

1st Sunday of Lent
Homily by Deacon Jim Olshefski
March 10, 2019

When I say "lost in the desert," what image comes to mind?

For me, I envision an individual in tattered clothing, crawling under the blazing, hot sun; dying of thirst. But deserts are not just physical: There are emotional, mental and spiritual deserts into which we humans become trapped. Take, for instance, St. Teresa of Calcutta (Mother Teresa): It was a full ten-years after her death, with the publication of her private correspondence and papers, before it became commonly known that Mother Teresa was afflicted with a deep sense of God's absence for the last half-century of her life. She had such tireless dedication to her work with the "poorest of the poor" that the world was completely unaware of her spiritual darkness, her spiritual desert. However, four years before she died, she warned her sisters in the *Missionaries of Charity* that "the Devil" is continuously on the prowl in order to "make you feel it is impossible that Jesus really loves you. "This," she said, "is a danger for all of us." None could have guessed that her remark was autobiographical.

More common for the rest of us, non-canonized saints, is the desert we experience with the loss of a loved one, or when we experience other

losses, such as unemployment, ill health or the end of a relationship: That desert is **grief**. Grief is a state of feeling empty, alone and lost. Grief is the emotional suffering we feel when something or someone is taken away. Grief is a natural response to loss. It is an emotional response to loss which also has physical, cognitive, behavioral, social, cultural, spiritual and philosophical dimensions. When grieving, God can seem distant, very distant indeed. Grief often-times involves introspection that focuses on the question: Did I love enough? Feelings of denial, disbelief, confusion, sadness, anger, despair and guilt often occur to those experiencing grief.

Those same questions and feelings occur to each of us during this Lenten season when we take a long, hard look at ourselves; a time in which we hold a mirror to our souls: Do I love and serve God enough? Do I truly love my neighbor? Does love rule my heart?

An honest examination of our lives reveals what St. Paul reminds us: That "all have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God." (Rom 3:23) But through our justification by faith, as Paul preaches in today's second reading, "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" by divine mercy.

And that brings us to the Gospel, St. Luke's account of Jesus' temptation by the devil in the desert. Jesus understands our human

weakness when faced with temptation. However, unlike the failure of Adam and Eve who succumbed to the devil's temptations, today's Gospel details Jesus' rebuke to the devil's enticements. This narrative of victory over temptation is our invitation to journey during Lent through the barren desert uniting ourselves to the mystery of Jesus in the desert which leads us to the hope of Easter morning.

Last week, on Ash Wednesday, we heard Jesus teach about prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

In today's Gospel passage, Jesus, hungry and weak since he had fasted during his 40 days in the desert, is for us an example during our Lenten journey. Jesus invites us to turn back to him and choose his saving grace over the temptation of sin through increased prayer, fasting and almsgiving:

- Prayer: Jesus rebuked the devil with his false promise of power and glory with the words "You shall worship the Lord, your God, and him alone shall you serve." Through prayer, during Lent, we come into closer union with Jesus. By cultivating the art of prayerful silence, we can better hear the still voice of God in the chaotic world around us.
- Fasting: Jesus answered the temptation of food with another quote from Deuteronomy: "One does not live on bread alone." Fasting

reminds us that the world and all its attractions cannot satisfy the human heart; our longing for God surpasses all worldly desires. St. Jerome wrote, in a letter to Eustachius, "Fasting and abstinence should be rooted in meditation on the Word of God and in the heart." Or as I would say it, fasting without prayer is just a diet. In addition to fasting from food, "fasting" from distracting and destructive behaviors, that lead us to sin, guide us through our Lenten desert.

- Almsgiving: With his words "You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test," Jesus is teaching us not to test God by expecting God to intervene and look after those in need but, instead, we are called to help our brothers and sisters. Active charity is at the heart of the Gospel message. We, Christians all, have the primary vocation to love one another. We are called to love and serve God, his Church and his people.

Unlike Jesus, who was sinless and was able to fight temptation, we struggle and fall and rise again with God's grace. This season of Lent is the time of year that we ponder these difficult struggles and temptations, that we pray for God's help in our resolve to be better and not succumb to temptation.

While there is a place for fasting and ‘giving up” things, I think it even more appropriate to give our time, talent and treasure to help our brothers and sisters: Do something **positive** to aid others. Above all, use this Lenten season to put your life in perspective. It may be that you need to clear a different path through the desert or that you need to help someone along the way. Lent is a time for us take stock and give ourselves again to God, and if we have fallen, get up and start over. With God's grace, we will safely navigate through the barren desert and be gifted by entrance into the heavenly kingdom, the land flowing with milk and honey.