

Fr. Curtis Miller      February 29-March 1, 2020      Homily for the 1<sup>st</sup> Sun. of Lent

A couple years ago I went on a mission trip to West Virginia to help rebuild homes in the poor region of Appalachia. At one of the houses where we worked, the homeowner pointed out a tall stand of grass and weeds at the edge of the yard where the rattlesnakes lived. (A member of our group had in fact been bit by one the previous year, after accidentally yanking one out of a woodpile, but he was rushed to the hospital and survived.) As long as we stayed out in the open, we should be fine. At least we could see them coming. That was very comforting. I'm happy to report that there were no incidents that year.

Thinking about Lent reminded me of this story, because Lent is about staying out in the open, away from the snakes. What do I mean by that? In our first reading from the beginning of Genesis, we heard about Adam and Eve living in the luxurious Garden of Eden. But it was amid all those good things that the serpent, the devil, snuck up on them, and tempted them to disobey God. In contrast, in today's Gospel reading, we heard about Jesus going out into the barren desert to fast and pray. It was in this desert that Jesus led the devil out into the open and fought back against his temptations. There was nothing for the devil to hide behind. His temptations are revealed as the bold-faced lies they are, wanton attempts to take the place of God, and to destroy us. Jesus calls out the devil and resists every one of his temptations. Our fasting and other Lenten practices are meant to leave the devil fewer places to hide in our lives.

What other distractions must I leave behind? What bad habits or resistance to prayer, what fear or hard-heartedness must I abandon? We must place our trust in Jesus and boldly go out into the desert where He will help us resist the devil's temptations and lies.

Consider how the serpent approached Eve. He exaggerates God's commandments to make them sound unreasonable. While God basically commanded, "Don't eat the fruit of this one tree because it will be harmful to you," the devil twisted that into, "Did God *really* tell you that you couldn't eat *any* of the fruits of the garden?" The devil wants us to think that God is an unreasonable tyrant, oppressing us and holding us back. His temptations lead us to believe that we can't trust God, that we have to take care of ourselves. But that isn't true! God loves us and cares for all our needs. Sometimes all we have to do is stop running away from God, and let Him hold us in His loving arms.

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Throughout the season of Lent, I would also like to briefly consider the Stations of the Cross, the fourteen moments that led to Jesus' crucifixion, death, and burial. I plan on focusing on two stations each week, and then three each in the final two weeks, just so we can get through them all before Easter. Also, on Friday evenings at 7 throughout

Lent, we will be praying the Stations of the Cross at St. Paul's, so please consider joining us then.

The first station: Jesus is condemned to death. Jesus was completely innocent, yet He was condemned to suffer for the guilt of us all. When I'm accused unjustly, I sputter and fume. But instead I can humbly accept the suffering and unite myself to Jesus. Also, consider Pontius Pilate. He says that he finds no guilt in Jesus, yet he still sentences Him to death. Why? Out of fear and the pressure of the crowd. Let's resolve to resist such cowardice. Also, every one of us faces a sentence of death, not knowing how long we will live. Let's choose to live and face death with the same deep trust in our Heavenly Father as Jesus did.

The second station: Jesus takes up His cross. They didn't have to force Jesus to take up His cross; He willingly embraced it. May we embrace the trials that come our way, in union with Jesus. In taking up His cross, Jesus took upon Himself the weight of our sins. If you or I am struggling under the weight of our sins, let's allow Jesus to forgive us in Confession and lift that burden from us. Then we will have the joy of being that lost sheep, carried home on the shoulders of the Good Shepherd.

Next week: Jesus falls the first time & Jesus meets His Mother, Mary.