NOT a fun memory for me from grade school was the required annual participation in the Presidential Physical Fitness Award. I think this program runs differently now than it did when I was going through grade school. Way back then, every year, we had to show our prowess, or lack thereof, in maybe 5 or 6 different areas. If memory serves me right, running, push-ups, pull-ups and throwing a soft ball were among the activities. You had to score above a certain national percentile in all of these areas to receive the Presidential Physical Fitness Award. I was never going to win this award; I was never going to come even close to winning this award. At times it felt like the PE teacher, rather than being encouraging, was actually embarrassed for me while watching me attempting to throw a ball. I was so uncomfortable and I felt judged by the PE teacher and by the more athletically-gifted in my class.

We’ve all had this feeling at one time or another - right? - of being judged, of being evaluated negatively – it begins at a young age. We become concerned with fitting in: how we look, how we dress, how we act, our ability on the playing fields, our ability in the classroom. We need role models who nurture us in feeling comfortable in our own skin, who help us recognize our particular interests and skills, who show us how to love, how to find our role in making this world a better place in which to live. Unfortunately, too many people in positions of influence in this country right now are not at all the role models their positions demand of them; rather, their rhetoric is debilitating. It finds fault, it discounts and discredits, when it should be listening and seeking compromise. Judgement - not discernment, but criticism – is prevalent in our society today.

Being shaped by the society in which we live, we walk into church and hear ominous
words of divine judgment. In our Old Testament lesson this morning, the Israelites have been set free from Pharaoh. Moses is leading them through the wilderness and they start complaining about how there is no food and no water. What does God do? God sends poisonous serpents; many of the Israelites are bitten and they die. Divine Judgment.

Scripture was crafted, shared aloud and eventually written down to teach all about our relationship with God. God is the fount of our being – this is the fundamental truth of life – God creates, loves, comforts and inspires. This truth is told in the Old Testament through the lens of judgment because that is the context in which the people lived, the people who were trying to express the truth of God in a way that would be understood. The Israelites identified in their lives a repeating cycle of sinning, such as worshipping idols, then being punished by some destructive act of nature or by the rule of an oppressive King, and then being saved by a bountiful harvest or by a just ruler. They sinned, they were punished, and then they were delivered. Scripture was written in their context of sin and punishment. The Israelites felt judged. We can relate and we assume judgment, we assume criticism in Scripture, because we experience this type of judgment in our lives.

Thankfully, we are reminded, we are re-inspired this morning by Jesus shedding a light on judgment. Jesus said, “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” God’s judgment is not about condemnation. It is about transformation. Jesus points us away from “thou shall not” to “thou shall.” God is desiring for us to be all that we can be, the potential within us, all that is fulfilling, and enriching, and expansive, and loving. Cynthia Bourgeault is an Episcopal priest, author, lecturer, retreat and conference leader. In her book, *The Wisdom Jesus*, she points us to Psalm 36:9. The psalmist writes, “Lord, with you is the well of life, and in your light we see light.” In your light, we see light. Bourgeault prompts us to think about seeing through Jesus’ eyes, feeling through
Jesus’ heart (pg. 29).

Let’s walk through this…we are created by God…the essence of our being is good…we have unique characteristics that we can offer one another and this world…and yet, we are shaped by life experience. Our unique characteristics evolve and will find different expression depending on our life experience. Someone with low self-esteem might find their niche in life and heal and live productively and peaceably. On the other hand, low self-esteem unchecked might be the underlying cause of contentious behavior. Yet, Jesus sees through how we’ve been shaped, positive or negative. Psalm 139:2: “Lord, you trace my journeys and my resting-places and are acquainted with all my ways.” Jesus sees through…whether we’re loving the world or fighting with the world…whether we have high self-esteem or low self-esteem, whether we are outwardly-focused or inwardly-focused…Jesus sees through how we’ve been shaped…to our uniqueness…and loves us.

So, what if we see through Jesus’ eyes? What if we feel through Jesus’ heart? How does this change how we interact with one another – how we listen, how we perceive, how we love? Seeing through Jesus’ eyes, aren’t we better able to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes? Feeling through Jesus’ heart, aren’t we better able to compromise to effect change? The season of Lent is an opportunity to get to know ourselves, who we are and who we might be. Athletes have already figured this out: the importance of resting the body, taking time off from training to allow the body to repair and strengthen itself. We need the downtime to find the peace in ourselves and, so, be able to open ourselves to God’s transforming love; we open ourselves to all that we might be. God desires us to live fully, to see the potential in ourselves and in one another. God invites us to take a look, to wander in our souls, to know the freedom in truth, to open ourselves to all that we can be…together. Amen.