



UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST IN THE PHILIPPINES  
RESOURCE MATERIAL FOR  
**LENT CELEBRATION**

"Bringing Good News of Light and Hope to the Masses in these Changing Times"

***First Sunday in Lent***

***February 21, 2021***

***“From Darkness to God’s Light”***

*Bishop Modesto D. Villasanta, UCCP Bishop Emeritus*

**Biblical Reference: Psalms 139:23, Job 10:6**

Sisters and brothers in Christ, we are now celebrating the season of Lent- the season in our liturgical calendar where we look back at the crucifixion and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. This time signifies darkness in human history which is the result of our human sins. This is also an opportunity for us to know our darkness within.

Indeed, our world is full of darkness which is the result of our own inner darkness manifested in many forms of negativity.

So first of all, knowing our darkness means knowing our sins. To know our sins, we need to examine ourselves and acknowledge that we fall short from the expectations of God as believers and members of God’s household. We also need to acknowledge before God that our sinfulness greatly affects the lives of people around us, thus, bringing them to situations that need light. It is only when we acknowledge before God our weaknesses and shortcomings that we become humble, realizing that we are not perfect and that we are only human that need to be saved. Knowing our sins is the first step in our journey towards experiencing God’s light.

Our texts in Psalm 139:23 and Job 10:6 tell us that we cannot take away our sins by ourselves. We also need God to examine us, search our hearts of whatever darkness it harbor. So, we too, are challenged today to look into ourselves, let God search us and know our sins and accept that we are sinners.

Secondly, since the Psalmist recognize his sins, he humbly submits himself before God declaring these words, “Search me O God and know my heart, try me and know my thoughts.” A song elaborated this by adding, “see if there be some wicked ways in me. Cleanse me from every sin and set me free.”

When the Psalmist uttered these words, he acknowledges God’s sovereignty over him and with all humility bow down before God and willingly submits himself to God for examination. This is because he knows he cannot take away his sins by himself alone. He wanted God to examine his darkness inside him. Deep inside, the psalmist is overwhelmed with hatred, greed, selfishness, pride, envy, and many other negativities which when remain unexamined will manifest into social ills like economic crisis, ecological crisis, political crisis, cultural crisis like racial discrimination, human rights violations and social injustice.

We need to allow God to examine our darkness within so as not to become an instrument of darkness in our world. This reminds us that we can become an accomplice of injustice like the

Sanhedrin who become an instrument of evil desire with the Roman empire spreading darkness by wiping out those who hold the light like our Lord Jesus Christ. We do not want to be instruments of darkness, so we submit ourselves to God for examination. From then on, we experience cleansing and the grace of God will be upon us.

A certain Pastor Sokou says that “We can tell the truth about darkness but let it not have the last word.” God doesn’t want darkness to triumph so we should not let the darkness triumph over God’s Light. After we are cleansed, we will be experiencing God’s light. In John 1:5, it says “the light shines in darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Thirdly, by willingly submitting ourselves to God, God will take away our sins. He will assure us of being forgiven. The scripture says, “when we confess our sins to God, he is faithful and just to forgive us.” This act of God allows us to experience God’s grace and light. Our darkness will be gone and will be replaced with light allowing us to experience God’s mercy that forgives and transforms our darkness into light. Then we will be able to respond to God’s call of bringing light to the world. We become instruments of spreading light to the world. We are called to do this in Matthew 5:16, “Let your light so shine before all, so that they may see Your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven.” As Christians, we are told to become light bringers to the world.

So as we celebrate lent, let us look into ourselves and acknowledge our personal sins; let us willingly and humbly submit to God for examination and then experience God’s grace and light. Let us become light- bringers to the world. Let us let God accompany us to complete our journey from darkness into God’s light. Amen.

***Second Sunday in Lent/Membership Sunday***

***February 28,2021***

### **“Together”**

*by Rev. Callum R. Tabada, Senior Pastor- Church of the Risen Lord*

**Biblical Reference: 1 Corinthians 12:25-31**

#### **Introduction**

There’s this familiar story about the body and its parts. One day, while the different body parts were going about with their daily routines and tasks, the mouth suddenly uttered a protest. Gathering all the other body parts, except for the stomach, the mouth said, “We have been working hard all these time to make sure that we put in food for Stomach. What’s in it for us? We do all the work, while Stomach received everything! He just sits there and happily takes in whatever we bring to him. Is he is our master? Let’s protest against this set-up!”

And so the other body parts agreed to protest and teach Stomach a lesson. Mouth said that he will not open up even if Hands will forget their agreement and accidentally bring food to Mouth. Feet also conspired saying that they will not walk towards the table especially knowing that Nose will not be able to resist smelling the wonderful aroma of food. Eyes said he will close so that he will not be able to see the food set on the table.

Breakfast and lunch passed and Mouth was chuckling to himself saying, “Now we’ll see how Stomach stomachs this lesson of just sitting there and not doing anything, now that there’s no food coming in.” Stomach, not knowing their plan, just continued to sit there waiting, just thinking that perhaps the body was busy with work with overtime and all, forgetting to eat and skipping a meal or two.

However when dinner time came and still no food came in, Stomach began to grumble. Mouth laughed and the Hands were clapping as if celebrating that they were successful in teaching Stomach a lesson. The Feet jumped for joy in celebration as well. Stomach then soon started to ache, and lo and behold everyone started to feel weird. Hands felt weak and couldn’t raise themselves up. Feet tried to move but were able to just slightly drag themselves a few inches. Eyes couldn’t open up and Mouth couldn’t close itself. They all ended up suffering together.

This could be a funny story but it is telling us of what could possibly happen to any body, including the body of Christ, the church. In our text this today from Paul’s first letter to the believers in Corinth, Paul somewhat tells the same story, using the metaphor of a body in addressing his readers at that time.

### **The text.**

When the Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the faith community in Corinth, they were actually in a mess. Corinth was a bustling metropolis where business thrived like any of our other big cities in the country. However, because of this, the newly established Christian community who have become well-off in terms of its status and standing in the community have become affected by what some of its members have given in to – some of them have grown indifferent to immorality and corruption, and have started to quarrel with each other, particularly boasting of who’s the best of them all. Because of this, Paul wrote this letter in order to teach the people in Corinth how to live for Christ in such a difficult situation.

Using the body in this metaphor is actually quite absurd in such a way that the different parts of a normally functioning body cannot decide what to do by itself since a body functions as a unit or whole. However, this is what Paul tries to point out to the believers in Corinth, that as followers of our Lord, we should all function as a unit, as part of the one whole body of Christ. As such there should be no quarrels or efforts to put one down in order to prop one up (“crab mentality”), or thoughts that one is better than the other or there are parts that are better off than the rest.

### **Lessons we can learn.**

From this passage we can learn three things. First, is that every part of the body has a unique function – a God-given gift apportioned by the Holy Spirit. Earlier in the same chapter in our passage, Paul points to us in verses 4 to 6 that, “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. 5 There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. 6 There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.”

Like the parts of our body that differ not only in form but also in function, all of us also have our own uniqueness with corresponding unique functions. Our hands don’t walk or feet handle things. Our nose can’t chew food nor our mouth hear. We don’t put water into our ears nor force our eyes to smell. It just doesn’t work that way. And so in order for us to function well, we must do the things that we are entrusted with and do it well.

Secondly, we need to constantly remember that we all are in this together. Theologian and Mega Church pastor, Dr. Timothy Keller, as well as leadership best-selling author John Maxwell and many other Church leaders around the world attest that there’s no such thing as “Lone Ranger Christianity” nor a “Lone Ranger Christian” for that matter. To be a Christian therefore is to be part of a larger community and this is what St. Paul is trying to say when he used the metaphor of the body in our passage today.

In a well-functioning body, body parts take care of each other or the whole body contribute to the well-being of all, especially those that need attention and help. For in doing so, all will benefit from the well-being of each member of the body. We remember those times when we experience a small cut in our hand and our parents would say, “Ay, layo ra na sa tinae,” or “malayo yan sa bituka mo” or “nasa kalingkingan lang yan” which basically means, it won’t cause one to die or it’s not that serious. However, even though it is “layo ra sa tinae,” “malayo sa bituka” or “nasa kalingkingan” or not serious, one cut would affect the whole body especially if it gets infected because we well know that such small body part is connected with the body and the infection could very well spread to the whole body.

Paul is therefore saying that we need to take care of each other, we need to help each other because doing so would help not just those whom we have extended help to but would benefit everyone in the body.

The Church as the body of Christ universal, and local as represented by each local congregation, functions the same. In order to be a healthy body, church members should support each other, prop each other up, be concerned and be helpful with each other. This way, we build the whole body of Christ and altogether be a healthy, functioning body that can do effectively the mission entrusted by God.

This brings us to the third and final point – the body of Christ exists not for its own wellbeing, but exists for a mission, God’s mission. Theologian Lesslie Newbigin who coined the phrase “missio Dei” which means “God’s mission,” explains that the church is not truly a church unless it is active in doing God’s mission. We therefore have to remember that the purpose of our concern for each other in the body of Christ is for us to be able to function well according to what we have been called to do. If we, as a body, functions well, then the things that this body does will most likely be well also – efficient and fully functioning. As a fully functioning and efficient body, we will be able to do what God wants us to do and become – as light and salt to the world, as God’s hands and feet in bringing the Good News to all those who need it, in preaching repentance and proclaiming the message of hope to the world.

## **Conclusion**

As individual parts belonging to the body of Christ, we have to affirm our individual gifts that God has given us through the Spirit. As such we need to remember that we belong to each other as parts of the one body, ever concerned and working for the well-being of the whole. As a healthy body, we can then be effectively and efficiently do God’s mission as entrusted to us as Christ’s body in our world today to bring the message of hope and salvation to all. Amen.

***Third Sunday in Lent /International Women’s Sunday***

***March 07,2021***

***“ Woman, Believe Me!”***

***By Rev. Annabelle A. Uriarte, LLCDM-CEN***

## **Biblical Reference: John 4:7-26**

### ***The Context***

As I was reading the book entitled, “Woman, Religion and Spirituality in Asia” by Sr. Mary John Mananzan, OSB, I was amazed to note that her words about the context of women in Asia before spoke the same truth as what women are experiencing today.

To borrow her words, “Asia is a vast, geographically well-situated region, rich in human and natural resources but generally suffering from unending poverty. Most Asian countries have a long history of colonialism, and almost all are prey to imperialism. Although all have gained political independence, the injustice of the colonizers have perpetrated by local elites who, in connivance with foreign powers, continue to exploit the great majority of the people. Aside from being dependent on foreign investments, Asian nations are groaning under the weight of increasing indebtedness. The free trade zones exploit Asia’s cheap labor. Unemployment and rising prices have spurred many Asians to look for work in other parts of the world. There remains an unequal distribution of wealth. The stratification of society into classes and castes has led to violence in various parts of Asia. Militarization is still prevalent and national defense spending in many countries eats up the big chunk of the national budget.

In this situation, Asian women suffer double and triple oppression. Aside from discrimination and subordination, women suffer various forms of violence, both domestic and social. They are also victims of trafficking in different forms: as prostituted women, mail-order brides, overseas contract workers, including helpers and entertainers.

Asia, however, has seen a growing political and social consciousness. People’s organizations, women’s organizations and ecological, peace and justice movements are conscientizing and mobilizing people to struggle for their rights and bring about a more humane society.”

### **The text**

With a similar situation, the woman with whom Jesus was talking to, was subjected to discrimination and condemnation because of her personal life. Her conversation with Jesus made her realize that she’s taking the words of a strange man literally. Jesus was talking about things and matters beyond what the present life can offer to her. Jesus’ profound grasp of her personal, economic, political and religious situation made her open up and share her hopes to Jesus.

A note-worthy statement from Jesus is found in verse 21, "Woman, believe me.." What could Jesus mean by this? Does this imply that Jesus found the woman an unbeliever, unworthy of the truth, and to make matters worse, unworthy of the Messiah? What should the woman believe in? What are the impacts of such statement from the person whom the woman was waiting all her life?

***It is affirming.*** In contrast to harsh, cruel and condemning words which women are subjected to every day in any setting - may it be in work, home, community or church, Jesus' statement enable the woman to affirm herself as a person, her value and the validity of her vision. Before the presence of the One from whom the "living water" comes forth, the woman was able to affirm her faith of the Messiah who will proclaim everything to the people (v.26).

Women today need to affirm themselves, to value their capacity to see visions, nourish their faith and strength for growth in order to help others.

***It is empowering.*** Talking with Jesus made the woman realize her limitless possibilities. She can drink the living water! Hearing Jesus declare being the Messiah whom she has been waiting for gives her renewed strength. She is talking to the Messiah himself! While others are waiting, she is already experiencing an extra-ordinary movement with him. No matter her condition and status in life, the woman seemed to have risen up from being a "victim" of society into someone who can bring the "good news".

Women today need to rise up from whatever condition and status they are in and become agents of change capable of empowering others.

***It is liberating.*** Being found out of having five husbands can send a woman into deepest pit of shame and guilt. Living her life in shackles of people's snare and opinions can bring her into an abyss of agonizing darkness. Being found out as someone who comes from a different race, of low status and sinful background can make someone feel like in prison with no hope to be free. Jesus' declaration of his being and intention to the woman tore down all forms of walls, shackles and prisons. Jesus took out the woman from her helpless and hopeless state into the light of liberation. The woman has been freed.



Women today need to gain self-knowledge and acceptance in order to experience liberation from whatever that imprisoned them and bring others to the light.

***It is a continuing struggle.*** The woman from the well brought with her an amazing experience and a wonderful news. No matter how empowering, liberating and affirming the message is, she continues to be a subject of violence, rejection, subordination and discrimination. Change in a woman's life cannot be that smooth considering the kind of society she has to wrestle with. It continues to have its ups and downs, " its peaks and abysses; its agonies and ecstasies". But Jesus' words, "Woman, believe me.." offer great possibilities of change, to great opportunities of growth and freedom.

In response to Jesus' words, women today need to respond, "Yes, we believe!" From the darkest pit of our hopelessness and enslavement to the whims of society, women can rise up and meet Jesus at our own well. Amen

***Fourth Sunday in Lent/ UCM Biggest Coin Fellowship Sunday***

***March 14, 2021***

**"OVERCOME DARKNESS BY RESISTING EVILS IN OUR TIME"**

*By Rev. Irma Salvador Mepico, Administrative Pastor - UCCP Faith Bible Church*

**Biblical References:** Hosea 6:7; John 3:26, John 3:19

We live in a time of uncertainty in many aspects of our lives. All forms of violence are happening in different countries of the world. Amid the global pandemic, we have experienced or hear of stories of different forms of human rights violations -from red-tagging, surveillances, threats and harassment, filing of trumped-up charges, illegal arrests and extra-judicial killings happening in the different regions of the country. The victims were farmers, indigenous peoples, workers, lawyers, journalists, urban poor, church people, peace advocates and human rights defenders. These are all happening while people are suffering from hunger and poverty due to the pandemic, natural calamities, joblessness, landlessness and development aggression. In these situations, we all have times of fear and anxiety and hopelessness. Some have even asked: where is the glimpse of light and hope in the midst of these challenging situations? This is a basic question of faith.

In our reading from the Gospel of John, light and darkness convey both Jesus' identity and saving mission and the world's opposition to it. This theological, soteriological manifestation of light and darkness resonate with daily human experience. Says scholar Craig Koester, "The interplay between light and darkness is a fundamental feature of human existence. Day and night, brightness and shadow, establish the contours of the world we see with an evocative potency that has prompted people everywhere to ascribe religious significance to them."

Jesus in the scripture is a penetrating light that provokes judgment by making it apparent what a person is. Jesus' mission is the focal point of the struggle between light and darkness, between good and evil, between life and death. The coming of the light makes apparent people's ultimate allegiance, whether they love darkness or light and puts their whole lives, both words and deeds, under scrutiny.

Prophet Hosea, in our Old Testament text, lived in a climate of violence and fear at the time where military power and might alone became the sole criterion for the right to rule and dominate the people. While in power, the ruler's main business became the maintenance and preservation of his own hold on the throne by brutally suppressing and destroying all possible threats and rivals in his realm.

The priests were also accused by Hosea of outright corruption simply feeding or enriching themselves at the expense of the people, reinforcing instead of correcting the growing waywardness of the whole society. For Hosea, the priest were also responsible for the increasing perversion in society. This included the elite's insatiable drive for power and wealth, the poor's continuing struggle just to survive and the growing disregard for the value of life and dignity and the essential rights of each person especially the poor.

The situation in our country today, the very context of our mission as a Church is similar to that of the ancient Israel during the time of prophet Hosea. While our Philippine Constitution contains the Bill of Rights that protect the rights of the citizens, we witness rampant and blatant violations of these rights by the authorities and agents of the law particularly with the enactment of the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 which in essence is not to run after the "real terrorists" as defined in the Human Security Act of 2007 but rather a direct attack against legitimate organizations, activists, human rights defenders and peace advocates including church people. We have witnessed how this present regime choses darkness over light, death over life, tyranny over democracy, historical oppression over just and lasting peace. Instead of providing comprehensive response to the pandemic, the government prioritizes the enactment of the Anti-Terrorism Law, the pushing of the Charter Change and the revival of death penalty. While people languish in abject poverty, corruption is happening in government agencies like PhilHealth, Department of Health, and the NTF-ELCAC through its fake surrenderee scam and intelligence fund.

Let us all be reminded that Jesus, the Light, gave his life fighting the system in his time that manipulates and sidelines people. His presence made visible the kingdom of God around us, bringing peace to some and conflict to others- to those who rejected the light because their acts

are evil. Let us overcome darkness by resisting evils in our time. To follow in his footsteps requires a certain loss of life for us, as well. There is no such a thing as neutral in living out our faith in Jesus. We really have to choose between good and evil, between the oppressor and the oppressed. It may be life-threatening given the political climate in our country today but we do not have other choice but to choose life and defend it. Jesus revealed the Way to Life; it is found only in Truth. Truth-telling leads to the cross and outer darkness as it exposes the systems which exploit others. As followers of Jesus, we find the paradox of both peace and conflict in this new kingdom. And the question each of us must ask is: How can I be the light of God in the world today?

This is precisely the reason why Christians are to be found in the very places where suffering is most intense. We don't need to run away from suffering, to block it out with a "dream" or a "fantasy." We can enter with Christ into places that feel most desolate, most "God-forsaken," because we believe that in Christ, God has not forsaken them. The Good News of Easter is one and the same as the Good News that he is both the one who suffers with us, and the one who comes to liberate us from oppression and injustice. As followers of Jesus, we cannot just wait things to happen. We cannot expect the oppressors to liberate the poor from their dismal condition. With all these pressing situations, we are expected to actively respond. Passivity has no room for Christians. The Hymn "Faith in the Service of the People" in our Hymnal of Faith Journey gives us a challenge to live out our faith in faithful service to the deprived and the marginalized in our society.

As one peasant declared, "We are coming to understand that the church is us; we better understand the meaning of church when we attempt to improve our condition and the conditions of all the people of our community. The ultimate reason for commitment to the poor and oppressed is not to be found in any social analysis we use, or in human compassion, or in any direct experience we ourselves may have of poverty. These are doubtless valid motives that play an important part in our commitment. As Christians however, our commitment is grounded, in the final analysis, in the God of our faith. Reading this passage I wondered who or what is that we claim as the God of our faith? What is that center that compels us to do good, to resist the oppressors in solidarity with the oppressed and the destitute?"

It's no wonder that some of the most powerful Easter songs were written by people who lived under slavery, discrimination and marginalization. They didn't have the luxury of a fantasy life that took them out of reality. Rather, they were sustained in the midst of an often brutal reality by the knowledge that they were children of God and part of his new creation. And the conviction which sustained them in the midst of oppression was at the heart of their struggle for liberation.

As Desmond Tutu puts it:

Good is stronger than evil;  
love is stronger than hate;  
light is stronger than darkness;

life is stronger than death.  
Victory is ours, through Him who loves us. Amen

***Fifth Sunday in Lent***

***March 21, 2021***

**“The Pains of Creation and Ours”**

*by Frank J. Hernando, Executive Secretary, OGS*

**Biblical Reference: Romans 8: 18-25**

*Present Suffering and Future Glory*

<sup>18</sup> I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.<sup>19</sup> For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. <sup>20</sup> For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup> that<sup>[a]</sup> the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

<sup>22</sup> We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.<sup>23</sup> Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.<sup>24</sup> For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?<sup>25</sup> But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

1. *The present challenging times of climate change, environmental destruction and the pandemic.* It was the month prior to the quarantine lockdown of Luzon when Bishop Reuel Norman Marigza made a startling observation on the extent of destruction on the mountain ranges where the roads to and from Baguio are winding. That was the same day that I was passing the same road on the way back to Quezon City when he made that commentary. I inquired from Jason Caperas, our office staff who accompanied me to Baguio, about the sorely sight of the mountain ranges in Benguet Province. He informed me that a mining company had taken all the precious minerals from beneath the earth.

Due to the barrenness of the mountain ranges, landslides are all-over the place and seldom we could see trees standing tall. The rivers are clogged and the mine tailings have leaked chemical wastes to the rivers, sources of safe water. Food produced was depleted and many local residents have become migrant workers in the National Capital Region and overseas.

Aside from Benguet Province, large areas in the entire country have been applied for mining operations by both Filipino and multinational companies at the Mines and Geosciences Bureau of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR). Recently, UCCP and other religious leaders in Northern Luzon have rallied for the non-renewal of the permit to operate of Oceana Gold Philippines in Nueva Vizcaya. The copper and gold mining company has destroyed the natural environment.

I was telling a group of friends that I was feeling downhearted in sending disaster impact and response bulletin to overseas partners because it seemed to me that the Philippines has never ending suffering caused by earthquakes, series of typhoons, and the Covid-19 Pandemic. One of my friends explained in a very subtle way by telling me that she had visited Montalban, Rizal and saw thousands of people still living in evacuation centers for their homes were destroyed by the floods in November and December last year, and many have to dig into the mud inside their abandoned homes to look for spoons, fork and other usable utensils for they could not buy new ones. That means my downheartedness must be transcended by the commitment to continue helping those who are still strangled in homelessness, unemployment and sorts of sufferings due to the impact of natural calamities and the lack of sustainable economic life that could have been made possible by the government. Perhaps the Church should help articulate people's need for rehabilitation.

2. *Pains and sufferings induced by human actions and excessive economic production.* Our text from Romans 8: 18-25 especially verses 22-23, we read the groaning of creation compared to the birth pangs of women in childbirth. Paul uses the image of birth pangs to describe the yearning for redemption of creation and humankind. He draws on the several strands of meaning in the image of birth pangs we can find in the Scripture. It is a common human experience; it is intense; it is unavoidable; and it is a process that, once begun, must run its course. The context of all of this realism about suffering as birth pangs is that it has a productive outcome: variously expressed as new birth, redemption, and the advent of the Messiah. There is a great deal of ethical implications here in this text,

such as the extent of agonizing pains that believers in particular are suffering because of their faith and commitment to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Yet, it is not just the believers that are suffering in pain, but creation as well, or the physical environment.

Also, in the light of the observance of Lent wherein we reflect on the passion and death of Jesus Christ, we are reminded of the pain and suffering that Jesus endured in the hands of his captors and the mass of people who were influenced by the negative notions about his ministry and messiahship. We attributed productive outcomes in the sufferings and death of Jesus, but believers find it too hard to follow the sacrificial aspect of his pain and suffering.

Supposedly, the one-time event of the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross intended for the redemption of humankind from sin--the violation of human dignity and God's image in humans and integrity of creation could have ended. Jesus' sufferings and death could have ended the sacrifice of humans in the arena of greed, aggression and violence. However, the groaning in pains as in birth pangs of childbirth continued because human society and the corporate interests are prone to sacrifice people and the environment than stopping the pains, protecting the lives of people in communities and the environment.

3. *The redemptive value of human suffering epitomized in the crucified Christ.* Moreover, in our text, we see that God has not separated us--humans from the earth. God continues to allow humanity to stand at the crucial point of the destiny of creation. In verses 18-25, Paul tells: creation has a future, and that future is tied to the resurrection life that God is bringing to God's beloved children. The identity that is ours by the Spirit is consummated when our bodies are redeemed and all creation is ushered into the glory that God has bestowed first on Christ and then on us. This future must not only be an end-time goal for believers but ought to be an affirmation of faith that the pain and sufferings of the present brought about by the destructive schemes of human society and the corporate world can be averted before the total destruction or annihilation of communities and nations happens.

The immensity of the impact of large scale open pit mining, as experienced by many communities around the country, whether in the Cordillera mountain ranges, Bicol region, Cebu and Mindanao are really devastating. The gold, copper and coal merchants

in the global market and the national banks that store gold bars in most secure vaults, the global jewelers that make expensive gold and diamond jewelries, the technology giants that produce high tech gadgets are blind to the sufferings of people and the impact of mining on the environment. They don't care what happens to the people and the environment where destructive mining operations are done.

The groaning of creation, especially the natural environment and the impact of global climate change, could hardly be reversed, as seen in how strong typhoons and tropical storms frequented in the Philippines and in other parts of the world. These typhoons wreck havoc on the homes and other physical structures, the farms and other means of livelihood of people. Many people in typhoon prone areas have developed a culture of resilience, that of being able to rise above the impact of calamity and destruction and start rebuilding their homes, and finding means to sustain their economic life. Resiliency among people is very important, but in so many ways this has become a governmental jargon for government officials and agencies to escape responsibility of aiding and providing adequate support for their rehabilitation.

God's project of redemption for humanity and creation, made known in the work of Jesus, awakens us, runs through us, and helps us commit ourselves to it. This does not stop until our human society and the entire created order is renewed. Yet, this begins with a call to put to death the deeds of the body, not about escaping from our bodies or escaping from earth, but becoming more truly embodied people, exemplars of God's image upon a flourishing eternal earth. In all of this, the resurrection that we think of as the future is forcing its way back and intruding into our present. To be adopted daughters and sons of God (8:15) is to have our future hope of adoption through the power of the resurrection (8:23) a real experience in our present. This can happen because the same Spirit through whom we are adopted raised Jesus and exalted him as God's firstborn Son (Romans 1:4).

We become agents of resurrection or the renewal and restoration of human habitation and solidarity as we pursue our own sanctification--the change of values and ethical practices, as we lay down our lives so that others might live (2 Corinthians 4:12), and as we treat the earth like an eternal partner in the life that God has in store for those who love Him. Amen.

-----

References consulted:

1. Alyce McKenzie <https://www.patheos.com/progressive-christian/labor-pains-alyce-mckenzie-07-14-2014.html>
2. J.R. Daniel Kirk, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-16/commentary-on-romans-812-25-5>

***Sixth Sunday in Lent/ PALM Sunday***

***March 28,2021***

***“PALM: Speaking the Truth, Becoming a Light to Situations of Darkness”***

*By Rev. Haniel Jose Taganas, Administrative Pastor of UCCP-Davao City Church*

**Biblical Reference: Luke 19:28-40**

## INTRODUCTION

The triumphant entry of Jesus was not at all received with much appreciation by everyone. While the crowd of disciples “began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen…” [19:37ff], there were some Pharisees who asked Jesus to rebuke his disciples [vs. 39]. Here Jesus replied, “I tell you… if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”

When Jesus says that “The stones will cry out” it indicates that the people’s acclamations should be encouraged, not suppressed.

Speaking the truth, becoming light and hope to situations of darkness would certainly face oppositions and suppressions. However, we could not delegate such role to inanimate beings. It is our task. We are to speak the truth, despite oppositions and suppressions. We need to be lights to situations of darkness. How? We can learn from the triumphant entry of Jesus – P.A.L.M.



1. **PRESS** on towards your the task of bringing the Good News of light and hope to the people despite suppressions or oppositions.

Luke 18:31-34 reminds us of Jesus, on their way to Jerusalem, who discloses to his disciples the suppressions and oppositions he will face in Jerusalem. He told his disciples that “he will be delivered over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him and spit on him; they will flog him and kill him···.” Despite all these, he pressed on to fulfill his task.

The task of becoming light to situations of darkness is not at all easy. But we need to press on.

2. **ACCEPT** some roles towards the accomplishment of the task of bringing Good News of light and hope to the people.

vv. 30-32 tells of His disciples’ acceptance of their role of finding a colt and bringing it to Jesus.

There are roles each of us need to play. Accepting our given role is necessary towards the fulfillment of the task of bringing Good News of light and hope to the people. We can not leave the work alone to Jesus. He chose us to work for and with Him.

3. **LET GOD** use your resources for the need of bringing the Good News of light and hope to others.

vv. 33-35 informs us that there are resources needed by the Lord to accomplish His task. “The Lord needs it··· would be your answer” , Jesus said, “to anyone who asks why you are untying the colt.” As they exactly replied, “The Lord needs it” , to the owners of the colt, the owners willingly allow the Lord to use it.

The task of bringing the Good News needs some resources. We need to let go and use the resources needed to accomplish the task.

4. **MAKE** a difference in other people' s lives in this changing and trying times.

Jesus chose to enter Jerusalem than to stay outside its walls. He chose a colt than a chariot. He chose people to speak out than be silent. He chose to make a difference.

Making a difference in the people' s lives can be made possible if we chose what is good and beneficial for others than for ourselves. This may be difficult and challenging but it is worth doing and even dying for. It is a choice we are called to respond – to speak the truth; to be light and hope in the world of darkness;

#### CONCLUSION

Truth can not be curtailed. It can not be contained. It is a light that needs to be shared when in darkness. Oppositions and suppressions should not be the last words to say. The stones would cry if we are to be kept from speaking the truth. This is a difficult task but the call does not end until the triumphant entry but even to calvary! We need to press on, accept the role, let God use our resources and make a difference.

***Maundy Thursday***

***April 01,2021***

***“Wash Not Just My Feet...”***

*Prepared by Rev. Homar Distajo, LLCDM Executive Secretary*

**Biblical Text: John 13:1-7**

I grew up in one of the UCCP local churches in Metro Manila. Every year, there are two occasions that are meaningful to me. Christmas as a celebration of giving or sharing with others. I enjoy receiving gifts during Christmas. And Maundy Thursday as a time to examine yourself and giving yourself to serve others. I love to see our elders and pastor in washing the feet of members and in serving the holy communion.

Now that I am a pastor, it is a humbling experience to kneel down and wash the feet of a child and an elderly, or another person's feet, whether small or big size, clean or dirty, and even with skin disease (alipunga), you perform the hospitality of Jesus in washing the feet of his friends.

Washing of the feet has been a hospitality practice in ancient civilization where a host would provide water for the guests to wash their feet, provide a servant to wash the feet of the guests or even serve the guests by washing of the feet.

Jesus did this to set an example to his friends – “For I have set an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.” (John 13:15-17)

Jesus showed them a reverse hospitality that the master or teacher washed the feet of the guests or his friends. The master became the servant.

This reflection aims to committing our whole self to journey with the people in their darkness is like journeying with Jesus through his dark moments. It is important to put emphasis on this during this time of uncertainty and challenging times of this pandemic and absolutism.

We can find assurance and strength in this example of Jesus washing his disciples' feet in John 13:1-20 that shows two points: (1) Cleansing and (2) Humility, in bringing the good news of light and hope to the masses in these changing times.

- (1) Cleansing: “Jesus said to him, ‘One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.’ For he knew who was to betray him; for his reason he said, ‘Not all of you are clean.’”

Cleansing is a process of removing unwanted substances, such as dirt and other impurities, from an object or environment. Just like Covid-19, we are required to sanitize our hands and disinfect our homes against impurities brought by Covid-19. If we commit our lives to Jesus, there should be cleansing so that we will not betray or put to the sidelines our Lord Jesus Christ. This cleansing involves re-examining our hearts and intentions to serve God and God's people. As David wrote in Psalms 51:10 says, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.”

When we seek God to clean our hearts, it involves humility.

- (2) Humility: Action speaks louder than words. Jesus' actions here show us both how He loved us when we were unworthy of that love and how we can love others who may not be worthy of it. John (13:3-5) paints the picture like this: "Jesus, knowing that the Father has given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him."

Humility requires thinking of others more highly than yourself. It means getting your focus off your rights and your needs and onto others' needs. It is easy to serve or to give to those in need out of pride. Peter's unwillingness at first to let Jesus serve him did not stem from humility, but from pride. It embarrassed him to think of Jesus washing his feet. That implied that his feet were dirty and in need of washing! It would have served Peter's pride much more if he had washed Jesus' feet. But Jesus explained that if He did not wash Peter's feet, then he had no part with Him.

***Good Friday***

***April 02,2021***

***A Good Friday Message***

*by Bishop Jesse Suarez, UCCP Bishop Emeritus*

**Biblical Reference: 1 Corinthians 15: 57**

TODAY, we join the whole Christendom in the observance of Good Friday, an important event in the Christian year, the center around which the story of salvation revolves.

Amidst the continuing battle against Covid-19, we see images of fear, anxiety, loss, uncertainties and sometimes the grim reality of death. Such were the same moods and images that surrounded that gloomy Friday afternoon when Jesus was crucified on the cross as if Jesus' ministry was to culminate in a miserable defeat. And yet, we are to find out later that Jesus'

death on the cross was not actually a story of loss but just the beginning of the victory of truth over falsehood and sin. Yes, even in our ongoing battle against the pandemic which appears to be ambiguous, there are also stories of victory that give us hope and strengthen our optimism that soon we will rise above this contagion as Christ prevailed over the power of death.

- We see people infected by covid-19 recovered and are now out of the sickbed. They have defeated the virus!
- We see scores of people exerting efforts to help those in need, getting out of the security and comfort of their homes to extend arms of support to the neediest communities and groups;
- We see individuals, groups, and organizations linking arms with others in the noble effort of collectively battling against a common enemy in corona virus.
- We see countries sending their medical experts and assistance to most affected nations to help overcome the pandemic;
- We see a number of affluent individuals and companies contributing to the cause of rising above this prevailing adversary;
- We see the growing number of people who volunteer to be in the frontlines of this war;
- We see more and more people entrust their lives to God which shows that after all, we acknowledge that only with God can we truly be victorious over this colossal challenge.

All these and more are stories of victory that give us reason to hope and be optimistic even amidst a despairing situation.

The crucifixion event is principally a story of victory and fulfillment - the reason why we declare with the Apostle Paul "***But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.!***" (1 Corinthians 15: 57)

If the victorious Christ lives within us, then we have the power to prevail over the adversaries of our life, including covid-19. If Christ, who at first looked overpowered by the sting of death was able to rise above such a great enemy, we too can prevail over this dangerous adversary. We may experience momentary downfall, but that is not the end.

We celebrate today for the reason that we too can be a part of Christ's victorious fight against falsehood because He lives in us and we can overcome the sting of darkness that surround us these days. Yes, we may be overwhelmed by apparent hopelessness and despair, but with Christ in us, we will overcome! Remember that Jesus did not give up until the end. He fought the good fight.

The story of Jesus' life, ministry and sacrifices did not end on Good Friday. It did not conclude on a note of defeat. It was just the beginning of the road to his joyous victory over life's greatest adversary.

TODAY, we gather as a people of God to claim that VICTORY, to celebrate God's triumph over the snare of this feared enemy.

And because Christ gave his own life to save us, we can all face the promise of a bright tomorrow, where there is fear no more. For God holds our future and life becomes all the more worthy to be relished, because in Jesus' death falsehood and sins were conquered in the end!

***Resurrection Sunday***

***April 04,2021***

**"THE GOSPEL OF THE "FIRST DAY" AND "EIGHT DAY" OF THE WEEK"**

*Prepared by Dr. Ferdinand Anno, UCCP Faith and Order Committee member*

**THE WORD READ:**

Mark 16: 1-8; Luke 24: 1-10; Matthew 28: 1-10; John 20: 1-18

**THE WORD RE-TOLD**

Christians do popularly claim that the uniqueness of Christianity lies in the fact that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. In his first letter to the Church of Corinth, the apostle Paul, himself, said that everything is vanity if Christ was not raised from the dead (1 Corinthians 15: 12-15). Why is the resurrection so central that the church has institutionalized the day of Christ's rising as the Christian day of worship? What is the resurrection and "easter day" (Sunday) saying to us now in our current situation?

There was an intriguing debate among folk-rock music enthusiasts of the and 70s and 80s as to what Don McLean's now immortal song, *American Pie*, was about. This stays unanswered to this day and Don McLean opted to be silent about his song. *American Pie*, eight-minute-long, is one of the longest songs ever recorded and performed and nobody's fully understanding what it is saying.

Students of popular music, however, say in bits and pieces that *American Pie* was Don McLean's lamenting the untimely death in 1959 of popular 50s music icon, Buddy Holly. It was, for Don Mclean, a personal tragedy and lamented it as "the day the music died."

For Jesus' disciples and followers, the death of Jesus Christ was the day everything in this world and this life died. Their hopes for a new life in a new and better world died and were buried with Jesus. The Romans and their Jewish surrogates tried to kill a movement that was a growing threat to their interests, and they succeeded. They were able to arrest Jesus, put up a sham trial for the trumped-up charges against him, and executed him both as a rebel and a heretic. Then and now, despotic rulers end the hope that is energizing popular movements by targeting their prophets and leaders.

Imagine Jesus' followers in the aftermath of his execution. On the day revered as a "perfect day," the *sabbath* day, the "day of completion of creation," the disciples were described as inconsolable in their grief, devastated by guilt, fearful for their lives, and were abandoned by hope. Not even the gospel of the sabbath day can bring them any assurance and relief. This is not unlike situations when not even our religious and spiritual resources cannot console and relieve us anymore.

**The "New Normal."** Accounts of the aftermath of Jesus' crucifixion narrate that despite their debilitating grief and fear, some of the followers of Jesus still struggled to do what was normal. They requested for the body of Jesus to be brought down, washed, wrapped, and buried according to Jewish Law (Mt 25:57-58, Mk 15:42-45, Lk 23:50-52, Jn 19:38). On the eve and

dawning of the first day of the week, Jesus' women followers bought burial spices and went to the tomb to anoint the body (Lk 23: 55-56).

This is the same routine we are familiar with when we lost our loved ones and relatives. We may be grief-stricken, dazed, confused, and physically exhausted but we try doing the normal thing: disposed of our hospital obligations, communicate with police/authorities, funeral services, and arrangements, etc. even for those who lost a loved one during the pandemic when normal things were disrupted, we stay doing things that mimic what was normal with hopes that this will help facilitate our transition toward a new normal. This is how we manage our crisis of losing someone dear to us.

### **THE WORD IN OTHER WORDS**

This is also how we manage our crises of faith and body on a wider corporate scale. During this time of the pandemic, we try living our normal lives in a "new" way. We suspend much of our social, work, and everyday rituals and try being productive in alternative and virtual ways. But the fact that the "new normal" is simply doing the same old things and arrangements the "new way" gives many the reason to despair and wallow deeper into hopelessness. Thus, we cynically sulk and say, no change is coming. If we survive this pandemic, we will be back wrestling with the old social virus of gross injustice and inequity. There is no light at the end of the tunnel. It will be darkness after darkness. We see ourselves like dried bones in the valley of death.

The scriptures, however, say that amid this hapless state of hopelessness, the Scriptures say that Jesus, on the third day, rose from the dead. This was the good news then; this stays as the good news now. Early Christians call this day when Jesus rose from the dead, the "eight-day," and this happened during the "first day of the week."

**The Gospel of the Eighth Day.** The "eighth day" surpasses our religious imagination and expectations. For Jesus, the seventh day is not necessarily the final, terminal day. We have seen this among the disciples and followers of Jesus. They were uncertain as to what happens next. To them, everything has ended. They may have heard often of Jesus's words about the "third day" and may still be clinging to whatever it meant to them but there's simply any certainty and even meaning to their "waiting." The imagination of their faith has been exhausted. Not even the sabbath was able to soothe that state of utter hopelessness.



But the "eighth day" happened. This was gospel to the early church who thought of the resurrection of Jesus as the eighth day. When they started celebrating Sunday as "the eighth day," the early Christians signaled that God's new creation had begun.

On the eighth day everything is made possible. That which we think is simply not possible is made possible.

There is an eighth day to the story of this global pandemic, and it is about rising and becoming whole again. There is an eighth day to our quest for a life better than the present and it is about the hope that it can happen. Not even the signs of the old normal coming in new forms in the "new normal" could prevent us from hoping that something qualitatively new can happen.

The social distancing that has emerged from our physical distancing cannot be the norm; neither does the "covering of our mouth" and our "staying home" for our safety. These may be the norms of a seven-day calendar, but the eighth day is saying that, past the pandemic and quarantine regimes, we can actually get rid of those socially constructed abysses that separate us from one another and be neighbors again; that we can open our mouths again to speak words of truth and prophecy and physically reach out to others in neighborly love.

**The Gospel of the "First Day."** The eighth day is at once the first day – the commencement day. It was the beginning of a new chapter in the life of Jesus's disciples and followers. In some accounts of the resurrection, it was the beginning of spiritual nourishment of the disciples who communed and were energized anew in body and spirit by the risen Christ.

The early Christians were also convinced that, with Jesus's resurrection, God's creative activity extended beyond the seven-day week, and so the first day, Sunday, was also the eighth day of God's work.

The first day is a creative day that would draw comparisons with the primal first day of creation. The first day is saying to us that we can now begin and co-create life anew.

The "miracle" of the eighth day includes our empowerment to begin our lives anew: as persons in some personal circumstance and predicament, as families, as communities, as a people; and to begin anew in our common work of bringing about a new life, a new world, and a new reality.

**Conclusion.** The global pandemic

But the resurrection of Jesus brings to us the gospels of the eighth and first days. That there is more to our human hoping. That the eighth day surpasses our cynical moves toward recovery; that a qualitatively new life beyond the "new normal" is possible; and that we are given this day, resurrection Sunday, the first day of the week to start anew in co-creating a new and better life for all.