



Thoughts on the Journey

February 27, 2022

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As Lent begins this week, I have vivid memories of my perceptions of Lent as a young person. As soon as the ashes were rubbed on my forehead on Ash Wednesday, it was though a dark cloud hovered over me and I entered the No-More-Fun-Zone. This is the place where wailing, gnashing of teeth, sack cloth and ashes, came alive for me in the form of extra chores, limited television, hours in church, unappetizing fish meals, more chores than any one kid should have to do, good deeds for neighbors that my mother volunteered me for, confession EVERY Saturday afternoon, and giving up everything that was good in life.

My understanding of Lent began to change in my mid-twenties when I started attending Easter Vigils. All of the sudden, everything began to make sense to me. The liturgy was a sensual transformation that helped make sense of Lent. After forty days in the desert, we went from darkness to light, from drab to beautiful, from ashes and thorns to incense and the aroma of Spring flowers, from somber music to triumphant sounds of joyful trumpets and choirs of praise, from the dry and parched to the witness of water and new life. Experiencing the contrast between the 40 days of Lent and celebrating the 50 days of Easter, I began to make the connection between suffering, death, and receiving the spirit of *new life*.

There is a perception among other faith traditions that, as Catholic Christians, we are preoccupied with sacrifice, self denial, and the overall emphasis on suffering and death. The questions I have heard are, *"why would a loving God want us to suffer?"*, *"how does it help my faith life to consciously deny myself pleasure?"* These are good questions all having the same answer; it does absolutely no good if it doesn't transform you and renew your spirit.

Jesus tells us, *"I solemnly assure you, unless a grain of wheat shall fall to the earth and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat. But if it dies, it produces much fruit. The man who loves his life loses it, while the man who hates his life in this world, preserves it to life eternal. If anyone would serve me, let him follow me; where I am, there will my servant be."* These were Jesus' words hours before His suffering and death. And yet, Jesus

glorified His Father in heaven who had the power to stop His suffering. Jesus Himself, as God, had the power to stop His own suffering and yet He did not. Our salvation depended on Jesus' suffering, death, and rising to new life. His sacrifice was a living testimony to the value of redemptive suffering: the very suffering that gives each of us a share in the cross - the suffering that transforms us and brings us into deeper union with Christ and His Father.

None of us escapes suffering in our lifetime and some of us suffer more than others. Regardless, it's what you do with suffering that makes the difference between fruitless suffering and suffering that bears fruit. When we die to ourselves and fully embrace the Paschal mystery, we engage in a cycle of transformation that takes us from the old business-as-usual, to a spiritual rebirth in thought, word, and behavior. Every time we accept the challenges, pains, sufferings, and trials and give glory to God, trusting that God will renew us, new life will come.

The gospel reading this week is a great prelude to the Lenten Season. It reminds us that authentic transformation and conversion comes when we are willing to do the hard work of looking honestly within ourselves rather than looking and judging others.

"A good person out of the store of goodness in his heart produces good, but an evil person out of a store of evil produces evil; for from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks."

Lent is an opportunity to look deep in our souls and question the behavior, attitudes, thoughts, actions, and motivations that do not reflect Gospel values. Ask yourself, *What* of who I am fails to reflect the profound love that Jesus taught us. This season is a time to stretch our ourselves and reach for the things of God. Prayer, sacrifice, repentance, giving of yourself in servitude to others, and saying "no" to the things that bind us to this world are true paths to new life and renewal.

As we journey through forty days in the Lenten desert, let us be transformed as we make our way to Easter joy!

