A close up of a sign

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**March 1, 2020 – Authentic Life**

**Given by Rev. Mattei**

The Coronavirus may be what we globally fear at the moment, and it is no small fit. But there is a much deeper underlying current of fear that runs like negative energy through our daily operations and interactions. On the surface, it manifests itself as fear of each other, as mistrust of other people’s intentions, and as doubt of there being sufficient resources for all. Yet, the invisible wall we raise between each other is the manifestation of a much deeper unresolved spiritual reality: uneasiness with life in general.

The difficult search for meaning, the relentless race to accumulate, and the constant struggle to impress and have other people’s admiration are what every human being, even Jesus, faces as ongoing temptation. In this week’s Gospel reading, in fact, Jesus chooses to enter a time of unguarded reality, retreating from society to the vulnerable exposure of the wilderness. There he faces the demon of disconnection with the divine and the temptation to navigate life by himself, as when one cannot trust anyone, not even God.

Jesus, however, can face his temptations unscathed because in him the spiritual and the material, the internal and the external, heaven and earth are aligned. At his baptism at the river Jordan, he is declared Son of God. The divine affirmation allows him to be confident about his identity and to be at ease with his relationship with the Father. His baptism gives him a strong indication of his foundations and allows him to have clarity about his place and presence in the universe. The time of spiritual preparation in the desert helps Jesus to consolidate his core values and be clear about how and when to present a cultivated version of himself to the world, and when and where to be vulnerable. Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection have periodic and alternating moments of retreat into prayer and openness to public ministry.

In the desert, the devil preys upon his potential weaknesses and Jesus, three times, denies the devil’s request to follow the devil’s prideful and irresponsible view of human accomplishment and worth. The three devilish temptations in the desert, in fact, were meant to question him at his spiritual core. What we have is:

* A question of “identity”: *Who am I?* Where will I find a description of and support for my identity? How clear, firm, and convinced am I about my identity and dignity? What informs and shapes my values and principles? *What “feeds” me?* What are the “ifs” in my life that create insecurity and anxiety? (Mt. 4:3-4)
* A question of “belonging”: *Whose am I?* What makes me doubt God’s closeness and investment in me? Or God’s care for me? Is there any doubt that God is on my side? If there is a doubt, where does it generate from? What is my understanding of life in God? Ultimately, of God? *Is life in God “enough”?* (Mt. 4:5-7)
* A question of “authority”: *Where does my power derive from?* Where do I find strength, direction, and courage for life’s tasks, challenges, and opportunities? What gives me, respect, credibility, and influence? *Do I influence others because I “matter”?* (Mt. 4:8-10)

Each of the three temptations dares Jesus to bypass the daily vocation of a meaningful life. Our encounter with reality is marked by the constant affirmation of what we are about in relation to our self, our neighbor, and our world. Healthy attention to self, others, and the world become our homework that is best done in retreat from the distractions of the world and in a wilderness immersion. A retreat into the wilderness is not escapism from life. On the contrary, the wilderness is a good place to put things into perspective and affirm life. It is in the desert, whether it is a daily discipline of prayer and meditation or a weeklong spiritual retreat once a year, that it becomes clear to us that denial or avoidance of our reality prompts suffering in me and in the world.

In each of the temptations, Jesus is offered what we all face every day, an easy way out of reality in search of significance and personal glory. The desire to win approval, to feel secure and protected, to succeed in some measurable, noticeable way always assails us. By their very nature as empty promises, temptations dehumanize and enslave us, those we relate to, and the world we interact with. The outcome of self-serving choices made out of a distorted sense of self (whether depleted or grandiose) reveals the fears we live by: the fear of meaninglessness, of not enough-ness, of not mattering. By reaction, the temptation is to take our life into our own hands, to make ourselves masters of our own ship, the gods of our destiny, to make judgment calls without consulting with our Word-based values. Then, our fears end up littering our reality with the recognizable sins of chaos, violence, power struggles, discrimination, envy, corruption, and total indifference to the suffering of others.

So the Lenten journey may be one of reconnection with the divine. It may be one of trust in the ever caring presence of the Spirit, in God’s Truth-telling Word, and in God’s readiness to forgive, heal, renew, and open hearts.[[1]](#footnote-1) What is not life-giving is death-inducing. Let us take the words of the prophet Isaiah (1:16-18) to heart as we journey through Lent :

Wash yourselves clean!

Put away your misdeeds from before my eyes;

cease doing evil; learn to do good.

Make justice your aim: redress the wronged,

hear the orphan’s plea, defend the widow.

Come now, let us set things right,

says the Lord:

Though your sins be like scarlet,

they may become white as snow;

Though they be crimson red,

they may become white as wool.

Let us pray: Holy God, as we enter the season of Lent and a time of repentance and reflection, help us to be aware of all the temptations around us and to find the truth in the midst of the lies. Help us to know the truth about ourselves and keep us from living out of fear and a false sense of self. Amen.

1. Ezechiel 36:24-28 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)