OLD TESTAMENT Isaiah 41:14–16

14Fear not, you worm Jacob,

you men of Israel!

I am the one who helps you, declares the Lord;

your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel.

15Behold, I make of you a threshing sledge,

new, sharp, and having teeth;

you shall thresh the mountains and crush them,

and you shall make the hills like chaff;

16you shall winnow them, and the wind shall carry them away,

and the tempest shall scatter them.

And you shall rejoice in the Lord;

in the Holy One of Israel you shall glory.

EPISTLE Hebrews 9:27–28

27And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, 28so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

HOLY GOSPEL John 11:32–40

32Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw Him, she fell at His feet, saying to Him, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.” 33When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in His spirit and greatly troubled. 34And He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to Him, “Lord, come and see.” 35Jesus wept. 36So the Jews said, “See how He loved him!” 37But some of them said, “Could not He who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?”

38Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. 39Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to Him, “Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days.” 40Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?”

**“God Has A Word For That”**

In the Name of Jesus Christ our blessed Lord and Savior. Amen. Christians do not tiptoe their way into the season of Lent. Ash Wednesday hits us head on with full force. It is for each of us to hear, “Dust you are and to dust you shall return.” Since the fall into sin by Adam, the curse of death is the sad outcome of all his descendants. And when man returns to the ground, we discover something else present, worms.

The worm has never been that impressive of a creature. Children beg parents for cuddly cats and dogs, not cold slimy worms. Zoos seek to show off roaring lions and beautiful fish, not bland muddy worms. When was the last time you saw someone stick up for the rights of worms? Around these parts, worms at best serve as a sign for good soil or what end up at the end of a fishhook.

In scripture, a worm is less than impressive. It is something cursed by God. When Jonah received shelter from the sun by a plant, God sent a worm to remove such comfort as a lesson to him (Jonah 4:7). Likewise, Jesus warning about hell described it as a place, “where their worm does not die…” (Mark 9:48). Tonight we come across God saying, “Do not be afraid, O worm Jacob.” Maybe a prideful Israel deserved such a name, but why did it go out to a people in exile?

Babylon drove Israel into the ground with a mighty blow. Any remnant left were buried under shame and guilt, frailty and weakness, brokenness and neglect, divorced, alone, barren, widowed, and empty of any glory. “O worm of Jacob” is like God addressing the dead. The exiles faced darkness on all sides. The promises of God appeared short-lived. Captivity was to a culture that mocked, desecrated, and was indifferent to the holy God of Israel. These worms became lunch for the beast of Babylon.

What should I consider of my captivity to sin in thought, word, and deed? How will I weigh out the finality of life as St. Paul said, “…it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.” Why is justice looking out just for me? Who am I when bitterness, anger, deception, and falsity fill up my days? What am I to say when delight for God’s Word has lost its luster? What am I to feel when being good still harbors lust in the heart? What am I to say when self-glory steals the show? God has already used a word for that: worm.

Concern over self-esteem or motivational inspiration is not the way of God’s Word. The Lord seeks for us to cry out to Him like troubled David, “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me” (Psalms 51:3). To be in need like drowning Jonah, “I called out to the Lord, out of my distress…” To join blind Samson before death, “O Lord God, please remember me and please strengthen me…” To confess weakness with St. Paul, “O wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death!” Lent is more than that we are all sinners. It is who we each are before God. Only repent sinners dead, buried, and covered in dirt can cry out for life.  
 Of course, Lent is not about us feeling good about feeling bad. That would only put the focus and reason for repentance back on us. The answer to such worms that we are is in what God says, “Do not be afraid, O worm Jacob, O dead ones of Israel, for I myself will help you, declares the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.” The Lord is not trying to make lemons of our life into lemonade. He is not a therapist trying to build up our self-worth. He is “your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.”

To be “your Redeemer” means God is the closest in line. He buys back an inheritance lost, earns freedom from slavery, and even pays off the debt owed. God’s redeeming word was not only for His people grieving over their burial in Babylon. The Father has won back a world buried under the curse of death with, “Christ having been offered once to bear the sins of many.” The Word of salvation is now the Word that Redeems all in the flesh. Jesus draws close to become dirty, rejected, and the sinner that stands in our place.

To be “the Holy One of Israel” means God is set apart from all others. The captivating glory of Babylon and its gods were fleeting. Isaiah said, “Behold, they are all a delusion; their works are nothing; their metal images are empty wind” (Isaiah 41:29). When the fullness of God came in Christ, His Word was life. He told Martha, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” This glory from Christ is at last a word that makes even His cross holy. Lent proves there is no other way of life than by the crucified Son of God.

In our worminess, we are to turn to Christ in Word and Sacrament. He has squirmed by His suffering and death to save sinners. The Psalm used for Maundy Thursday makes it clear, “I am a worm and not a man.” Jesus betrayal, mockery, scourging, at last nails Him to the cross twisted and bent in His body. The holy Son of God is stuck on the fishhook for sin, death, and all the powers of the Devil to devour. St. Paul tells our wormy lives, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Galatians 3:13).

Prayer, fasting, and charity as part of Lent never earns salvation. That is foolish compared to faith, but they bring awareness of God’s mercy toward us in life. As the Lord says, “See, I am making you into a threshing sledge, new and sharp, with many teeth. You will thresh the mountains and crush them, and reduce the hills to chaff.” Soon the ashes of Lent will have the better word of Easter. White robes of baptism washed by the blood of the Lamb. This glorious promise lets us eagerly wait for Christ because He cares about worms. Amen. In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.