

**Fifth Sunday in Lent C**  
**Rev. Dr. Patrick Shebeck**

**Lectionary 36:**

Isa 43:16-21

Ps 126:1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 6

Phil 3:8-14

John 8:1-11

<https://bible.usccb.org/bible/readings/040322-YearC.cfm>

**Possible preaching themes:**

- Shame
- Reconciliation
- Memory

**Scientific Resources**

- **Shame** plays a prominent role in today's Gospel reading, and – to a lesser extent – in the second reading (implied) from Philemon. But how does shame work?
  - **In-Depth Resources:**
    - Shame may be something that is developed before we can even speak, as the physical anatomy of brain's limbic system is developing. See: Gerald Fishkin. *The Science of Shame And It's Treatment*. Marion: Parkhurst Brothers, 2016.
  - **Brief Resources:**
    - Similarly, this article from *Science Daily* proposes that shaming children makes them much more aggressive in the long-term <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/12/081219172143.htm>
    - Shame is deeply tied to depression and anxiety, which – in turn – are tied to each other. Thus, early shaming can have long-term health impacts for the whole of our lives. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-scientific-underpinnings-and-impacts-of-shame/>
    - Joseph Burgo in this article from *Vox*, conversely argues in *Why Shame is Good* that shame can be an impetus for change and good <https://www.vox.com/first-person/2019/4/18/18308346/shame-toxic-productive>
- **Reconciliation** is another theme in all of today's readings, and a prevailing theme in the Church's preparations throughout Lent as we move toward Easter. Likewise,

“religion” and “faith” are often proposed as two subjects that cannot be reconciled to one another. Interesting homiletical possibilities can be exchanged between these two frames of science/religion and reconciliation/estrangement:

- **In-Depth** resource on Faith and Science:
  - Edward Kelly, Adam Crabtree, and Paul Marshall, ed., *Beyond Physicalism: Toward Reconciliation of Science and Spirituality*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019.
- **On reconciliation of individuals and communities:**
  - How the brain’s physical anatomy changes with forgiveness and reconciliation <https://www.neurologylive.com/view/neurobiology-forgiveness>
  - How forgiveness has health benefits [https://www.templeton.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Forgiveness\\_final.pdf](https://www.templeton.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Forgiveness_final.pdf)
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- **Memory:**
  - *Inside the Science of Memory* from Johns Hopkins University: <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/inside-the-science-of-memory>
  - Human beings obviously “remember,” but what about the universe itself? Is information “stored” to be recalled for later use? *How the Universe Remembers Information* by George Musser: <https://nautil.us/how-the-universe-remembers-information-7999/>

## Homily Outline

- **Isaiah’s** reading today begins with God “opening a way in the sea and a path in the mighty waters,” but the Hebrew is better translated as “track” or “course” rather than “path.” Why does this matter?
  - Because it implies that the way to reconciliation is not a narrow or untrodden way, but a way already set by God that is well-worn and well-used: many have received the mercy of God in the past and many will in the future. In short, we are not *alone* in the receiving of mercy.
  - Similarly, the reading goes on to imply that God’s mercy (the “track”) is a creative activity of God that elicits praise from the creation itself. In essence, God’s mercy creates a new creation *within* the old creation, a forward-looking theme of eschatological hope (embodied in the resurrection of Jesus) to which the Lenten is consummated at Easter.
- The **second reading** comes from one of Paul’s earliest letters occurring within larger narrative of Paul’s personal story.
  - Remember: Paul had been imprisoned and separated from many of the Churches he founded, but his letter to the Philippians is intended to let them

- know that he is still alive, and – *yet more confident* - that he will be freed through the miraculous work of God.
- Like Isaiah, this freedom is a “track” or a “course” that has already been set. Freedom *will come*, of that there is no question. This, too, is the purpose of the Lenten preparation for Easter: that freedom is coming and it has been established since the foundation of the world.
  - The most important of today’s readings is the **Gospel from John**, an impressive tale of not only of forgiveness and reconciliation, but also a reminder to us of how we internalize systems of shame and guilt.
    - Science is beginning to understand the ways that our brains are hard-wired to maintain systems of self-guilt and self-shaming from before we can speak. Shame may also serve as a biological tool to keep us safe. Even so, “shame” as a concept is one that is overused in destructive ways, diminishing the dignity of the human person, and having neurobiological consequences that are far-reaching.
      - Scientists are beginning to propose that it can cause aggressive and vengeful behavior, a repeating cycle of destruction that passes from generation to generation.
    - Today, John tells us that the woman caught in adultery is – *literally* – made to stand “in the middle” where she can be not only stoned, but publicly shamed before her impending death. Nowhere in John’s narrative today do the scribes and Pharisees speak *to* her; they only speak *about* her, never affording her the dignity to answer for herself.
      - “Shame” ignores the individual’s specific circumstance and instead rests upon generalizations that are applied by others from outside. The law cited (Deut. 17:6, 19:15), requires a witness to the crime; in this story, none is ever produced, placing the accusation on questionable legal footing.
    - Jesus acts beyond the Mosaic prohibitions on adultery by appealing to *mercy*, implying that the shaky legal case for the woman’s stoning is wrong, even if the case had been clear (which it is not, i.e., absence of witnesses).
      - Beyond this specific instance however, an important understanding of morality is raised: what is correct or legal is not always right. The distinction is one of grace rather than legalism.
    - It is of great interest to note Jesus’ *writing* on the ground. What is he writing? What is the finger of the incarnate Holy One writing that has not been written before?

- Like at the creation, could the Word be writing a new word into being, i.e., that God's new creation is *reconciliation and forgiveness* rather than shame and vengeance?
- Lastly, it is only Jesus – the Word – who speaks words to the woman, and as he does, proclaims the freedom she needs and – in a pre-Easter miracle? – an escape from death itself.

**Tags:** creation, forgiveness, freedom, mercy, shame

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### **About the Preaching with the Sciences Initiative**

A primary way Roman Catholics explore their faith and nourish their spirituality is by participating in Sunday Mass and actively engaging in the homily. However, few preachers explicitly connect faith or spirituality with science. The Preaching with the Sciences initiative, made possible by a generous grant from the John Templeton Foundation, gathers scientists and leading homileticians to explore the positive contributions science can make to preaching, and consequently contribute to more contemporary modes of believing. Such contributions are grounded in the rich imaginations that scientists bring to their work as well as in scientific discoveries that have a potential for revealing religious truths and even shedding new insight on ancient teachings and beliefs.

With guidance from world-renowned scientists with differing areas of expertise, a select number of homileticians will draft homily outlines for preaching key Sundays and feast days across the 3-year lectionary cycle. Over 100 homily outlines will highlight some of the way's sciences and the contemporary search for religious meaning can interface. These free homiletic resources have the potential to influence thousands of preachers seeking help each week in crafting sermons and helping to shape a scientifically informed religious imagination among future preachers.