

Homily St Pius–St Anthony 1st Sunday Year B

I'm sure you have heard me say it, but Mark is the shortest gospel. Which by the way, that would be a great Lenten project: read all through his gospel a little bit a day, there is sixteen chapters, so break it down into two chapters a week and that will get you to the last four chapters by Holy Week, which works perfectly because then you can read the last four chapters which record the final events of Jesus life in Holy Week day by day—interesting 1/4 of Mark's gospel is just the last week of Jesus' life!).

Mark is brief. He gets to the point. We see it today in the story of the temptations of Jesus in the desert. Mark gives two verses (12-13) to it. In our minds, I imagine we run the whole movie version though, see the high stakes conversation between the devil and Jesus (something like the old Charlie Daniels song devil jumped up on hickory stump...), they go back and forth about stones to bread, throw yourself off the Temple steeple, bowing down and worship. But for all of those details you have to go to Luke and Matthew. Mark just says here 1) Jesus went to the Desert, 2) he was tempted 3) and ministering angels helped. I think we can draw a lot out of these two simple verses for ourselves moving into this season of change and conversion.

This is Lent. 1) Going to the Desert, 2) Temptations are there 3) Yet so are angel-helpers

First, we are going into the desert. We have to ask, "How are we creating that in our lives? What kind of desert have we entered so far?" well, let's start with what the desert is supposed to be like? What does going into the desert even mean? Well, it is getting away from the chaos and hustle of cities and crowds. It is divesting ourselves of diversions that keep our souls asleep or unaware. Our checklist for going into the desert is not one of packing more and more (what do I need), but more about unpacking (take along only what is necessary-What is in my way of growing closer to Jesus?) Turning off distractions and keeping close to just what, is most important and truly needed? We carry into the desert only what is needed-desert is no place for luxury baggage I learned this back in 1993, when St John Paul II came to Denver Colorado for World Youth Day. For the final day closing mass, we (all half million young people were bussed in the night before- to take our place in marked off areas to wait for his mass and message the next day). First lesson for me was that Cherry Creek State park was not a park in the way I thought of park. It was just a huge open range with mountains in the background. A kid taught me this, as we were hiking in, we all had our back packs, bags, shoulder slings-fanny packs (all necessities, of course), and as they were getting tired a child stopped, bent over-hands on knees to take a breath, and he got all loud, "I knew it, I knew it, what are we doing here in this desert- he caught sight of a trampled down cactus plant on the ground, and had to show it to everybody- a cactus in wild was proof we were in the

desert. Yes, it was desert like isolation. But the better lesson came as we were leaving the park the next day, and the kids dead tired- half million kids in outdoor auditorium- how much sleep do you think they got? But as we were walking out somehow the packs all got **too heavy for them** to carry on, so we adults all looked like camels with saddle bags (every free appendage that you could hook a strap in was hauling a pack, sleeping bag or whatever couldn't be left behind). The lesson for us: only take into the desert what you have to use, have to have to live on. The same goes for us moving into Lent. We have to trim down what is not needed. Take stock & return to the basics. Simplify! We have to ask "What do we have to have?", and then hang on to it, but what complicates our lives, we have to let it go.

A second point from Mark's gospel is that we are going to be tempted. How does that go? Devil tell us like a good advertiser, 'Oh you really do need this'. Watch for that little tempting voice, "Are you sure you can get by without a full 5 hours a day facebook; or 3 hours video games or unlimited Netflix, Hulu, peacock or amazon streaming..... ?" That is temptation to keep you hooked into their entertaining escape services, and not spending the quiet time (your desert) with God in Prayer that Lent is supposed to be. Before we can **turn on** the transformative power of grace we have to **turn off** the deceptive signals or distracting noise of devices-whatever they are. So we will be tempted to not unplug- But Lent is **change** in our life. And what change is easy? There is so much out there that will work against any of us changing for the better.

And thirdly, remember that we have help. Mark tells us that ministering angels were in the desert too. We are not alone. The heavy lift of spiritual conversion is not achieved all by ourselves alone. Keep in mind too, that we heard the Spirit Himself led Jesus into the desert for Jesus' deeper communion with Father's will & mission. So, there are helpers along the way. Think of the mutual encouragement, we all gain from helpers, like sponsors in 12 step groups, church community families, weight watcher coaches or nutri-system buddies (tops), Peloton Teams, walking partners or any advocates that coach us to better life practices. So, God provides the grace along the way to sustain us in our resolve to make the hard decisions and follow through letting go of the unnecessary attachments that prevent us from growing stronger faith and increasing holiness. Verse 13 called them 'ministering angels'. The angels help us. God's grace will strengthen us to hear more clearly his voice as we turn off and tune out all that would keep us superficially distracted. The Desert lets us strengthen inner life, increase our spiritual and resilient resources, tap into creative life giving graces that let us draw closer to God and keep greater faith with him, grow

in relationship to Him. A lot is out there that doesn't want us to accomplish a stronger personal relationship God, so count on temptations to ignore or not take Lent seriously. But we start by finding that quiet and still place (desert) that we commit to visit every one of our forty days of Lent, to turn off noise, and listen to God's voice (and talk to those ministering angel helpers he sends to us) so we can die or let go of what holds us back and then we can rise with Christ to new life with him come Easter.