Sunday, February 22, 2015

Into the Desert

This Sunday’s Scripture Readings
1st Sunday of Lent
http://new.usccb.org/bible/readings/022215.cfm

Genesis 9:8-15
1 Peter 3:18-22
Mark 1:12-15

Trappist Monk Thomas Merton introduced us to the wisdom and beauty of Eastern religious traditions. As a spiritual master, Merton discovered that many eastern practices and ideologies could bring a breath of insight and wisdom to his own spiritual tradition. For those looking to take seriously this year’s Lenten journey, similar parallels and depth of awareness can be achieved. Matthieu Ricard, who had a promising career in biochemistry, left and journeyed to the Himalayas some forty-plus years ago. We can learn from each other’s journeys and realize that all serious seekers have similar goals.

Catholic spiritual tradition has always promoted experiences to the desert. The Desert Fathers and Mothers were individuals who physically removed themselves from the concerns of everyday life in order to seek the presence of God without distraction and noise. It was in the desert, stripped of all dependencies, where they discovered the truth of who they were and the God who sought them. Mark’s Gospel this weekend details how Jesus remained in the desert for forty days. Though tempted by Satan, we can assume that this desert experience was one of enlightenment, empowerment, and enrichment for Jesus who was more acutely able to learn the ways of God. He emerges after forty days with clarity of intent and purpose and proclaims: “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.” The desert clarified many
things for Jesus and gave him the orientation and direction he sought. In short, his awareness of things changed dramatically.

The Book of Genesis reminds us: “I will establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all bodily creatures be destroyed by the waters of a flood; there shall not be another flood to devastate the earth.” God’s covenant is with all living creatures and with creation itself not just with a select few who may be deemed worthy or good. In fact, God’s loving, compassionate, and all-merciful bond with all human beings and with all of creation is permanent, regardless of individual or corporate disposition. As Christians, we believe in this personal, loving God who has an intimate connection and relationship with everyone and everything he has made. Our task, highlighted once again this Lenten season, is to learn to recognize this presence of God in our daily lives and thus experience this love of God.

Increasing awareness and mindfulness of things is a goal of many traditions. Our Christian tradition brings us to the gift of contemplation as a way of increasing our awareness and mindfulness of God and the abounding fullness of his presence in and through all that is in and around us. It is this contemplative experience that is sought by our psalmist when he petitions: “Your ways, O LORD, make known to me; teach me your paths, Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my savior.”

Relationships always involve growing pains. They often consist of unequal doses of clarity and confusion, focus and ambiguity, certainty and doubt, presence and absence, connection and disconnection, joy and agony, satisfaction and fulfillment and distance and despair. When we feel close to the one we love, we can carry on with playful abandon and when we experience detachment or separation we can actually experience apprehension, anxiety, and dread. There is no difference in our relationship with God.

It is no wonder that our legendary spiritual ancestors and masters spoke of darkness in the quests for God. St. John of the Cross, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, and Mother Theresa of Calcutta all spoke of an agony or darkness that prevailed in their relationship with God. Hence, we are called again this year to take that sometimes lonely journey into the desert, into the unknown. It is there that we accept that very challenging task of learning about ourselves, our relationship with the world, and more importantly our relationship with our covenant God. As the Letter to St. Peter reminds us, “Christ suffered for sins once ... that he might lead you to God.” It is Christ who reveals to us the real face of God. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, our awareness of God’s presence can be intensified and the way we think and perceive life purified. We certainly do not need as much as we think we do and in the end, less is really more. In the desert we can see things more clearly, recognize our emptiness, take stock of our sinfulness, and learn again what it really means to repent and believe.

It is not the stuff around us that defines us but what we discover within and what we accumulate as we embark upon our true vocation, which is love. These lessons of the heart are what make life worth living and give us the passion to stay on course, committed to the Gospel.

Rev. Mark Suslenko

PRAYER

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you and I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road although I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear for you are every with me and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen.
—Prayer by Thomas Merton, OCSO

NOTICES

LENT AND CRS RICE BOWL
Lent begins on Wednesday, February 18, and Catholic Relief Services is again offering their successful Lenten action program, CRS Rice Bowl, to parishes. If you haven’t yet ordered your supplies, or if you want to find out the very latest on the great resources available, visit: www.CRSricebowl.org/. Bulletin resources for CRS Rice Bowl are also available on the LPi Art & Media Portal at www.Portal.4LPi.com; search keyword “Rice Bowl.”

LENTEN RESOURCES FOR PARISHES AND INDIVIDUALS
The USCCB offers special resources for Lent on its website at: http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/liturgical-year/lent/index.cfm. From there you can download the pastoral letter on the sacrament of penance, “God’s Gift of Forgiveness,” as well as other great resources.

COLLECTION FOR THE CHURCH IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE
Many dioceses will take up the collection for the Church in Central and Eastern Europe on Ash Wednesday, February 18. For more information on this collection, and for parish resources to help promote it, visit: http://usccb.org/catholic-giving/opportunities-for-giving/central-and-eastern-europe/collection/index.cfm.

LENTEN COVERS FOR LPi PRINTING PARTNERS
LPi has created an exclusive series of bulletin covers for the Lenten season and Easter. The covers are available to LPi printing partners at no cost on our Art & Media Portal; just search keyword “Lent 2015”. The cover set is also available for purchase here.