

Lent 1
2/18/2024

TEMPTATIONS IN THE DESERT

Lent is a season with many themes but an overriding theme is baptism. Originally, Lent marked the final period of preparation for catechumens, those preparing for baptism. It also became a time of preparation of those who are already baptized to prepare to renew their own baptismal promises at Easter.

The first reading reminds us that the flood can be seen as a symbol of baptism. Afterwards God enters into a covenant, a sacred relationship with Noah. This continues through the Old Testament with Abraham, with Moses and with David. The prophets started to look at this as a type of marriage.

In the second reading St. Peter explores this further. He insists that Jesus suffered and died to lead us to God, we would say into a covenant relationship. In baptism, we share in Jesus death and resurrection, his paschal mystery. In the Eucharist, we share in and renew the everlasting covenant with God

The gospel doesn't talk about baptism but describes what happened to Jesus immediately after his own baptism. The Spirit drove him out into the desert where he remained for forty days and from which we have the forty days of Lent. In the desert, Jesus was tempted by Satan. This reminds us of something very important, even after the tremendous gifts of baptism and the Eucharist, we can still fall, we're still subject to temptation. In the Our Father we pray, *...lead us not into temptation*. That phrase can puzzle some people. It's not saying that God is throwing down banana peels as we walk down the street. Just as the saying, *Bite your tongue* doesn't literally mean to bite your tongue but rather, to be quiet, so too, *lead us not into temptation*, means, don't let us fall into temptation.

Following the Exodus, the Israelites spent a Lent of 40 years in the wilderness and also faced temptations. The temptation of nostalgia, looking back at the past through rose colored glasses. The temptation of assimilation. Once in the promised land they wanted to be like the other nations, forgetting their unique and high calling. The temptation of despair, to just roll over and die, to give up

We can face the same three temptations in our own lives, especially when we feel like we're traveling through the desert. Nostalgia or retrenchment can close us in on ourselves and sometimes out of fear, preferring the evil and slavery we know to the freedom yet to be revealed. It can involve looking at the past through rose colored glasses and that's dangerous.

Assimilation—Wanting to be like everyone else. We're called to dialogue with and to evangelize the world but not simply to let it dictate our values. We seek to affirm what's right but also critique what needs correction and when attempts are made to compromise our fundamental values as a people and our fundamental rights as citizens, we must resist. The gospel doesn't promise an easy life to any one and it's interesting that religious movements that offer a challenge and a high code of conduct often seem to flourish while those that accommodate themselves too much to the culture often seem to languish

Then there's a third temptation: —Simply to give up and say why bother with anything? But despair is a luxury not given to Christians. Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, we always have hope and despair isn't an option. A variation on this is the temptation of mediocrity and the temptation of superficiality, to just fly below the radar and get by; to be good enough to stay out of big trouble but to not really let the gospel make a difference in our lives. Jesus calls us to many things but he doesn't call us to be mediocre and he doesn't call us to be superficial.

In our lives there may be big temptations like cheating, stealing and adultery but there can also be smaller yet serious temptations like neglecting prayer, complaining, gossiping, entering the church parking lot through the exit rather than the entrance or leaving Mass right after Communion.

And yet the flip side of every temptation is an invitation. A temptation to cheat on your taxes is an invitation to honesty. A temptation to cheat on your spouse is an invitation to grow in your marital commitment. A temptation to lie or gossip and invitation to grow in truth. A temptation to nostalgia is an invitation to face the reality of the present. A temptation to assimilate is an invitation to grow in the vocation of being a Christian and a temptation to just get by is an invitation to excellence.

Through our Lenten practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, we seek to grow more deeply in our relationship with God and to grow in interior freedom

Lent is an invitation. To resist temptation in our lives, whether it be that of nostalgia and retreat, of accommodation or just giving up. To resist the temptation to be superficial and mediocre and those big as well as little temptations. But Lent is especially an invitation to reflect upon and grow in the grace of our own baptism, our own covenant relationship with God that is renewed every time we celebrate the Eucharist.