

A Lenten Meditation by Bishop Owen R. Williams, March 6, 2022

The First Sunday in Lent

Around the five hundredth year after the birth of our Lord, a Priest-Monk, named Zosimas, left his monastery and crossed the river Jordan for a forty day fast.

There was nothing strange about this. All the monks in the monastery did this in preparation for Holy Week. They would leave on the Sunday before Lent with only a little food and scatter across the desert to observe this ascetic ritual. Abba Zosimas did the same. He went far into the desert with a secret hope of finding some other holy man who might be living there and who might be able to satisfy his spiritual thirst and longing, for he had already conquered the appetites of the body.

The Hagiography, the story of the lives of the saints, goes on to say that he walked for 20 days into the desert. On that twentieth day, the point of no return, the day he must turn back, to be at the monastery by Palm Sunday, he met someone. He met St. Mary of Egypt.

Mary had been born in Egypt, and in her words, given in to a life of total depravity. On a whim, she joined a group of young men, who were going to Jerusalem for some festival, trading her "services" for passage. On the holy day of the Exultation of the Cross, she made her way to the Church of the Resurrection.

Now her reason for going was for mere entertainment, and maybe the chance to seduce someone in the crowd. But for some reason, she could not enter the church. Try as she might, she could not pass the threshold. Even as the rest of the crowd flowed in through the doors, some powerful and unseen force prevented her entrance. Exhausted, she sank to her knees and then, with great difficulty, it began to dawn on her why she was prevented from seeing the Cross. Like the sun rising on her soul, she understood the sinfulness of her life. There on the porch she prayed. She repented her former life, renounced the world, and dedicated her life to Our Lord. She then, with fear, attempted one more time to enter the church. The way was open, the crowd parted, and she passed into the shrine and prostrated herself before the Cross.

She then went to the shrine of Mary the Theotokos in the church and prayed to the Virgin to lead her. She heard a voice from on high, "If you cross the Jordan, you will find rest." That day she made for the Jordan. The next, she crossed it and then remained a hermit for forty-seven years.

Zosimas is the first person she has seen during that time. The story of their conversation is too long for today, but as they parted, she asked that in a years' time they meet again - This time on the banks of the Jordan and, at that time, she would like to receive Holy Communion.

The next year, they met for her Communion. The year after, Zosimas made the twenty-day trek into the wilderness and found the body of St. Mary. He buried her and prayed over her grave.

Another story:

In September, 1969, a retired Bishop of California was on a trip in Israel with his second wife, Diane. They had only been married for eight months. Jim and Diane had left their hotel in Jerusalem for a little drive. They wanted to get to know the area down to the Dead Sea. There was Qumran, famous for the Dead Sea Scrolls. And, some researchers felt that this was the area where Jesus went after His Baptism.

Their car got stuck in a ravine and they took off on foot, with one bottle of Coca-Cola between them. Jim, being several years older than Diane, all but collapsed in the heat.

They separated and ten hours later, after walking all night, Diane found a crew of Arab road workers. After many fits and starts, the search for Jim began.

Several days later, the body was found. No one knows why he left the last known location. No one knows why he didn't stay at the pool of water at the bottom of the canyon and wait for searchers. No one knows why the controversial Bishop James Pike died, having fallen onto a ledge on the cliffs in the Dead Sea wilderness.

Three different experiences in the Desert: Abba Zosimas, Mary of Egypt, James of the 20th century. It begs us to draw some analogies between Christ's temptations and each of these individuals. However, it is the Desert Experience itself on which I'd like to focus.

We have all heard about...and I hope, have had..."Mountain Top Experiences." Those times when you go on retreat, or even vacation, to the mountains. Or possibly never left home, but for some reason, by some manner, you were lifted above it all. Maybe, you have just listened to a portion of the Mozart Requiem, or read a sublime passage from Dante's Paradiso. Perhaps, you have just finished hearing a talk on the nature of God's grace or looked at a Sequoia redwood that has been growing since before Christ's incarnation.

We feel exalted, our spirits soar, we are taken to the mountain top and in that rarefied air, we see it all -- laid out below us. The pity is that we cannot live on the mountaintop. Life is lived in the foothills or on the plains.

Then there is the Desert Experience. This is the place where most people do not want to go (unless it is to gamble). It is hot, dry, unpopulated – Arid, unforgiving, sparse, deadly. These words more accurately describe the realm of the spiritual desert. Yet this is where we are more likely to encounter ourselves and God.

On the mountain, we might praise God for all his wonderful deeds. In the desert, we pray for health and safety.

On the mountain, we see how wonderful and intricate God's creation is. In the desert, we know we are totally dependent on God's Grace.

On the mountain, we see the beauty of it all. In the desert, we see ourselves, bare bones, unadorned.

Jesus Christ, Our Savior, had many mountaintop experiences: The Sermon on the Mount, The Mount of Transfiguration. The Gospel of John tells us that, after teaching on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, everyone else went home but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives, presumably to sleep or pray, to be renewed for the next day's work.

The Gospel for the first Sunday in Lent is different. Jesus went into the desert - not to be renewed, but to be tested. The devil comes to tempt, to distract, to deceive. But Jesus persevered and emerged from the desert, strengthened, ready to begin His ministry which would finally lead to that final Mount - Golgatha.

We have just begun the Season of Lent. This is the time to participate in the desert experience - But, with a purpose. If you have chosen a particular abstinence or have taken on a Lenten devotion --- Do it with a purpose. Like Abbot Zosimas, search for deepening your spiritual life. Like St. Mary of Egypt, cleanse your soul of all the garbage that gets between you and God.

But there is a warning here. For to go into the desert with no clear purpose, you can lose your way. You might risk danger walking in the dark. You may get so confused that you wander, and never come out.

Only with a PURPOSE - will you get through Lent. That path leads to a cross. And, after that, ...**a Glorious Resurrection!**