

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

In the movie musical, "The Wizard of Oz," – one of my all-time favorites -- Dorothy singing "Over the Rainbow" to Toto remains one of the most magical moments recorded on film. It touches something deep within many people's hearts. In many ways, the only thing more delicate than the colors of a rainbow in the still-glistening sky, its darkness being overcome by the bright light of the sun, is the look on a child's face when he or she sees a rainbow for the first time. What is it about a rainbow that is so special for young and old alike?

How do we reconcile our beginning of this season of Lent -- what is supposed to be an austere time of introspection, repentance, penance, and forgiveness -- with the bright image of the rainbow?

It is most unlikely for Jesus to see a rainbow as he prays in the desert. Like Jesus, our 40 days in the Lenten desert will be filled with temptations and wild beasts bent on drawing us away from the task of reconnecting ourselves with God. God promises that God's loving presence will always be with us. God makes a covenant with us, and the rainbow is a sign of that promise. But when we go searching for rainbows, we seldom find them. They seem, rather, to find us, to appear when we least expect them to. This Lent, perhaps it would be better not to spend our time in the desert scanning the horizon. We might be looking in vain for what is already present in our own hearts.

Another dreadful mass shooting took place in our country. And it led to the usual responses: condolences and prayers, calls for gun control, stiffer qualifications and limitations on the purchase and kinds of firearms. I am a firm believer that whatever tragic evil befalls us – as a nation, as a state, as a city, as a parish and as individuals – God will bring about a greater good for us. Archbishop Allen Vigneron has often said that there is no death from which Resurrection cannot come forth. There is never a Good Friday without an Easter Sunday. This is the rainbow that breaks through the storm clouds after a rain. If anything marks us uniquely as Christian believers, it is our faith, it is our hope.

It is our loving acts of Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy – being Christ for others. We will do this this week as we host the Warming Center.

A “friend of a friend of mine” is a Trappistine nun who spends a good part of each day in silent prayer. She once told her friend that the hardest adjustment she faced when entering the monastery was not the serene quiet of the monastery, but realizing how much “noise” was going on inside her heart and head – especially at times of silent prayer. That was helpful to hear.

I thought it was just I who had such a difficult time quieting down for prayer. When I set aside time for quiet prayer, my brain quickly generates thoughts and fears, desires and anxieties, inner turmoil and random troubling emotions, and all that bad news on the television. Plus today’s and tomorrow’s work. Maybe that’s what Jesus experienced when He went out into the desert. Today’s Gospel tells how He went out into the desert and dealt with bad news as if He were encountering wild beasts.

Because He was like us in all things but sin, those wild beasts might simply have been the very human array of wild emotions, notions, and passions rolling around within Him. The Good News is that the Gospel says He was also ministered to by angels. The same can be true for us. This Lent, as you take up new practices of prayer, don’t be discouraged if the first thing you find in the silence is a noisy self. Continue patiently, trusting that you will, in due time, encounter the angels of peace, serenity, surrender, and love to comfort you and guide you past the wild beasts and into the presence of God.

This is God's purpose in times of testing, to help us grow and to show us that we have the faith and ability to stand up to the testing so that we will trust God in difficult times -- to strengthen our faith and Christian character. At the same time, Satan has his own purpose -- to turn those being tested away from God -- to "tempt" them to sin. Jesus has opened and made available the very life of God. All people have to do, then, is open themselves to Jesus and follow His way of prayer to prepare, to fortitude in the desert, to love when asked to be faithful, and to service when challenged to put that faith into practice. AMEN!