Today is the first Sunday in the season of the church year known as Lent, which began last Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, and concludes on Easter Sunday. Lent is forty days long, but if you count forty days from Ash Wednesday you fall on Palm Sunday, seven days short of Easter, so what’s that about? Interestingly, the Sundays during the six weeks of Lent are not considered a part of Lent but are Sundays “in” Lent or inside of Lent. Every Sunday is considered a mini-Easter celebrating the resurrection of Jesus. So it is set within Lent, yet is also apart from it.

Lent is the period of the year in which we who follow Jesus Christ are invited to more seriously consider who Jesus is, what Jesus offers to us, and the demands Jesus places on us. Lent is a time to get serious about our following of Jesus. I know that sometimes we need a little incentive, a little motivation, to get recharged in our spiritual lives. Once I visited my mom in New Orleans just before Lent. I took a taxi from the airport. As we drove along, I asked the taxi driver if there were any Mardi Gras parades in my mother’s neighborhood. The taxi driver promptly opened a newspaper, spread it out over her lap and began to read it looking for the answer to my question as we continued to zoom down Interstate I-10 at seventy miles an hour! I was remarkably moved to trust Jesus Christ.

So, this Lent I pray you are moved to trust Jesus Christ and refresh your relationship with him. To assist you, we have a wonderful Lenten Devotional guide for you, which you may download from our website. Use it as a way of growing close to our Lord during these days in Lent. Our Scripture for this morning may be called the pinnacle text in the New Testament Gospels about Jesus. It addresses the most important question you will ever be asked to answer in this life and in the life to come: Who is Jesus? Who do you say that he is?

Jesus is very direct in pressing the question, “Who do you say that I am?” and then, for those who grasp that he is the Messiah of God, he explains rather bluntly what it will mean for those who place themselves under him, the highest leadership. So, we begin with Jesus’ question, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” You are John the Baptist, you are Elijah, and
“Who do you say that I am?”

you are one of the prophets who have come again. They don’t really know who Jesus is so they throw out the names of famous religious leaders that come to mind. Today, they’d say someone like Mother Theresa or Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Of course, the question, “Who do the crowds say that I am?”, was a way to get Jesus’ disciples thinking about him, because the real question is the next the one Jesus put to his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?”

Luke reports Peter’s response, “[You are] the Messiah of God.” Matthew’s Gospel adds a bit more, with Peter saying, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). Some translations have it, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” The word Messiah is from the Hebrew and the word Christ is from the Greek language, both meaning Anointed One. Messiah or Christ are words that mean “King” to a Jew. Jesus is Messiah, Christ, God’s final King, the King of kings, the ultimate one, the Anointed One.

Last week, Pastor Pete referred to The Screwtape Letters by C.S. Lewis. Lewis also wrestled with this question, “Who is Jesus?”, because he came at the question from the perspective of an atheist. He described his final decision to follow Jesus as, “kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance to escape.” He found himself drawn irresistibly to Jesus. He realized when people say that Jesus was a prophet or Jesus was a great moral teacher that they don’t get Jesus. Interestingly, to understand Lewis’ very famous reply to such claims, it helps to know what a poached egg is—an egg cracked and dropped into boiling water.

So, C.S. Lewis said of Jesus: "I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon, or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to

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2 C.S. Lewis Surprised by Joy
The Apostle Paul’s point: Jesus Christ is God.

us. He did not intend to.” Who do you say that Jesus is? I say, along with a great chorus of voices throughout history, Jesus is the highest leadership there is. Jesus, Messiah, Lord, God and King.

Many years ago, my wife, Ann Marie, dropped by a yard sale and picked up two books for me for the outrageous price of ten cents apiece. They turned out to be from a series of books published by the YMCA in the early years of the Twentieth Century, and their intended use was to develop college-aged students as disciples of Jesus Christ. I wound up collecting many of the books in the series and have especially loved this one with the great title, Under the Highest Leadership, a book by John Douglas Adams published in 1917. Who are the highest leaders under whom you have served? Highest might refer to the highest level of authority. Highest may also refer to the quality of the leader and the quality of the leadership.

In a fascinating conversation reported to have occurred between a General Bertrand and Napoleon, Bertrand said, “I can not conceive, sire, how a great man like you can believe that the Supreme Being ever exhibited himself to men under a human form, with a body, a face, mouth, and eyes. Let Jesus be whatever you please,—the highest intelligence, the purest heart, the most profound legislator, and, in all respects, the most singular being who has ever existed: I grant it. Still, he was simply a man.” To which Napoleon replied, “I know men [and he did]; and I tell you that Jesus Christ is not a [mere] man. Superficial minds see a resemblance between Christ and the founders of empires, and the gods of other religions. That resemblance does not exist. There is between Christianity and whatever other religions the distance of infinity. Every thing in Christ astonishes me. His spirit overawes me, and his will confounds me….He is truly a being by himself….” Napoleon got it. He was under the highest leadership, Jesus.

In his letter to the Colossians, the Apostle Paul tells us that Jesus Christ created all things, that Jesus Christ is before all things, that in Jesus Christ all things hold together. “And he is the head of the body, the church; [Jesus] he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy” (Colossians 1:18 NIV). The Apostle Paul’s point: Jesus Christ is God. He also tells us that peace was made through Jesus’ blood. Jesus was also fully human. In fact, the apostle goes on to say, “But now he has reconciled you

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4 http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/person.iv.xv.html
Sometimes people hold back from following Jesus, afraid he might ask them to do something difficult. It’s not a might. He will.

by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight” (Colossians 1:22 NIV).

With Jesus Christ our highest leader, fully human, fully God, the Messiah of God, what does it mean to be “Under the Highest Leadership?” I get the feeling that when Peter said, “You are the Messiah,” that Jesus gives him and the disciples with him the shock of the lives. You would assume if he is the Messiah that he would rule and all would be well. Instead, Jesus says, “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” Then he said to them all, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:22-23). Suddenly, the disciples discover there is a cost to following Jesus.

Jesus predicts his own suffering and death and calls them to follow him by taking up their own crosses, which meant suffering was going to be theirs, also. We know Jesus promises rest to we who come to him. He promises to be with us. He promises an abundant, full life and the promise of eternal life. He also says it won’t be easy. Sometimes people hold back from following Jesus, afraid he might ask them to do something difficult. It’s not a might. He will. If you place yourself under Jesus, as your highest leadership, you can know there will be some tough moments ahead. He tells you that directly. You can also know that he who suffered for you fully gets your suffering and is with you every moment along the way.

Not long after the end of the Second World War, one of the great Christian leaders of the Twentieth Century, Henrietta Mears, visited Europe to see the devastation first hand. She was deeply touched by what she saw. Returning home, she spoke to a gathering of over one thousand people with these words, “During the war, men of special courage were called upon for difficult assignments; often those volunteers did not return. They were called ‘expendables.’ We must be expendables for Christ.” Wow! Now, in our day, when the highest goals of American culture seem to be personal peace and affluence, why would any of us be willing to be an expendable for Christ? Because the Spirit of God, who calls to your deepest heart, helps you to know there is no greater honor, no greater service, no greater purpose in life than to lay one’s life down at the feet of Jesus and say, “Lord, you expended it all for me and I would expend it all for you.” And mean it.

Oswald Chambers captured the notion of under highest leadership with his wonderful devotional, My Utmost for His Highest. “What does the word
“utmost” mean? When I was in the eighth grade, we were living at West Point, the Military Academy, where my Dad was stationed. One Saturday afternoon, Dad took me to a track meet between the cadets of West Point and the track team of Villanova. The time came for the mile relay, now known as the 4 by 400, with each man on a four-man team running one-quarter mile lap. The gun sounded and they were off. It became quickly apparent that Villanova had the stronger team and, as each lap was completed and the baton handed off to the next runner, the distance between the leading Villanova runner and the West Point cadet increased. Finally, they were down to the last lap. The anchormen, the fastest men on either team, took their batons but the Villanova man had an insurmountable lead of nearly a quarter turn, which in a sprint like that was the distance of infinity.

To our astonishment, we watched that cadet turn in an unbelievable quarter mile. With every step the gap began to close and close quickly. By half-way around the track, the distance had been cut more than half. By the third quarter-turn the cadet was only a step behind the lead runner. The stadium was bedlam as we were hollering our hearts out. The finish line was coming up fast, the cadet continuing to catch up was only a half step back and just before reaching the line, whom the cadet passed out in mid-stride and his unconscious body slamming onto the track and skidded to a stop, the Villanova man cruising through the tape.

The stadium was dead silent. Stunned. People rushed out to pick up the cadet. I turned to Dad, "What happened, Dad?" When clear pride in his voice he replied, "Son, that man gave more than he had in order to win." While perhaps that cadet had actually collapsed for other reasons, I have often thought about my Dad’s words in the years since. I came to realize that on the one hand that was as pure a demonstration of competitive spirit as I have ever seen. The one hundred percent expenditure of one’s self in the pursuit of a worthy goal. That’s what “utmost” is all about. My Utmost for His Highest. Utmost means to expend to the highest degree, to the greatest extent possible. To give our utmost is flat out, full out, full tilt, to the max.

To be under the highest leadership—my utmost for his highest, for me means I want to leave it all on the track for Jesus Christ, the highest leadership I am under, to be an expendable for Christ. After I told that story to another group, a distinguished and accomplished gentleman of deep faith approached me with a sad face to say, “Stan, I know I have not left it all on the track for Jesus.” I replied, “My friend, I do not
We follow because he lives. We follow because he calls us by name to walk in the same path he walked.

As a paragon of virtue, I speak. I know the many times in my life I did not leave it all on the track and have disappointed and embarrassed myself and my Lord. It is why I take very seriously the prayer of confession and the affirmation of forgiveness we do every Sunday. I love the words of the hymn, *And Can It Be*, that describes Jesus coming to us in our messy lives: “My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.”

No matter what has transpired in your life, it is never too late to put yourself under the highest leadership of Jesus and offer to be an expendable for him. You can do it right now.

Last May, Ann Marie and I visited the Vatican Museum in Rome. The Pope’s decision to step down brought vivid memories of that visit to mind. After we toured hall after hall of incredible art in the Museum, we came to that unique place on the planet earth, the Sistine Chapel, with its ceiling painting by Michelangelo of God touching Adam’s finger, and so much other wonderful art. It is the place where the Papal Enclave will elect a new Pope. Afterwards, we made our way to the Basilica—the church of St. Peter. It’s incredibly huge. Immense. I found myself just wondering looking up and all around. Turning to my right, I suddenly found myself looking at the Pieta. I want to tell you I was utterly unprepared.

Yes, this sculpture, the Pieta, was done by Michelangelo when he was twenty-three years old. Yes, it’s very famous. Yes, someone tried to destroy it so it’s behind plate glass. None of that was in my mind. I was just strolling around the stunning St. Peter’s Basilica when suddenly I found myself looking at a mother holding her lifeless son. I was so moved I was unable to speak for several minutes. The mother, Mary. The son, Jesus, the Messiah, my Messiah. Why would I or you or anyone put oneself under the highest leadership that is Jesus and be an expendable for him? “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” Then he said to them all, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.” Why follow? We follow because he gave it all for me and for you as the ultimate Expendable. We follow because he lives. We follow because he calls us by name to walk in the same path he walked. It is the highest calling that can be placed on your life—to place yourself under the highest leadership—Jesus.

If the prayer in your bulletin under the sermon title expresses your heart to be an “expendable for Jesus,” please pray it with me—out loud: Lord Jesus, I trust you with my life. I would...
from this moment forward
place myself under you as the
highest leadership of my life. It
is my heart's desire to live for
you and follow you as Lord of
my life. I trust that you will
transform me into the person
you want me to become. Fill
me with your Spirit’s presence
so that I may share this faith
and love with other people. I
offer this prayer with gratitude
in Jesus name. Amen.

It is my heart's desire to live for you and follow you as Lord of my life.