

Please be seated. Good Afternoon.

Today we celebrate the second of the Three Sundays Before Lent. Until about thirty years ago, these three Sunday's were called by the Latin names of Septuagesima, Sexagesima, and Quinquagesima. These are the Latin words for 70th, 60th, and 50th, referring approximately to the days remaining before Easter.

During this Pre-Lenten season, many of the customs of we associate with Lent – not saying alleluias and engaging in acts of self-discipline – these would have begun last Sunday rather than in two and a half weeks on Ash Wednesday as we do now. These three weeks were to prepare us to undertake the pilgrimage of Lent. Since Lent is a preparation for Easter, during this Pre-Lent season, one prepared to prepare.

Almost as if we were using our old liturgical calendar, Lent seems to have come early this year. In January the American economy lost 598,000 jobs. One in eleven in California is unemployed. Locally we have state and county workers on furlough while others are facing pay cuts. I teach at a public school and we are waiting for the state budget to finally pass in order to gage the extent of the bad news.

The President did not tell us something new when he said in his Inaugural Address, “the challenges we face are real. They are serious and they are many. They will not be met easily or in a short span of time.”

The season of fasting and self-denial is already here.

In these times we may more readily identify with the race in which only one wins, with the Psalmist's sack-cloth, with the leper who stands outside society.

But that is not the to end today's readings. The race is one that all may win. Weeping at night is followed by joy in the morning. The leper is healed.

The race is Paul's metaphor, and it would have been especially meaningful to the Corinthians. Every two years, outside Corinth, the Isthmian games, the second-most prestigious in Greece, were held in honor of the Greek god Poseidon. The winner of these events would receive a wreath made from pine needles. The athletic metaphor works well now. Whether you are a sports fan or not, competition is everywhere in our culture.

"The runners all compete, but only one receives the prize." Paul contrasts the impermanent pine wreath won in by the single winner with imperishable salvation given by God to all. How hard do athletes work to win? How much harder, Paul encourages us, should we work to win an everlasting reward? This race, like the foot race or the boxing match is one that is difficult and requires self-control.

In Paul's Letter to the Galatians, self-control is a fruit of the spirit along with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, and gentleness. It is hard to ignore the image of Paul's punishment and enslavement of his body that he feels is necessary in order to gain self-control. Self-control is difficult, but it is a spiritual gift from God, like our psalmist's joy in the morning. We run this race with God's help. Paul reminds us not to run aimlessly. Our goal is not to win the world's race and the perishable pine wreath. Our goal is God's salvation, the imperishable reward.

The race is not easy. Our Psalmist is refreshingly direct in his complaints. God is someone we can speak with personally and frankly. One can almost hear the sarcasm when our psalmist complains to God "Will dust praise you?" And he makes the very modern sounding lament, "What profit is there in my blood?" It is difficult to sing God's praises while we wear sack cloth and while we weep, however, our psalmist turns his thoughts to God's grace and mercy. It would be easy to see only the literal relief from physical pain and illness as the cause for the psalmist's change of heart, but that would paint a very narrow picture of God's grace. We often lose the world's race – how few win

that wraith? All may win God's grace. The Psalmist reminds us that the story does not end with weeping but with God's love and mercy.

Just to be clear: our suffering is not part of God's plan to toughen us up. Disease is not part of some divine justice. Jesus never met someone in need he did not cure or help. Infirmity is a sign of the world's brokenness that God wants to redeem.

And so Jesus responds to the Leper with healing and touch. Leprosy in Jesus' time also included most skins diseases. Anyone with these skin blemishes was banished from society and had to walk down the street crying out, "unclean, unclean" so no one would accidentally touch the leper and be made unclean. Jesus touches the leper, not making himself unclean but making the person whole. Jesus' words to the leper, "I do choose" are beautifully symbolic of God's relationship with us. For however hard we run the race, we do not earn our salvation. We are chosen by God.

So what do we do? Run the race we cannot lose. Our task as a church is to support each other in that divine race and to help each other stay focused on the imperishable prize. It is our Lenten discipline. It does not begin on Ash Wednesday or end on Easter Sunday. Those are spiritual signposts, reminders to us in the church calendar of our Lenten discipline and our Easter hope. That's the lesson of today's readings, the tension we live in--Paul's admonition to stay focused and disciplined--Lent, and the Gospel's promise of renewal--Easter. The world and God, perishable and imperishable, night and day, weeping and joy, discipline and resurrection, Lent and Easter--reminders that we are called to live a life in Christ.

Amen