

Good Morning! Let us pray... Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and kindle within us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and we shall be created And you shall renew the face of the earth. O God who by the light of the Holy Spirit did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy your consolations, through Christ our Lord. May the words of my mouth & the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight...rock & redeemer of us all. Amen

“The Grace of Les Miserables: Jean Valjean and the Long Road of Grace”

1 Corinthians 1:18, 24-25; Luke 6:32-36

Welcome to the season of Lent! It is a time of focus and of centering. It is a period of self-reflection and outward action. It is a time of remembering the WHY of being Christians...why we follow Christ... and an opportunity to connect, commit, and celebrate the work of God through Jesus Christ.

Lent is a period of time established – NOT by Jesus command or a prophetic voice... rather it is a period of time established by the Church, FOR the church. Its purpose... to turn...to remember... and to prepare for living as People of the Resurrection!

We are called to live as people who do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.

We are people called to love and serve God & God’s people because of the EMPTY TOMB! The empty cross and the empty tomb symbolize death is not the final word...God in Christ overcomes the chains and the barriers of sin & death!

In this season of reflection, intention & focus we will walk with the primary characters of Victor Hugo’s story, Les Miserables. Each week we will learn from the character and from the wisdom of scripture. The character of Jean Valjean (JVJ) helps us to realize that this transformation takes time! For Jesus...it was just 3 days...but for us... it takes a lifetime. <share larvae, chrysalis, butterfly>

Perhaps you are familiar with the story of Les Miserables...set in France in early 1800s...a monarchy and a society of haves/have-nots... nobles & peasants; those who have wealth and those who struggle to pay for daily food.

Jean is a woodcutter, struggling to find work. His widowed sister & 4 children live with him and are without food. Desperate, JVJ steals a loaf of bread...is caught and sent to prison for 5 years. After escape attempts, JVJ is to do 19 years. Even though JVJ saves the lives of two men, he is facing despair. He says to the head of the prison guards, Javert, 'you treat people like animals and that's what you'll get.'

JVJ is successful in an escape and finds himself taking refuge at the local parsonage, where he meets the Bishop. After a wash and a meal, JVJ has a place to stay for the night. However, he rises early, takes the silver and leaves. He is caught and returned to the parsonage where he is treated as a friend who forgot to take the gift of candlesticks.

It is at this moment Jean experiences conviction...and the bishop says to JVJ, '*No man made by God for good can be made all bad by man...There is always a spark inside. Promise to use these for good honest work. Now go, my brother. I saw your soul and withdrew all evil and gave it to God.*'

Have you experienced a moment of conviction?

It can drive you to your knees, flood you with tears and an overwhelming sense of love and presence.

And with that moment of conviction, JVJ receives grace. But how hard it is to receive God's grace!?

Following Christ is more than 'not sinning'. More than 'thou shall not'!

Being 'convicted' by grace challenges our 'now' assumptions... JVJ is challenged to believe he is more than 'less than a dog'!

Becoming a child of God – being worthy – loved- and so much more... is conversion... is a process. It is when we change on the inside! Think Paul on the Damascus Road. It took days for him to process his sudden blinded by the light experience...and his new sight after Ananias (an enemy) prayed over him. Imagine the conviction and conversion it took for Ananias to meet Paul and do what he had been instructed to do for Paul, an enemy!

In Acts, as Jesus ascended... the disciples stand watching...until 2 messengers ask, why are you standing here? It is natural for humans to retreat... 40 days in the wilderness... 40 days on an ark... 40 days on the mountain... retreat is not so much an escape as it is a period of discernment, preparation, planning, readying for what comes next!

In the story, JVJ takes a new name, becomes a successful business man; becomes Mayor. He is generous, compassionate, even assisting a man trapped under a loaded cart.

Doing good leads to a difficult outcome...exposing JVJ to the new Police Chief who is the former Prison Chief is reassigned to the town.

Later, with a report that the fabled escapee had been caught, JVJ must decide to remain free or to be authentic and prevent a life of misery for the other man.

Doing good always requires a struggle to 'do right'. It involves taking up the cross...denying self so that another might live and be loved.

We are all 'becoming'... In this season of Lent let us reflect on our own journey of transformation...our points of conviction and process of conversion...as God has worked within us and around us.

Where has God been leading you to grow?

What part of your needs to be released and pruned to make room for new life?

How might this season of intentional focus on connection (prayer), commitment (fasting), and celebration (service/action) create space for a new level of relationship with God in your life?

There are tools for this journey available to you (many received them on Ash Wednesday). They include a daily calendar, a devotional book, a cross, and a stone to carry to remember with God all obstacles can be overcome. We are all 'becoming'... and the good news is we are not alone on this journey...for we have each other... and God is with us. Amen.