

Church of the Good Shepherd
and
St. John the Evangelist

3 Lent
March 11, 2007
Fr. Bill McGinty

“Shuffling the Deck”

There is no story in the Old Testament quite as dramatic as the story of Moses and the Burning Bush. It is the first time that Moses encounters God.

It is a story that is full of symbolism. Moses is a shepherd like Able, Abraham and Jacob before him. He encounters God on a mountaintop in the wilderness. God appears to him as fire. In the story we are introduced to the idea of the holy, the idea that some things are so precious that they cannot be touched or contaminated by man.

It is now hard for us to listen to this story without hearing the booming voice of John Houston, as the quintessential voice of God.

In reality we know that it is more likely that God spoke to Moses in the quiet stillness of his heart. The solitude of the wilderness and the mountain, speaks to us of that kind of God-man encounter. It parallels Jesus' experience after his Baptism in the wilderness beyond the Jordan.

The writer holds his audiences attention with this dramatic image of the Burning Bush. It lives on in the imagination long after we have forgotten other details of the story.

Yahweh's promise to Moses of a land flowing with milk and honey becomes the vision for Israel's future which will carry her over many obstacles and years of trial.

Paul in the second reading warns the Corinthians that now that they have been baptized and accept Christ as their Savior, they cannot relapse back to a life of sin. He tells them that such a course leads to death and destruction, just like it did in Moses' day. Jesus too, in the Gospel, tells his followers to repent and not follow evil ways, but by their actions be bearers of good fruit and good works.

The three readings today should tell us something about our relationship with God. I think it is this. Salvation is not a passive activity. God does not just make a plan and then save us. Salvation, God's intervention in our lives, calls for a response. God's invitation to us invites us to participate in his plan of salvation. In other words, Paul and Christ in the Gospel are saying the same thing: Faith alone will not save us, but an active faith whereby we take up Jesus teachings and make them live, will.

Many of us in this church are at a very exciting time in our lives. It is exciting for several different reasons. First we can plainly see that we have many more years behind us than there are ahead of us. Very soon, we are going to encounter God on his Holy ground and he will ask us to give an account of our stewardship. The very thought of that turns me into

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a gambler. I want to shuffle the pack and go for broke. I want to say to myself: “Let’s take Christ at his word in the Gospel and really try to make it come alive in this place. Let’s feed the poor, care for the prisoner, protect the victim and make a difference in this community.”

It is also exciting because many of us who grew up in the church over the last 50 years spent most of the time being told what to do. We listened to our elders and did what we were told, even when we didn’t particularly agree with it. One of the great benefits of age is that at long last; our turn to determine the kind of church we would like comes around.

As a church and as a parish we become the fig tree in Jesus’ Gospel story. We can just exist and bear no fruit or we can decide that we are a seed that has to grow into the tree that feeds the entire community.

We are not just witness to the Gospel; we are the living Gospel in this place. We are not here to say: “We believe!” We are here to bring Jesus teaching into other people’s hearts by what we do. What we say and how we impact their lives.

The Gospel that we believe in can never be passive; it is a demanding motivator, it is a mandate that we must respond to.

“Respond” says Jesus in today’s Gospel, “or you might as well be cut down.”

Moses responds to God’s demands at the Burning Bush and the results are immediate and dramatic: Paul urges the Corinthians to reject their old ways and become a dynamic church by taking Jesus’ Gospel and making it their rule of life. Do not just say: “we believe” but rather live that belief in the everyday of your life.

In a real sense today’s readings bring us to the same encounter with God. We could just say: “we are okay. We are a true witness. What would we want to change?” Yet, none of us want to be the fig tree that bears no fruit. Maybe our response should be: “Let’s spin the wheel, shuffle the pack, let us take a chance and gamble on the Gospel.”

On September 9, 2007 we will begin a Parish project called: “Our True Story.” It will last for 6 weeks and involve many people in the parish. The object of the project is to “Recover our True Story,” of who we are, why we are here, why we were founded, when at times we lost our story and identity, and how our story and mission should develop in the future to give us a vision and purpose.

In the next week you will all receive an envelope with the Easter Pastoral letter, with it you will find a lavender colored survey of four to five questions asking you about your experiences of church. Please answer and return it. The responses will go to six discussion groups that will be held between September 9 and October 20. It will be their job to gather and evaluate, what we as a parish think our Mission is, and how we can start to plan and

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bring about the type of church many of us dream about. In these six weeks we will participate in 6 special liturgies that will celebrate who we are, seek healing and forgiveness for the times we have strayed from our true mission and story; and paint us towards a new mission for the future.

When the 6 weeks are up, a team will evaluate the project and produce a written Handbook called: "The Good Shepherd Wellness Manuel" a blueprint to guide us towards our vision for the future.

You have all heard the expression: "Life is not a rehearsal." Well, we find ourselves in a unique situation, we have the opportunity and the ability to create the sort of church and parish that responds to the Gospel in a unique way. Already we are beginning to seek unique opportunities for growth and development that were not there even a few years ago. In the last year a variety of organizations have requested that we become involved with projects such as Survivors Resources, children in needs, mothers groups, drugs anonymous and an extended prison ministry.

The needs of the Pike County community are growing to the extend that we cannot remain as we are; we need to reach out and help.

Many people have a problem with this. They point to their already heavily scheduled lives and say: "We barely get by right now. How would we possibly take on more?"

The answer is that as a church we need to work more with our sister churches in Milford and do for some our reach what we are already doing with the food Pantry.

Those who wish to participate will participate, and for those who cannot, there are other ways that you too can continue to lift up the life of the parish.

Around the parish we have people whose main contribution is that they pray. a phone call from me and Katie and Lucie call on any number to provide a chain of prayer day or night.

I have seniors who do repairs and others office work or cleaning. Making posters, designing flyers, visiting the sick, all show a willingness to respond to the Gospel and be that active vibrant church.

In our Eucharist today, let us raise our voices in praise and thanksgiving for the many good things that abound in the parish. Let us also pray that the Holy Spirit will continue to show us a vision for our future, responding to the Gospel.

Amen+

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