

Year A: Lent 1b Gen 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Ps 32; Rom 5:12-19; Mt 4:1-11
St. Barnabas, Florissant: March 01, 2020

I offer these thoughts in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.....

This past Wednesday was Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the forty days of Lent, that season of repentance and preparation for Holy Week and Easter. In much earlier times in church history, those forty days were a period of intense preparation specifically for new converts to get ready to receive the Sacrament of Baptism at the Great Vigil of Easter. In addition, it was a time for those “who, because of notorious sins [as our *Prayer Book* puts it] had become separated from the body of the faithful were reconciled by penitence and forgiveness and restored to the fellowship of the Church.” Similarly, their “restoration” was also accomplished at the Great Vigil of Easter, and those notorious sinners were again admitted to the Sacraments.

As time went on, this Lenten period of preparation was extended to all the faithful, and it was a time to put each of us in mind of the message of pardon and absolution set forth in the Gospel.

Of course, we can be sure that all of us Christians continually have need to renew our repentance and faith, and Lent is a great time to focus on this.

If you happened to come to church on Ash Wednesday, you would have received a cross of ashes on your forehead at that service. Those ashes are a contemporary version of the ancient practice of repenting and sitting “in sackcloth and ashes.” The message we received along with those ashes was “Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return.”

If we add more contemporary practices to this historical list --- practices such as abstaining from meat on Lenten Fridays, giving up treats such as candy, alcohol, or desserts --- Lent becomes a pretty dismal time of the year. Apparently, some Internet contributor with a sense of humor allegedly commented, "I hope your Ash Wednesday isn't ruined by being reminded you're going to die."

And those downer Scripture readings that we get during Lent: they're all about sin, and judgment, and temptation, and death. Hardly the stuff of rejoicing. And you might have noticed that the church even makes us give up shouting ALLELUIA during these forth days.

In any case, my own past experience, and maybe yours as well, has frequently been to dread the coming of Lent and to endure it with the hope that it will pass quickly, and we can get on with Easter.

PAUSE

With all that as introduction, it will probably come as a surprise for you to learn that, this year, I am happy to see Lent come, and I look forward to these forty days as a time of joyful *renewal* in my life. And I hope that I can influence your attitude as well.

PAUSE

I've often preached on the Gospel for this First Sunday in Lent. Each year in our three-year lectionary cycle, we have some version of the Temptation story. Jesus is led (or "driven" as Mark puts it) into the wilderness by the Spirit to endure forty days and nights of fasting and prayer, and to be tempted by the devil. There's lots of meat and substance in this story, too, from the fact that this forty-day ordeal occurred immediately after Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River where he's dramatically assured that he is the beloved Son of God, and that God is well pleased with Jesus, to the fact that the three temptations recounted in the story seem to be intimately related to the temptations we all encounter in our ongoing lives as human beings.

But, this year, while reading and reflecting on today's Scripture readings, I was particularly struck by the Psalm, Psalm 32 if you recall.

What really came home to me were the words in verses 3 through 6: "While I held my tongue, my bones withered away, because of my groaning all day long. For your hand was heavy upon me day and night; my moisture was dried up as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and did not conceal my guilt. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.' Then you forgave me the guilt of my sin."

PAUSE

Maybe it's going on in your life right now. Or, if not, maybe you can remember the experience of living with some secret guilt. You try to make everything look just perfect on the outside; but the guilt, some secret transgression you're hiding, is gnawing away at your insides. You even hold your tongue from God, not admitting any guilt.

Of course, you feel like your bones are withering away, or that your freshness and moisture is dried up in summer heat.

I vividly remember a movie that came out back in 1986, called *THE MISSION*. It tells the story of some 18th-century Spanish Jesuit missionaries to the Amazon Indians of South America. At the very beginning of the movie, a small group of these Jesuits are scaling an incredibly high waterfall in order to reach a particular tribe of Indians. In this group, there is a former mercenary soldier and slave trader, played by Robert de Niro, who is carrying a heavy bag containing his armor and sword. That bag, which weighs him down mercilessly, is finally cut loose by the Indians and plunges down the mountainside. De Niro is finally freed symbolically and literally from his past and is able to begin a new life as a Jesuit himself.

What is so compelling about this imagery is that many of us go through our lives weighed down by some huge bag of guilt and sin. We feel compelled to hang on to that bag because letting go of it would involve admitting our sin and guilt to God, and maybe even to fellow human beings. It would involve giving up what little control we seem to have over our lives. And that's simply too scary even to imagine.

PAUSE

Lent gives each of us time and opportunity to take a fresh look at those bags which maybe weigh us down, and which we've possibly even forgotten we're lugging around everywhere with us. Lent gives us the opportunity to "look ourselves in the face", admit our shortcomings, forgive ourselves, and accept the freeing forgiveness of God. As the Psalmist puts it at the beginning of Psalm 32: "Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven, and whose sin is put away! Happy are they to whom the LORD imputes no guilt, and in whose spirit there is no guile!"

Like De Niro in *THE MISSION*, we can let go of that big heavy bag and be free at last. And that really IS a wonderful experience.

PAUSE

What Lent should really be about is not discipline, or giving up this or taking on that; it should be about surrender, about giving up resistance "to the One who loves me infinitely more than I can guess, the One who is more on my side than I am myself."

What we're really called to give up in Lent is control itself! Letting go of that control to God is what leads us to the freedom which Jesus attained through surrender to the Spirit, and which he promises to give to each of us: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." (2Cor 3:17)

So, sisters and brothers, this year, let's be glad that it's Lent. Let's not be depressed or feel dismal. It's time to let go of some burdens we might be carrying with us, and to rejoice in the love of God, who just can't wait to forgive us and put away our sin forever!

AMEN.