

The Lectionary for Ash Wednesday and the Sundays of Lent: Critique and Alternative Vision

J. Frank Henderson

Frank Henderson's Page on Liturgy and Medieval Women
<http://www.compumart.ab.ca/fhenderson>

© 2001 J. Frank Henderson

Contents

- Goals and Methodology
- The Present Lectionary Readings
 - Principles and Description
 - The Readings
- Issues, Concerns and Questions
- Principles: Easter and Baptism
 - Baptismal Living
 - An Inclusive Community
 - Respect for Jews and Judaism
- Alternative Readings and Rationale
 - First Sunday of Lent
 - Second Sunday of Lent
 - Third Sunday of Lent
 - Fourth Sunday of Lent
 - Fifth Sunday of Lent
 - Passion (Palm) Sunday
 - Ash Wednesday

Goals and Methodology

This is a critical and creative study of the present lectionary readings for Lent.

The goals of this project are simple: (a) to discern concerns and questions regarding the lectionary readings for Lent, and (b) to imagine concrete ways in which the Lenten readings might be improved.

The methodology used may be described as follows:

1. The principles that guided the choice of readings for Lent in the present Roman Lectionary and Revised Common Lectionary are set forth. The lectionary readings themselves are then listed.
2. These principles and the individual lectionary readings are studied to reveal concerns and questions.
3. Principles are formulated to guide the selection of an improved set of readings.
4. Present readings are evaluated on the basis of these principles and criteria, and readings that do not conform are set aside.
5. Possible alternatives to the present readings that would meet the stated criteria are then imagined and named, together with a rationale.

If at all possible more than one alternative is offered. This is to try to prevent simple either/or judgments; it is also intended to encourage critical discussion of issues and alternatives. Finally, this allows for the possibility of different solutions and alternatives to meet different pastoral situations.
6. The psalms or psalm passages that follow the first reading have not been considered in this study.
7. It is recognized that the alternatives proposed may themselves be incomplete responses, and not the only possible courses of action.
8. It is also recognized that a case can be made for the retention of individual readings of the present lectionary.
9. My suggestions for re-visioned readings are not viewed as the end of the process, but rather a beginning. Further dialogue and conversation, refinements, evaluation, and reflection are anticipated and invited.

The Present Lectionary Readings

One starting place for this study is the present (1992 Canadian) edition of the Roman Lectionary. (*Lectionary: Sundays and Solemnities*. Ottawa: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1992). The other is the *Revised Common Lectionary* (prepared by The Consultation on Common Texts) (Winfield BC: Wood Lake Books 1992). These are closely related, and in general the term “lectionary” in the singular is used to refer to these together.

Principles and General Descriptions

The principles and general description that govern the Lenten readings in the Roman Lectionary are set out in official Roman Catholic documents.

General Norms for the Liturgical Year and Calendar. March 1969

27. Lent is a preparation for the celebration of Easter. For the Lenten liturgy disposes both catechumens and the faithful to celebrate the paschal mystery: catechumens, through the several stages of Christian initiation; the faithful, through reminders of their own baptism and through penitential practices.

Lectionary for Mass: Introduction, second edition (1981)

97. The gospel readings [for the Sundays of Lent] are arranged as follows:

the first and second Sundays retain the accounts of the Lord’s temptations and transfiguration, with readings, however, from all three Synoptics.

On the next three Sundays, the gospels about the Samaritan woman, the man born blind, and the raising of Lazarus have been restored in Year A. Because these gospels are of major importance in regard to Christian initiation, they are also read in Year B and Year C, especially in places where there are catechumens.

Other texts, however, are provided for Year B and Year C; for Year B, a text from John about Christ’s coming glorification through his cross and resurrection and for Year C, a text from Luke about conversion.

On Passion Sunday (Palm Sunday) the texts for the procession are selections from the Synoptic Gospels concerning the Lord’s triumphal entrance into Jerusalem. For the Mass the reading is the account of the Lord’s Passion.

The Old Testament readings are about the history of salvation, which is one of the themes proper to the catechesis of Lent. The series of texts for each Year presents the main elements of salvation history from its beginning until the promise of the New Covenant.

The readings from the letters of the apostles have been selected to fit the gospel and the Old Testament readings and, to the extent possible, to provide a connection between them.

Revised Common Lectionary: Introduction

24. The Revised Common Lectionary, along with its Roman parent, emphatically relates the gospels for the Sundays of Lent with the Easter proclamation. This is particularly true in year A, where the baptismal emphasis is strong. These Sundays relate closely to the primary Lenten theme, preparation for the joy of Easter, rather than to a penitential note.

..

The Readings

Individual readings are listed below. For Sundays 1-5, the gospels, first readings, and second readings are grouped together to facilitate seeing patterns within each group.

The two sets of readings, from the Roman Lectionary and Revised Common Lectionary, are generally similar but often include relatively small differences in versification. (Verse numbers in both cases are based on the New Revised Common Version of the Bible.)

Abbreviations: RL = Roman Lectionary; RCL = Revised Common Lectionary; [alt] = alternative reading (when two readings are presented for the same day). The Sundays of Lent are numbered 1-5 (or Lent 1, Lent 2, Lent 3, Lent 4, Lent 5). The years of the three year cycle are designated A, B, C.

As an aid to readers – and to anticipate the conclusions of this study – the fate of each lectionary passage in the re-visioned set of readings is indicated underneath its listing, in italics. Thus the present reading may be “set aside”, i.e., omitted from the re-visioned set of readings, or it may be “proposed for” a particular day.

Ash Wednesday

First: Rend your hearts (RL Joel 2:12-18; RCL [alt] 2:1-2, 12-17)
Set aside
Loose the bonds of injustice (RCL [alt] Isaiah 58:1-12)
Isaiah 58:6-12 proposed for Ash Wednesday

- Second: Be reconciled to God (RL 2 Corinthians 5:20 – 6:2; RCL 5:20b–6:10)
Set aside
- Gospel: Your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you (RL Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18; RCL 6:1-6, 16-21)
Set aside

Sundays 1-5

Gospels

- 1A Temptation of Jesus (RL, RCL Matthew 4:1-11)
Proposed for 1A
- 2A Transfiguration (RL, RCL [alt] Matthew 17:1-9)
Proposed for 2A
 Unless one is born of water and the Spirit (RCL [alt] John 3:1-17)
Proposed for 2B
- 3A Samaritan woman (RL, RCL John 4:5-42)
Proposed for 3A
- 4A Man born blind (RL, RCL John 9:1-41)
Set aside
- 5A Faith of Martha and Mary and Raising of Lazarus (RL, RCL John 11:1-45)
Proposed for 5A
- 1B Temptation (RL Mark 1:12-15; RCL 1:9-15)
Proposed for 1A
- 2B Transfiguration (RL Mark 9:2-10; RCL [alt] 9:2-9)
Proposed for 2A
 Whoever would save his life will lose it: Prediction of the passion (RCL [alt] Mark 8:31-38)
Set aside
- 3B Jesus in the Temple (RL John 2:13-25; RCL 2:13-22)
Set aside
- 4B God so loved the world / Belief and condemnation (RL, RCL John 3:14-21)
Proposed for 2B
- 5B The hour has come / The kind of death he was to die (RL, RCL John 12:20-33)
Set aside
- 1C Temptation (RL, RCL Luke 4:1-13)
Proposed for 1A

- 2C Transfiguration (RL Luke 9:28b-36; RCL [alt] 9:28-36)
Proposed for 2A
 Herod seeks Jesus' death: Prediction of the passion (RCL [alt] Luke 13:31-35)
Set aside
- 3C Unless you repent / Fig tree (RL, RCL Luke 13:1-9)
Set aside
- 4C Prodigal son (RL Luke 15:1-3, 11-32; RCL 15:1-3, 11b-32)
Proposed for 5C
- 5C Jesus confronts the hypocrites (RL John 8:1-11)
Proposed for 5C
 Mary anoints Jesus (RCL John 12:1-8)
Proposed for 5C

First Readings

- 1A The creation and the sin of our first parents (RL Genesis 2:7-9, 16-18, 25; 3:1-7; RCL 2:15-17; 3:1-7))
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 proposed for 1A
- 2A The calling of Abraham (RL Genesis 12:1-4; RCL 12:1-4a)
Set aside
- 3A Give us water to drink (RL Exodus 17:3-7; RCL 17:1-7))
Exodus 17:1-7 proposed for 1B
- 4A David was anointed king (RL 1 Samuel 16:1b, 6-7, 10-13a; RCL 16:1-13)
1 Samuel 16:1-13 proposed for 3B
- 5A I will put my spirit within you (RL Ezekiel 37:12-14; RCL 37:1-14)
Ezekiel 31:1-14 proposed for 2C
- 1B Covenant with Noah (RL Genesis 9:8-15; RCL 9:8-17)
Genesis 9:8-17 proposed for 3A
- 2B Abraham and Isaac (RL Genesis 22:1-2, 9-13, 15-18; RCL 17:1-7, 15-16)
Set aside
- 3B Ten commandments / Sinai (RL, RCL Exodus 20:1-17)
Proposed for 3B
- 4B Infidelity / punishment / salvation / Cyrus (RL 2 Chronicles 36:14-17a, 19-23)
Set aside
 Moses made a serpent of bronze (RCL Numbers 21:4-9)
Proposed for 4B
- 5B New covenant (RL, RCL Jeremiah 31:31-34)
Proposed for 3C

- 1C Profession of faith (RL Deuteronomy 26:4-10; RCL 26:1-11)
Set aside
- 2C Covenant with Abraham (RL Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18; RCL 15:1-12, 17-18)
Set aside
- 3C Moses and the burning bush (RL Exodus 3:1-8a, 13-15)
Exodus 3:1-6, 13-15 proposed for 2A
Come to the waters (RCL Isaiah 55:1-9)
Proposed for 3C
- 4C Entering the Promised Land (RL Joshua 5:9a, 10-12; RCL 5:9-12)
Joshua 4:19-24 + 5:10-12 proposed for 2C
- 5C I am about to do a new thing (RL, RCL Isaiah 43:16-21)
Isaiah 43:15-21 proposed for Ash Wednesday

Second Readings

- 1A Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more (RL, RCL Romans 5:12-19)
Proposed for 1A
- 2A God called us to be holy and gives us life (RL 2 Timothy 1:8b-10)
Proposed for 2A
Abraham believed God (RCL Romans 4:1-5, 13-17)
Set aside
- 3A God's love has been poured into our hearts (RL Romans 5:1-2, 5-8; RCL 5:1-11)
Romans 5:1-2, 8-10, 18b-20 proposed for 3A
- 4A Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you (RL, RCL Ephesians 5:8-14)
Set aside
- 5A The Spirit of God who raised Jesus from the dead will give life (RL Romans 8:8-11; RCL 8:6-11)
Romans 8:6-11 proposed for 2C
- 1B The waters of the flood prefigure baptism (RL, RCL 1 Peter 3:18-22)
Proposed for 1B
- 2B God did not withhold his only Son (RL Romans 8:31b-35, 37)
Romans 8:31b-35, 37-39 proposed for 2B
Abraham's faith (RCL Romans 4:13-25)
Set aside
- 3B We proclaim Christ crucified (RL 1 Corinthians 1:18, 22-25; RCL 1:18-25)

- Set aside*
- 4B Even when we were dead through our trespasses, God made us alive (RL Ephesians 2:4-10; RCL 2:1-10)
Ephesians 2:4-10 proposed for 4B
- 5B Christ learned obedience and became the source of eternal salvation (RL Hebrews 5:7-9; RCL 5:5-10)
Set aside
- 1C This is how believers in Christ profess their faith (RL Romans 10:8-13; RCL 10:8b-13)
Proposed for 1C
- 2C Christ will transform our humble bodies (RL, RCL Philippians 3:17 – 4:1)
Set aside
- 3C Our ancestor’s experience in the desert under Moses (RL 1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12; RCL 10:1-13)
Set aside
- 4C Through Christ, God has reconciled us to himself (RL 2 Corinthians 5:17-21; RCL 5:16-21)
2 Corinthians 5:16-21 proposed for 4C
- 5C I have suffered the loss of all things (RL Philippians 3:8-14; RCL 3:4b-14)
Set aside

Passion (Palm) Sunday

Procession

- A Entrance into Jerusalem (RL, RCL Matthew 2:1-11)
Used for A
- B Entrance into Jerusalem (RL Mark 11:1-10; RCL 11:1-11. Or RL, RCL John 12:12-16)
Used for B
- C Entrance into Jerusalem (RL, RCL Luke 19:28-40)
Used for C

Eucharist

First Reading

- ABC Servant Song (RL Isaiah 50:4-7; RCL 50:4-9a)
Set aside

Second Reading

ABC Jesus humbled himself (RL Philippians 2:6-11; RCL 2:5-11)
Set aside

Gospel

- A Passion Narrative (RL, RCL Matthew 26:14 – 27:66)
Matthew 26:6-13 used for Passion Sunday
Matthew 26:69-75 used for 1C
Remainder set aside
- B Passion Narrative (RL, RCL Mark 14:1 – 15:47)
Mark 14:3-9 used for Passion Sunday
Mark 14:66-72 used for 1C
Remainder set aside
- C Passion Narrative (RL, RCL Luke 22:14 – 23:56)
Luke 22:24-27 used for 1C
Luke 22:54-62 used for 1C
Remainder set aside

Issues, Concerns and Questions

Careful examination of the principles and general descriptions given above, and of the list of individual readings, raises certain questions and reveals several issues and concerns.

1. One concern is that the gospel readings for year B and year C do not appear to be oriented toward Easter, at least in the same way as those of year A. This is illustrated, for example, by the directive that the readings of year A for Lent 3, Lent 4 and Lent 5 be used in year B and year C “where there are catechumens.” In fact, the logic of the gospel readings for Lent 3-5 in years B and C is not clear or compelling; they are not as paschal as those for year A.

In addition, one may ask what view of preparation for Easter is expressed by passages that have a negative or scolding character?

2. Another issue is that the reading of the synoptic passion narratives on the last Sunday of Lent tends to make this another Good Friday, but one outside the context of the full paschal mystery that is celebrated in the Easter Triduum.

3. The stated principle that the readings from the Hebrew Scriptures tell salvation history seems limited and limiting; might other approaches also be appropriate?

4. Only a few readings include women in a significant way.

5. Some readings can be interpreted as being negative toward Jews and Judaism.

6. Is it really necessary to use the same gospel stories (temptation, transfiguration) for all three years for Lent 1 and Lent 2, respectively, instead of three different stories? Similarly, is it necessary to tell stories of Abraham in the first reading of Lent 2 in all three years?

Principles: Easter and Baptism

The present re-visioning of the readings for Ash Wednesday and the Sundays of Lent is based on the principle that Lent is a preparation for the celebration of Easter; this implies and includes preparation for baptism (Christian initiation). The liturgical readings must serve this end.

This is of course the principle enunciated above for the Sundays of year A; here it is applied to all three years of the lectionary cycle, to Ash Wednesday and all the Sundays of Lent, and to all three readings for each day.

It may be helpful to begin by considering the terms “Easter,” “baptism,” and “preparation.”

“Easter” refers to the annual three-day celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – the paschal mystery. This includes Good Friday and Easter Sunday in a unified experience and mystery. In addition, Easter is understood to extend to the living out of the paschal mystery in the daily lives of Christians.

“Baptism” refers to Christian initiation as it is celebrated in the Easter liturgy, generally (at least for some Christians) the three sacraments of baptism, confirmation and eucharist in a single celebration. In addition, baptism includes the living out of Christian initiation: the trinitarian life into which persons are initiated, and the daily living of that life.

A consideration of “preparation” notes first that the Lenten readings are addressed to two audiences: catechumens, and the baptized. Catechumens are those who are in the last stages of their preparation for baptism. The baptized help the catechumens move toward baptism; in addition they themselves are preparing to renew the baptismal covenant at Easter. The baptized accompany, encourage and pray for the catechumens; furthermore, they demonstrate the meaning and consequences of baptism by the example of their daily living.

Baptismal Living

Readings for the Lenten liturgies should express the meaning of Lenten preparation for Easter and baptism and guide and support this experience for catechumens and the baptized alike.

The present re-visioning approaches this goal by suggesting readings that have to do with significant characteristics of baptismal living. These characteristics, which are listed below, have constituted concrete criteria for selecting the readings offered here. Baptismal living does not simply pertain to the lives of individuals, however; it also has to do with the life of local Christian communities and the life of the church in all its manifestations.

Baptismal living reflects a renewed relationship with God, with self, with other persons, and with the rest of creation. To live baptismally means at least the following:

1. To experience and acknowledge the fragility of the human condition, including temptation and sin.
2. To experience and acknowledge the possibility and potential of the human condition, including knowing God, living in fidelity, being fully alive, experiencing wholeness.
3. To live lives in which prayer, blessing, word and wisdom are central.
4. To live in a covenantal relationship with God, in continuity with the covenants of the past and mindful of the continuing and eternal dimension of covenant.
5. To know and follow Jesus Christ; to live in Christ, through the Spirit.
6. To live in a respectful relationship with the rest of creation.
7. To live in loving relationships with other persons, especially those in need; this includes doing justice, sharing with others, showing compassion, taking care of others, being life-giving persons.
8. To experience and support life in and by an inclusive community.
9. To experience and promote respect for Jews and Judaism.

These will be considered in more detail below, when the rationale for choosing individual readings is presented. Two of these characteristics of baptismal living, however, warrant separate consideration now.

An Inclusive Community

Women and men together were created in the image and likeness of God and were redeemed in Jesus Christ. The Christian Scriptures teach that in Christ and in baptism there is no male or female, and the liturgy of baptism does not distinguish on the basis of gender. Life in and by an inclusive community – one in which women participate fully – is therefore a characteristic of baptismal living. Because un-Christian discrimination against women has at times been practiced in the church, it is appropriate that this characteristic be named.

In the present work this criterion has been recognized in several ways:

- (a) Women's stories from scripture are included throughout the set of readings; it is a particular focus for the readings of Lent 3;
- (b) the important place of women in the life and ministry of Jesus and in the early church is acknowledged;
- (c) the special role of women as the death of Jesus approached is recognized and honored;
- (d) stories of violence against women are included in order explicitly to condemn such attitudes and behavior;
- (e) several stories having to do with youth and children are also included.

Respect for Jews and Judaism

A second particular characteristic of baptismal living that is expressed through this set of readings is that of respect for Jews and Judaism. The basis of this may be discerned in the following quotation from Vatican Council II's document, *Nostra Aetate*.

4. Sounding the depths of the mystery which is the church, this sacred council remembers the spiritual ties which link the people of the new covenant to the stock of Abraham.

The church of Christ acknowledges that in God's plan of salvation the beginnings of its faith and election are to be found in the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets. It professes that all Christ's faithful, who as people of faith are daughters and sons of Abraham (see Gal 3:7), are included in the same patriarch's call and that the salvation of the church is mystically prefigured in the exodus of God's chosen people from the land of bondage. On this account the church cannot forget that it received the revelation of the Old Testament by way of that people with whom God in his inexpressible mercy established the ancient covenant. Nor can it forget that it draws nourishment from that good olive tree onto

which the wild olive branches of the Gentiles have been grafted (see Rom 11:17-24). The church believes that Christ who is our peace has through his cross reconciled Jews and Gentiles and made them one in himself (see Eph 2:14-16).

Likewise, the church keeps ever before its mind the words of the apostle Paul about his kin: “they are Israelites, and it is for them to be sons and daughters, to them belong the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race according to the flesh, is the Christ” (Rom 89:4-5) the Son of the Virgin Mary. It is mindful moreover, that the apostles, the pillars on which the church stands, are of Jewish descent, as are many of those early disciples who proclaimed the Gospel of Christ to the world. . . .

Respect for Jews (i.e., not being anti-Jewish) is dealt with in the present work in several ways.

(a) Passages that are negative toward Jews and Judaism are set aside. Further direction here is provided by the “Guidelines for Catholic-Jewish Relations” published by the Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations of the U.S. Catholic bishops (1985 revision). Three of these guidelines are:

An explicit rejection should be made of the historically inaccurate notion that Judaism of [Jesus’] time, especially that of Pharisaism, was a decadent formalism and hypocrisy. (10c)

Special care should be taken never to . . . portray Judaism as rejected by God or in any way unworthy of our love and esteem. (4)

The presentation of the crucifixion story should be made in such a way as not to implicate all Jews of Jesus’ time or of today in a collective guilt for the crime. (10b)

More specifically, the lectionary readings for Lent should not (i) emphasize Jesus’ controversies with his opponents, (ii) be concerned with laying blame for Jesus’ death, (iii) be negative toward Torah, and (iv) be critical toward Jewish worship.

(b) Positive passages regarding Judaism are added to the lectionary readings; this is a particular focus of the second readings for Lent 5. Again, the U.S. bishops’ guidelines are helpful in this regard:

[We must] recognize Judaism as a living tradition that has had a strong and creative religious life through the centuries since the birth of Christianity from the common root. (10 a, i)

[We must] remove . . . those materials . . . that fail to show Judaism’s continuing role in salvation history in a positive light. (5)

(c) The way the first readings are chosen from the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) needs careful consideration. The principle set out by the Roman “Introduction to the Lectionary for Mass” is the following:

The Old Testament readings are about the history of salvation, which is one of the themes proper to the catechesis of Lent. The series of texts for each year presents the main elements of salvation history from its beginnings until the promise of the New Covenant.

This principle shows respect for the Hebrew Scriptures, and certainly can be defended. In as much as Christians see salvation history leading to Jesus and the church, however, the “salvation history” approach can also suggest that the Hebrew Scripture are *merely* preliminary in nature.

However, the U.S. bishops’ guidelines give a broader perspective:

[We must] appreciate the Hebrew Scriptures as a source of faith with their own perpetual value. (10 a, ii)

This is similar to the statement in the Introduction to the Revised Common Lectionary:

41. Today’s Christian Church fully accepts the Jewish Scriptures – our Old Testament – as the word of God, recognized by Jesus and the apostles and the early Christians.

Thus readings from the Hebrew Scriptures are not just stories of salvation history (though they may have that character as well). Nor are they intended to relate to or be dependent on the gospel of the day. Instead, they relate to the basic character of the Lenten season, that is they have to do with the characteristics of the baptismal life already named above.

Alternative Readings and Rationale

Readings of the present Roman Lectionary and Revised Common Lectionary were set aside if they were not respectful toward Jews and Judaism, were negative, were not paschal, or otherwise were not relevant to the above-named characteristics of baptismal living. A detailed assessment of individual readings is not given here. Roughly one-third of the present readings were set aside; hence the same proportion are new. Some of the present lectionary readings were

moved from one day to another, or from one year to another. Where basically the same story was told on the same Sunday in two or three years, these were combined. Alternatives are presented in a number of cases.

The re-visioned readings, together with a brief rationale for their choice and assignment, are set forth below. With respect to the rationale, the gospels are considered first, then the first reading, then the second reading. They are then presented in the liturgical order, for all three years.

First Sunday of Lent

Third Reading (Gospel)

The gospel story now used in the lectionary for all three years, the temptation of Jesus, is accepted as the basis for thinking about the readings for this Sunday.

Without presuming to exhaust its meaning, the temptation of Jesus is understood here to speak of the fragility of the human condition, which includes temptation and sin. Though Jesus withstood temptation and did not sin, other humans may succumb. Jesus, however, is model and source of strength for the baptized.

Year A: All three versions of the temptation of Jesus are listed for this year (Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-15; Luke 4:1-13)

Year B: Another story that speaks of the fragility of the human condition is that of Judas' betrayal of Jesus, taken from the passion narrative. All four versions of this story are listed here. (Matthew 26:47-56; Mark 14:43-50; Luke 22:47-53; John 18:1-11).

(As the passion narratives on Passion (Palm) Sunday are omitted here, and because it has been suggested that the gospel reading for Good Friday be shortened, this story is not [or need not be] read twice during Lent-Triduum.)

An alternative story of human fragility is also offered, that of the killing of John the Baptist (Mark 6:17-29)

Year C: Yet another story of human fragility is that of Simon Peter's denial of Jesus, again taken from the passion narrative. All four versions are listed here (Matthew 26:69-75; Mark 14:66-72; Luke 22:54-62; John 18:15-18).

An alternative story of human fragility is also offered, that of the dispute among the disciples about who is the greatest and Jesus' statement of what greatness means in the Reign of God. All three versions are listed here (Matthew 20:25-28; Mark 10:42-45; Luke 22:24-27).

First Reading

The idea of the fragility of the human condition is also taken as the basis for selecting readings from the Hebrew Scriptures. However, there is no "typological" relationship between individual passages and the corresponding gospel readings; the stories of the Hebrew Scriptures stand on their own.

Year A: Several stories from the early chapters of Genesis have been chosen to speak of human fragility: the struggle having to do with the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil

(Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7); conflict between siblings (Genesis 4:1-10); and cultural divisions among peoples (Genesis 11:1-9).

Year B: Additional stories from the accounts of the exodus have been chosen to tell of human fragility: lack of trust and courage (Exodus 16:1-3; Exodus 17:1-7; Numbers 21:4-9); forgetting the true God and constructing idols (Exodus 32:1-10); fear and rebellion in times of challenge and opportunity (Deuteronomy 1:19-33, 41-45).

Year C: Several stories of sexual abuse and violence against women have been chosen for this year to provide an opportunity to condemn this kind of behavior (Genesis 34:1-7, 25b-31; 2 Samuel 11:2-26; Judges 19:22b-30; 2 Samuel 13:1-11). In addition there is a story of injustice by those who are politically and economically powerful (1 Kings 21:1-16).

Second Reading

The present lectionary readings are retained. They all speak of sin, but also of the overcoming of sin and its effects through faith in Jesus Christ.

Year A: This reading speaks about sin and death, but then turns to the abundance of God's grace and the free gift of grace in Jesus Christ (Romans 5:12-18).

Year B: This reading also begins by referring to sin, but then turns to the saving ministry of Jesus Christ; it concludes by speaking of baptism (1 Peter 3:18-22).

Year C: This reading speaks of belief in Jesus Christ that leads to salvation. (Romans 10:8-13)

Second Sunday of Lent

Third Reading (Gospel)

The present lectionary story, the transfiguration, is accepted as the basis for thinking about the readings for the second Sunday. (It should be noted that some Anglican and Protestant communities do not use this passage on this day.)

Without presuming to exhaust its meaning, the transfiguration is understood to point to possibilities and potential of the human condition. Again, Jesus is model for the baptized; he desires that sisters and brothers -- indeed, all people -- reach their full potential and destiny. The ancient maxim, "The glory of God is the human person fully alive," is recalled.

Year A: All three versions of the transfiguration are listed for this year (Matthew 17:1-9; Mark 9:2-10; Luke 9:28b-36).

Year B: Being born of water and the Spirit in order to enter God's kingdom is another image of the potential of the human condition (John 3:1-10), as is the affirmation of God's great love for the world and the promise of eternal life for believers (John 3:14-17).

Another set of passages speaks of becoming like children in order to receive the reign of God (Matthew 18:1-5; Matthew 19:13-15; Mark 10:14-16; Luke 9:46-48; Luke 18:15-17).

Year C: Yet another story of human possibility is that of the leper who was healed and who gave thanks and praise (Luke 17:11-19).

Another passage speaks of infinite mutual forgiveness within the community, and the continuing presence of Jesus in the community of believers (Matthew 18:15-22).

First Reading

The idea of the possibilities and potential of the human condition is retained as the basis for selecting readings from the Hebrew Scriptures. Again, however, there is no "typological" relationship between the first and third readings; the former stand on their own.

Year A: Several stories of human encounter with the divine have been chosen to speak about human possibility: being called by God and learning God's name in mysterious circumstances (Exodus 3:1-6, 13-15); providing hospitality to the divine and receiving the promise of an alternative future (Genesis 18:1-5); receiving a promise of God's continuing presence (Genesis 28:10-17); encountering God in sheer silence (1 Kings 19:9b-13).

Year B: Several stories of fidelity to God in difficult circumstances have been chosen: defying abusive power and saving life (Exodus 1:15-2:10); defying the ruler to protect Israel's brave ones (Joshua 2:1-21); sharing what little one has with one in need (1 Kings 17:8-16); refusing to worship false gods (Daniel 3:13-28); remaining faithful despite threats (Daniel 6:10-13, 16-23).

Year C: Several passages also speak of freedom and new life: the experience and celebration of freedom (Joshua 4:19-24; 5:10-12); new life for the people of God (Ezekiel 37:1-14); God's prophets restoring children to life (1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:18-27).

Second Reading

The present lectionary readings from Year A and Year B have been retained, and that for the Fourth Sunday, Year B, is used for Year C. All speak of the possibility and potential that arises out of life in Jesus Christ.

Year A: This reading says that God has saved us and “called us with a holy calling,” that God’s “grace was given us in Christ Jesus,” and that God has “abolished death and brought life and immortality” (2 Timothy 1:8b-10)

Year B: This reading asks, “If God is for us, who is against us?” and affirms that nothing “will be able to separate us from the life of God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:31b-35, 37-39).

Year C: This reading affirms that “the Spirit of God dwells in” us, and hence that God “who raised Christ from the dead will give life to” us (Romans 8:6-11).

Third Sunday of Lent

Third Reading (Gospel)

The present gospel reading of the lectionary, the Samaritan women, is accepted as the basis for thinking about the first and second readings for this Sunday.

For centuries this reading’s references to water, and to Jesus himself as the living water, have led to its connection with preparation for baptism. This passage also reveals Jesus as one who respects women, including women on the fringes of society. Other gospel stories of Jesus’ ministry and relationship with women have been selected to parallel that of the Samaritan woman.

Year A: The story of the Samaritan woman is listed (John 4:3-42). Jesus reaches out to the Samaritan woman personally, converses with her, asks and receives, challenges and affirms. Jesus also invites her into his own ministry: she is invited to witness and tell the good news about him; she becomes an evangelist.

Year B: Another reading that speaks of Jesus’ ministry and relationship with women is that of the Canaanite / Syrophenician woman (Matthew 15:21-29; Mark 8:24-30). Like the Samaritan woman, she is marginal in relation to Jewish society. In the course of the story, she engages Jesus in debate and, in a certain way, becomes his teacher. Her boldness is affirmed and her daughter is cured. (For many centuries this story was read in some places on the second Sunday of Lent.)

Year C: Jesus’ ministry and relationship with women is also set forth in the dual story of the daughter of Jairus’ family and the woman with a hemorrhage (Matthew 9:18-26; Mark 5:21-43; Luke 8:40-56). Again, the boldness of the adult woman is affirmed and her faith praised. This passage also pairs the initiative of a woman and a man.

First Reading

The first readings tell stories of covenant - with Noah, with Abraham, at Sinai, with David, the continuing and everlasting covenant. This is a central theme in the present lectionary readings from the Hebrew Scriptures, though the lectionary passages are not as extensive and are distributed differently.

Year A: Passages have been chosen that tell of the covenant with Noah (Genesis 8:13-22; Genesis 9:8-17) and of the covenant and blessing of Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 17:1-8, 15-22).

Year B: The readings proposed tell of the covenant at Sinai (Exodus 19:1-6; Exodus 20:1-17; Exodus 24:1-18) and the covenant with David (1 Samuel 16:1-13; 2 Samuel 7:1-17; 2 Samuel 23:1-5).

Year C: The continuing – indeed eternal – covenant with God’s people is the subject of the passages chosen (Jeremiah 31:1-34; Exekiel 36:23b-28; Isaiah 54:9-14; Isaiah 55:1-13).

Second Reading

The present lectionary readings have been set aside. In their place passages that connect in some way with the gospel readings have been chosen, namely passages that refer to women and that speak of the church as an inclusive community.

Year A: This passage affirms that in baptism all are one in Christ Jesus and that in this regard there is no longer male and female (Galatians 3:26-28).

Year B: Here God is thanked for the transmission of faith from grandmother to mother to son (2 Timothy 1:1-7).

Year C: This passage describes the ministry of women and men in the early church (Romans 16:1-16).

Fourth Sunday of Lent

Third Reading (Gospel)

The lectionary reading for this Sunday in Year A, the story of the man who was born blind and then healed by Jesus, conveys a mixed message. Washing in the pool of Siloam makes it suitable for use in relation to baptism, especially when the man’s physical blindness and

returning sight are spiritualized to refer to sin and conversion. In part, however, this passages fails to promote respect for Judaism, and for this reason it has been set aside.

For present purposes – and of course without exhausting its meaning – the story of the man born blind is understood to be a message of care and compassion for persons in need. Thus other gospel readings have been chosen to reflect this message.

Year A: In the passage selected, friends and neighbors carry the paralyzed man to Jesus, overcoming serious difficulties to gain access. Jesus cures the paralytic and acknowledges the faith of the friends (Mark 2:1-5).

Year B: This reading presents the great vision of final judgement, in which the ultimate criterion is compassion for those in need (Matthew 25:31-46).

Year C: In this passage Jesus shows compassion on the widow whose son has died. In restoring the son to life, he also gives new life to the widow (Luke 7:11-17).

First Reading

The present lectionary reading for this Sunday in Year C refers to Israel's entrance into the promised land. (In the present work this passage is used on the Second Sunday, Year C.) The promised land of milk and honey is taken to be a symbol of the whole of creation, and the readings that are suggested for Year B and Year C speak about creation, its care, and the relationship of humankind with the rest of creation.

The promised land is also taken to be a land of justice, love of neighbor, and mutual care and respect. Readings that speak of justice, sharing and caring for the marginalized in society have therefor been chosen for Year A.

Year A: Two passages speak of love of neighbor and give practical ways in which this is manifested (Deuteronomy 24:10-15, 17-22; Leviticus 19:9-10, 13-14, 18). The third reading tells of the consequences of implementing the laws of sharing: Ruth eats until she is satisfied, and has enough left over so that Naomi can do the same – an image of God's bounty and care (Ruth 2:14-18).

Year B: One passage describes the bounty of God's promised land (Deuteronomy 8:7-10). Another presents legislation for the sabbatical year, a time when the land takes its needed rest; at the same time people and animals have enough to eat from the bounty of the earth (Leviticus 25:1-7). A third passage names various trees, plants and their products as images of holy wisdom – and by extension, of the divine (Sirach 24:1-2, 12-17).

Year C: One reading sets forth an image of creation flowing from the throne of God and of waters that are bountiful and that support life and healing (Ezekiel 47:7-12). The second passage is a hymn of praise to God for creation (Prayer of Azariah and Song 35-60 / Daniel 3:57-82).

Second Reading

The present lectionary readings have been retained (for the most part); all speak of the Christian life.

Year A: This reading encourages us to “walk in light, for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and true” (Ephesians 5:1-2, 8-10, 18b-20).

Year B: This reading tells us that we were “created in Christ Jesus for good works -- as a way of life” (Ephesians 2:4-10).

Year C: This reading says that Christians have been “given the ministry of reconciliation”; we are “ambassadors” (2 Corinthians 5:16-21).

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Third Reading (Gospel)

The gospel reading for Year A in the lectionary, the faith of Martha and Mary and the raising of Lazarus, is retained. Without exhausting the meaning of this passage, it is understood to be a story of compassion, care, and giving life. The compassion, love and life of Jesus are also experienced today; these qualities are also characteristics of the life of the baptized.

Year A: The story of the faith of Martha and Mary and the raising of Lazarus is listed (John 11:1-45). This is also a story of women’s faith in Jesus.

Year B: Compassion, love and life are also expressed in stories of Jesus eating and drinking with sinners; three versions are listed (Matthew 9:9-13; Mark 2:13-17; Luke 5:27-32).

Year C: Two other stories along the same lines are offered. One, the prodigal son and loving father, is given in the lectionary for the Fourth Sunday of Lent, Year C (Luke 15:11-32). The second, Jesus confronts the hypocrites, is given for the Fifth Sunday of Lent, Year C, in the Roman Lectionary (John 8:1-11).

First Reading

The life of the baptized includes prayer, wisdom, word and blessing. These experiences should therefore be part of baptismal preparation and baptismal reminder, and are appropriately included among the readings of Lent; at present, they are not prominent. It is also appropriate that such readings be chosen from the Hebrew Scriptures, which deal with these experiences at length.

Year A: Several passages that show women and men at prayer are listed: Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10); Judith (Judith 9:1-11); Esther (Esther 14:3-14); Nehemiah (Nehemiah 1:5-11); Solomon (1 Kings 3:3-9).

Year B: Several passages that speak of holy wisdom are offered (Proverbs 4:5-13; Wisdom of Solomon 9:9-18; Sirach 1:1-10); as well as one that has to do with word and torah (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

Year C: Several passages that speak about blessing have been chosen. Individuals are blessed (Genesis 24:53-61; Numbers 6:22-27; Judith 13:18-20); or God is blessed (1 Samuel 25:32-35); one also speaks of the blessing of the entire community (Deuteronomy 28:1-6, 8-14).

Second Reading

Another facet of the life of the baptized that is not adequately referred to in the present lectionary readings for Lent, is respect for Jews and Judaism. Appropriate readings from the letters of the Christian Scriptures have therefore been chosen with this matter in mind.

Year A: The passage chosen affirms that to Israel belongs the glory, the covenants, the promises, the patriarchs (Romans 9:1-5).

Year B: This passage denies that God has rejected the Jewish people (Romans 11:1-6).

Year C: This reading affirms that ancestors such as Noah and Abraham received God's approval because of their faith (Hebrews 11:1-3, 7-12).

Passion (Palm) Sunday

Passion (Palm) Sunday has a special character, and its lectionary readings need in some ways to be considered separately from those of the preceding five Sundays. This day constitutes a transition – hinge, link– between the first part of Lent and the Three Days of Easter that will follow shortly. Thus Passion Sunday arises out of and is in continuity with Ash Wednesday and Sundays 1-5, but also looks forward to and provides some immediate preparation for the Triduum. In a sense it has a more “historical” character than the rest of Lent in relation to the life and death of Jesus.

(Because this Sunday is rather focused, the general practice that three different stories should be used on a given Sunday, is here set aside.)

The Passion (Palm) Sunday liturgy has two parts: the procession with palms, and the eucharist.

Procession with Palms

The present gospel readings for the procession with palms have been retained; these tell of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; John 12:12-16; Luke 19:28-40).

Eucharist

Third Reading (Gospel)

The synoptic passion narratives that are given in the lectionary have been set aside. The basis for this is, simply, that Passion (Palm) Sunday is not Good Friday, and it should not be oriented exclusively (or primarily) toward Good Friday rather than the paschal mystery as a whole.

The passion narratives are not abandoned entirely, however; their first sections in Matthew and Mark – the story of the woman who anointed Jesus -- are used here. The corresponding story from John's gospel is used as well. (The Lukan version has a different context and a message, and is not appropriate here.)

The anointing of Jesus by the woman – in Matthew, Mark and John – is an anticipation of Jesus' death and prophetic preparation for his burial. These readings therefore look forward to Jesus' death, but do not tell the entire story of his last days. The anointing on the head in Matthew and Mark is an anointing for Jesus' ministry of priest, prophet and shepherd. This action is therefore a statement of who it is who is moving toward his death, and a statement regarding the meaning of his paschal mystery.

The action of the woman who anoints Jesus speaks of her great affection and regard for Jesus, and at least in the case of Mary of Bethany, of her personal, close friendship with him. It is also an act of courage and boldness as well as of care and concern. Finally, it is an action of a minister of the gospel, in anticipation of Jesus' death and resurrection.

The story of the woman who anoints Jesus also connects with the rest of Lent and its readings. Thus the invitation to know Jesus that was issued on Ash Wednesday has resulted in close friendship and loving concern for Jesus. This woman exemplifies the courage and boldness that results from hearing, accepting and responding to the good news – told both in the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Scriptures. In this action, as well as in Jesus' own person, the reign of God is seen to be near. This anointing also is an example of compassion for one in need and of care for the poor and marginalized – he who will soon be condemned to die.

The anointing story also provides an example of the ministry of women and the kind of relationship that Jesus had with women. It also recognizes that these are Jewish women, performing Jewish ritual actions.

Year A: The anointing of Jesus by the woman (Matthew 26:6-13).

Year B: The anointing of Jesus by the woman (Mark 14:3-9).

Year C: The anointing of Jesus by Mary of Bethany (John 12:1-8).

First Reading

The first reading of the lectionary, one of the suffering servant passages, is here set aside. In contrast, stories of Moses are offered in its place. This is not done with any “typological” intent, however, trying to see Jesus in Moses. Rather, the intent is to see Moses in Jesus; the stories of Moses tells us something about Jesus. Jesus is viewed in continuity with Moses, not in contrast.

These stories, therefore, are not focused on the suffering and death of Jesus, but on intercession, prayer, prophetic ministry, leadership, closeness to God -- all experiences and qualities of Moses and likewise of Jesus. They also pertain to the life of the baptized. They are therefore stories that relate to the entire paschal mystery, not just Good Friday.

Year A: Stories of Moses are taken from the book of Exodus (Exodus 14:21-22, 29, 31; Exodus 18:13-23; Exodus 19:16-20; Exodus 24:1-8; Exodus 32:11-13).

Year B: Stories of Moses are taken from the book of Numbers (Numbers 11:1-3; Numbers 11:25-29; Numbers 12:6-8a; Numbers 14:10b-19; Numbers 11:1-19)..

Year C: Stories of Moses are taken from the book of Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 9:18-29; Deuteronomy 18:15-18; Deuteronomy 34:5-12)..

Second Reading

In place of the present second reading, used in all three years -- which has been set aside -- three readings from the book of Revelation that speak about the Lamb are suggested. The Lamb here is both slain and risen, and these passages therefore point to the entire paschal mystery. The emphasis, however, is not so much on the death of the Lamb but on the life-giving character and continuing ministry of the risen and triumphant Lamb.

Year A: This passage proclaims that the saints, who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb, are indeed blessed (Revelation 19:6-10).

Year B: This reading asserts that God and the Lamb themselves provide light for the holy city. It is inhabited by those who are inscribed in the Lamb's book of life (Revelation 21:22-27).

Year C: This passage speaks of the river of life that flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb. It waters the tree of life, whose leaves are for the healing of the nations (Revelation 22:1-5).

Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday poses a particular challenge, both with respect to its lectionary readings and also with respect to the symbol of ashes.

One possible response to these challenges is simply to omit Ash Wednesday (and the three weekdays that follow); historically, these days were a relatively late addition to the six weeks of Lent that previously had begun with the first Sunday of Lent. However, because Ash Wednesday is so popular today, and because it also presents certain opportunities, it has been retained for the present project.

Ash Wednesday is complex. As the first day of Lent, it appropriately defines the character and spirit of Lent (at least in part). It also constitutes an invitation to enter into this liturgical season, and as well, it is the initial response to this invitation. Lectionary readings need to indicate that Lent is a preparation for Easter and for baptism, and that it is a period of baptismal reminder.

The readings should be positive in tone, not negative, should express affirmation and not penitence in the sense of self-abnegation. They should hold out a vision, not scold or nag. They should be inviting – and show a Jesus and a God who are inviting – and not distancing or burdensome.

Ashes (which are not mentioned in the readings themselves), are viewed as a symbol of honesty about oneself and one's society and world; accepting ashes is an acceptance of the human condition. In addition, they are considered to be a symbol of the relationship of humankind with the rest of creation. They therefore have no negative connotation, nor are they associated with penitence in the sense of self-abnegation.

Third Reading (Gospel)

Gospel readings have been chosen that focus on the person of Jesus Christ, his message and his mission. Jesus proclaims God's good news and the nearness of the reign of God. Catechumens and baptized alike are called and invited to know Jesus, to follow him, and to grow more and more fully into his likeness.

Year A: In the beatitudes Jesus the teacher describes the life his disciples are to live, and promises them blessings (Matthew 4:23–5:1).

Year B: Jesus also heals many ills and proclaims good news (Mark 1:29-39).

Year C: Jesus is filled with the Spirit of God, uses the words of Isaiah to describe his mission, and promises wholeness (Luke 4:14-21).

First Reading

The first reading is based on the view that Lent is a journey to “be who you are called to be” and issues an invitation to set out along this path.

Year A: One reading names us as created male and female in God’s image (Genesis 1:26–2:3), while a second says that we are recreated to be God’s people of praise (Isaiah 43:15-21).

Year B: One reading says that we are called to care for the hungry and afflicted (Isaiah 58:6-12), while another says that we are led by holy wisdom to know the right path (Wisdom 9:9-18).

Year C: One reading says that we are chosen to be a holy people – God’s own people – purely out of the love of God (Deuteronomy 7:6-11). A second passage says that we are precious and beloved of God (Isaiah 43:1-7).

Second Reading

The second reading again invites us to a close relationship with Jesus Christ; it also names additional characteristics of this relationship.

Year A: In this reading we are called into companionship with Jesus (1 Corinthians 1:4-9).

Year B: This reading tells us that in Christ our hearts are enlightened (Ephesians 1:15-23).

Year C: This reading says that we have been chosen in Christ (Ephesians 1:3-14)..

The alternative readings proposed are set out in lectionary format in a separate document, [Re-visioning the Lectionary for Lent](#).