

“You are dust and to dust you shall return.” Last Wednesday we heard those words. ...But now, I’d like to ask what do they mean for you? ...Do they remind us of our humble beginnings and our mortality? Do they remind us of how we have fallen short in our relationship with God and our neighbor.... Does the cross that was made on our foreheads remind us of God’s mercy and salvation. I think that’s what those words and that action were supposed to do. And as Paul reminds out, there is a connection between such actions,... our faith, and our belief. That’s why he enjoins us to remember who we are as God’s people... so that our actions **can** spring from that identity. And today, of course, we hear Moses encouraging the Israelites to remember who they are ...as they leave behind their desert struggles and enter into the promised land ...**and** we see Jesus struggling with his **own** identity as the Devil tempts him in the desert.

For the Israelites and for Jesus, the desert was a place of revelation, of struggle and temptation, as well as a place that awakened in them a sense of their dependence upon God and their blessedness....for remember, God was always with them even... when they didn’t **feel** that presence.

...Now, most of us would not go into the desert like Jesus did-with nothing. And **probably**, if we're honest, we identify more easily with the Israelites who didn't want to go into the desert, who only did it to escape something worse, slavery. Their goal was **never** to stay in the desert, but to get beyond it. Most of us don't like to be beyond our comfort zone for very long and usually we don't enjoy fasting... Neither did the Israelites. And several times, **their** appetites even led them into being **unfaithful** to God, to the extent that they wanted to create and worship a god of their own making. But what about us, what do we have to learn from our **own** desert struggles? You see, I think one of the reasons the observance of Lent is so important for us... is that it gives us a time to **remember** who we are and to take stock of how we are living out that identity with God and each other.

I think Moses, himself, instituted a liturgy for the Feast of Weeks, so that the **Israelites** would **remember** who they were **after** they entered into a more prosperous existence.... So, for a moment, let's take a look at that liturgy.... Notice, the stress it puts on the necessity of obedience to the Torah, the law, but also how it encourages them to remember their **history**, the times when **they** were once the needy, "perishing" Aramean, the

resident alien, the poor, the widow, and the orphan. That memory was to move them toward gratitude and generosity; they were to offer their first fruits in gratitude for God's bounty and with generosity for **other** people's need...as Moses said, "so that **they, too**, might eat their fill". What if we, this Lent, took a lesson from them? What if we focused less on guilt, self-hatred and shame and **more** on how **we** might better live out our God-given identity, remember the love that God was and is willing to share with us, and then, out of **that realization**, consider how unaware we have become of that love, how ungrateful or angry we might be, and how we have failed both to love ourselves and our neighbor....What would that look like?

In this lush countryside, it might be difficult for us to imagine living in a barren desert, but **can we**... imagine ourselves as the blessed People of God... living in **our own** sort of promised land. I think that is hard for some people to believe that. Can our Lenten practices spring from that memory, that creative imagination? And can our repentance proceed more from gratitude... than useless guilt, shame and blame? You see, the desert was a place not only of testing, but of **discernment**... both for Jesus and the People of Israel.... The **testing** they experienced in the desert-whether it

was personal or corporate - taught them **who they were** and by going through it, they were empowered them for their vocation.

So what might our testing reveal to us about God, ourselves, and the People of God?... Most of us don't particularly enjoy tests because there is always the anxiety that we might not be as prepared as we need to be. We might fail. ...But then, there are tests that we can't avoid, aren't there? Life itself daily confronts us with tests.

For example, just considered how we have struggled with Co-vid, the stress it has caused in our families through financial and psychological problems, sickness, the death of loved ones, the stress between workers and employers, the lack of resources, the rising conflicts between countries and protests in many areas. And now, the violence taking place in the Ukraine. Might this situation be our desert now? Our experience of testing? Our moment of discernment and revelation?

When the Devil tested Jesus, he aimed at the very heart of Jesus's identity as Son of God, but through his testing, Jesus was reaffirmed in his true identity. Reaffirmed because of his faithfulness through the testing and his

memory. We should recall that he had already experienced the baptism. He had already heard God's voice, telling him: "You are my Son, my Beloved, in whom I am well pleased." ..But in the desert, immediately following that revelation, the desert into which the **Holy Spirit** had driven him, he had to **own his** identity and say "yes" to the Father's call, a call to **act out** that identity in ministry. And remember, also, what was considered the role of a son in that period and culture; the son was to be the father's representative and to work with the father. We see how the Devil, time and again, tempted Jesus in the desert ..to ignore the father's will, to act in self-serving ways and basically to take the father's place; those basic temptations that tempt human beings daily: temptations toward avarice and greed, power, and desiring equality with God. Temptations that the Israelites had succumbed to, when they revolted against Moses, **God's representative**, when they nearly killed Moses over a lack of water and food,... and when they grew so tired of **waiting** on God to act that they replaced Yahweh with a god of their own creation. In doing that, they **showed us** the devastating effect of sin: that it cuts us off from God and each other. It cuts us off from our true identity and calling as God's people. Makes it impossible for us to be happy.

We cannot fully appropriate God's grace and salvation when we are unaware of it. But look at **Jesus, he** demonstrates what it is like to orient ourselves **toward** God; his identity was rooted in his relationship with God. And **through his** struggle and example, he encourages us even today to identify as God's people, to turn around in order to do so if necessary, that's what "repent" means, turn around, go towards God, and accept the **free** grace that God offers us.

You see, Lent is intended, not as a curse, but as a blessing. It offers us a time to focus on who God is and who we are with God and each other, to acknowledge any isolation, any separation, that we might feel in that relationship, to mourn it, reject it, turn around and get on with life....

Remember again those ashes we rubbed on our foreheads? They were once the palms used on Palm Sunday, when we as members of the human race, used them to welcome Jesus. We are the same people who later denied him. We must acknowledge that reality if we are to be in solidarity with the Communion of Saints. But, as today's lessons also show us, God is always faithful, whether we are or not. That is the good news that spans all time. God has stood in the breach, created by sin, and has claimed us as his own, his Beloved, and **God wants** relationship with us.

So, let this Lent be a time when we specifically remember who we are and **whose** we are, and remember that, though we may have erred and strayed from God's ways,... **God** waits, watches, and longs for our return, hoping that we will hear and recognize his voice calling to **us**: "You are my daughter, my son, on you my favor rests." ... We only have to **be** who we are and **act** out of that identity, Jesus showed us that. And in doing so, we, too, will become channels of God's blessing ... Transformed by God's love, we will **know** God and ourselves ... and our actions will naturally flow from gratitude, not fear or shame. Amen.