

Lent

c-b-1st Sunday of Lent Feb 18 2018

When my nieces and nephews were younger

one of their favorite past times was beating up Uncle Jim.

Very soon after I entered the house we would get into a friendly wrestling match.

I loved those moments when I was taking on six or eight of my nieces and nephews
all at the same time.

Eventually our tussling matches would reach near pandemonium.

When this happened, my brother or sister would say, "Okay that's enough."

More often than not they would have to say it three or four times.

After we finally heard it, we would slow down and stop. We would take a time out.

This time out served a number of purposes.

Number one, it allowed my brothers and sisters nerves to settle down,
they needed it, after near pandemonium had just erupted.

Two, it allowed me to regain my energy.

It was tiring, especially when my nieces and nephews got bigger.

But most importantly it allowed, my nieces and nephews and myself,
time to reflect on our relationship.

When we give our children a time out,

it is often because they went through a time when they lost control of their emotions.

The time out, is not so much a time of punishment,

As it is a time to reflect on their relationship to the rest of the family,
and the need to treat everyone with respect.

Parents send their children to their rooms and tell them,

"You can come out of your room, when you have thought about what you have done,
and you are ready to treat everyone with respect."

Children need a time out

because they do not realize that their misbehavior is a result of frustration or excitement.

They may not know how to deal with a situation.

They may not be able to control their emotions,

They may not realize how their behavior affects others.

They need a time out to reflect on their actions.

Lent serves the same purpose. Lent is a spiritual time out,

when we go into the desert and think about what we have done,

and how we have or have not treated everyone with respect.

The forty days of lent are not an arbitrary number.

Numbers in the Bible have a specific meaning...40 being one of the most symbolic.

It rained for 40 days and 40 nights.

The Hebrews wandered in the desert for 40 years.

Moses was up on the mountain for 40 days.

Today we read that Jesus was tempted in the desert for forty days.

The symbolism of 40 has multiple meanings.

On one level, it represents an extended period of time.

On another level there is an understanding that in this longer extended period,
the individual or group will experience a time of struggle, and testing.

And in this time of struggling and testing
the individual or group undergoes a purification,
which always leads to action.

Action which includes both God's action, and the action of the group or individual.

After the flood in Genesis, God makes a new covenant...with all living creatures

After Moses converses with God, the covenant is renewed.

After Israel's wandering in the wilderness, they will enter into the Promised Land.

After Elijah's journey, God strengthens him to resume his prophetic ministry.

After Jesus' temptation, he begins his public ministry.

After the Ascension, which is 40 days after the resurrection, we enter the age of the Church.

Just as the longer extended period of time is symbolic,
the place where the 40 days/years are spent is also symbolic.

More often than not the individual or group spends the 40 days/years in the wilderness, or desert.

The desert is a place of no water, no food, and little vegetation.

It is where dangerous animals live.

Ultimately the desert is a place of extremes, where survival depends on making the right choices.

Choosing God will lead to life. Not choosing God will result in death.

While in the desert.

People usually experience two types of temptations.

The first temptation is to simply stop the journey, to settle down and say,

"That's enough! Let's stay here.

We will see this next week when we will read the gospel of the Transfiguration.

At that time Peter said, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here, we will make three tents...

so that we can stay. Peter does want to go.

While in the desert...while in Lent...we do experience God, and it is an awesome experience

and this is a good thing, but we cannot stay there forever,

we cannot forget that our experience in the desert prepares us for a task.

The second temptation is probably more common.

You hear it about three days after someone has given up coffee. They begin to complain.

Remember the Hebrews in the desert.

Just after Moses had saved them from harsh oppression; what did they say,

"Why did you bring us out of Egypt?" (Ex 14:11).

These complaints are not directed at stopping the desert experience, so they can stay there.

The complaints are directed at going back to the way things were.

Even after the Hebrew people had experienced God's awesome signs and wonders in the desert.

They wanted to go back to Egypt! They wanted to go back to the ways things were.

This nostalgic view of the past is very attractive.

You know what you are dealing with.

When Albert LeGatt was a priest in our diocese, he was fond of saying,

We would rather live with the demons we know, than the angels we do not know!

Our view of the past...is often dependant on selective amnesia.

We remember the good things.

But if after 40 days of Lent nothing changes and we just go back to the way things were,
then our time spent in the desert will have been an exercise in futility.

We do need to remember the past,
but we need remember the past in such a way that we bring the past into the present,
in order to move into the future.

We cannot allow ourselves to go back, to go back to the past and avoid the future.

You would think that once through the desert it would be clear sailing.

Unfortunately when we survive the trials in the desert we experience a third temptation.

History has shown when people are freed from oppression,
they quickly become oppressors in turn.

The victims of today become the oppressors of tomorrow.

Talk to someone who has quit smoking, they look harshly upon anyone who smokes.

It is sometimes difficult to talk to an “Enlightened Christian”

because they know exactly what God wants.

If the Hebrew people went directly from oppression in Egypt to power in the Promised Land
they would very quickly mirror the oppression of the Egyptians.

Instead they go into the desert for a longer, extended period of time—a time out.

A time of purification, where they are transformed. They become the “Chosen People.”

For us, lent must be a time of purification,

when we receive grace from God and allow ourselves to be transformed.

So that when we exit the desert, we are ready to act in a God-like manner.

The end result of our forty day journey, should be some type of change

One in which we exercise our faith in a new and different way...and intentional way.

Our diocese is striving to make all parishioners “Intentional Disciples.”

It is no accident that as we continue our pilgrimage

we are reminded of the first message that Jesus preached.

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near;

repent and believe in the Good News.”

In the first reading we hear the story of the covenant that God made,
not with humanity, but with all living creatures.

Over time, through Abraham, Moses and eventually Jesus,

God has expanded and deepened this covenant.

For our part we think that it is too good to be true.

But that is the wonder of God. He is not too good to be true.

However, from time to time we need time out

to reflect on what aspects of the Good News are of divine origin,

and what are false notions of the Good News, that are of human origin,

that we have allowed to creep into our faith.

My friends, we have entered Lent, we have entered into our spiritual deserts.

In this “time out” let us seek to purify ourselves,

let us seek out to be transformed by God,

so that at the end of the forty days we may be prepared to do God’s will.