THROUGH THE FEAR
YOU HAVE TO TAKE THE JOURNEY

Each year the First Sunday of Lent sets the stage for us with a dramatic scene. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke name three temptations that Our Lord confronted in the wilderness. They are presented to Jesus by the devil before Jesus begins his public ministry. In Mark’s gospel, the earliest written, as well as the shortest and most direct and unembellished, no temptation is named. We’re simply told, in the most sober and concise language, that the Spirit drove Jesus into the desert where he encountered wild beasts.

In this understated setting we don’t know how Satan tempted Jesus or what kind of wild beasts assailed him. We’re free to speculate. More importantly, however, we’re invited to name the wild beasts that we are encountering, and how this graced period of Lent can bring us God’s strength and ministering angels to attend to us amidst life’s challenges.

Our hearts and the hearts of our nation were burdened on Ash Wednesday by the horrendous acts of a pitiable and deranged young man who took the lives of seventeen students and teachers in Parkland, Florida. An author in the Jesuit magazine America states it boldly:

May we repent, and may God forgive us, as we worship at the altar of the gun, even to the point of sacrificing our own children. May we repent, and may God forgive us, as we allow the moneyed lobbyists to speak for us, and to subvert the popular will to curtail the ubiquity of military-style weapons among us. May we repent, and may God forgive us, as we offer “thoughts and prayers” that cost us nothing, instead of real and lasting answers to the hatred we bear each other, to the fears that drive us to kill, to the violence that permeates our lives.

In this and in so many ways, we encounter beasts everyday – within and without. We confront those people or situations, those habits and ways of behaving that hinder us from being God’s beloved sons and daughters.

We can take our cue for the beginning of the Lenten Season from a popular movie Into the Woods. Based on the Broadway musical by composer Stephen Sondheim, the story uncovers the darker realities of the fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm. Into the Woods re-imagines the familiar stories of Jack in the Beanstalk, Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, Rapunzel, and an original tale about a
baker and his wife who are childless. In the beginning of the story, all the characters express their wishes for happiness: a handsome prince to marry, a warm home and enough to eat, a child to love. But in order to realize those dreams, the characters have to travel "into the woods" to confront the wolves and witches and giants and charlatans that thwart their dreams.

Like Jesus who is driven into the desert by the Spirit, there is a path that a person of faith must take, and that road is not without its challenges. Along that path, with Jesus, we encounter the beasts. It’s the confrontation every Christian must face as Jesus calls you to take up your cross and follow him. The lyrics of the musical’s song “Ever After” offers an apt description:

**Though it's fearful, though it's deep, though it's dark, And though you may lose your path, Though you may encounter wolves, You mustn't stop, You mustn't swerve, You mustn't ponder, You have to act! You go into the woods, Where nothing's clear, Where witches, ghosts and wolves appear. Into the woods, And through the fear, you have to take the journey.**

This Lenten Season of forty days gives us the opportunity to renew our discipleship: turning to God in prayer, looking deep inside by fasting, and moving out to others in deeds of compassion through almsgiving.

The story of “Into the Woods” isn’t a child's book of fairy tales but a "grown up" take on these stories. In their journeys through the woods, the characters discover that life is not a fairy tale: some characters die; others see their fairy-tale lives disintegrate: Cinderella discovers that her prince isn't so charming; Jack's encounter with the giant has unexpected consequences; the baker and his wife understand the true cost of parenthood. What they thought would make them happy has made them anxious and afraid; reality has cruelly crushed their romantic images. They discover that the line between dreams and nightmares is a fine one. They realize that the real monsters we must defeat are selfishness and greed, that the most potent "spells" we have to break are our own fear and self-deception. The woods are a dangerous place, the little company of travelers discovers, but the way of happiness is marked by humility and generosity.

Today we begin our Lenten journey "into the woods." Lent calls us there -- to the wilderness and deserts of our hearts that we might turn away from the attitudes and behaviors that mire our lives in selfishness, anxiety, unhappiness and disappointment, and turn toward the values of God we seek to embrace. As Jesus was led by the Spirit to the desert to confront the mission before him, that same Spirit calls our own hearts to confront what we are making of this time we have been given, what we want our lives to stand for, what we want to leave to those we love.
Lent challenges us to ask ourselves what we really believe in, what and who are most important to us, what we are willing to sacrifice for. In confronting these questions honestly, sincerely and faithfully, we complete our trek "into the woods" with a new realization of God as the center of our hopes and dreams, and a new yearning for the fulfillment of the Easter promise in our own lives. At the end of the musical the lyrics sound a hopeful note:

Journey over, all is mended,  
and it's not just for today,  
But tomorrow, and extended ever after!  
All the curses have been ended,  
The reverses wiped away. All is  
tenderness and laughter forever after!

For too long we have thought of Lent as a time for us to sacrifice our wants and our desires, to give up things in order to devote ourselves to God. The scriptures, however, today and throughout Lent, tell us something very different. This isn’t only a time to deny ourselves something, but a time for us to receive. We’re not the ones who are meant to accomplish great things for God. Rather, it is God who acts; it is God who makes the sacrifice; it is God who accomplishes great things for us. It is God who establishes with us an everlasting covenant and sends us angels who minister to us. Ours is the task and challenge of opening our minds and hearts to receive what God has already done for us and will continue to do. His cross and resurrection are set before us that we might live, not only as the fairy tale says -- happily ever after -- but happy here and now -- in the knowledge and experience of God’s gracious and enduring love.

John Kasper, OSFS