

1st Sunday of Lent “Spiritual Awakening”

Bishop Frank Schuster

My friends, it is difficult to believe that three years ago, we began Lent with Covid 19 shutting down much of society. Strict measures were put into place to keep people from gathering. One of those measures was to prohibit the public celebration of Mass. I think most of us can look on those days as being some of the worst days in our lives. In my best moments, I keep those memories out of my mind. However, every so often, the memory comes back of celebrating Mass in an empty church on Sundays with only a couple servers and a camera for company. Those memories to this day tempt me to tears, causing me grief. The first Sunday of Lent always focuses on accompanying Jesus into a desert for time of fasting, prayer, and no shortage of temptation. In 2020, that desert was real. Many of us went months without gathering with family. Many of us went months without even a haircut. During that time, I made the mistake of trying to cut my own hair. It was a complete disaster.

I fear that only three years later, we are already forgetting what those days were like. Those days, indeed, months, in the desert of Covid 19 robbed us of the ability to gather in our churches for something as simple as giving praise to God. My prayer back then, as is my prayer today, is that we may never forget what life was like in Lent of 2020, so we do not make the mistake of forgetting how special it is to have the privilege of gathering for Sunday Mass. In that spirit, may Lent always be for us a spiritual awakening, calling us to greater fidelity to God and to each other, lest we forget how special this is.

For natural reasons, I was interested three years ago to find out the etymology of the word “quarantine”. I was amused to discover that this word comes from an old Italian dialect meaning “Forty Days”. This was back in the days when ships would be put into holding for about forty days before being allowed into European ports so to avoid the spread of disease. I couldn’t help but think back then that the season of Lent could also be seen as a kind of quarantine, a spiritual quarantine, where we are called to follow Jesus into the desert for forty days of purification and enlightenment. We are of course sinners, and so we will struggle with temptations along the way.

Speaking of which, I am particularly struck by the juxtaposition of the first reading and the Gospel reading this Sunday. Both readings talk about temptation. Adam and Eve are tempted by the serpent. Jesus is tempted by the devil. Adam and Eve succumb to the temptation and become distanced from God. Jesus triumphs over his period of temptation and the suggestion seems to be that we can too if we are united with Jesus in our times of struggle and doubt. And so, where did Adam and Eve go wrong during their time of temptation and what went right in the Gospel?

The story from Genesis speaks of our human tendency to turn away from God and his commandments out of a false sense of freedom. The forbidden fruit looks good enough to me so why not take it against God’s will? I am free to do that, like I am free to not go to Mass, or be charitable, or to take my faith seriously. And ironically, that expression of the so-called freedom we have of refusing God’s will in our life becomes the very thing that enslaves us. Notice how

later in that chapter of Genesis, Adam and Eve find themselves hiding from God because of exercising what they incorrectly thought was an exercise of freedom. In the temptation in the desert, the devil also offers Jesus one reasonable temptation after the other under the guise of false freedom. You are hungry Jesus, you have the freedom to turn this rock into bread, why not? You have the freedom to be saved from any harm, why wouldn't you do that? The devil even suggests that Jesus can have the whole world kneel to him if he just knelt to the devil. Sounds like slavery to me.

Jesus sees through it all. Jesus understood that feeding his belly with whatever he wants all the time isn't what makes him free. Being able to deny himself and detach himself from worldly delights is what makes him truly free because he is not enslaved or addicted to any possession or earthly sensation. Jesus also understood that using his freedom to keep him always safe from harm is in truth very enslaving because now we are living in fear all the time. Jesus prefers to trust his heavenly Father in all things instead which is why he won't put his heavenly Father to the test. Because Jesus simply trusts his heavenly Father's will in all things, he is truly free. Finally, the devil shows his cards when he says Jesus can have the whole world if he prostrates before him. The very act of kneeling before the devil is the very definition of enslavement. Jesus exposes the devil for who he is, be gone Satan, only the Lord my God shall I worship. Only the Lord my God shall I serve.

And so, even though this season of Lent is starting off in a much more comfortable way than in 2020, with the ability to enjoy more freedom than we did back then, the invitation this year is to not get so comfortable as to forget how important Lent is for our souls. As a Church, we are invited to freely enter together once more into our spiritual "quarantine" of Lent, our forty days of purification and enlightenment away from the world, together. As pilgrims on this journey, we will ask ourselves, do we love God with our whole heart as we should? Do we truly serve the Lord alone...or is it only when it is most convenient and acceptable to the culture in which we live? Are we kneeling to something that isn't of God right now. What chains of slavery am I bound to right now under a false understanding of freedom? These are powerful questions to pray about as we begin our forty days of the season of Lent. Yes, my friends, Lent is a time for spiritual awakening. If we enter this season with our whole heart, not taking our relationship with the Lord and with each other for granted, how much more spiritually healthy we will be as a People of God when Easter Sunday comes around?