

First Sunday of Lent

February 18, 2024

My dear friends we are in Lent and the primary purpose of this grace-filled season is our spiritual preparation for the celebration of the Paschal Mystery, recalling Jesus' death on Good Friday and Resurrection on Easter Sunday. Hence, the Church leads her sons and daughters to "repentance," a type of conversion. Repentance is the process by which one reorders one's priorities, and changes one's values, ideals, and ambitions, through fasting, prayer, alms giving and penitential mortification.

Lent, then, is a period of self-examination, prompting us to repent of our sins, and so to effect a real conversion: to turn completely to God and to His teaching, and to do good for others. Lent also challenges us to reform our lives by turning away from self, from evil, and from sin, so as to turn toward God and toward others with renewed Faith and fervor.

Lenten observances are also intended to lead us to our annual solemn renewal of Baptismal vows on Holy Saturday. Through Baptism, we are called to live justly, to love God with all our being, to love our neighbor as ourselves, and to build the kingdom of God by our acts of

charity. That is why the three readings chosen as today's Scripture refer to Baptism directly or indirectly.

We live in a mobile society. That goes without saying. Many of us are constantly jumping in the car and going from one place to another, running all over God's green earth. And sometimes (often because of the hectic nature of our day-to-day lives) we forget something on our journey. Who hasn't left his or her phone at home by mistake? That's a really bad feeling. Yes, forgetting to bring necessary things is an easy thing to do.

A few days ago we, as a faith community, we began a journey. And this journey is a sacred journey, forty days in the desert, in imitation of our Lord. And as you know, this holy journey is rarely easy, no matter how many times we have made similar journeys in the past. It requires focus and commitment. It requires patience. It requires perseverance. It requires humility. It requires generosity of heart. And it requires sacrifice. That's a long list.

And it would be a shame if we forgot to bring everything we needed, if we forgot something essential, something that, if left behind, would make our journey a kind of failure. And yet we often do precisely that, we forget the

thing we need most. Oh, that's not exactly right. You see, what we often forget to bring on our Lenten journey is not a "what" at all. It's a "who". You guessed it. Many of us start down this forty day journey and forget to bring God, I hope you heard right. God.

That may seem like a ridiculous statement, and you may find yourself wondering what I'm talking about. What I mean is this - If we are not careful, these forty days can be all about us, our accomplishments, our will power, and our egos. Sometimes I can fall into the trap of feeling a little too good about what I'm able to "do" during this sacred time, find myself filled with a little too much pride (instead of humility).

At times it's as if my Lenten observances are tests I give myself to "see if I can do it", not so that I can grow closer to my God. And those times when I actually accomplish what I set out to do, such as not eat candy, or read my bible every day, or not drink alcohol, or never fail to abstain from meat when I'm supposed to, or go to every single thing the Church is offering, like participating in the Fridays stations of the Cross, there is a temptation to come away thinking, "Boy, I'm a pretty great guy. I did it!

Look at what I accomplished. And that is in no way related to the spirit of this holy season.

In today's Gospel passage from St. Mark we hear how the Spirit "drove Jesus out into the desert", where he remained for forty days. (Matthew and Luke say that Jesus was "led" into the desert by the Spirit.) In either case, one thing seems to be pretty clear - Jesus did not go out into the desert alone. This was not Jesus simply doing what HE wanted. This was not Jesus fashioning his own plan or satisfying his own will or ego (if I can use that sort of language).

Rather, this was Jesus being motivated by the Spirit to embrace the sacred plan of the Father, for whatever happened in the desert, however we want to understand this Scripture story. Jesus returned from that journey ready to embark on his public ministry, ready to fulfill whatever his Father would ask of him. And the clarity with which he emerged from that experience, the complete focus he would have in the years ahead, the strength and courage he would muster in the face of adversity and sorrow and pain and disappointment, was only possible because it was God's Spirit that was leading him and guiding him and empowering him every step of the way.

And so it is with you and me. Lent, my dear friends, will never be fruitful, never draw us more deeply into the mystery of God, never enable us to be more faithful, if we try to go it alone. And even though we can't ever fully understand the interplay of Father, Son, and Spirit, even though we can't fully get our minds around the Incarnation, even though we can't know exactly how our experiences differ from those of Jesus, one thing is clear; Jesus couldn't do what he did without God, and neither can we.

And so let's make sure we strive to "do Lent right". Let's not fall into the trap of making this holy season some sort of contest or challenge to see if "we can do it". Rather let's see it as a sacred opportunity, an opportunity to love God a little more deeply, live our lives a little more faithfully, and carry out the work of God a little more humbly.

In other words, as we carry out our Lenten observances, as we pray a little more, and give to the poor, and make some small sacrifices, let's not see it simply as something we "do".

Instead let's take God with us into the desert and see what God wants to "do" in us.

Have a blessed Lent everyone.