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It's all about hope

Christopher J Monaghan CP

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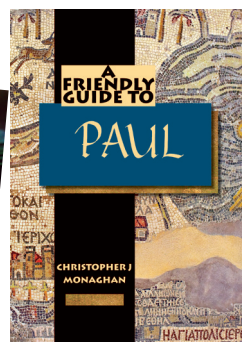
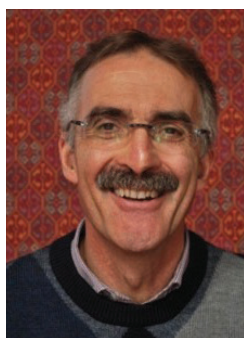
THE EASTER TRIDUUM 32

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Christopher Monaghan CP is a Passionist priest who was born in Melbourne and studied at Yarra Theological Union, a member college of the University of Divinity. He undertook postgraduate studies

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See with the Eyes of the Heart, and *A Friendly Guide to Paul*. This Lenten resource combines his love of the Scriptures, our rich spiritual tradition, and the beauty of the creation that enfolds us.



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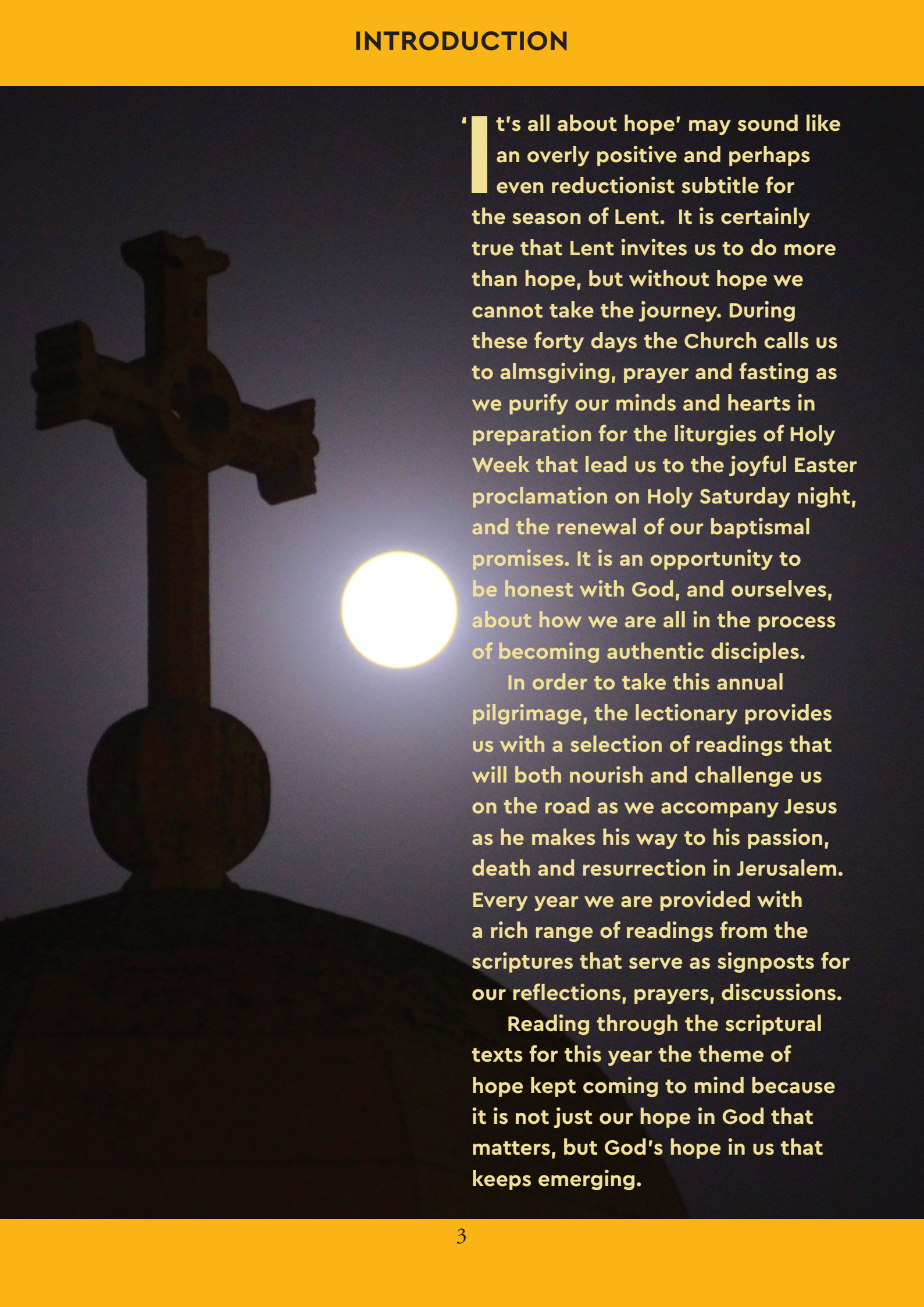
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INTRODUCTION



'It's all about hope' may sound like an overly positive and perhaps even reductionist subtitle for the season of Lent. It is certainly true that Lent invites us to do more than hope, but without hope we cannot take the journey. During these forty days the Church calls us to almsgiving, prayer and fasting as we purify our minds and hearts in preparation for the liturgies of Holy Week that lead us to the joyful Easter proclamation on Holy Saturday night, and the renewal of our baptismal promises. It is an opportunity to be honest with God, and ourselves, about how we are all in the process of becoming authentic disciples.

In order to take this annual pilgrimage, the lectionary provides us with a selection of readings that will both nourish and challenge us on the road as we accompany Jesus as he makes his way to his passion, death and resurrection in Jerusalem. Every year we are provided with a rich range of readings from the scriptures that serve as signposts for our reflections, prayers, discussions.

Reading through the scriptural texts for this year the theme of hope kept coming to mind because it is not just our hope in God that matters, but God's hope in us that keeps emerging.

INTRODUCTION



OLD TESTAMENT PASSAGES

The Old Testament texts for the Sundays of Lent provide glimpses into pivotal moments in Israel's story, with its times of failure and disappointment, renewal and hope. The symbol of the rainbow that accompanies the renewed covenant with Noah, placed before us on the First Sunday in Lent, is amplified and reinforced by Jeremiah's hope in a new covenant written on our hearts on the Fifth Sunday. Hopes might have been dashed in the Exile, but the reading from 2 Chronicles on the Fourth Sunday exults in the ways that God can use a foreign ruler like Cyrus to mark a new beginning for the people – giving them permission to return and restore the Temple in Jerusalem to its former glory. On Palm Sunday, Isaiah calls the person of faith to take each day as it comes, learning the art of listening like a disciple. All these texts provide tools that we can draw on to till the soil of our hearts and spirits, preparing them for the new life of Easter.

NEW TESTAMENT PASSAGES

During Lent, the New Testament readings consistently invite us to hope in the extraordinary and gracious love of God. 1 Peter calls us on the First Sunday to keep in mind that Jesus died for us, frail though we might be. Paul's letter to the Romans provides a clarion call on the Second Sunday to remember that with Christ on our side there is no need to fear, or be overcome by anxiety. The letter to the Ephesians on the Fourth Sunday in its turn powerfully reminds us that our hope is grounded in God's gracious love. Further encouragement is provided by the letter to the Hebrews on the Fifth Sunday by the example of Jesus himself who learned obedience through his own experience of suffering. On Palm Sunday the early Christian hymn preserved in Philippians brings us to the ultimate challenge of learning to make Christ's mind our own, and to imitate his humble gift of self in his death on the cross – a death that provides the key to new life for us all.

INTRODUCTION

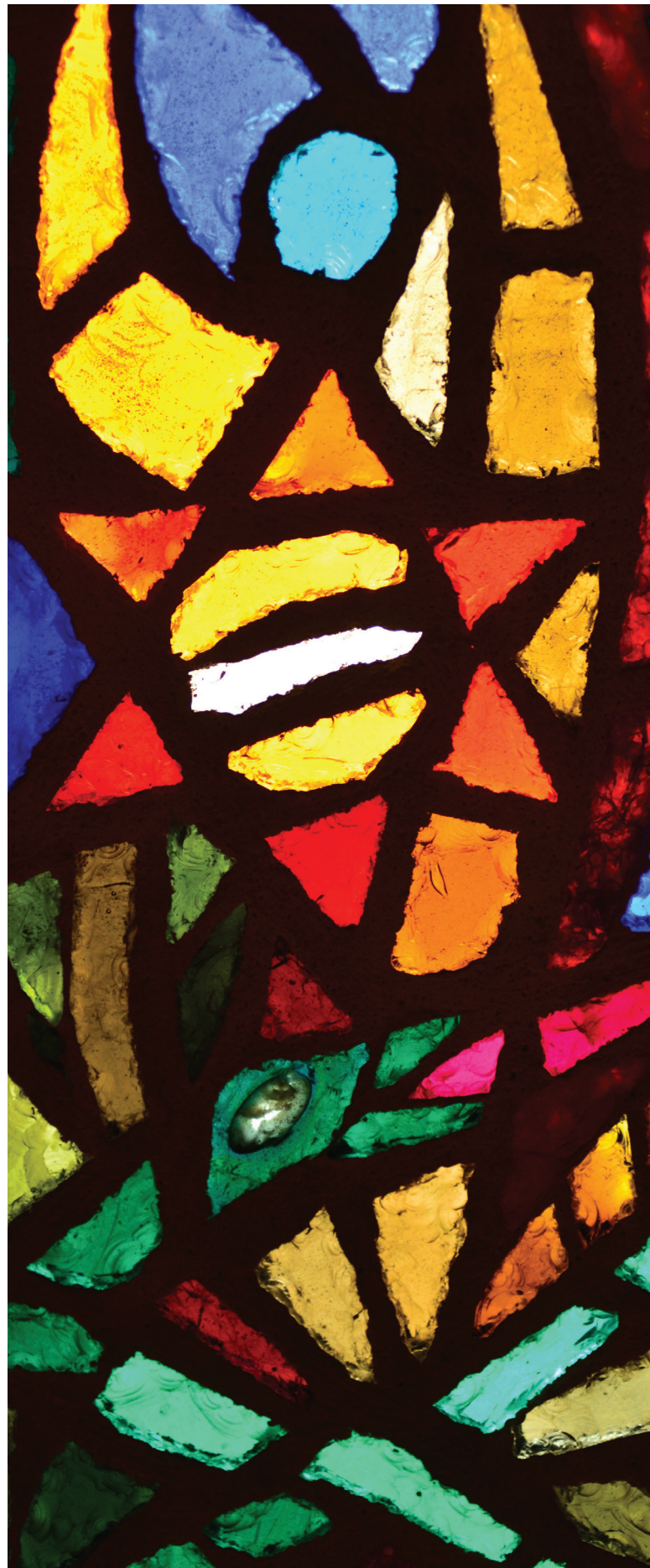
GOSPEL PASSAGES

The Gospel passages for Lent are rich sources of encouragement, challenge and hope. The First Sunday of Lent traditionally focuses on Jesus' time of trial in the wilderness. It was a time of discernment and prayer that served to clarify his sense of mission, joining his journey with that of Israel in the wilderness, and ours as disciples. The Transfiguration of Jesus on the Second Sunday prepares disciples of every age for the long journey ahead, with its future glimpse of glory and the call to avoid the danger of standing still building tents when the first steps on road to Jerusalem must be taken. The Third, Fourth and Fifth Sundays shift our focus from Mark's Gospel to John's and begin with Jesus' overturning the tables of the money changers in the Temple. It is a scene that powerfully urges us to look to ourselves and so join in the process of purification that is an essential element of the Lenten journey to wholeness. The conversation of Jesus with Nicodemus on the Fourth Sunday nourishes the spirit and kindles hope with the perennially uplifting proclamation that God so loved the world that he gave His only Son. As Lent draws close to Holy Week, the Fifth Sunday invites us to reflect on the call for disciples to take up the challenge of opening our hearts and lives to become grains of wheat, sharing intimately in the Paschal mystery that leads us from death the life.

WISDOM OLD AND NEW

In addition to the scriptural readings there are quotes taken from saints both ancient and modern, and as well as from some contemporary sources of wisdom. These have been chosen because they shed their own light on this time of grace, acting as trustworthy and wise guides for the journey that lies ahead. It is a journey that we will make many times during our lives, and that we share with many who have gone before us.

So, the road beckons — let us take it with hope in our hearts, confident that the one who begins this good work in us will bring it to completion.



Opening Prayer

Loving God,
as we begin our Lenten journey
we pray that the mists that can cloud
our vision may lift, so that we may see
the road that lies before us and so come
with open hearts to you, the source of
living water. Melt what is frozen within us,
warm our hearts, and lift our spirits that
we do not lose heart in our capacity to
grow, or in your desire
to lead us safely home.
Amen.

First Sunday of Lent

**We have been called to heal wounds,
to unite what has fallen apart,
and to bring home those
who have lost their way.**

St Francis of Assisi

First Sunday of Lent

GEN 9:9-10

'See, I establish my Covenant with you, and with your descendants after you; also with every living creature to be found with you, birds, cattle and every wild beast with you: everything that came out of the ark, everything that lives on the earth.'

The Nile, Tigris and Euphrates are the great rivers whose waters enabled life to flourish in the world of the Old Testament. When these rivers flooded there was often loss of life, and so much that people had worked for was washed away – homes, livelihoods and hopes. As Australians we know from experience how destructive floods can be. At the same time that floods destroy they bring much-needed nutrients and silt so that life can begin again – as it always does. The tradition of the great flood was used by ancient Israel to address the ongoing interplay between human freedom and God's saving plan. Sin had multiplied in the human family as one poor decision led to another. The cycle of violence in the human family needed to be addressed and washed clean. By means of this tradition the people of Israel were able to proclaim how it is God who took the initiative and provided humanity the opportunity for a new beginning.

This first Sunday of Lent provides a powerful orientation that can lift our spirits as we enter more deeply into this time of grace. Once the waters of the flood receded, Noah's family offered a sacrifice of thanksgiving

and God graciously renewed the command made at creation for all created things to be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth. Life in all its forms is considered precious and God makes it patently clear that the spread of violence and the spilling of blood has no place in this renewed creation.

God's promise in the Genesis tradition is that God will never again bring a flood that will destroy the life that has so lovingly been called into being, and humanity must do its part too, and honour the lives of others. It is God who ensured that life in all its forms could start anew by means of the Ark, and it is God's desire for all creation that we live in harmony bound together by the knowledge that God's covenant is made with all creatures. Three times in this short passage God declares that the covenant is for humanity and all created things. It is fascinating to reflect on the fact that God does not use anything created by human hands to serve as a sign of the covenant – no altar, temple, structure, or ritual. The sign is found in creation itself. The rainbow that reaches out to span heaven and earth will be the sign of the covenant. We cannot control it, contain it, or demand that it appear when and how we desire. It is a reminder that the gift of life is vulnerable and precious.

1 PET 3:18

Christ himself, innocent though he was, died once for sins, died for the guilty, to lead us to God.



First Sunday of Lent

There are many vantage points from which we can explore the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Peter invites us to reflect with confidence and gratitude on the meaning of our own baptism as being incorporated into a community that has been washed clean, just as the flood cleansed humanity. The purpose of this extraordinary gift is that of leading us to God. As we enter into Lent, we are called to open our hearts to accept the invitation to come home and be in right relationship with God, the source of our lives; with others who are our companions on the journey; and with all created things with whom we share this amazing planet we call home.

MARK 1:12-15

The Spirit drove him out into the wilderness and he remained there for forty days, and was tempted by Satan. He was with the wild beasts, and the angels looked after him. After John had been arrested, Jesus went into Galilee. There he proclaimed the Good News from God. 'The time has come' he said 'and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News.'

With the words ringing in his ears "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased", Jesus is thrust into the desert by the Spirit. During forty days he

is tempted by Satan in preparation for the mission that awaits him. In Job 1:6-12 Satan asks God for permission to test Job's integrity and faith. The time that Jesus spends in the desert is when his deepest self will be revealed, and his desire to be true to his vocation be both tested and strengthened. It is significant that Jesus' sonship is declared before his time in the desert, not after the time of testing. Knowing that he is loved by God provides him the courage to enter into the contest, and be proved like gold in a furnace. As we enter in these forty days we know that we too are beloved by God. This enables us to enter into this time with confidence and faith. Without trying to be too dramatic we can find ourselves caught at times between angels and wild beasts. Our hearts too can be torn and divided. This season provides us an opportunity to be pushed beyond our comfort zones. It invites us to go deeper in order to explore our values, motivations, and actions.

In the Northern Hemisphere, Lent coincides with a world that is waking from the sleep of winter and entering into Spring as the cold recedes and new life breaks forth. Spring brings a sense of hope and gives Lent a very different feel from the Southern Hemisphere. Nature and the Liturgical calendar combine to turn our minds and hearts to hope for new beginnings and renewal. This will reach its climax in the Easter ceremonies as we welcome once again the light of Christ into our hearts and lives.

**Yesterday is gone.
Tomorrow has not yet come.
We have only today.
Let us begin.**

Mother Teresa

First Sunday of Lent

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The discussion questions pick up themes in the readings for the Sundays of Lent and are offered as guide for your own reflection and sharing. Each of us brings our own experience and wisdom. For that reason, you are encouraged to gently listen to the wisdom of others. The reflections that come from wrestling with the text, and God's Word woven into the tapestry of our lives, are all precious. Where we are standing is holy ground (Exod 3:5) so we invite you to be gentle with yourself and others as you share your own reflections, questions and learnings.

1. Does it change your way of looking at the earth to know that God's first covenant was made with the earth and all its creatures, not just humankind?
2. For Jews and Christians, the rainbow is a sign of hope and a source of strength. What are some practical ways that we can play our role as sources of hope and encouragement this Lent?

3. Jesus was led into the desert to better understand his identity and mission as God's Son. How will you use this desert time of Lent to grow in your own sense of mission as a disciple?
4. Jesus' time in the desert is a reminder to strip away all that is superfluous. Are there any attitudes, practices, and behaviour you feel called to let go of in this Lenten time?

PRAYER

- ◇ Loving God, as we commence this Lenten journey, may we do so filled with the certain hope that Jesus travels with us as companion and guide. He is the treasure hidden in the field of our lives. We pray for eyes that are open to see the gifts that are offered to us in this time, and hearts that are open to respond with generosity and love. Amen

If we enter the desert with Jesus, we will leave it at Easter when the power of God's love renews life, he said, and just like those deserts that bloom in spring with buds and plants suddenly sprouting from the sand, if we follow Jesus, our deserts will also bloom.

Pope Francis General audience
26 Feb 2020

