

1st Sunday of Lent “Hope is On the Horizon”

Fr. Frank Schuster

Baptisms are happy occasions for every Christian family. It is a celebration of new life, a welcome into the Body of Christ the Church, and also an opportunity for family to gather in a spirit of celebration. After his baptism in the Jordan however, Jesus was clearly not led into a celebration or banquet. He was led into the desert, a place of dryness, a place of work, a place of hunger and thirst, and a place of temptation. And there is something right about this because, as I have shared with you in the past, wherever we are most blessed in our life, this is where the devil will attack us. You can set your watch to it. If God has blessed us by a gift of relationship with him through the Sacraments, the temptation to reject his gift will surely follow sinners that we are. This is why it makes sense to me that, after Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan, he is led into the desert. Where he goes, we must follow.

The first Sunday of Lent this year feels like an anniversary. A year ago, we were just coming to grips with Covid-19. It wasn’t soon after that, in the interest of public safety, we were only allowed eight people inside the church...and only for the purpose of live-streaming. The whole world changed in a blink of an eye and our lives were turned upside down. A year later, it feels like we are starting to see light at the end of the tunnel. God promises Noah in our first reading from Genesis that better days are coming. It feels like God is offering us the same consolation today. We are not there yet, but hope is on the horizon. When you consider that the very word “lent” comes from a word meaning “springtime”, perhaps this is the best way to understand Lent this year. Hope is on the horizon. How do we get there?

Lent of course began with Ash Wednesday. This was a day that reminded us to get our priorities in order because we are dust and to dust we shall return. At face value, this can be misconstrued as quite morbid. Who wants to think about death, raise your hand? However, far from being morbid, Ash Wednesday taught us to not take our lives for granted or put off to tomorrow what we should be doing today. And so, in that sense, Ash Wednesday was also a reminder to live each day to the fullest and to live as a people of hope. This is where Lent is leading us. Our destination is Easter Sunday and the hope for our eternal salvation. That hope in the future gives us a reason to not only carry our cross but to also embrace it.

My friends, the season of Lent teaches us that being a disciple of Jesus isn’t always about the good times. Our character is sometimes measured by how well we make it through the hard times. If this past year taught us anything, it was that. A year into this pandemic, every one of us has had our moments of discouragement. If we are honest with ourselves, we can probably look back on this past year and count a number of ways we have failed. As we begin Lent this year, we have the opportunity again to turn away from the futility of our past way of doing things and follow Jesus. What are the areas in my life I have been spiritually lazy? What are the areas in my life that I need to become more spiritually serious? What are the areas in my life that I need to not just pick up my cross but to embrace it? What are the ways I need to be more loving to the people around me, especially the most vulnerable? What is it going to take for me to follow Jesus into the desert these coming weeks?

You see, I think this is really the reason why we celebrate the day of our baptism. The day of our baptism was not a destination. It was a beginning. Our baptism says we belong to Jesus. No matter what cross we have in store for us in the course of our lives, we have been given a compass to our destination. That is something worth celebrating. And even though we have to deal with challenges and temptations along the way, when we stay close to Jesus, there is no reason to ever feel lost. With Jesus as our guide, there is never room for despair. With eyes fixed on Jesus, and by keeping one foot in front of the other, our future is always full of hope. Believe it. Lent shows us the way.