

Readings

Gn 2:7-9; 3:1-7

Ps 51:3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 17

Rom 5:12-19 or Rom 5:12, 17-19

Mt 4:1-11

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Lent is most truly a journey of the soul. The richness of the liturgical experience as well as the continual call to turn within, is a challenging expectation, but is truly at the source of everything that matters. Augustine describes that in his *Confessions* as he calls out to God “Our heart is restless until it rests in you.”

More often than not, what we are hoping for in Lent is a deeper understanding of the real presence of God in the sacraments, in the Church, and most significantly, within our very selves. The indwelling of God is a vital and dynamic spiritual reality within our faith that serves as an intimate guide for life from conception through to death. God remains with us always, even when we depart from God. His Spirit planted within our soul is a Divine compass leading us deeper and deeper into the things of heaven so we might find the meaning and purpose we all long for. An earnest and intentional Lent can potentially support an interior journey towards God if we have the courage to begin to imagine what parts of ourselves need change so we can follow God’s work and remain in God’s plan, rather than our own ambition.

Once again, the wisdom of Saint Augustine comes out to meet us as we scramble to figure out how all of this divine grace can be accomplished: “I was always looking outside while all the while you were waiting for me within.” This is the Augustinian language for the soul in

the sense that the soul is planted within, thus it is in that part of ourselves where God dwells within. There is a depth here that sounds complicated and difficult to follow. When we simply remain faithful to prayer and the sacraments, to reading and listening to the scriptures, God does the work within. All we need to do is remain humble and strengthen the grace that God is always giving through life.

Sounds so lovely and inspiring! Yet not many of us advance in humility and mercy, largely due to stubbornness and personal preferences. We call this Original Sin. Lent comes to our rescue with a kind of reset opportunity. We hear this weekend the very human words of Psalm 51:

*Have mercy on me, oh God, in your goodness;
in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense.
Thoroughly wash me from my guilt, and from my sin cleanse me.*

Which one of us does not cry out with the same compassion at one point or another? When sin is mentioned, many lose interest quickly, and often walk away. Perhaps that is because of the punitive righteousness of some Christians who loudly accuse and shame others, to avoid their shame.

Today's reading from Book of Genesis is the ancient metaphor of the birth of shame in the human condition. "Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they realize they were naked so they sewed fig leaves together and made loin cloths for themselves."

The same shame of Adam and Eve remains in our human contemporary and personal experience, thus the outsized focus on sin rather than salvation. I truly believe that shame is at the root of all evil perpetuated on human beings and our planet.

Perhaps a useful practice during Lent might be to ask oneself, “Who am I? And what difference am I called by God to make happen in my own life?” In searching that question, in searching ourselves, we will find what our vocation is. Without that we will be stuck in some human-based religious piety that accidentally avoids God rather than following God.

Jesus had and continues to have another plan. He recognizes who we are and accepts as we come.

Sin in the Aramaic language, the language that Jesus spoke and everyone he knew spoke, translates sin as “missing the mark.” None of us would have the nerve to say that we have not at times missed the mark, and we are likely to do for the rest of our lives. Jesus knows that we are subjected to our humanity and he has come to heal us with his divinity. No being kicked out of the Garden of Eden, no fire and brimstone, just unbounded compassion for our weakness, generous forgiveness, and life changing transformation.

When one has the grace and the concomitant courage to see who one really is then reality itself becomes clearer and, over time, the only true way we meet God. This is a kind of mature agency through which we share in God’s work, opening up a spiritual awakening that takes on the mind of Jesus. In addition, this spiritual pathway cultivates a reasonable humility where we understand that the grace we receive is not because we are good, it is because God alone is good. Without that journey inward we hide our shame and thus tolerate and initiate violence against others that are not like us to take the spotlight on everyone else.

This Lent let’s encourage one another to acknowledge just how much mercy God has given us, so that we can forgive others as we have been forgiven. When we do so we can change the world: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done. On earth as it is in heaven.”