

Readings

2 Chr 36:14-16, 19-23

Ps 137:1-2, 3, 4-5, 6.

Eph 2:4-10

Jn 3:14-21

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This Lent, as we continue to wander in the desert with Christians around the world, we are gifted with an opportunity today to drink deeply from the oasis of God's love for us and for the whole world. Our opening prayer today sets the tone for us of God's abundant graciousness and encourages us to bask in his magnificent heavenly awe:

*O God, who through your Word
reconcile the human race to yourself in a wonderful way,
grant, we pray,
that with prompt devotion and eager faith
the Christian people may hasten
toward the solemn celebrations to come.*

If we are truly Augustinians searching and listening for God in everything, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear, we are invited daily to search spiritually for the original reality of God that the disciples of Jesus experienced first hand: the awe and wonder of standing *with prompt devotion* in the presence of God. The Church in her liturgy today reminds us that what we are sacrificing during this extraordinary season of Lent is not aimed to punish us, but rather, to quicken our soul to always recall that abundance is ours eternally through faith in Jesus.

Perhaps you might pause right now wherever you are for a moment and see if you can notice that you are always in the presence of God and God's holy Angel that he has sent to protect you.

This prayerful inner wisdom and experience is the *wonderful way* that God reconciles the human race to himself, everyday in every way. This is where we find inspiration.

Today's first reading from the Second Book of Chronicles begins with God's judgement, as his judgement is the way that God guides us to reconciliation over and over again as we search and strive to be faithful. Obeying the law is the beginning of our commitment, leading onto the path of conversion and faith. Here we accept the challenge to live God's plan in good times and in bad. But, of course, obedience for the sake of obedience can hardly sustain a lifetime of devotion: only true love can nourish and give us the grace of fortitude on the spiritual journey.

Today's readings pour out an abundance of love. In the middle of this season of obedience through austerity, sacrifice, fasting, and charity, today's scriptures boldly remind us of the depth and the breadth of God's love for us. In fact, John's Gospel quenches all of our human longing for acceptance, belonging, respect, and love. John's Gospel tells us that actions of our *prompt devotion* and hopefulness of our *eager faith* find fulfillment in our lifelong love affair with the Creator of the Universe. Fewer words in scripture frame the mind of God and the incarnation of Jesus with such clarity and magnanimity as we hear today:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

While these most Divinely inspired, magnificent, and hopeful sacred words may be the most famous lines from scripture, I fear they are also the most neglected.

If our faith life is a love affair with God, then believers ought to live and act as though they were in love. Sadly, many Christians today prefer the smallness of judgment and exclusion.

Some mistake the law for our ultimate destination, and perhaps inadvertently stop going forward in faith and worse, use the law to accuse and judge others. Many allow themselves to believe that politics of church or nation are companions on the journey of our love affair with Christ. This is manifested in the advancement of fear-based divisions and global violence, as we watch holy wars of every sort play out daily. But let's be real: we all have that potential of inner antagonism and of blame and judgement within ourselves, to one degree or another.

Is this the *wonderful way* that God reconciles us to himself? I think we are all clear that it is not. This aspect of division is one of the most important things that Jesus saves us from.

St. Paul, in the Letter to the Ephesians, elevates the characteristics of love and sets us Lenten desert wanderers on the right path:

Brothers and Sisters: God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love he had for us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, brought us to life with Christ – by grace you have been saved – , raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace and his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

The way that we can divest ourselves of the perceived right to judge and divide is to encounter this great love that the Gospel and the Epistle passionately remind us of today. If we are disinclined to love ourselves, how can we imagine that God loves us? Our devotion, and the scriptures' imperative, is that God does not love us because we are good, but God loves us because God is good! After all this is the Good News of God saving us, not a story about us saving ourselves! ... *by grace you have been saved!*

This grace filled reality quickens our devotion, brings about in our hearts hope of redemption, and evokes a humility called "self-knowledge" that would hardly dare judge another

for fear of being judged ourselves. Grace is God's free gift that helps us accept our perpetual imperfection by delivering into our souls the Divine love that changes everything. Thus, grace elevates the soul to know the love that is God so that God *might show the immeasurable riches of his grace and his kindness to us in Christ Jesus*. Grace is the felt reality of our experience of Love! Grace teaches us that Love is everything, and the only thing that matters. That's what Jesus teaches Christians in the heart and the head.

In his great love God teaches us to persist in integrity through the law so that we might experience tastes of heaven while here on earth. At some point in our lifetime of faith and hope we are called to move with and through the law into the mystical, the direct union of the soul with Jesus. St. Augustine experienced this union together with St. Monica, as did St. Therese of Lisieux, St. Theresa of Avila, and St. John of the Cross, to name but a few of our ancestors in faith. John's Gospel is a pathway into the mystical, a pathway towards believing in *all things visible and invisible*, and in loving God and being loved by God in return.

We stand in this love-inspired devotion here and now, in church, in the office or the classroom, visiting the sick or those in prison, driving on the highway, or in line in the supermarket: in fact, everywhere. We are encouraged this Lent to express our *eager faith* in God who never leaves us, who sends his Angels to guide us when we are in trouble, who is unconditionally healing and compassionate, who does not discriminate or alienate, God who longs to soften our hearts and minds towards healing and transformation, not just for us but for the whole world!

May we be a part of the spiritual healing of our broken world, and never contribute to it.

Peace.