

First Sunday of Lent, February 21, 2021

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ Jesus, I would like to start out with an image pertaining to today's Gospel.

A group of people were traveling across a large desert. After a few days, they began to run short of food. This led to anger, quarrelling and fighting. They were so desperate for food they even tried to eat each other. Finally, only the mighty remained, having destroyed the weaker members of the group.

In another image, there was a monk who wanted to spend his life close to God in solitude and prayer. He found a secluded place in the desert that was comfortable for him and prayed all day long. After a few days, a cat entered his tent and disturbed his prayer. He found a rope, tied up the cat, and continued with his prayers. After a few days, he noticed that the cat was dying of hunger. He decided that he must get some milk to feed this cat. So he went out to buy a cow. Then he could milk the cow and feed the cat; then he could get on with his meditation. A few days later, he found his cow was hungry. So he went out to buy a plow and some oxen to till the soil and plant grass for the cow. He was so happy he had grass to feed the cow so he could milk her and feed the cat. And now, he realized he would need help to till the soil because it was more than he could handle by himself. He went to the village, where someone suggested he find a wife. So he found a girl and got married. Then he needed to take care of his wife so he built a better house, and finally, his life of prayer and meditation was gone. His intention of staying in the desert was lost.

These are two images of desert and life.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is in the desert. In the Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John, Jesus faces three temptations after 40 days in the desert. In the first temptation, the devil gives Jesus a stone and says, "You are God. Turn this stone into bread." In the second temptation the devil takes Jesus to a high mountain and tells him to throw himself down - that angels will protect him. In the third temptation the devil said, "This kingdom is mine. I will give it to you if you bow down and worship me."

Mark's Gospel just says the spirit took Jesus into the desert and he was tempted throughout his 40-day stay, not just at the end.

Now, we need to go back to the Old Testament for understanding. For 40 years the Israelites were traveling through the desert to the Promised Land. And here we really need to understand the struggle of the People of Israel. Israel - the word breaks down to Is, meaning man; ra, meaning enemy; and el, meaning God. So there was a fight between man and God, and in between them there was the devil. And always the devil tries to turn man away from God. The People of Israel went away from God because of their stiff-neckedness. They turned from God toward Baal, and made a golden calf to worship. That was a 40-year journey; for some of them it was a lifetime.

For us, through the Gospel of Mark, we are asked to understand and reflect that our life is in the desert. We need this desert experience.

Perhaps we need to analyze the images we started out with. If we are powerful, we can subdue and overpower others. In the second image; in our journey toward God through the desert of our lives, we sometimes lose our focus. We want to reach a destination, and that is the Kingdom of God. But along the way we can be distracted by events in our lives such as financial crises, family problems and political problems. Our attention is diverted and our focus is lost.

My Dear Sisters and Brothers, today Jesus is asking us to consider where we are, where God is and that the devil is coming between us, distracting us from this journey toward God. It's a fight. It's a conflict between good and evil. This season of Lent gives us a beautiful opportunity to get into ourselves, to know where we stand. Where do I belong: do I belong to God or do I belong to the devil? Will I allow myself to be tempted? Jesus was tempted in the desert but he resisted. That is our duty, also.

There is a story about St. Jerome. It is said that he lived in the same cave in which Jesus was born, and lived there for 25 years. Once he was speaking to Jesus, "Jesus, you gave your life for the salvation of humanity. What can I do?" He heard a voice - "What can you do for me, Jerome?" Jerome replied, "I can spend all my life in prayer." "I'm so happy, Jerome, that you can spend your life in prayer. But what more can you do?" Jerome replied, "I can give all my talents." (Of course Jerome was using his talents writing the Vulgate.) Again Jesus told him, "I want you to do a little more." Then Jerome said, "I will give all my possessions to the poor." "That's good. I still want you to do a little more." Then Jerome said, "I have given you everything, my Jesus. What else can I do?" Then Jesus said, "Can you give me your sins so I can erase them all?" Jerome literally wept and said, "Yes, Lord. I did not know that I could do that, but I give everything to you, as you gave everything of yours to me."

Yes, my Dear Sisters and Brothers, what Jesus wants us to give most is not our talents or our money, but our own sins so that God can erase our sinfulness. This Lent is inviting all of us to give our sinful nature so that God can fill us with his grace and erase all our iniquities and infirmities. Today, let us ask the Lord that as we travel in the desert we can keep our focus on the journey towards God. We face many temptations because of the forces of evil. But we have help in resisting all these temptations through the ministering of angels. Let us look to the angels who are with us day and night fighting the devil and safeguarding us. Let us give ourselves to the protection of these ministering angels so we can reach the destination of God in our lives. Amen