

Church of the Good Shepherd and St. John the Evangelist

1 Lent
February 25, 2007
Fr. Bill McGinty

“Under the Stars!”

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. Our journey to Calvary and the cross has begun. The church has very fixed instructions how we should spend the Lenten season. It is a time of repentance when we distance ourselves from the materialism of the world and reflect on our own eternal salvation and how we are responding to the teaching of Christ in our life.

Today in the Epistle, St Paul tells the Romans that there are two things necessary for salvation. First, to hear God’s word and believe, and second to take that faith and proclaim it to others.

I listened to a radio program this week, where the lady preacher had one message to proclaim about salvation. She said: “Salvation is not possible unless you have a personal relationship with God.”

By that, she meant that you can believe all you want, and have the greatest knowledge of your faith, but it benefits you little unless you take the time to speak with God and listen to him speaking to you.

This makes us all pause to think: “When do I really speak to God and hear him speak to me?” We already know how and where we speak to God collectively. That is we build and come to churches, but sometimes dialoguing with God as opposed to prayer, praise or worship, we stop short of. When we try to ask ourselves why, the answer normally arrives as one word: “fear.”

We are afraid because our very humanity and sinfulness makes us unworthy to be that close to our almighty God. As we read last week we cannot ‘lift the veil’ and look God in the face.

Over the years I have asked any number of people about their closest encounters with God and it always amazes me at how similar their replies are.

Margaret Higgins told me that she was in the kitchen one morning baking bread alone and deep in thought. She had an overwhelming feeling of God’s presence. She felt a peace and great kindness envelope her. Every thing she ever wanted to say to God she said in an instance and she felt that all her questions, all her concerns were resolved in that moment too. She found that she had to sit down, unsure whether she was laughing or crying, but knowing that she was experiencing great joy. She eventually looked at a clock and was surprised that two hours had gone by. She felt forced to pick up her Bible and read. The words seem to speak to her as never before. Pain that she had over the death of her son Chris, some years previous had gone. From that day on she sought out moments in her life

The Rev. William J. McGinty, Rector
110 West Catharine Street, Milford, Pennsylvania 18337
Phone: (570) 296-8123 ♦ Fax: (570) 296-4383

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to be alone. She made a space to read from the scripture or the psalms, then sat quietly and invited God in.

You may well wonder if this was what Jesus was doing in today's Gospel, when he allowed himself to be led by the Spirit out into the desert to the hill country on the other side of the Jordan?

Charles DeFaux, the 20th century monk and mystic who spent so much of his life as a hermit in the Sahara Desert says: "The beauty of the desert lies in its solitude. There lying alone beneath the stars, you become aware of your insignificance in the Universe, but your significance under the gaze of a God that loves you."

Jesus goes out into the desert after his Baptism to be alone with his Father.

If you read the Gospels often enough you will know that there is nothing that Jesus does in his life from birth to death which is not laid out as a blueprint and model for us to follow. This story of the Temptations in the desert is no exception. It is a story that we need to dissect and take on board because it applies more to each individual one of us than it does to him.

Imagine ourselves this morning in Christ's place; so alone in the vastness of the desert that we cannot avoid that face to face encounter with God as our Father. Nor could we avoid encountering our own faults, frailties and inadequacies. Yet, our experience would surely be, not one of fear or reprehension, but one of love, forgiveness and affection because that is the nature of our God.

Too often, faced with a difficulty or the pain of loss or something we can't cope with, we turn to God looking for a miracle, looking for him to take the pain away. We ask him to turn stones into bread.

"Why does God allow it?" we ask. "Why does God not deal with our pain?"

God doesn't turn stones into bread and he doesn't turn pain into joy. He allows us to experience that which is most human, he allows us to love so deeply and feel so painfully that outside it little else matters. Maybe it is then that we feel closest to our God.

Life takes us, from time to time, up on top of the mountain. We are tempted to think that we accomplished everything ourselves, but our worst temptation is in beginning to worship ourselves. We look at our achievements and the titles and honors we collected for ourselves and we decide that we deserve the Oscar. We forget about God's grace. We need to lie on the sands of the desert and look up at the stars and remember how insignificant we are with out the love of our God. It is God as Father that we serve and honor.

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And oh, that third temptation, putting our God to the test. Maybe we have that dialogue with ourselves all the time.

I don't have to do anything, just believe, God will protect me. He will not let me perish. As long as I say, I have faith and I believe I will be okay. Believe and I can forget about everything else and get on with the rest of life which I can sum up with my personal motto of three little words: "Make me happy!"

It is a temptation as bad as jumping off the top of the Empire State and expecting God to send an angel to save you.

Salvation is not a miracle. Salvation is a Covenant. It is a Covenant signed in a man's blood. We cannot take it for granted or disrespect it. A Covenant always has two parts and two signatures. We have signed that Covenant, we have witnessed that death. We have said in Baptism that we will be a living witness to this man's teachings. We will be God's children and fulfill all the obligations of children. We will enter into a loving relationship with our Father and it will be more important than any other facet of our life.

What does this tell us? It tells us that unless we have God's personal cell phone number piped into our phone, we should use the season of Lent to become better acquainted.

This Lent we need to go out into the desert and encounter our God. This Lent we need to strip ourselves of our masks and pretensions and come face to face with the one who really loves us.

This Lent we must stop putting God to the test by playing Russian roulette with our salvation and decide that God's way is better than our way.

I asked the Bishop two years ago what his minimum requirement for being an Episcopalian was. He replied: "Father", he always says that when he is being serious or telling you off. "I expect Episcopalians to be worshipping God in church each and every Sunday and I expect them to be listening and praying to God throughout the week."

Lent makes demands on all of us because like the desert it hits us where we live and it asks us.

How good a follower of Christ am I? Can I feel good about pausing and inviting my heavenly father into my life to talk? And will he be happy with what he finds? Lent allows us time and opportunity to clean house. Let us not waste the opportunity.

Amen+

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