

First Sunday Lent 2021

Mark 1:12-15 – “Temptation in the Desert”

In Mark’s Gospel, the Temptation of Jesus is quite short: The ***Spirit drove*** Jesus out into the ***desert***...and Jesus remained there for ***40 Days*** tempted by ***Satan***...among the ***wild beasts*** and the ***angels ministered*** to him. After that, Jesus came to Galilee and preached the ***Good News*** that the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe. Simple.

The ***forty days*** was not so much to recall Israel’s wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, but the number was an echo of the ***40-day testing*** undergone by Moses and Elijah. It is interesting to note that behavior psychologists suggest that ***to break a habit*** takes about 5 weeks or 40-days.

Forty-Years of wandering by the Israelites was to cull from the people those who rebelled against Moses. It represents a ***whole generation*** in that time and age. In order to break bad habits and establish new habits one must undergo an intense time of dying to oneself and replacing with something better. It is not surprising that Lent was usually the time that the Catechumens were initiated into the Church by prepared for Baptism at Easter with a 40-Day Period...a time of putting off the Old Man and putting on the New, which the white garment at baptism represents.

What makes this time of Lent important is that it breaks our routine so that we become more alert and receptive to the gospel. If you were at the ***Ash Wednesday*** service, you would have noted that the Penitential Rite was replaced with the Blessing of Ashes on our Foreheads. Our routine of starting Mass with the “Lord Have Mercy” was interrupted with Ashes of Repentance. Gloria was omitted at the beginning of masses throughout Lent. Abstinence interrupts our eating of Meat with Fish on Fridays and Ash Wednesday. That is the whole idea, to change our routine.

It is hoped that the daily routine in our lives is interrupted by time spent with God in ***prayer***, and that it will continue! If only our 40-days of prayer throughout Lent will become a habit! Can we add Alms Giving? I don’t know if we can add Fasting, that might be going too far. The important thing is that if the Kingdom of God is near, are we prepared?

I mentioned last week Sunday that there are many ways of praying; either Public or Private. Let me describe one way now that concerns Private Prayer. This way was modeled in the gospels by Jesus in today's passage, his being let into the desert by the Spirit. Desert can mean many things, such as a **deserted place**, not necessarily deserted by plants and animals, but deserted by people. The word translated in today's gospel as desert is really from the word '**wilderness**', or wild place, which makes more sense since there is mentioned that Jesus was accompanied by 'wild beasts.'

The reason for this distinction is that 'wild' places are more common for us than deserts and would include nature reserves, even though they may not be life-threatening 'wild beasts'. Sometimes it is good and prayerful to be in places where we are alone by ourselves to pray as in a **park or nature reserve** or national park, if one is so fortunate. Retreat houses with lots of land are for that very reason, so that the retreatant can be by themselves, without too much distraction from others.

In my younger years, I was fortunate enough to love 'back-packing' and took full advantage of it several times throughout the year spending three to four days completely alone **in the wilderness**. When I went to Africa that was impossible **because** of the wild beasts, like lions and baboons and ornery water-buffalo! Now I am too old, but I can still go to places like Gethsemane in Kentucky. You will never get as close to that kind of prayer that Jesus experienced until you are in a wilderness and alone with the sole intent to pray. This is the simple prayer of presence; no words are needed. We are present to God in ourselves and nature.

I remember well my very first time alone **in the wilderness** on my very first night. I was terrified! What did I get myself into? Here I am in the middle of nowhere and there are bears out there and coyotes and wolves and...I finally fell asleep from exhaustion. The next day, though, I felt wonderful. The second night, no problems! But...I woke up in the middle of the night by this **bright light**. I kept thinking to myself, they put on the streetlights right out here in the middle of nowhere...or I was surrounded by a search party with flashlights...but the lights were not moving!?! I got up and went outside and looked up. I was absolutely in awe!!! I never saw so many stars in my life. I was dumbfounded, where were these stars

come from, they weren't in the city? Needless to say, I didn't get much sleep that night either. And for the first time in my life, I truly praised God!

Psalm 139:11-12 - If I say, "Surely darkness shall hide me, and night shall be my light; - Darkness is not dark for you, and night shines as the day. Darkness and light are but one."

If you want to be in awe of God, you have to break out of your routine and remove yourself to a place where God is in charge, and what better place than nature.

What would have Jesus seen in the night sky when he went out into the wilderness, away from all the light pollution from the city, (from parking lot lights and city streetlamps and car headlights)? He would have look up into the sky and maybe even prayed this very psalm, "The night shines as the day."

I think Jesus would also realize that all the awesome *real estate* up there, Sadly, was worthless, because it could not love his Heavenly Father in return.

Only we can.
Therefore, it was made for us,
That we might praise God more truly, more deeply.

This is what Lent is supposed to accomplish.