

Today, may be one of the hardest days to be Catholic. Here we are, 5 days into Lent and going through withdrawals from the things we've given up, and, to make matters worse, we all had to wake up an hour earlier, due to the time change. Maybe this explains why the 11:30 mass is so popular today!

The truth is, Lent can be an arduous season. It's a time when we challenge ourselves to be better Christians through a process of 1) detachment from worldly comforts and 2) attachment to God and the building of His kingdom.

Today's reading from Deuteronomy talks about serving God by giving back. God reminds his people that he brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and tells them, through Moses, how to express their gratitude. Moses tells them to declare before the Lord their God, that they will bring the first fruits of their land that their Lord has given them, and having set them before the Lord, they shall bow down in His presence.

The lesson for all of us is to reflect on the blessings in our lives, attribute them to God's goodness, and share a portion with the Lord, by sharing with those in need. This speaks to the Lenten practice of alms giving, or giving a portion of our time, treasure, and talent to those in need. It also speaks to the importance of prayer and worship, bowing down in his presence, and remembering our Lord by going to mass more often, even daily, praying at home with our families, and keeping God in mind throughout our day.

Now, let's look at the Gospel. In his book, "The Gospels 101," Theologian Ian Boxall, says, "The four gospels are guides for following Jesus. They teach us about discipleship, and they teach us about imitating Jesus and putting his, often radical, teachings into practice in our own lives." Lent is a time when we as a Church, roll up our sleeves and face this challenge head on. Let's consider how Luke's gospel teaches us how to imitate Jesus as He spends time in the desert, fasting and fighting off Satan's temptations.

We are told Jesus is, "Led by the Holy Spirit into the desert." We too are led into Lent, by a spirit of holiness, of seeking, and of following Jesus. The desert is a place of detachment, a place where John the Baptist and Jesus have both sacrificed worldly comforts. "Sacrifice" actually comes from the words, "To make holy," and Jesus, though He is God, shows us the way to holiness. His sacrifice is giving up eating for 40 days in order to follow the will of His Father in heaven. Jesus' version of Lent follows the pattern of detachment from this world and attachment to God the Father and the work of His Kingdom.

When my kids were young, we would all pile into the family SUV and drive down to the beach together. One hot summer day, as we were pulling out of the driveway, I heard a complaint from the back seats, that the AC was not working. I pushed some buttons on the dash to no avail and pulled the car over to the side of the street.

Knowing that our old car suffered from occasional issues, I turned off the car for 30 seconds, started it up again, and voila! The AC kicked in and we were on our way. Sometimes, all we need is a reboot to get things working again.

Lent is a reboot of our spiritual lives, a time when we turn off the noise of the world, like Jesus did in the desert, and reconsider God's plan for getting us to heaven. Lent gives us a clean slate, a blank sheet of paper to co-author our plan for salvation with Jesus our Lord.

We look at our habits of prayer, fasting, and alms giving and re-engage in our journey to heaven. Lent is a time to consider a new prayer routine, a healthier lifestyle, and a new ministry or charity to support.

Making Lent work takes commitment. We need to take an actual blank sheet of paper and write it down. We should include what we're giving up, what we're doing extra, and what outcome we plan to achieve. The next step is to tell a friend about our plan and ask if they will help us keep accountable by checking in once a week and asking how it's going. Think about what Jesus might have said to John the Baptist before spending 40 days in the desert. Get some coaching from a fellow Christian and ask them to pray for you as you partake in this spiritual journey.

We as a parish also offer numerous opportunities for engagement during Lent. If you open the Calendar link on our parish website, it looks like one of those cruise ship daily schedules with something literally every day. We have our adoration chapel open on Mondays and Thursdays, Centering Prayer and Bingo on Tuesdays, Parents in Prayer on Wednesdays, Stations of the Cross and Fish Feasts on Fridays, and we even have Qigong (Chee Gong) a gentle exercise to improve your endurance, strength, and motor skills, so you can keep up with your fellow parishioners during this busy Lenten season.

Seriously though, these are for you. Consider them an oasis of opportunity in the desert of Lent, to refresh your soul and get to know your community. I especially encourage all the men of our parish to join us for the Men's retreat on Saturday April 5th to learn about The Forgiveness Journey with Dcn Peter and Mass with Fr Ricardo.

Whether you have perfected your Lenten routine through the years (if so, please see me after mass, I'd like to hear your ideas) or you are like the rest of us, struggling with this holy assignment, let's pray for each other. Let's ask the Holy Spirit to guide us as we journey with Christ to understand the mysteries of our faith and encounter His Easter joy.