

Lent 3 - 3.22.25

Parents who request baptism for their children are asked this question at the very beginning of the rite: “will you raise your children in the practice of the faith by loving God and our neighbor?” They respond, “I will.” That means they intend to raise their children in the faith. They do so by forming them in the teachings of the Church and Christian service; by praying with them on a regular basis; and by worshiping with them at Mass every Sunday. In contemporary society, Baptism is often viewed as a social convention – a familial custom rather than a wholehearted commitment to living out the Catholic faith. The “I will” for parents means walking the walk of faith with their children each and every day, not just on the day of their Baptism.

The same thing happens at weddings. During that celebration the couple is asked these questions, “Have you come here freely? Will you accept children lovingly from God? Will you love and honor each other as husband and wife for the rest of your lives?” The couple responds to those questions with an “I have” and “I will.” With that exchange, a Catholic marriage begins.

At the ordination of a deacon or priest, the candidate is asked about his commitment to living out that ministry. During the rite, the bishop directs these questions to those wishing to be ordained: will you faithfully preach the gospel and teach the Catholic faith; will you celebrate the Eucharist, Reconciliation, and the other sacraments with care and reverence; will you pray unceasingly; and will you unite yourselves more closely with Christ each day? To each of these questions the candidates for ordination respond, “I will.”

In each of these sacramental experiences, a promise is made. That promise presumes a commitment will be lived out to the fullest each and every day.

In the first reading today from the Book of Exodus, the Lord calls out to Moses. He responds in a way that should sound familiar to all those who receive the sacraments. He says, “here I am, Lord.” Our spiritual journey in the Church begins and is strengthened with that first “here I am, Lord.” God wants us to hand over our wills to him. As we do that, God affirms that he will give us what we need and will do the heavy lifting of helping us as we serve one another.

Like us, Moses is an unlikely candidate for ministerial leadership. Moses is merely a shepherd. He holds no position of power or importance. The flock he tends is not even his own. It belongs to his father-in-law. He is not known for being an articulate speaker. He gives into brooding and allows his anger to get the best of him, which plays out in the worst of ways. Nevertheless, God calls him. And God calls us, as imperfect and unprepared as we might be to do his will.

At this point, I hope you are asking yourselves, “what is it, Lord, that you want me to do for you?” For some, the path to service in the Church is clear. For others, it is a bit more muddled. But all of us are being called by Christ to say “yes” or “here I am, Lord” to living out our faith in a specific way or in several ways.

And how can will fulfill or live out that calling? That question is answered in today’s readings. Again, in the first reading, Moses sees God revealing himself in the burning bush. The shrub is on fire but not consumed. That encounter teaches us two things: in the scriptures, God often reveals himself in the form of fire. It is a column of fire that leads the Hebrews to the Promised Land. When the Holy Spirit descends upon the disciples gathered in the Upper Room, it appears as tongues of fire. Fire brings light and warmth. It purifies and changes landscapes. The fire of God’s love does the same in us and for us. All the while, the burning bush is never consumed. That amazing feat reminds us that the love, life, and goodness of God is never exhausted. God infinitely cares for us. His love has no limits.

The second answer to our question, “how will we fulfill or live out that calling?” comes to us in the gospel reading. At the end of today’s passage, Jesus tells the parable of the non-producing fig tree. While the owner wants that seemingly worthless tree cut down, the gardener (who can be seen as Jesus) decides to care for it, fertilize it, and coax it into bearing fruit. That is what Jesus does for us. As unworthy as we

might be, Jesus continues to pour out his grace into our hearts. That promise is fulfilled as we receive Holy Communion today. While we proclaim, "Lord, I am not worthy," Jesus affirms "I give you my word, by receiving this precious gift of my Body and Blood you are healed."

Like tending to a garden, the spiritual life and the way we live out our spiritual calling is often difficult. It is sometimes tedious. But it is always life-giving, bearing for us and for the Church the fruit of everlasting life.

A temptation which often delays or detours our spiritual journey is found in the opening lines of today's gospel. Those gathered around Jesus spoke about two recent events which happened recently to people they knew. Some were killed by a falling tower. Others were ridiculed and then murdered by the government leaders of the day. The people give into despair and declare that God must have abandoned them. We hear or make similar remarks today. "Why did God let me get sick and not heal me? Why is my child suffering? Why did I lose my job? Why am I being unjustly criticized or singled out?" In essence, Jesus responds to his audience and to us, "the Father is with you. Have faith. Live in hope." And he advises us to repent. Repenting literally means "to turn back." His reminder is to always walk with the Lord and to not walk alone. If we take that solitary walk, it usually leads to a dead end.

Each year during Lent, I re-read the same book. It's called This Serious Season. The scripture readings at Mass today remind us and challenge us about the seriousness of Lent, the seriousness of our Lenten conversion, and the seriousness of our journey with the Lord. The Lord himself reminds us that it is THIS time, THIS season, and the Lenten practices we engage in THIS year that matter most. Our humble, meager efforts this Lent are not impossible. Only serious. And engaging in them with vigor, earnestness, and deep trust in the Lord is what leads to a deeper faith and a more foundational relationship with the Lord. May we know that with his grace, this serious season will bear good fruit in us. The only thing he asks is that we give him our time, our patience, and our very selves. In turn, he will do the rest, bringing about an abundant harvest in us and in his Church!

Amen? Amen!