

Homily – March 9th, 2025 – First Sunday of Lent



About 25 years ago, I took up the hobby of stained glass making. The first thing I attempted to make, with my new-found hobby, was the “comedy and tragedy” masks you have probably all seen. It’s a laughing face alongside a frowning face based on ancient Greek theatre. It’s called “comedy and tragedy,” but my first attempt at stained glass was so bad, I

named my creation, “tragedy and more tragedy.” However, I didn’t give up. Nothing I make, in the world of stained glass, will ever be good enough to be sold for money; that’s for sure. But the joy of seeing incremental improvements, with each successive project, is enough to keep me going. When I get down on myself because a project isn’t turning out perfectly, I dig out my first piece, compare it to what I’m currently working on and say, “Phil, you’re no master, but you have come a long way, baby.” It’s always a good thing to remember our humble beginnings. In retrospect, I’m glad I didn’t give up. I did something else; I endured. One of the last things Jesus said publicly before he entered into his passion—his suffering, death, and resurrection—is that if we stand for the truth, we can expect to be betrayed by family members, hated in general, and some of us will even be put to death. But here comes the next line: **“By your endurance you will gain your souls”** (Lk. 21:19).

Moses, in that first reading, reminded the people of their humble beginnings. He tells the people that when they eventually get to the Promised Land--and they will--they are not to forget their past. He tells them, "Don't ever forget our father, Jacob, who was a wandering Aramean. With his 12 sons they ended up here in Egypt and were beaten as slaves at the hands of Pharaoh's cronies. But it was another hand, the mighty, outstretched hand of God that led us to the land flowing with milk and honey. Don't ever forget the endurance of your ancestors, and don't ever forget what God did for them and is doing for you now. By their endurance these ancestors of yours gained their souls, their lives, their freedom. So when you get to this new land, the Promised Land, the first thing you should do is gather the first fruits of the land into a huge basket. Give the basket to the priest who will place it before the altar of the Lord. In that moment, give God thanks. Bow down before the Lord, and no one else, for it is the Lord who liberated you. Look at where you began (slavery) and look at where you are now (liberated)."

I know we were never meant to simply endure or persevere; we were meant to have life in abundance as Jesus told us. But on the way to this abundant life, everyone of us will have to endure much, just as Jesus did. I take my hat off to people who serve the Church, or their family, or their broader community generously, often voluntarily, and who do it with little or no fanfare. I admire people who endure cancer treatments, who endure chronic pain, who endure narrow-minded or bigoted people, who endure sobriety when the bottle is so close, who endure a toxic house or a toxic job. I want to say to them, "By your endurance you are not only gaining your souls, but you are also pointing me and

many others to the Kingdom of God, the very thing Jesus was most passionate about.”

Every first Sunday of Lent, we get one version or another of the “Temptations of Jesus in the Desert.” Like all versions of the story, Jesus in today’s version doesn’t do anything sensational or spectacular. He doesn’t call down lightning bolts from heaven to burn up the devil. The cavalry doesn’t ride in to rescue him. He doesn’t retaliate against the lies of the devil. He doesn’t threaten. What does he do instead? He endures. By his endurance, he gained his soul. When you live from a place of soul, you are a person of integrity. Jesus knew where he came from. He came from the world of truth, the truth that was reinforced at his baptism where he heard the voice of God say, “You are my Son.” Nothing will dislodge him from that truth even though food, power, and entitlement were offered to him on a silver platter.

What Jesus did on the Cross was exactly the same thing he did in the desert with the temptations. He endured. There was no sound and light show on the Cross, no dramatic rescue, no showing who was really in charge. Instead we have a bloodied, suffering man enduring the worst the world could give him, all the while remembering the word, “You are my Son, the beloved” in a sea of lies and heckles.

There is another connection between the temptations in the desert and what happened on the Cross. The temptation story we just heard ends with, ***“When the devil had finished every test, he departed from Jesus until an opportune time.”***

The devil, whatever you conceive evil to be, retreated temporarily, lying in wait for

another ambush, another chance to take down Jesus. Three times in the desert Jesus is tempted to stop listening to the voice of God and to succumb to the offers of the devil. The temptations always begin with ***“If you are the Son of God...”*** The devil is banking on Jesus wavering, doubting his relationship with God, doubting his true identity. If he could accomplish this first step, then the bowing down and worship him will be the next, almost easy, step. The “opportune time” to try to ambush Jesus is when Jesus is on the Cross. The desert and the Cross represent the two most vulnerable times in Jesus’ life. The three temptations in the desert are, once again, repeated as Jesus is dying. The crowd, the soldiers, and one of the thieves all repeated the words of the devil, “If you are the Son of God, come down from the Cross, save yourself, and save us.” Jesus didn’t succumb to this second ambush of lies but endured in the truth, just like he did in the desert.

I love what theologian John Shea said when he wrote, ***“God raised Jesus from the dead not because he never flinched, talked back, or questioned but having flinched, talked back, and questioned, He remained faithful.”*** In other words, he endured in the truth.

Don’t ever make the mistake of thinking that these Scripture stories are not as relevant to us as they were to the people in Biblical times simply because our context couldn’t possibly be compared to theirs. This is the living Word of God as alive and pertinent as it has ever been. I want to know—I need to know—what God is saying to us during these troubling times. In times of suffering the Gospel seems to speak more directly. The truth is that God’s word is always being spoken

to me, to us. During hard times, I just hunger for God's word all the more, I call on God from some depth with more honesty.

What the world saw unfolding in the Oval Office in the White House two Fridays ago was the repeat of the Gospel for our own time. It was nothing less than heroic on the part of one man and nothing less than disgusting on the part of three others. President Trump, vice-president Vance, and an extremist reporter from MAGA (Make America Great Again), waited until an opportune time to ambush President Zelensky in an attempt to humiliate him with one tasteless low blow after another. This was the gospel being played out once again. Three mocking voices—three idiots—were playing the role of the mocking crowd, the mocking soldiers, and the mocking thief at Jesus' crucifixion. Their strategy was to crush someone who was in a vulnerable position. Like Jesus, President Zelensky held to the truth. He buckled to none of their lies and temptations. He kissed nobody's boots, and he bowed to no corrupt earthly king. He persevered in the truth, he gained his soul and showed us the face of enduring love. Trump left the room to go golfing in Florida. Vance left the room to go skiing in Vermont. The reporter left with a smug smile on his face. President Zelensky left with his integrity.

By your endurance you will gain your souls.

~Fr. Phil