

[Readings: Genesis 9:8-15; Psalm 25; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:12 -15]

How many of you remember the Great American Blackout that happened in one third of our nation from August 14-15, 2003? As it got close to sunset, I was looking forward to the peace and quiet of no blaring TV sets and no booming music coming from my neighbor's house. As it got darker, I was able to see constellations in the dark sky that I had never seen before. The only problem was when I had to get ready for bed by candlelight when it got dark in the house, it got really dark, didn't it? Welcome to the desert. At night, dark, quiet, scary. And during the day, relentless sunlight and relentless heat. Alone with yourself.

Maybe that is why we are scared to get deeper into ourselves during Lent. The first reason may be because we will expose things about ourselves that we don't want to see or won't like. The second reason is that we might discover Jesus Christ in the desert, and that might mean we have to change certain things about ourselves and certain ways of thinking about Him.

We are told that Jesus was led into the desert by the Spirit. The desert IS a dangerous place. Not only because of vagabond robbers, but wild animals. And the Jews believed that the Devil Himself lived there to tempt us. During one of their ceremonies, people would confess their sins as a group, and then lay hand on a goat and shoo him into the desert. That's where we get the term "scapegoat." The goat escapes into the desert. We lay blame on another who may be totally innocent of our crime. Yet angels are also found there, to minister to us in our need, and to get us ready to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom.

There is one phrase in the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father, which some Catholics ask me about: "And lead us not into temptation." Does God lead us into temptation? Why in the world would God do that? A theologian and a linguist named Louis Evely has described the English translation of this phrase from the original Aramaic or Greek as "really blasphemous... As if God could wish to lead us to do evil." Evely suggests this as a better translation: "Do not let us give way or give in to that which will lead us away from You." But even that suggests that we put the blame on God when we are tempted and still sin.

So, how do we, like Jesus, when faced with the wild animals of temptation and surrounded by the waiting angels of virtue, respond faithfully?

Another writer, Peter Gomes, suggests in his book, *The Good Book*, that we can do four different things when tempted to go off the diet, cheat on our spouse, lie with our finances, spread gossip or be irresponsible in our conduct.

First, name the temptation. Be morally explicit and identify the particular evil by name, rather than by generalities. Naming the evil sharpens our focus and our attempt to fix the situation.

Second, name the tempter. This unmask any delusion we may try to hide behind and deflates our temptation to rationalize it. Sin is sin. And this is the cause of that sin. These are the particular circumstances.

Third, practice resistance. It takes the discipline of identifying the "near occasions of sin." Remember those? It means don't place ourselves in situations when we would most likely give in. Stay away from sinful places. To use a phrase, "Don't go there!"

Fourth, call for help. Call a trustworthy friend or family member. Call on God. Find a mentor who can get you through the rough times. One spiritual director once said to me: "Would you go there if you were wearing your priest's collar? Would you say that or do that if your mother was in the room with you? Does your mother know what you're doing???" YIKES!!!

Look upon moments of temptation as a time and a place in which to meet and to lean on God. In that encounter and in our reliance on grace, our struggle is blessed. Jesus emerged from His struggle with temptation closer to His Father and stronger for the mission for which He was sent. What doesn't kill us makes us stronger. Isn't that how the expression goes?

In other words, NAME IT, BLAME IT, TAME IT, RECLAIM IT!

In our Second Reading, St. Peter reminds us that Jesus suffered at the hands of evil and unrighteous people. But His death was not the end of His ministry. Jesus rose victorious from the dead and went on to preach "to the spirits in prison." Where exactly was this?

This is another phrase mentioned to me by some confused Catholics.

If Hell is a place of eternal punishment and condemnation, why did Jesus “descend into Hell” as we profess in the Apostles’ Creed? Jesus doesn’t go to that “hellish” place. He goes to the place called “Hades” in Greek or “Sheol” in Hebrew. This is the place where, according to sacred tradition and the teaching of the Church, the souls of all who died before the death of Jesus were waiting His arrival. A “passenger terminal” of sorts where they stood and waited for their Loved One to disembark and set them free.

Jesus delivers all the souls of the just in Hades or Sheol to bring them, if they are worthy, to life eternal in Heaven. The others may have to wait a while until they are made perfect and are fully prepared to see God face to face. We call this “place” or state of existence, “Purgatory.” This phrase retains a curious uncertainty about the effect that Christ’s saving death had on all who lived before and all who live after Jesus returns to the Father in Heaven.

St. Peter also mentions that the waters of baptism not only wash us clean on the outside, but washes us clean on the inside and makes us worthy of Heaven through the compassionate mercy and grace of God. This hope encourages us to faithful discipleship while we are still on this earth.

While we are still on earth, God gives us a continuous sign of His covenant love for us: the rainbow. Usually, the rainbow we see is only a small segment of an arc. But if you have ever seen a rainbow from a plane or from a high mountain, the rainbow changes its shape from an arc to a full circle. [I didn't know that.] In other words, we only have an incomplete idea of how beautiful God’s loyalty is to us. The circle from ancient times until now is seen as a sign of perfection and completeness. A figure without a beginning or an end. That is why rings are exchanged between a husband and wife, not only as a sign of their love for each other, but as a reminder of God’s love for His people, the Church.

So the next time you are tempted to doubt that love of God, look at the rainbow. Look at the ring that is already on your finger. And remember Who really put it there. Let that divine assurance carry us through this Lent. AMEN!