

1st Sunday of Lent “The Waters of Baptism and Spiritual Deserts”

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My friends, the readings for this first Sunday of Lent are very interesting. Our first reading reminded us of Noah and the great flood. St. Peter tells us in our second reading that this great flood foreshadowed baptism, representing the flood of God’s grace washing away sins from the earth. And right after John the Baptist baptized Jesus in the Jordan, the Gospel starts in, “The Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert, and he remained there in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan.”

And this is very startling. It seems all rather counterintuitive. We would expect that, after something as wonderful as baptism, the Spirit would lead Jesus to the parish hall, for cake, punch and balloons. No, after Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan, the Gospel says, “The Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert to be tempted by Satan, for forty days”. No cake, no punch, no balloons! And we can relate to this can’t we? After every mountaintop we experience in life, a valley is sure to follow. And with all the violence in our world today, and all the temptations we struggle with, a reminder this week to work on personal holiness comes at a good time.

C.S. Lewis articulated how difficult this process can be in his book the Screwtape Letters. You have all read this by now right? The main character is a demon by the name of Screwtape who is writing to his demon nephew Wormwood about the joy of tripping up newly baptized Christians. I may have shared this with you before but it is worth repeating. This is a good warning for our catechumens preparing for baptism at Easter. However, it is also a good reminder for those of us who have been baptized and confirmed for some time to not grow slack. Screwtape encourages his nephew, and I quote, to “work hard on the disappointment or anticlimax which is certainly coming to the patient (the newly baptized) during his first few weeks as a churchman. The Enemy (he means God) allows this disappointment to occur on the threshold of every human endeavor. It occurs when the boy who has been enchanted in the nursery by stories from the Odyssey buckles down to really learning Greek. It occurs when lovers have got married and begin the real task of learning to live together. In every department of life it marks the transition from dreaming aspiration to laborious doing. The Enemy, (again, he means God), takes this risk because He has a curious fantasy of making all these disgusting human vermin into what He calls His ‘free’ lovers and servants...desiring their freedom, He therefore refuses to carry them...Here lies our opportunity”, my dear nephew, and so forth.

In this chapter of the Screwtape Letters, C.S. Lewis puts forth this interesting explanation for why God allows us to experience hardships and spiritual dryness in life, even though we have been baptized into God’s grace. God wants us to learn how to love. We cannot love unless we have the freedom to choose this or otherwise. Our love cannot be tested unless there is hardship. Thus, Jesus is led into the desert...and so are we.

Do you know who probably understands this better than most? Athletes. Have any of you watched any of the Olympics this year? Athletes are really something to watch, aren't they? They are so on top of their game that they sometimes make their sport look easy. On the other hand, if I were to attempt figure skating, I imagine I would be in the hospital shortly thereafter. At my best, I probably would look like that Geico commercial of the Sumo wrestler on ice. Did you see that? I love watching athletes compete. The few minutes of glory these athletes experience in life are the result of years of blood, sweat and tears. I think being a real Christian is like that, except no matter how hard we work at it our reward cannot be earned. Eternal life is a gift, not a prize. But our souls must be in shape to receive this gift. So, therefore, we must work at it and it isn't easy.

After his baptism in the Jordan, Jesus wasn't led into a banquet. He was led into the desert, a place of dryness, a place of work, a place of hunger and thirst, a place of temptation. And so, as disciples, we have been led into the desert, a desert called Lent. Lent is a training ground, a place of purification and enlightenment, a place where we make Lenten promises to give up a vice or take on a virtue, a place where we will be tempted to give up on our Lenten promises at every turn, and a place where Screwtop and Wormwood will give us all kinds of reasonable excuses to fall down on our faces. Lent is also a place where we practice penances, where we pray even in the dryness, and where we care for the poor through our almsgiving and so forth. It is a place where our spiritual muscles get flexed and strengthened, where we strengthen our will, where we are challenged to stare down the violence and hate in this world with the love Jesus calls us to. Yes, my friends, during Lent we must work on loving God and our neighbor with ever greater intensity regardless of what the world throws at us. This activity, of choosing to be more loving, prepares us for everlasting life with God because God is love.

Like our readings this Sunday suggest, this journey begins with our baptism. Once we get past Lent, on Easter Vigil we will be welcoming new Christians into our community at our font. After our time in the desert, we will be renewing our baptismal promises as well at all the Easter masses. And so, it is fitting that we hear St. Peter this weekend remind us of the importance of living our baptism well. It is also fitting to hear Jesus challenging us to change our current way of thinking if necessary, to repent and believe in the Gospel.

Yes, my friends, we have entered into the sacred training ground of Lent. On this first Sunday, I think it is good to be reminded that this season isn't just about hiding the candy, dropping change into paper boxes, and loading up the freezer with fish sticks, as wonderful as these things are. More than that, Lent is a time to get spiritually serious, to pick up our cross whatever it is and follow Jesus into the desert. Like Jesus, we will be tempted along the way. With Jesus, is our hope for salvation!