

1st Sunday of Lent. 2/21/2021

The temptation in the desert.

Every now and then my family and I get a sense of adventure, and the urge to explore the beauty of the Pacific Northwest: A camping trip. They make for great experiences, I think, although you might hear mixed reviews. Not everything runs smoothly. Among the things that take a couple of tries is packing the car. The first time around, somehow, there isn't enough room for the five of us plus all the things we wanted to take with us. Through the trip, we find that some things we needed did not come. At the end of the trip, we find that some things just came along for the ride but were never used.

Now, imagine we are to take a trip into the desert, no car, no hotel, no restaurant. What do you pack? I know my first list would be too long. But as I come to realize that we go by foot, that all I have is a backpack and I need to carry it on my shoulders, I will start crossing out items. In the end, I will be left with only the essentials. Hopefully, all of them.

This is a question for us at the start of our Lenten journey.

What are the essentials? What is critical? What is it that really makes a difference when we get to the end of 40 days? What is it that really matters at the end of 40 years?

And what are the non-essentials? What are things that we carry that burden us, or that simply take up space away from more important things?

The world gives us plenty of shiny objects that catch our curiosity, then our attention, our time, our heart. Typical example: TV used to be a common time sink. It has now been replaced by the internet. Useful and valuable, yes. It can entertain us, inform us, and connect us. But we may let it grow out of control. We may let it take a life of its own, and lay claim to our time and to our heart. For each of us, there may be other shiny objects that we have let become compulsions. These are great temptations that we face constantly.

At the start of the Lenten journey, we take a hard look at all those non-essentials in our lives, and ask God to help us stop carrying them, and focus instead on the essentials. What are the essentials? Our relationship with God, our dignity as Christians, our relationship with others.

If you haven't settled on a goal for this Lenten season, here is a suggestion: Make each day count.

Each day start in prayer, in intimate dialogue with God, in gratitude for everything we have received from him. Bring to him our struggles and disappointments. Ask him for his Grace, and to make us instruments of his love. And make a point, this day, to do something loving. It doesn't have to be something big, but the point is not to skip a day. Make each day count.

Starting with those closest to us, we can let them know how much we value their presence. We can dial up our patience, especially if they happen to have quirks that we find irritating.

Beyond our immediate circle, we can try to put ourselves in other people's shoes. Give company or a word of encouragement to somebody who needs it. Seek reconciliation in a wounded relationship. Give of our time and treasure to relieve the suffering we see.

And if there is something that bothers our hearts, if there is a heavy weight of pain that we ourselves are carrying, come to the Lord for healing, in his Church.

Christ came to set us free from bondage and to bring us back to God. Through the Grace of God, in these 40 days our life can become more centered in Christ, and we can help to bring his presence and peace into the world.

We approach Jesus today in Holy Communion, with all our trust, asking him to lead us by the hand through this Lenten season.