light." Notice that in the beginning of this liturgy we prayed to a God who is light. That means this is a God who shows us things, who enlightens us, who brings light into the darkness of our confusion. Let's look at the gospel, because Jesus has already done something that is very important to understand if we are going to get the full impact of this occurrence called the Transfiguration. My sense is that what he is fundamentally doing in the Transfiguration is something that Paul is hoping will happen to all of us. It's something that happened to Abram. In the gospel account of the Transfiguration of Jesus, we have

three men — Peter, James, and John — who had an experience that made them more committed to this path Jesus is going to walk.

What we need to understand about this gospel is that Jesus has just done the most extraordinary thing: He has just spoken to his disciples for the first time about the nature of his ministry. He does this by first setting up his disciples to see if they can possibly believe he is the Messiah. Jesus asks the disciples: “Who do people say that I am?” And he asks Peter: “Who do you say that I am?” Peter says, “I think you are the one. I think you are the Messiah. I really think you are the one we have all been waiting for.” Peter gets an A-plus for that because Jesus says, “You are absolutely right. I am the Messiah. You didn’t figure that out yourself. That has been revealed to you. God revealed that to you. God is keeping his covenant with you. He is keeping his promise to you that he will show you things that are truthful.” The stage is then set for Jesus to look at his disciples and to say what will be a shock to his disciples and is still a shock today: The way Jesus is going to conquer sin is by giving in to sin. The way Jesus is going to rise is by dying. The way Jesus is going to gain everything is by letting go of everything. The way Jesus is going to bring life to all of his disciples is to put them all through an experience that almost feels as if they have died. Their doubts. Their fears. Their lack of being able to be committed. And of course, Peter looks at Jesus as we all do (in more subtle ways!) and says, “I think this is the dumbest idea I have ever heard. This is ridiculous. Don’t do that. You, as the Messiah, can’t suffer and go through that horrible death. And give in to sin. What are you talking about?” Jesus looks at Peter and all of the disciples in the eye and says, “Get behind me, Satan.” That’s exactly what evil does. It takes this incredible core message and tries to lift it out of the scenario. Out of the equation. “No, I am going to pray to God. God made a covenant with me. I am going to ask for the things I need, and he will give them to me.” Without recognizing that ninety-nine percent of the time that when we are asking for core things, basic things, God is going to invite us into a process that is difficult, painful, and wrenching.

It is a process that can only be described as a kind of death. That’s not good news, in a sense. But it is important news, because that is the only way it works. That is the plan. When asked about that plan by mystics, God often responded by saying, “If I could have come up with a better plan, I would have. This is the only way I can get you — in the world I have created — to the fullness that is your inheritance. You must experience the Paschal mystery. You must experience the negative part. The suffering part. The dark part. The only way you can get through that part is if you are committed. And if you are not committed, it’s just not going to work.” Commitment — this recognition that if we don’t stay with the process — is vital. If we don’t remain committed, we will be torn apart. Our spiritual lives get cut in half. We become spiritual on one side, human on the other side. The spiritual just sort of withers away. The whole idea is integration of spirit and flesh. Jesus so powerfully represents this integration. We have to become divine and human. This is an incredible combination of two elements interlaced together. That is what is called the full potential of a human being. We are made to be spiritual beings as well as human. That’s the challenge Jesus gives to his disciples in this moment. What is so interesting is that any time you are asking someone to leave a particular way of thinking, you are asking them to let go of the foundations they have based that thinking on. These disciples — Peter, James, and John — were basically rooted in the Old Testament. That’s what they had. Moses was a major figure. Elijah was a major figure. These men were their mentors, their teachers. Think of it this way: It is as if you were involved in some discipline, and there was a great teacher in your life and you thought that teaching was everything, and then someone comes along and says, “That man gave

you some very important things, but I am going to give you something that will change everything. It is not going to destroy or shatter everything you believe in, but it is going to change everything. It's an additional piece of information — something you have to grab hold of and wrestle with.”

Isn't it interesting that Jesus takes Peter, James, and John to the mountain. All of a sudden, they see this light emanating from Jesus. The light is an image of the truth. If we focus on Jesus, then we are enlightened. We will be able to see things, to understand things, that don't make any sense. They see Jesus filled with light. All of a sudden, they see Moses and Elijah, and it looks like they are in conversation with Jesus. They are nodding and approving of what Jesus says. We have the image of Jesus, who is not destroying the work of Moses and the prophets, but who is building on it. It is part of the whole process. Then, as confusing as all of this is to the disciples, Peter decides he is going to build three booths. Maybe he thought this was the Final Coming. The tents may have been for a celebration of the final times. All of a sudden, a cloud descends on the scene. The whole incident gets confused. Then comes the moment of the Word. This is the heart of the experience on the mountain. Peter, James, and John felt they really heard the words of God. They sensed God was speaking to them. These are the words: “This is the one. This is the Messiah. This is actually my Son. I want you to listen to him. Trust him. He has got the truth. He's really telling you the way it is. If you can embrace the way it is, you are going to have everything your soul has ever longed for.”

There's not one guarantee that this will come without pain. Or suffering. There is not one guarantee. In fact, it is just the opposite. There is a guarantee that there will be pain and suffering and difficulty. That is why this Second Sunday of Lent, focused on commitment, reveals to us that when we don't have this on board, then when things don't feel right, when things don't seem like they are moving in the right direction — we will believe God is a liar. Without commitment, we will feel we are doing everything the way we should, and that God has not kept his promise. We might say: “I'm miserable. How can you possibly be the God who is answering my prayer, how can you be the God I trust in, because I don't feel it.” The images we have today are that we will feel it. It is coming. It is certain to happen. We will feel it. Our process is to wait. To suffer. To endure. The hardest thing for the human ego to embrace is the possibility of the way to wholeness. That's why we see in many of our prayers of the Mass and the liturgy itself and the Eucharistic prayer, “All life, all goodness, all holiness, comes from God through the working of the Holy Spirit.” We can't do the work on our own. We've been through a Sunday trying to get us focused. Watch out how we want to use this power of God. This Sunday we have been reminded that the only way to salvation, the only way to this wholeness, is through a radical commitment, knowing that if we give up on the commitment, if we give up on God, we will be torn apart. We will be split apart, and we will die.

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Listen, Let Go, Laugh!

By [Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)

All through this decade I have been privileged to share Lent with you. Largely because of you I have struggled to deepen my grasp on these 40 days. Thousands are the words I

have winged your way; varied are the visions I have evoked for you. At this point I want to extract from those many utterances three themes that strike me as uncommonly crucial for your Lent and for your life.<sup>1</sup> These three themes take seriously the command of Jesus that we "repent," but take just as seriously the first Lenten Preface, which describes these 40 days as "this joyful season." These three themes amount to three Lenten penances. (1) For your Lenten penance, listen! (2) For your Lenten penance, let go! (3) For your Lenten penance, laugh!

I

For your Lenten penance, listen! Begin by listening to one another, to the earthbound humans whose lives touch yours. Not easy. Most conversations are not conversations at all. Either they are monologues: I wait patiently till you have finished—since civility demands it—and then I say exactly what I would have said if you had not spoken. Or they are debates: I do indeed listen, but only for that inept word or false phrase at which I proceed to intercept and destroy. No. To listen is to give yourself totally, for that moment or that hour, to another, to put yourself into the other's mind, the other's heart. It means you hear not naked words but a flesh-and-blood person.

Remember our Lady? She listened: to an angel in Nazareth and angels in Bethlehem, to shepherds and wise men from the East. Remember Helen Keller? Blind, deaf, mute, she "listened" to Annie Sullivan as if her life depended on it (it did indeed). Remember St. John Vianney, famous parish priest of Ars in France? Twelve hours a day in the confessional, he listened—not simply to sins but to fractured hearts. I remember my remarkable mentor in early Christianity at Catholic University: "I learn as much from my students as my students learn from me."<sup>2</sup>

The problem? To listen is to risk. It takes your precious time, often when you can least afford it. You take on other people's problems, when you have enough of your own. You must pay attention to folk less brilliant than you—like students. If you're a good listener, people "dump" on you. If you listen, someone may fall in love with you—and that can be a burden you do not care to bear.

But the risk will be matched by a matchless joy. For listening, really listening, is an act of love; and so it is wonderfully human, splendidly Christian. I used to think, in my youthful arrogance, that what I had to offer the Catholic world was a hatful of answers. No. I come to others as I am, with my own ignorance, weakness, sinfulness, my own fears and tears. I share not words by myself; I am there. And that, dear friends, is my Christian mission and yours: to be where another can reach out to us.

Second, listen to Jesus. That was the Father's command from the cloud: "Listen to him!" (Lk 9:35). Why? Because here is God's Revelation in flesh, the Word God speaks. How does Jesus speak to us now? Vatican II rings loud and clear: "[Christ] is present in his word, since it is he himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the church."<sup>3</sup> Do you believe that? Do you really believe "This is the word of the Lord"? If you do, how do you listen? As breathlessly as Moses listened to the Lord on Sinai? As open to God's word as was the teenage Mary of Nazareth? Do you "marvel," like his townspeople, at "the words of grace" that fall from Jesus' lips (Lk 4:22)? Do you exclaim, as the two disciples exclaimed on the road to Emmaus, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us...while he opened the Scriptures to us?" (Lk 24:32). Or has repetition dulled your appetite, made J.C. less exciting than J. R. ?<sup>4</sup>

Third, listen to the world around you. God speaks to you through the things He has shaped. For God could fashion nothing unless it imaged some perfection of His. There is no blade of grass that does not speak of Him. The whirlwinds reflect His power, the mountains mirror His majesty, surging waves His irresistibility, a star-flecked sky His breath-taking loveliness. If I miss their message, it is because I am not tuned into God, am not listening.

God speaks to me through history, through human events. The cry of the blacks for freedom was a cry of God, "Let my people go!" From the ovens and gas chambers of Dachau, the God of Abraham is talking to a world that would like to forget its inhumanity to Jewish man and woman. From Appalachia to Calcutta it is the voice of Jesus that begs for bread and human dignity. But I need him to put his fingers into my ears and murmur "Be opened" (Mk 7:33—34).

Good friends: If you want to "do" something for Lent, if you want to share in the dying-rising of Jesus, rise above Oprah Winfrey and the Optifast diet. Simply listen: Listen to one another, listen to Jesus in the proclaimed word, listen to the Lord speaking through the things and people that surround you. For your Lenten penance, please...listen!

## II

For your Lenten penance, let go! Suppose we begin with the Word of God rather than the word of Burghardt:

Though of divine status,  
 [Jesus] did not treat like a miser's booty  
 his right to be like God  
 [his right to appear like Yahweh in glory],  
 but emptied himself of it,  
 to take up the status of a slave  
 and become like men;  
 having assumed human form,  
 he still further humbled himself  
 with an obedience that meant death-  
 even death upon a cross!  
 (Phil 2:6-11)

Moving, poignant words. A liturgical hymn sung in ancient Christian liturgy. But what does the hymn say to us? Not only did Jesus himself journey to Jerusalem; he commanded us to follow him on that journey. It is a journey that goes to life through death; and death gives life not only when we breathe our last, but all through our Christian existence.

In our journeying to life, we die in two ways; for death comes to us from two sources. Death comes, first, from sin—from the sins of our own fashioning and from "the sin of the world," all the weight and burden of human transgression from Adam to Antichrist. And "the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23). Not the soul leaving the body; not some abstract absence of God. The results of radical sin, of "mortal" sin, are within me. It unmakes me, undoes me, unravels me, misshapes me. In radical sin I am a different person; for Life has left me.

To the death that is sin we have been dying since our baptism. And the dying is never ended. For dying to sin is not something negative; dying to sin is turning to Christ, and turning to Christ is a constant conversion. If sin is rejection, dying to sin is openness: I am open to God's presence poured out on me through every flower that opens its chalice petals to me, every breeze that caresses my skin, every man or woman whose eyes meet mine, the awesome presence of the Holy One Himself tabernacled within me. In dying to sin, we live to God.

Death comes to us in a second way: from the very shape of the human journey—even apart from sin. For your human journey to go forward, to move ahead, you must let go of where you've been, let go of the level of life where you are now, so as to live more fully. Whether it's turning 21, 40, or 65, whether it's losing your health or your hair, your looks or your lustiness, your money or your memory, a person you love or a possession you prize, yesterday's rapture or today's applause—you have to move on. Essential to the human pilgrimage, to the Christian journey, is a self-emptying more or less like Christ's own emptying: Time and again, from womb to tomb, you have to let go. And to let go is to die a little. It's painful, it can be bloody; and so we hang on, clutch our yesterdays like Linus' blanket, refuse to grow.

But no, it will not do—especially for a Christian. You are commanded to let go. Not invited—commanded: "Follow me!" It is a risky thing, this letting go of yesterday, if only because you cannot be certain where it will lead, except that the journey is in the tracks of one who laid aside his divine glory to clothe himself in our flesh, let go of Nazareth and his mother, the hill of Transfiguration *and* the garden of Gethsemane, the sinners he had touched with his forgiveness and that unpredictable band of mixed-up apostles—let go of the very miracle of being alive.

The comforting thing, the thrilling thing, is that you let go for a purpose. Emptying, dying, is not its own end. You let go of yesterday because only by letting go, only by reaching out into a shadowed future, can you grow into Christ, grow in loving communion with God, with the crucified images of God, with the breath-taking beauty of God's creation.

Only by dying, not only to sin but to yourself, can you come fully to life. You don't *forget* your yesterdays; they are part of who you are today. You simply refuse to live in them, to wallow in them, to pretend that there, in some near or distant yesterday, there life reached its peak or died its death.

No, good friends, die a little, to live more richly. Let your yesterdays be yesterdays, the joys and the sorrows, so that *today* you may listen to the Lord's voice (cf. Ps 95:7), receive his flesh and blood for *today's* food and drink, go out to a little acre of God's world where anguished women and men need so badly a Christian who has died to sin and self, who lives to God and for others...today.

For your Lenten penance, please...let go!

### III

For your Lenten penance, laugh! In the famous Abbey of Lérins, on an island off the southeast coast of France, there is an unusual sculpture. It may go back to the 12th century, and it has for title *Christ souriant*, "The Smiling Christ." Jesus is imprisoned on the cross; his head is leaning somewhat to the right; his eyes are closed—in death, I think;

but on his lips is a soft, serene smile.

Now the Gospels never say that Jesus smiled or laughed, as they twice testify that he wept—over Jerusalem and Lazarus, over his city and his friend. But I do not understand how one who was like us in everything save sin could have wept from sorrow but not laughed for joy. How could he fail to smile when a child cuddled comfortably in his arms, or when the maître d' at Cana wondered where the good wine had come from, or when he saw little Zacchaeus up a tree, or when Jairus' daughter wakened to life at his touch, or when Peter put his foot in his mouth once again? I refuse to believe that he did not laugh when he saw something funny, or when he experienced in the depths of his manhood the presence of his Father.

But granted that Jesus smiled, is there room for the smiling Christ these 40 days? Yes, but only if in Lent you refuse to pretend. In Lent you dare not make believe that Christ is not yet risen, that you have to wait for Easter to enjoy his rising. Even in Lent you and I are *risen* Christians. Oh yes, during these weeks we represent the stages of our Lord's journey to Jerusalem, his way to the cross; but we do it as risen Christians. That means we do right to reproduce in our own Lent, on our own cross, the smiling Christ of Lérins. The cross is victory, not defeat; and we need not wait for that victory, wait for Easter to dawn.

But we cannot pretend the other way either. Simply because we have risen with Christ in baptism, we cannot make believe that Lent is unreal. Risen we are, but not yet *fully* risen. That is why we must ceaselessly reproduce Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, not only in liturgy but in our flesh and bones. That is why our laughter is not yet full-throated, why it is often through tears that we smile, why we still pray "Father...remove this cup from me" (Lk 22:42). We have not been transformed completely into the risen Christ; that transformation will take place only if we go up to Jerusalem with Jesus. The smiling Christ rests on a cross.

Is Lent for laughing or for crying? I say, for both. But I am stressing the laughter of Lent because it is so far removed from our spirituality. It is almost as hard to find a smiling Christian on Good Friday as it is to find a smiling Christ in crucifixion art. Little wonder we have the philosopher Nietzsche's cutting critique of Christians: You "do not look redeemed."

How look redeemed? I suggest that you give up something tastier than nachos, smokier than Kents, perhaps more destructive than sin. I mean an absorption in yourself—where you take yourself all too seriously, where the days and nights revolve around you. I ask you to see yourself as you really are: a creature wonderfully and fearfully made, a bundle of paradoxes and contradictions. You believe and doubt, hope and despair, love and hate. You are exciting and boring, enchanted and disillusioned, manic and depressive. You are "cool" on the outside and you hurt within. You feel bad about feeling good, are afraid of your joy, feel guilty if you don't feel guilty. You are trusting and suspicious, selfless and selfish, wide-open and locked in. You know so much and so little. You are honest and still play games. Aristotle said you are a rational animal; I say you are an angel with an incredible capacity for beer!

If it is the incongruous, what does not fit, that makes for humor, you can indeed smile at yourself. St. Ignatius Loyola has a rule for Jesuits: Our "whole countenance should reflect cheerfulness rather than sadness." If *we* don't obey Ignatius, you should!



Your smile will turn to lusty laughter if you only realize how lovable you are. Not because of anything you've made of yourself, but because God loves you, because God died for you, because God lives in you...now.

Then, with your new-found delight in yourself, minister the smiling Christ to others. Not far from you is someone who is afraid and needs your courage; or lonely and needs your presence; or hurt and needs your healing. So many feel unloved and need your touching, are old and need to feel that you care. Many are weak in so many ways and need for support your own shared weakness. You will rarely know greater happiness than when through you a smile is born on the face of someone in pain; you will have given birth to a smiling Christ.

Christianity needs men and women who repent of their smallness, fast from their selfishness, abstain from isolation. Lent calls for risen Christians, men and women like the hero of Eugene O'Neill's *Lazarus Laughed*—the Lazarus who has tasted death and sees it for what it is, whose joy in living is irresistible, whose invitation to the world is his infectious cry:

Laugh with me!  
Death is dead!  
Fear is no more!  
There is only life!  
There is only laughter!<sup>5</sup>

Unreal? In a sense—when you look at the Middle East, Northern Ireland, Southeast Asia; when you touch bellies bloated with hunger or shriveled from cancer. But where does the Christian start—start to overcome fear and death? Here, right where you are; now, not after Easter. By bringing the smiling Christ, the joy of Jesus, to one man, woman, or child reliving his passion. Who knows? It just might be your own healing, your own salvation.

At any rate, if the crucified Christ can look redeeming, the crucified Christian can at least look redeemed. For your Lenten penance, therefore, please...look...redeemed! For your Lenten penance, please...laugh!

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