

The Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 22, 2026
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American Lutheran Church

Ezekiel 37:1-14
Romans 8:6-11
John 11:1-45

“Time flies” is something we’ve been known to say and to feel. In fact, we might be saying it and feeling it right now. It’s hard for me to believe this is already the fifth Sunday in Lent. It doesn’t seem like it’s been more than a month since Grand Canyon Synod Bishop Deborah Hutterer was here to help us celebrate Ash Wednesday. As we’ve been known to say and to feel, “Time flies.” Even so, I don’t think it can be said that our appointed gospel readings this Lent have flown by in no time at all.

These past four weeks we’ve heard one hundred and forty-one verses from the gospel of John. By way of comparison this is fifty-three more gospel verses than will be used throughout the upcoming seven Sundays of Easter. When it comes to the gospel readings appointed for use this Lent, time has not flown by in no time at all. Has there been a point to this sustained challenge to the well-established maxim that time flies?

Well, perhaps the point has been to suggest that faith explained, and faith lived are two very different things. In most cases it just doesn’t take much time to explain the core tenets of the Christian faith. In essence, there are two of them. We’re all on the outside looking in when it comes to salvation and only God’s grace can bring us in from out in the cold through the work of Jesus and the Holy Spirit’s gift of faith. Though Lutherans never grow tired of proclaiming it, this really doesn’t take much time and effort to explain. It’s short and sweet. It’s simple and straightforward and we have in fact been hearing it in recent weeks.

Two weeks ago, we heard, “God is spirit, those who worship him must worship in spirit and the truth,” with Jesus being not just the Way and the Life, but also the Truth. And when our long readings from John began three weeks ago, we heard, “No one can enter into the Kingdom of God

without first being born of Spirit (who alone produces faith) and of water (which baptizes us into Jesus' victory over sin, death, and the devil). In short and sweet and simple and straightforward terms here has been gospel we Lutherans love to preach and teach. And it's perhaps because we know it can be said in such short, sweet, simple, and straightforward ways that we may have found this Lent's gospel readings to be long and laborious. But it really is one thing to explain the Christian faith as I've just done and quite another to live and practice this faith in real time and space. The living and practice of Christian faith in real time and space is what we might call spirituality and I'm here to tell you that spirituality is not quick and easy.

Faith lived, faith practiced, spirituality, whatever we want to call it, takes time. It takes sustained attention. It takes repeated trial and error. And even as they've succinctly communicated gospel truth, this may be precisely why our long gospel readings have refused to fly by like a TV commercial or a Facebook post. These have been gospel readings which require sustained, serious listening and undivided attention; requirements perhaps intended to tell us that it's going to take time and attention and trial and error to learn how to pray better; time and attention and trial and error to learn better how to love the world God loves; time and attention and trial and error to learn how to be better stewards of our time, talent, and treasure.

Even so, it shall be important from the start to recognize that time, attention, and trial and error are never going to be enough in and of themselves. If spiritual growth is to happen, the Holy Spirit is always going to have to take the wheel and drive the bus. Where this is concerned, today's reading from Romans is right on point when it says things like "Those who are in the flesh (without the Spirit, that is) cannot please God." But as necessary as the Spirit shall be, my, oh my, can it be an epic struggle to get us out of flesh that is death and into the Spirit who is life and peace. And our long gospel readings this Lent have certainly accentuated this point.

Last week, we had a long reading about spiritually blind people who don't know they were blind. They thought the one Jesus had healed was blind, but it was really them who were blind in the

spiritual sense of the word. And today, Martha doesn't hear Jesus when he announces he is the Resurrection and the Life. Proving just how difficult it is to abide in the Spirit who is life and peace, Martha is one hundred and one percent in the flesh when at her brother's tomb she says to Jesus, "Don't bother! It's pointless. There's nothing that can be done. After four days, can't you smell the stench, Jesus?" This is how it's been for four weeks. Our long gospel readings have found God in one place and us in another. Clearly it can be like pulling teeth to get God and us on the same page. There's just a lot that stands in the way of getting us out of the flesh and into the Spirit so we can hear and see and learn and grow spiritually. If it's to happen, the Spirit shall always be necessary and usually lots of time, attention, and trial and error before we learn to pray better; before we better learn how to love as Christ first loved us; before we learn how to be better stewards of our time, talent, and treasure. But there is hope for us.

After saying in absolute befuddlement, "How can these things be," Nicodemus did go on to wrap Jesus' dead body in a hundred pounds of spices worth two hundred thousand dollars today. Likewise, the woman at the well did go on to bring her entire village out to Jesus so they also might drink of his living water. And after scolding Jesus today, we don't know what happened to Martha. But we do know her sister Mary, who also scolded Jesus, did go on to anoint Jesus for burial with perfume valued at one year's pay. Quite clearly, spirituality, the living of faith, the practice of faith may be long in coming but can in fact come. But as our long gospel readings have through their length borne witness to all the time it generally takes for faith to flower, they've also made clear that the wait shall be worth it in the end. Just go through the readings with me one final time.

Three weeks ago, Nicodemus drew himself and all others who had attained physical maturity outside the circle of spiritual growth. People like him and like us couldn't change and evolve. Two weeks ago, women and foreigners were drawn outside the circle of divine attention and concern. A week ago, blindness and other inheritances by way of birth were drawn outside the circle of where God and God's people could ever be expected to come. And today it's the dead who are drawn outside

of God's orbit and plan. In each case, the circle drawn in the flesh proves to be way too limiting and small. In each case, the flesh erroneously and errantly diminishes God and God's work on us and through us. The repeated lesson has been that when God and us finally do get in the same room and we do finally through much time, attention, and trial and effort actually hear what God is saying, what emerges every time is a new creation; a whole new ball game with more players, plays, and possibilities than we ever thought possible. And so, in, by, and through the Holy Spirit, let's put in the time. Let's give the needed attention. Let's stick with trial and error until we clearly get the Spirit's green light. And then, let's realize Jesus wasn't lying when he said his goal was to give us not just life, but abundant life. Amen!