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February 16, 2021

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“Go to your inner room, shut and door and pray in secret” (Matthew 6:6).

Joel 2:12-18; 2 Cor 5:20—6:2; Matt 6:1-6, 16-18

Lent is here again, overtaking the already penitential season imposed on us by the deprivations and isolation of Covid-19. Familiar Lenten practices hardly seem adequate to define us spiritually. The readings summon us back to the root meaning of Lent, a time of purifying recommitment to follow Jesus into the desert, then to Jerusalem to complete his mission at Passover by dying on the cross, his exodus from this world to the promise of new life at Easter.

After his baptism, a reenactment of the crossing of the Red Sea, Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Spirit to discern the kind of messiah he would be. He was no solitary pilgrim. He became the nation by recapitulating its history, its liberation from slavery and 40-year desert journey. Fasting stripped him to the core of his being, opening his heart and making him totally vulnerable to the divine voice.

Satan, quoting Scripture, aped that voice to seduce him with success by bread and miracles, earthly power to do good. Jesus answered the Liar with Scripture, grounding himself in submission to the One God, accepting the role of the Suffering Servant. He entered the desert as the Son of God and emerged as the Son of Man, full of grace and overflowing with purpose.

This is also our Lent, a time to ground our real selves, stripped of distractions, appetites scheming for treats and entertainment, bored and sleepy, reluctant to begin the journey. Fasting, almsgiving and prayer are the boot camp of every

serious religion, meant to prod us forward. Take the first step, then the next, listen to your heart, the deepest voice within you, and wait to hear the voice of the Spirit.

If we follow him, Jesus will lure us beyond self-improvement or the challenge of discipline for its own sake, to real adventure. For what lies deepest within us is our secret place, the wellspring of truth, where God waits in secret, sees in secret, reveals to us the secret of our existence. We are temples, so come from the busy, noisy outer courts to the inner courts, then to the sanctuary, then to the holy of holies, and kneel in silence before the tabernacle where God dwells.

This is where real prayer happens, the intimate conversation with God that called you into existence, revealed your secret name, gave you a unique mission, loved you toward your destiny. Without this encounter we will not know ourselves. Lent is about getting serious, asking for and receiving the sealed orders that reveal who we really are and what we must do to be on the road that Jesus is on, ready to die with him in Jerusalem, rise with him to new life in glory.

Forty days from now we will arrive at the Triduum and the Easter Vigil. A Pandemic has primed us for the best Lent we may ever make. Let us begin and make this journey together.

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