

8th Sunday of Ordinary Time B “Preparations for the Desert”
Fr. Frank Schuster

My friends, our first reading from the Prophet Hosea begins, “Thus says the Lord: I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart.” Who is this woman Hosea is talking about? Well, this woman is Israel. You see, in the religious imagination of the Jewish people, Israel is likened to the bride of God. The book of Hosea begins with the analogy that the bride of God, Israel, has been unfaithful to her “spouse” by worshiping other gods than the one true God of their ancestors, Abraham and Sarah. God therefore leads his wife Israel into the desert and speaks to her heart. The prophet continues, “She shall respond there as in the days of her youth, when she came up from the land of Egypt. I will espouse you to me forever: I will espouse you in right and in justice, in love and in mercy; I will espouse you in fidelity, and you shall know the Lord.” God responds to Israel’s infidelity with mercy and committed love, but it is a tough love, you see, because this all takes place in a desert.

Trappist monk and spiritual writer, Thomas Merton begins his book “Thoughts in Solitude” with a reflection on what it means to be led into the desert. He reminds us that the desert was a place of supreme danger. It was a wilderness that was untamable by human beings. It was a place where you could die of heat and thirst. It was place where you can go mad or even be tempted by the devil. Because the desert was a harsh place of solitude, it was also a place of purification. God led the Hebrews from their captivity in Egypt to the Promised Land by way of forty years of purification in the desert. After his baptism in the Jordan, Jesus was led into the desert for forty days and forty nights, where he successfully faced temptations prior to beginning his public ministry. Merton comments that the image of being led into the desert doesn’t capture the modern imagination because we live in a day when human technology can make a trip into the desert comfortable. Today we have very efficient automobiles and rv’s with air conditioning and stereo systems. Back then, you were lucky to have a camel. You certainly wouldn’t have an ice box to pull a soda out of. And the desert was a quiet place, a lonely place, a frightening place. Merton therefore gives us a way to understand what it means to be spiritually led into the desert. He writes, “The desert is the home of despair. And despair, now, is everywhere...Despair is an abyss without bottom...This then is our desert: to live facing despair, but not to consent. To trample it down under the hope in the Cross. To wage war against despair unceasingly. That war is our wilderness. If we wage it courageously, we will find Christ at our side. If we cannot face it, we will never find Him.”

My friends, the new Israel is the Church Jesus founded. The Church is therefore understood correctly as the Bride of Christ. Jesus, Himself, used that imagery over and over again, in his teaching and parables, such as likening the Kingdom of God to a Wedding Banquet and referring to himself as the Bridegroom like in our Gospel Reading today. Because the Church is the Bride of Christ, it makes sense that every year, the Church is led into the desert for forty days and forty nights. We are led into the purifying sands of Lent.

Our journey into Lent is a time of purification and enlightenment, but is also a place of temptation. We will begin Lent by fasting on Ash Wednesday this coming week. We will have several opportunities to receive ashes on our foreheads that day remembering that we are dust and to dust we will return. Those who are in good health are asked to fast that day. On Ash Wednesday and on the Fridays during Lent, we will observe the practice of abstaining from meat products. Consider this a spiritual exercise that reminds us that our bodies are on loan from God and we should be mindful of what we put into it. We are also invited to take up an additional spiritual exercise or penance during the season of Lent. It could take the form of giving something up, like candy, cigarettes, or alcohol. It could also take the form of taking something on, like participating in operation Rice Bowl, cleaning out our closets and cupboards and make a donation to the Hope House, or adding a little exercise into the schedule each week. It could take on the form of making an effort of praying the rosary, or even a decade of the rosary each day, taking time each day for a little spiritual reading, and so on. We have until Wednesday to make our decision of what it is we will be sacrificing or taking on as we make our pilgrimage through the desert wilderness of Lent.

My friends, one mistake that we can make when we choose our Lenten penance, is to treat our spiritual exercise like a new patch sewn onto our old way of doing things. As we make our Lenten observance, we should consider the Lord's invitation to pour the new wine into fresh wineskins. We should consider a Lenten observance that is symbolic of the new creation we wish for ourselves at the end of our time in the purifying sands of the season of Lent.

Yes, my friends, Lent is coming fast. It is time to break out the violet, fill the freezer with fish sticks, and hide the candy! We will begin our desert journey on Wednesday with ashes that will remind us of our mortality. At the end of our journey is a garden with an empty tomb that will speak of our salvation.