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Lent is not necessarily a time just for facing guilt, doing penance, working toward conversion from sin, and focusing on failings and inadequacies. Essentially, Lent is

an invitation to deepening our relationship with God, an invitation to growth, to fuller life.

While the focus on "repentance" has come to carry connotations of facing our guilt and turning from sin, it literally just means "thinking about it again." Lent is a time to reflect on our lives and reevaluate our relationship with God. It is a time to look at it again to see if it is where we want it to be or if growth and enrichment are possible. Growth can be challenging, for sure, but its focus is positive and inviting.

So, I want to approach Lent this year reflecting on how the Sunday liturgical readings invite us to grow in our relationship with God, growing in our presence to God and opening to God's fuller presence to us.

Guidance from Moses and Jesus

The first reading for the first Sunday of Lent is part of the teaching by Moses to the Israelites as they reach the promised land but before they have entered it. His fundamental message is this: you will find amazing things in this land. You will have richly productive yields from your fields, be amazed at the power of the leaders, the politics, the comforts and more. You will be tempted to think their gods are greater than ours. But you are to remember where we came from and who got us here. So, bring the first fruits of your labors and offer them in thanksgiving to the true God, the one who brought you out of slavery in Egypt, covenanted with you at Sinai, promised this land and brought you here. Stay present to and faithful to the God who brought you here.

When Jesus came and was baptized by John, he heard clearly, "You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." In his time of discernment in the desert, he came to realize his mission to proclaim the good news of the reign of God already emerging in people's lives. During that 40 days in the desert, he too faced the major temptations that his people had faced and had not handled well: temptations to be seduced and distracted by the comforts and wealth of the culture as well as by the lure of political power and public attention and celebrity. The temptations are only too familiar.

What is striking is that Jesus dips back into the teaching of Moses in Deuteronomy to respond to the tempting of the devil. In each case, he fundamentally reframes the way the devil had approached him. He insists in the first case that it is not about his hunger or his status as Son of God; it is the guidance that comes from God that is the key issue. In the face of the promise of political power for carrying out his mission, Jesus shifts attention from the political power; the true issue he chooses to be present to first and foremost is the one he worships by taking on the mission. And in the case of jumping from the parapet of the temple to show the world he was the chosen one, he again reframes the situation as being first of all about his relationship with God.

In all three temptations, in other words, Jesus draws on the guidance from Moses and insists on being present above all to the one who got him there. He will not let the temptations coming to him be framed in such a way that they distract from central and pervasive issue: his presence to God, God's presence to him, his relationship with the God who brought him there. These must define his mission to his world at that time.

It is a skill we can all have or develop: reframing our understanding of the situations we face so that we make certain we focus our conscious presence clearly on what is most important: the relationship of gratitude and fidelity to the God who has brought us here.

Advertisement

"How did you get there?!"

Last summer on the first day of my retreat, I ran into a Jesuit friend of more than 50 years. He asked me where I was now and I told him I was in a small town in southeastern Michigan, a long way from my high-profile life in Washington, D.C. for many years. He exclaimed, "How did you get there?!"

That became one of the driving questions of a great retreat. Reflecting back, I began to see the little inspirations, nudges, the arrival of key people and influences at critical times that all worked together to "get me here." It provided a glimpse of my personal "salvation history" story, explaining how God has shaped my identity. It fits into the larger story Moses laid out and Jesus carried forward, for sure. But it is a personal version of the story that I need to stay present to, grateful and faithful. It

details how God has been present to me and how I want to grow in grateful, faithful presence to God "who got me here."

Given moments of insight and grace, I believe we all have a salvation history story like this that we are living now. If we can discover it and stay present to God in it — to God who has brought us this far in our lives — and are open to let God be more fully present to us in it, we will become better able to see through the distractions and temptations so rife in our culture. We will be able to reframe the issues to reveal their true significance and value.

That is of critical importance at this time in our history. It does not take much imagination to see that our nation is continuing to succumb to the temptations to make idols of wealth, political power, and celebrity. The wealth and celebrity of President Donald Trump were what persuaded so many people to believe he should be given so much political power. As a nation, we are now watching as he uses it not for the common good and the vision and mission we have embraced in Jesus — either nationally or globally — but to further enrich himself, sow division, and attempt to suppress those he sees as enemies. We are experiencing the social impact of being seduced by these temptations.

As we pray to deepen our presence to God and our openness to God's presence to us, as we seek to stay grateful and faithful to "God who got us here," what word do we have to preach to the nation with our lives? The God of Jesus in whose tradition we belong is a God of universal love and justice for all. How can we witness to our God in the current viciously adversarial social context in our nation and increasingly in other parts of the world? How can we help the nation to reframe the issues we face, redirect our presence, our consciousness from the problems and the fears they provoke to the loving God who got us here, to the God who cares for all, especially the marginal and vulnerable?

May our trust in God's power to transform people and situations in amazing ways grow stronger and our Lenten prayer be fruitful.

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