

# SUNDAY

## by SUNDAY

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

**H**ave vigil lights for each person. Open a bible. Have each group member light a vigil light, hold it during prayer, then place it around the bible.

**LEADER:** Christ our Light will make the truth burn in our hearts.

**ALL:** *May the truth purify and transform us.*

**LEADER:** Christ our Light will fill our mouths with truth.

**ALL:** *Our mouths will be filled with laughter; our tongues will sing for joy.*

**LEADER:** Christ our Light will plant the seeds of truth deep in our hearts.

**ALL:** *Those who sow in tears will reap with cries of joy.*

**LEADER:** Christ our Light will fill us with courage to live the truth.

**ALL:** *God has done great things for us; we will sing for joy!*

**S**unday's gospel fits the #MeToo movement. A group of men who oppose Jesus catch a woman in the act of adultery and bring her to Jesus to set a trap. The woman seems the obvious sinner as the story begins. But these men, Jesus' opponents, are using the woman and making her an object of public spectacle and shame.

Unwanted sexual advances are what #MeToo aims to stop, employment cultures in which bosses expect sexual favors or flavor the office with their advances. Today no means no,

a step forward. The #MeToo movement has led many women to tell their stories of sexual assault and rape in an effort to end them.

Many people in our Sister of St. Joseph community work with law enforcement to help young trafficked women get out of prostitution and find a life rather than go to jail. Human trafficking and prostituting women happens under our noses at malls, hotels, on streets in our cities. Teens whose families fail or abuse them or who get alienated from them become very vulnerable to trafficking.

**A**woman who participates in a theology seminar I help teach writes about meeting a young woman on the streets. Their encounter echoes Sunday's gospel.

"When I was shopping on a cold, wet day," Debby Reisinger writes, "I saw a young woman sitting under a tree with a sign saying she needed money for a bus ticket home. She looked thoroughly miserable.

"After reminding myself that I professed a desire to protect women from trafficking, I parked my car and asked her for her story. She said she had been living on the streets and wanted to change her life.

"After obtaining her assurance that she wasn't using and had no weapon, I invited her home with me to shower, wash her clothes, and get a bus ticket to Iowa. She napped while I fixed a warm meal, and I heard her phone ding a number of times.

"While we were eating, a friend from the streets called her to ask if she was safe. She assured him that she was fine and told him that my husband and I had helped her out with a shower and clean clothes.

"I was astonished at what she said next; she told her friend, 'That's how you know there's a Jesus.'"

● **How do you know there is a Jesus?**



# GOSPEL

## Jesus will not condemn.

**NARRATOR 1:** Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. At daybreak he reappeared in the temple area. When the people started coming to him, he sat down and began to teach them. Some scribes and Pharisees led a woman forward who had been caught in adultery. They made her stand there in front of everyone.

**PHARISEES:** Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. In the law, Moses commanded such women to be stoned. What do you have to say about the case?

**NARRATOR 2:** They were posing this question to try him, so that they could have something to accuse him of.

**NARRATOR 1:** Jesus simply bent down and started writing on the ground with his finger. When they persisted in their questioning, he stood up and said to them.

**JESUS:** Let the sinless one among you cast the first stone at her.

**NARRATOR 2:** Again Jesus bent down and wrote on the ground. The accusers drifted away one by one, beginning with the elders. This left Jesus alone with the woman, standing before him.

**JESUS:** Woman, where are they all? Has no one condemned you?

**WOMAN:** No one, sir.

**JESUS:** Nor do I condemn you. You may go. But from now on, sin no more.

John 8.1-11



women guilty of adultery (Deut. 22.23-24). Actually the law calls for stoning both a man and woman caught in adultery.

In this story Jesus confronts individuals that can exist in any religious group or organization—those who are inflexibly certain they are right. Jesus’ opponents publicly shame the woman in order to trap Jesus in a no-win situation. Jesus either rejects the law of Moses that requires stoning or breaks the Roman law against carrying out capital punishment.

● **Where is the man with whom the woman was caught in adultery?**

No real evidence exists that first-century Jews enforced the Mosaic law against men and women who commit adultery. The law prescribes that both be put to death (Leviticus 20.10; Deut. 22.22). A man caught in adultery has already walked away in secret before this gospel story begins.

## Who will be the first to throw a stone?

Only John’s gospel tells the story of the hypocrites who use a woman they catch in adultery to trap Jesus. The story fits uneasily in John’s narrative and reflects themes more common in Luke, which we read during Lent this year and which emphasizes second chances and forgiveness.

Scholars conclude that this story is a late addition to John’s gospel—perhaps the third century—and that an editor fit the story into the conflicts Jesus faces in Jerusalem. Crowds think Jesus may be the Messiah. Temple police sent to arrest Jesus don’t do it because his teaching so amazes them. This leads a group of scribes and

Pharisees to set the trap that forms Sunday’s gospel. They set Jesus up to speak against the law of Moses.

The dynamic between Jesus and his opponents is exquisitely subtle. It is early in the morning and people are gathering in the temple area to listen to Jesus when the scribes and Pharisees appear, greeting him as Teacher, and announcing that they have a woman whom they have “caught in adultery.”

According to John’s gospel, the Romans have denied the Jews the right to administer the death penalty. Both Jesus and his opponents know this and know that the Mosaic law prescribes stoning a married



Instead of standing up to his accusers and falling into their trap, Jesus bends over and writes in the dirt. His silence and attentive writing create space for them to see themselves. Instead they persist in questioning Jesus until he looks up and sets a counter trap for them. “Let the sinless one among you cast the first stone at her.”

According to Mosaic law, a witness to a crime must throw the first stone and take responsibility for a sinner’s death (Deut. 17.7). The law also safeguards against false accusations by demanding more than one witness to verify testimony (Deut. 19.15-21).

The accusers drift away. They acknowledge their sinfulness and their complicity in threatening the woman’s life for their own purposes.

- **What complaints against others do you consistently make? What do your complaints reveal about you?**
- **What double standards have you experienced in which one person takes blame for many who have done the same actions?**

**T**he story is not about the woman dragged and humiliated before this impromptu tribunal—not until the end. She endures public

shame among the crowds in the temple courtyards until the men who accuse her slink away.

When Jesus turns to the woman and their encounter begins, he assures her he is not one of her accusers. Perhaps she recovers a little dignity as he speaks to her respectfully. He empathizes with her, caught and shamed in a trap set for him. Jesus does not judge her but challenges her to sin no more. He treats her as a person with the power to choose and act.

By standing with her, Jesus counters those who make her a spectacle. But what about the crowd? What can the woman do to find belonging in the community again? Can she go back to her husband? Her children? What will neighbors say who know her probable guilt?

The text doesn’t tell us what the woman does, nor how to seek reconciliation with family, friends, and God if we get called on a sin everyone knows we did. Organizations that work with trafficking victims help them restore their lives and often work in groups with other survivors. Accepting the person requires remembering our own experiences of feeling hurt and shame and putting our stones away.

- **What do you think the woman would say if she had voice in the scene?**
- **How do you treat those you must forgive?**
- **How have you been treated when you needed forgiveness?**

DO SOMETHING



**CHARITY**



**JUSTICE**

- **BreakingFree.net** recognizes sex trafficking is slavery and works to get women out of prostitution, which often starts with teenage girls 14-16.
- Look for organizations that do similar work in your area.

## How do we see the new?

**S**unday's first reading comes from the book of Isaiah, the Old Testament book most read at our Sunday Liturgy of the Word. This book has three editions. The first edition (Isaiah 1-23,28-39) originates with a prophet named Isaiah in the southern kingdom of Judah during the decades before and after the northern kingdom of Israel falls to the Assyrians in 721 B.C.

A second edition adds chapters 40-55, the words of a second Isaiah who spoke for God in exile in Babylon at the time the Persian King Cyrus began to conquer the Babylonians (540 B.C.). A third edition adds chapters 56-66. These prophecies come from a period after Israel's return from exile.

Second Isaiah, from whom we read this Sunday, is the great prophet of the exile, the one who recognizes something new is afoot in the victories of King Cyrus over Israel's Babylonian captors. Second Isaiah sees the arm of Yahweh at work in this new conqueror who will allow the exiles to go home and rebuild their city and themselves as the people of God.

The God for whom Second Isaiah speaks is the God who made the heavens and the earth, the God who once brought Israel out of Egypt, and the God who is about to bring the exiles home. Israel's God—who in the beginning separated the sea from the dry land and in former times opened a dry path through the watery chaos of the sea—is about

to lead Israel home across the dry desert. Rivers will spring up for them to drink on the way.

In every age God does something new! Remembering the past will help one perceive what is coming in the future. Yahweh is above all the one who fulfills all hopes and is indeed worthy of praise.

### God brings us better times.

**Thus says the Holy One, the one who opens a way through the sea, a path through the waters, who leads forth chariots and horses, a powerful army, until they lay dead where they stand, snuffed out and quenched like a wick.**

**Don't remember these early times, or think about the events of long ago.**

**See, I am doing something new that springs forth now. Do you not perceive it?**

**I make a path through the desert and put rivers in the wasteland. The wild animals honor me—jackals and ostriches—for I provide water in the desert and rivers in the wasteland for my chosen people to drink. These are the people I have made for myself to tell my praise.**

Isaiah 43.16-21

● **What part of Isaiah's prophetic poetry captures your imagination?**

● **What do you perceive God doing in our times? What is springing forth new in our world or in your life?**

## PRAY

Recall your goals for Lent. Say them aloud in your group if this fits. Pray Paul's words about running the race.

**LEADER:** I am running to grasp the prize. I do not think of myself as having reached the finish line.

**ALL:** I give no thought to what lies behind but push on to what lies ahead.

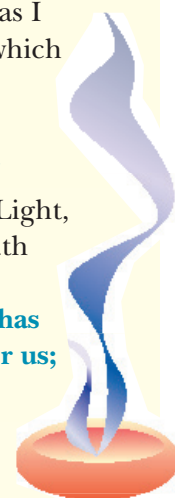
**LEADER:** My entire attention is on the finish line as I run to the prize to which God calls me—

**ALL:** Life on high in Christ Jesus. Amen.

**LEADER:** Christ our Light, you restore us to truth and grace.

**ALL:** The Holy One has done great things for us; we are glad indeed!

*Extinguish all candles.*



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