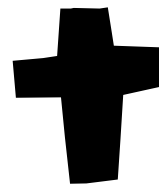




Bringing Home the Word



3RD SUNDAY OF LENT March 7, 2010

The Cry of God's People

By Diane M. Houdek

Moses is fleeing from his past in Egypt when he finds himself not only in the desert but near the mountain of God. There he discovers his future. His flock will no longer be his father-in-law's sheep but the people of the God of his fathers. He is called from security into the unknown.

Once he encounters the Lord—first, curious about the burning bush; then, awed by the presence of the Lord—he comes close enough to hear the call and respond, though he knows not where it will lead him.

God tells Moses that he is being sent

by the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This title summarizes the whole history of the Hebrew covenant to that point. Moses, though raised in the Egyptian court, is one of the chosen people, the people of the covenant. This fact defines who he is and determines his destiny. In the same way, our lives are shaped by the fact that we are baptized into the life of Christ.

Because of the covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Lord heard the cry of his people, held in bondage and oppressed by the Egyptians. He still hears the cry of his people, held in bondage and oppressed by any of those things that keep us from living freely—fear, addiction, depression, illness, sin.

God wants to reach out but he can only do so through other people—Moses, Jesus, all those who accept the challenge to live the gospel. At times we are the Israelites, languishing in bondage and crying out for deliverance. At other times, we're the ones called to deliver others from their chains.

We can ask why we have been called, we can ask for proof of the Lord's integrity, we can find reasons why other people come to bad ends, we can hesitate for a time, but when all the questions have been asked, we are challenged to respond yes or no.

Recall that one of the temptations of the desert is to demand proof of the covenant. When he was tempted in the desert, Jesus responded, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." If we forget everything else in our relationship with God, we need to remember that we are called into an unbreakable covenant with the Divine.

Whatever our destiny, we must respond to the Lord's call. If we fail to fulfill the task he has created us for, we will be as useless as the fig tree in today's Gospel. Yet, like the gardener, God is willing to give us a little more time to prove our usefulness.

God will give us more time, but only as long as we are resolved and even eager to change and cultivate our lives. We have to take responsibility for beginning the conversion process. We are fortunate if we have people who both nurture and challenge us.

The journey of Lent can seem like a trackless wasteland at times, but the people of God have always found their most direct encounters with God in those times and places when everything seemed bleak and barren, when all the creature comforts are stripped away. The demand of the desert is to stand before the burning insistence of God and believe that he has heard our cry. In that belief, we will come to the Promised Land. †

SUNDAY READINGS

Exodus 3:1-8a, 13-15

God's people pray for deliverance. God plans to lead them to a land filled with blessings.

I Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12

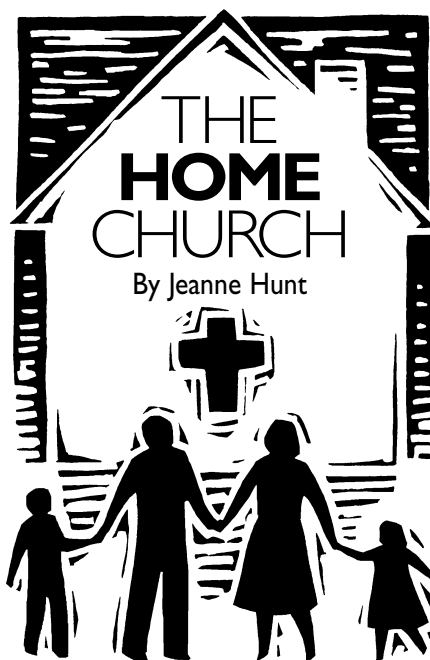
Paul recalls Israel's failure despite their God-given privileges. Their example stands as a warning to Christians not to be overconfident.

Luke 13:1-9

Jesus recalls two tragic events. He tells a parable of a fruitless fig tree to emphasize the need to be always prepared for the final day.

REFLECTION
QUESTIONS
QUESTIONS
REFLECTION

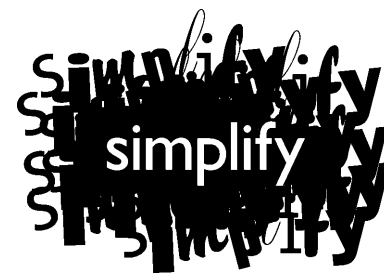
- What change would you like to make in your life in one year?
- What trouble lies in associating sin with misfortune?
- What kind of fruit should your parish produce in the next year?
- Who is the gardener meant to represent in this parable?
- What does repentance have to do with restoring life?
- Share some fig-tree success stories.



In many ways, we are like the fig tree in today's Gospel. We decide to turn our lives around in one year, lose forty pounds in six months or write the great American novel over the summer. There is something intriguing about the dynamic that says we must complete a task in a given time.

Divine Wisdom is at play in the fig-tree story. God wants us to take advantage of the challenge to restore wholeness in our lives with the help of a calendar. We are halfway through Lent. Is the state of our souls coming along? The fig tree in the Gospel needed pruning and fertilizer to come back to life. Perhaps we need to apply a hefty dose of prayer and let the discipline of fasting and denial prune away some bad habits. Three weeks is not a lifetime, yet it might be enough to prove to ourselves that we can revive our souls to a healthier spiritual life.

The calendar may be our best friend when it comes to making changes. To sit in church on Easter and realize that our lives are exactly where they were on Ash Wednesday is not what we want. God tells us that fig trees that don't bear fruit are cut down. A few green shoots are possible by this Easter if we work at it. God waits for us to make our move.



As the earth begins its journey back to increased light and new plant and animal life in the spring, we get restless to get outdoors and breathe fresh air.

Spring is a good time to plan a summer vegetable garden. Raising your own fruits and vegetables is a gift to your consciousness as well as to your kitchen.

As a spiritual activity, do some garden dreaming this week: Get some seed catalogs or visit online gardening sites and plan a summer garden.

If you have limited space, plan a container garden for your patio, a window garden for your high-rise or whatever you can imagine in your situation.

In your imagination, the warm sun of July will burst through the long, dull days of March.

Family Fun With the Word

Plant some seeds this week and talk about pruning and fertilizer.

PRAYER

O Divine Gardener,
I need a little pruning
and a little fertilizer.
Come to me this Lent.
Encourage me
with your touch
as I prune away
my dead wood.
Fill me with the hope
of your care
as I try to fill my roots
with prayer and fasting.
Amen.

WEEKDAY READINGS

Monday	2 Kgs 5:1-15b; Lk 4:24-30	Thursday	Jer 7:23-28; Lk 11:14-23
Tuesday	Dn 3:25, 34-43; Mt 18:21-35	Friday	Hos 14:2-10; Mk 12:28-34
Wednesday	Dt 4:1, 5-9; Mt 5:17-19	Saturday	Hos 6:1-6; Lk 18:9-14



Bringing Home the Word

4TH SUNDAY OF LENT March 14, 2010

Coming Home to God

By Diane M. Houdek

Today's Gospel tells the familiar story of the Prodigal Son. Most of us can identify on some level with this rebellious younger son who loses himself in pleasure and adventure. And we also know what it's like to come to our senses and realize that somewhere we've taken a wrong turn.

Our wandering in the desert exposes all our weaknesses and reduces us to our essential being. When everything has been stripped away, we must discover that we are rooted in God or we will be nothing more than dust—and

the things we take pleasure in will one day be nothing more than empty husks.

When we realize that the road we have been following, the life we have been leading, may not be the one that is best for us, we must have the humility to admit that we have strayed, that we have been mistaken, that God knows better than we the life that will lead us to him. We must resolve to say, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you."

The journey back may be long and uncertain, the road may get hot and dry and dusty. The desert sand stings our faces and tastes dry and gritty in our mouths. Nothing is more difficult than admitting that we have failed, that we have sinned. We feel haunted by the past, we rehearse the role that we feel sure lies ahead, we practice confessing our weaknesses.

Many of the burdens we carry from our past have to do with not being able to forgive ourselves. Until we can do that, we can't believe that God—or anyone else—is able to forgive us. We cannot stay in the desert forever, wandering in despair. No matter how much we rehearse our role, no matter how willing we are to do penance, suffer and take on the heavy burden of our guilt, in the end the greatest humility is accepting the role the Lord

has written for us.

Our recognition of our sinfulness is the first step, but it can only be redeemed if it turns us toward God. Like the lavishly forgiving father in the Gospel, all that the Lord asks is that we come home.

We discover that the Lord has heard our cry and showed us the way back. We have left Egypt and we're still wandering in the desert and over long roads. St. John Chrysostom wrote, "It is not enough to leave Egypt; we must also journey toward the Promised Land." We begin to understand that there's a destination ahead of us.

We must accept our roles as sons and daughters and not refuse this great gift of love by insisting that we're only hired hands. This is the mistake the elder son makes. Although he says he's slaved for his father all his life, like his brother he, too, is a son. We are all children of the Father. We are all welcome in our Father's house. We must live as a forgiving and a forgiven people. This sounds easy, but in fact it can be quite difficult. This may be why so many of Jesus' parables talk about forgiveness. The very prayer he taught us has forgiveness at its heart. And the same Gospel writer who tells the story of the Prodigal Son shows Jesus on the cross forgiving the people who crucified him. ✚

SUNDAY READINGS

Joshua 5:9a, 10-12

God's people celebrate the Passover in the land of their forefathers. Their long journey through the desert has finally ended.

2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Paul reminds us that faith and baptism bring about a new creation. We are no longer burdened by sin; we enjoy friendship with God.

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Jesus' story of a man with two sons teaches a profound lesson about God's immense capacity to forgive and receive back those who are lost.

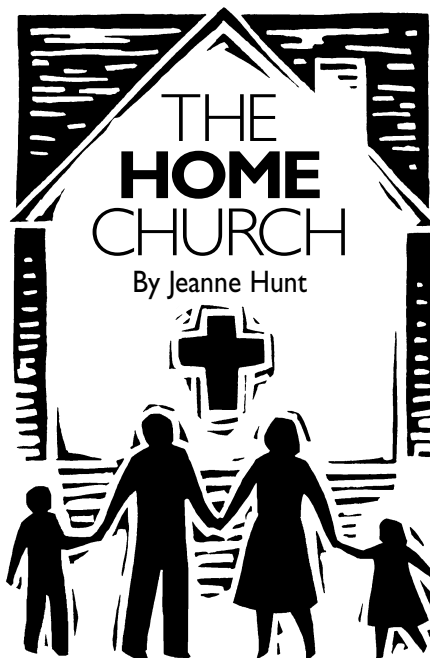
REFLECTION
QUESTIONS
QUESTIONS
REFLECTION

- Did you ever run away from home? What happened?
- With which character in the parable do you most identify?
- What stages does the prodigal go through that lead him back home?
- What does this parable teach us about repentance?
- How has God acted in your life when you have strayed?

PRAYER

O Father,
I want to
come home again:
home to the sacraments;
home to daily prayer,
home to stewardship.

I want to live totally
in and with you.
Amen.

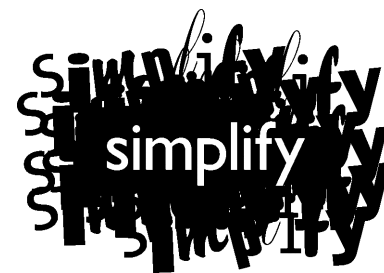


Many of us have childhood memories of running away from home. Somewhere between the front door and the next street sign we lost courage and returned home. This childhood lesson comes back to us today. The deeper message of today's Gospel story is that we are always welcome to come home. No matter how far we wander away from the ideals of faith, the love of family, the roots that formed us, we can walk through the doors of God's mercy and pick up where we left off.

In every church this Sunday sit the same characters: the obedient ones who honor the Father and obey all the rules of the Church; the wild ones who struggle with keeping the Church's laws, but love God just the same. All of us sit together at the Lord's table and experience beyond any doubt that we are his own.

If we know people who feel rejected by the Church, condemned by God or angry with how God's people have treated them, we need to do exactly what Jesus would do. Mercy is meant for everyone, not just those we think deserve it.

What makes the prodigal story so enduring is that the wandering son is still with us. In fact, there is a little bit of the wayward son in each of us.



Our grandparents undertook the task—almost a ritual—of spring cleaning every year. Most of us are far too busy with family life, work and leisure to find time to take our houses apart, clean and reassemble them in a similar manner.

I offer you a simple solution: Clean a little every day. It is far easier to clean one area or room each week by doing a small part of the job every day.

A friend of mine noticed that her china cabinet looked like dust bunnies were permanent residents. She looked at it for a week or two and finally decided to take action. Each day she cleaned one shelf and everything on it. By Sunday she had a shiny cabinet.

Start by considering the worst spot in your house. Perhaps it is the attic, the basement, the garage. Attack it every day in small portions.

Clean, discard, or reorganize a couple square feet of floor space, a shelf, a box of old things. Slowly order and cleanliness will be restored.

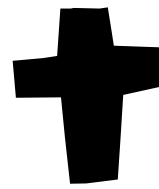
The trick is to accept the fact that the inch-by-inch method is ongoing. Gone are the days of spring house cleaning, but tiny spot cleaning is a great alternative.

WEEKDAY
READINGS

Monday	Is 65:17-21/Jn 4:43-54	Friday	2 Sm 7:4-5a, 12-14a, 16; Rom 4:13, 16-18, 22; Mt 1:16, 18-21, 24a
Tuesday	Ez 47:1-9, 12; Jn 5:1-16		
Wednesday	Is 49:8-15; Jn 5:17-30		<i>Joseph, Husband of Mary</i>
Thursday	Ex 32:7-14; Jn 5:31-47	Saturday	Jer 11:18-20; Jn 7:40-53



Bringing Home the Word



5TH SUNDAY OF LENT March 21, 2010

Doing Something New

By Diane M. Houdek

Our journey through the desert becomes one of new birth, the discovery of new life where no life existed before, the hope that comes from putting the past behind us so that we are free to enter into a new life of water and the spirit.

No matter how bleak things may look, the Lord promises that a new beginning is possible. We must remember the covenant and all the things that the Lord has done for us in the past, but we must also remember that our relationship with God is dynamic. We

must be open to the ever-changing ways of salvation the Lord may have planned for our future.

Isaiah tells the people of Israel: “Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; see, I am doing something new.” Newness is always both exciting and a bit frightening. Much depends on how invested we are in the status quo.

In the Gospel, the Pharisees base their accusation on the Law of Moses. They have codified the way people relate to each other and the way they relate to God. This has become a limited and limiting desert of impersonal laws and regulations. They don’t see a woman before them, only a broken law.

We are told that Jesus comes to this confrontation after spending the night at the Mount of Olives, perhaps grappling with his own human weakness in the face of his inevitable suffering and death. Out of the most basic core of his humanity, coupled with his identity as God’s Son, he suggests a radical new law of compassion.

Jesus’ tracing in the sand perhaps reminds the people of the deserts where they themselves have wandered and strayed from the Lord. The crowd has gathered as a solid group, secure in the rigid institutionalism of the Law. But they drift away one by one as they confront the weaknesses in their own lives from which no institution can

protect them. What they miss by leaving Jesus, however, is the forgiveness and compassion he offers to the woman.

Such a radical change compels us to be open to the possibility of new starts, of putting the past behind us and accepting forgiveness for ourselves and others. The woman stays because she knows that Jesus and the refreshing changes he brings are her only hope for something better. She has nothing to lose.

Those who left in their guilt, those who believed they had everything to lose, ultimately killed Jesus and rejected his law of compassion. But death could not confine the life force that would make everything new.

Today’s Gospel asks us to choose where we will stand: with the woman, open to the new life Jesus has to offer; or with her accusers, confused and frustrated by Jesus’ openness. The challenge of the Gospel is to be willing to be open to Jesus as God’s Word.

As we approach the final week of Lent, the spiritual stakes are high. We journey through Lent as a community of faith, but at some point in the journey, we each are called to spend time alone with Jesus, hearing him speak to us the words he spoke to the woman in today’s Gospel: “Neither do I condemn you. Go and from now on do not sin anymore.” †

SUNDAY READINGS

Isaiah 43:16-21

A prophet has good news for the people. God is going to do something for them even more wonderful than the exodus from Egypt.

Philippians 3:8-14

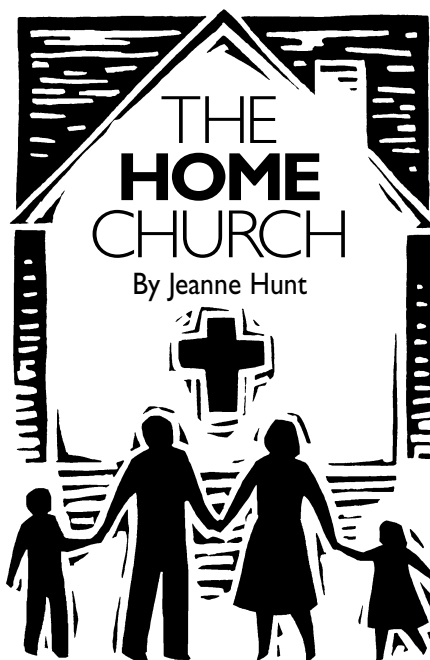
Paul asserts that he considers all his pre-conversion accomplishments nothing compared to his present knowledge of Christ. Faith in Christ is the only thing that counts.

John 8:1-11

Jesus shows care and concern for a woman accused of adultery. He protects her from the ill will of scribes and Pharisees.

REFLECTION
QUESTIONS
QUESTIONS
REFLECTION

- Share a time from your childhood when someone told on you.
- How does Jesus react to your sins?
- How can we learn to accept others as Jesus does?
- What can we learn about helping someone who wants to return to grace?
- How is this Gospel meant to be a trap for Jesus?



I've got my bucket of stones. Do you have yours? Throwing stones is a popular pastime in our day. It might not be a form of legal execution any longer, but it still deadens our relationships with one another.

Too often in family life, arguments begin based on the question, "Whose fault is this?" It would be far better to use our energy fixing the problem and leave blame to God or whoever is in charge of counting our mistakes in the Kingdom of God.

Perhaps we need to follow Jesus' advice, put down our bucket of stones and start embracing the sinner in our midst.

As a family, we need to look at making peace with one another regardless of who is responsible for the distress. We need to forgive and ignore the little problems that nag us. Parents need to love their outrageous teenagers and have listening hearts. Advice can be saved for those rare occasions when it really matters.

I could go on, but you get the idea. Jesus wants us to start really loving one another and to give up that stone-in-the-hand approach. It didn't work for the Pharisees—and it won't work for us.



Since the topic of the Gospel is adultery, it seems like a perfect time to talk about cleaning up our act electronically.

Most of our households are now linked electronically by the World Wide Web. For the first time in history, millions of people have instant access to science, art, news and literature.

This upgrade in information has a downside however. It means that everyone also has access to pornography and other evil suggestions that contradict our faith.

In simpler times we had much more control over what kind of information entered our space. With each new technological advance, a little bit more of that control slips away from us.

We need to continue to protect our sacred spaces with an ounce of prevention. Take time this Lent to block pornography and x-rated Web sites from all your electronic devices.

Let your personal cyberspace be a place where goodness and the highest ideals are proclaimed.

Family Fun With the Word

Put a big stone on the kitchen table with the words, "You who are without sin..."

PRAYER

Jesus,

I have a couple of stones
I need to drop.
Help me take the first step
and move on.
Help me open my fist
and release my hurt.
Help me let go
and forgive.
Amen.

WEEKDAY READINGS

Monday	Dn 13:1-9, 15-17, 19-30, 33-62/Jn 8:12-20	Thursday	Is 7:10-14; 8:10; Heb 10:4-10; Lk 1:26-38 <i>Annunciation</i>
Tuesday	Nm 21:4-9; Jn 8:21-30	Friday	Jer 20:10-13; Jn 10:31-42
Wednesday	Dn 3:14-20, 91-92, 95; Jn 8:31-42	Saturday	Ez 37:21-28; Jn 11:45-56



Bringing Home the Word

PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION March 28, 2010

When Life Comes at Us Too Fast

By Diane M. Houdek

Nationwide Insurance ran a series of commercials a while back. Perhaps you've seen some of them: The partying college student is suddenly a balding man with a mortgage; the baby in a car seat is a teenager by the next intersection, the father pushing a toddler on a swing is suddenly knocked down by a hefty adolescent bulging over the sides of the swing. The slogan: "Life comes at you fast."

This might be a good slogan for the Palm Sunday liturgy. We begin the liturgy with Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. The citizens welcome him with palm branches and shouts of "Hosanna to the Son of David." It seems to be his finest hour, the popular

recognition of who he is as the long-awaited Messiah. But we know from elsewhere in the Gospels that the popular idea of the Messiah was rarely the role that Jesus was destined to fill. All too soon the fickle crowds will be turned by some of their leaders to condemn this very person they greet so enthusiastically. The disciples' heads must have been spinning at the sudden reversal of fortune.

Our own liturgy moves quickly from the procession with palms into the reading of the Passion. One campus parish tried to separate these two different moods by a solemn reading of the Passion at the end of Mass, a foreshadowing of and entrance into the events of Holy Week. While it had a dramatic effect, it missed the fact that in this holiest of weeks, we are not spectators at a dramatic recreation of the final week of Jesus' life. Too often we get cast in the role of the crowd, extras playing bit parts in an epic movie. But we are in fact participating in a most solemn commemoration of the Paschal Mystery—the death and resurrection of our Lord.

Reflecting on this movement from triumph to tragedy to the ultimate triumph during Holy Week can help us understand the way the Paschal Mystery manifests itself in our own lives. As members of the body of Christ, we, too, experience the death and resurrection that Jesus did. We

have all had experiences of life coming at us fast and leaving us gasping for breath and searching for meaning. We find that meaning not in the financial security of a life insurance policy but in the awareness that everything in our lives—the heights of joy and triumph, the depths of suffering and death—is united with the life of Christ.

St. Luke gives us many memorable scenes unique to his account of the Passion. Only from Luke do we hear the story of the two thieves crucified with Jesus, men who knew that they deserved this punishment—and who knew, too, that this man between them did not. In the depths of his despair, the one we know as Dismas, the good thief, asks Jesus, "Remember me when you enter into your kingdom." Jesus promises him, "This day you will be with me in Paradise." Luke also tells us that Jesus says, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." We might find comfort in these words when we find ourselves acting out of anger or frustration and hurting those we love.

Jesus' last words in Luke's passion are, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." These words are perhaps our best response to our sense that life comes at us way too fast sometimes. Our lives are forever in God's hands. Knowing this in the depths of our beings gives us all the assurance we need. ✝

SUNDAY READINGS

Isaiah 50:4-7

A prophet speaks of his devotion to the word of God. He knows his message will give life to the people.

Philippians 2:6-11

Paul proclaims that the Son of God did not cling to the trappings of divine glory, but emptied himself.

Luke 22:14—23:56

Jesus completes his journey to Jerusalem by undergoing his passion and death as the innocent Son of God.

REFLECTION
QUESTIONS
QUESTIONS
REFLECTION

- What does the Eucharist mean to you?
- Have you ever experienced a Seder? Share your story.
- Jesus came to serve. When have you picked up the basin and the towel?
- How has the meaning of the last supper changed your life?
- How is God calling you to drink the cup of suffering?

PRAYER

Bread of Heaven,
fill my soul with
your very essence.

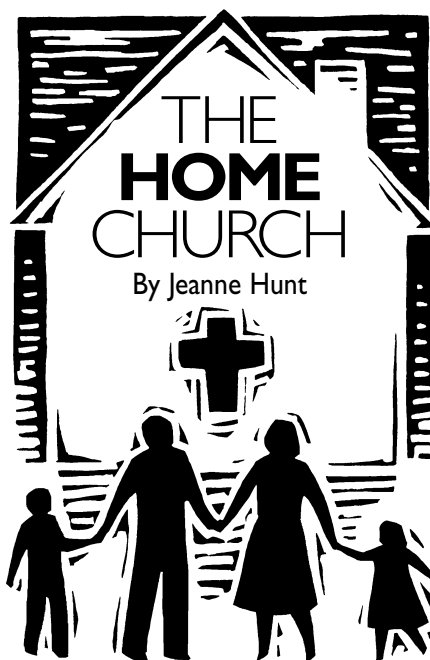
May I become
what I have eaten.

May I see with
the eyes of Christ.

May I listen with his heart.

May I speak as his servant.

Amen.

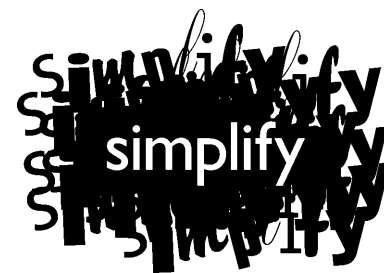


When a family sits at table, they nourish both bodies and souls. Memories are made at the kitchen table. Stories of the family are told over pots of soup. The dining room table is the place of high feasts: Thanksgivings, birthdays, anniversaries. The nicked-up old coffee table is the shrine of pizza parties, football championships, jigsaw puzzles and even a resting place for tired feet.

When we look at the Gospels, we discover that Jesus spoke some of his most profound words while gathered around a table for a meal. “Did not we recognize him in the breaking of the bread?” queries the Emmaus couple.

Jesus is still breaking bread with us: The table of the Eucharist is the holy way. Yet he is present, too, when we gather at our family tables—if we invite him. There is no more natural place to pray as a family than at table.

As we come into this most Holy Week, resolve to meet the Christ at your family table by beginning your time there with prayer. We teach profound lessons about what happened at the Last Supper by living our faith and acknowledging the presence of the Christ in ordinary ways.



New life is all around us, and it is perfectly free. In these days when a movie ticket is 10 dollars and a baseball or concert ticket even more, watching the earth coming back to life can be a wonderful alternative form of entertainment.

If the recession has curtailed your entertainment budget, try a few of these ideas on a Saturday afternoon or evening. Visit the local zoo and take a peek at the babies. New animals proclaim a quiet hope in God’s care. Visit a chicken or fish hatchery and watch life beginning. Go for a walk in the woods and make a list of the buds. Trees, flowers, even weeds peeking through the soil let us know that something new is coming to life. Watch the sky and the spring moon teaching its ancient lesson of wonder and light.

On the night of Holy Saturday, remove all the dead wood from your bushes and trees and build a fire. Let it be your personal reminder of the Light of Christ coming to your yard and your neighborhood, teaching once again that hope springs eternal.

Family Fun
With the Word

Make bread from scratch. Break off pieces of the loaf and pass them around the table.

WEEKDAY
READINGS

Monday	Is 42:1-7; Jn 12:1-11	Friday	Is 52:13—53:12; Heb 4:14-16; 5:7-9; Jn 18:1—19:42
Tuesday	Is 49:1-6; Jn 13:21-33, 36-38	Saturday	Gn 1:1—2:2 or 1:1, 26 31a; Ex 14:15—15:1; Rom 6:3 11; Lk 24:1-12
Wednesday	Is 50:4-9a; Mt 26:14-25		
Thursday	Ex 12:1-8, 11-14; 1 Cor 11:23-26/ Jn 13:1-15		