

## Homily – February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2024 – 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent



On Ash Wednesday we celebrated, as we do each year, a rite called the “Imposition of Ashes.” It sounds like throwback language the Church used long ago, yet there is something to this word. An imposition is something imposed on us that seems unfair or something that makes an unwelcomed demand on us. The boss asks you to do

more at work without necessarily increasing your salary is an imposition. It’s an unwelcomed demand and doesn’t seem fair. Impositions are never things we would willing choose, yet every one of us is confronted with at least one imposition every day. Depending on how we deal with them, impositions can either be wonderful opportunities for growth or they can lead us to become bitter and angry people who constantly complain, “Why me?”

We are told that the Spirit—of all people—drove Jesus into the wilderness where he dealt with the wild beasts. Talk about an unfair imposition. Jesus willingly goes without saying, “Why me?” or “This is unfair!” or “What else can go wrong?”

We are also told, in the opening line of today’s gospel, that Jesus goes to the desert *after* he was baptized. In the waters of baptism he heard the voice of Truth, the voice of God, say to him, “You are my beloved son, on you my favor rests.” When you know, and deeply know, that you are God’s beloved son or God’s cherished daughter, you can face any desert, any wild beasts, any temptations, and any impositions with courage.

Another word we might use to speak about impositions is to speak about our shadow or our shadow side. Jesus goes into the desert to accept and deal with his shadow side, and we have to do the same. To deal with our shadow is Spirit work, that’s why Jesus is driven into the desert by the Spirit.

Every human being who has ever lived had or has a shadow. None of us like our shadow but, at the same time, our shadow keeps us humble, real, authentic. The only group of people who refused to carry their shadow were the Pharisees. The tax collectors and the prostitutes knew they had a shadow and didn't pretend, like the Pharisees, that they were perfect. In their imperfection they learned to hunger and to call on God while the Pharisees sat in their self-righteousness.

Fr. Richard Rohr writes: ***“Spiritual transformation is often thought of as a movement from darkness to light. In one sense that is true, but in another sense it is totally false. We forget that darkness is always present alongside the light. Pure light blinds, only the mixture of darkness and light allow us to see. Shadows are required for our seeing. God alone lives in perfect light.”***

Jesus has another way of speaking about our shadow. He called it the log in your eye. When we recognize it, the log in our eye is the necessary humiliation that prevents us from continually pointing out the sliver in our neighbour's eye and thinking ourselves so much better. The moment you become whole and holy is the moment when you can accept your shadow side, or to put it in moral language, that is when you can admit your sin.

Jesus, better than anyone else, held together his shadow side and his God side. Maybe that's what it means when the gospel tells us, ***“he (Jesus) was with the wild beasts and the Angels waited on him.”*** Without the angels, we would not have the courage to handle the wild beasts. Without God saying to me, “You are my beloved,” I doubt I would have the courage to honestly deal with my shadow. Instead, like the Pharisees, I would push my shadow away, thinking, falsely, that I am pure light.

All of this makes me think about initiation rites that pre-dated all world religions by thousands of years. Ancient wisdom cultures, all over the world, saw how necessary it was to “impose” initiation rites on their teenage boys. It was believed that boys would not naturally grow into men if they were not concretely and deliberately initiated by elder men. If they were not taught how to be men, they

would always abuse power. (Aside: now, for the first time in history, women also need initiation rites). All over the world, cultures and tribes, sent their teenage boys into the wilderness, into the desert, to humble them with some humbling truths, that they did have logs in their eyes, that they did have a shadow side whether they wanted to believe it or not. (If you remember one of the first T.V. mini-series, back in 1977, was “Roots.” It started with a teenage boy named Kunta Kinte who, while in an initiation rite with other teenage boys, is capture and taken into slavery. Talk about an “imposition!”).

Teenage boys worldwide, who were mentored properly, were all taught the same five truths. And if they did not learn them, they were not allowed to return to their tribe to become fathers or to take on any leadership roles for the rest of their lives.

Fr. Richard Rohr calls these the **five promises of male initiation**, the five hard truths, the five shadows we would do well to befriend.

1. **Life is hard.** Let’s just acknowledge life is full of challenges and difficulties. Now, here comes the flip side that is also true; here come the angels. While life is hard, Jesus says, “My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”
2. **You’re not that important.** It sounds like such an insult to our imperial egos. In the grand tapestry of existence, you’re just a piece of dust in a moment of time. Now here comes the flip side of that coin; here come the angels. While you are not that important, you are so infinitely important that your name is written on the palm of God’s hands never to be forgotten.
3. **Life is not about you...but you are about life.** You have a purpose that extends beyond your self-centered pursuits. Now here comes the flip side; here come the angels. While it is true that life isn’t about you, Saint Paul tells us, “I live now not my own life but the life of Christ who lives in me.”
4. **You are not in control.** Life has limitations put on you every moment. You who are parents, they moment your first child was born, knew—beyond a shadow of a doubt—that you were not in control. Here comes the flip side;

here come the angels. While it is true you are not in control, Jesus says, "Can any of you, for all your worrying, add a single moment to your span of life?" So, relinquish your control to God who is in control.

5. **You are going to die.** No young person, regardless of whether they are on an initiation rite or not, wants to hear that. Yet, it's an invitation to confront our mortality, our impermanence. Here comes the flip side; here come the angels. While it is true, that you are going to die, St. Paul tells us, "I am certain of this, neither death nor life, nothing that exists, nothing still to come, not any power, not any height nor depth, nor any created thing can ever come between us and the love of God."

Jesus went through his own initiation rite in the desert. He embraced his shadow. Let's do the same. I guarantee you, the angels will wait upon you.

*Fr. Phil*