

Forty days... that's what we have entered into in this holy season of Lent - forty days. Forty days of penance, when we seek to separate ourselves from the sins in our lives that keep us from God. Forty days of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, when we strive to refocus our vision on loving God with all our heart and loving our neighbor as ourselves. Forty days of Lent.

It should be no surprise that the Church chooses the number forty for this season of Lent. Forty is a number that should be very familiar to us. It comes up in the Bible over and over and over again. The Israelites remained in the desert for forty years during their sojourn from Egypt to the Promised Land. Moses spent 40 days on top of Mt. Sinai as he received the Ten Commandments from God, and then he spent another 40 days on that mountain as he begged God for mercy upon the people who had worshipped the golden calf. Jonah brought God's message of repentance to Nineveh: "40 days more and Nineveh will be destroyed." And in two of our readings today we hear references to this number 40. In the reading from Genesis we hear God's words to Noah following the Great Flood, when it had rained for 40 days and 40 nights. And in the Gospel, St. Mark reminds us that Jesus spent 40 days in the desert at the beginning of His public ministry.

With this number coming up so often, it is clearly not just a coincidence. And so we look closer at these periods of 40 and there we can see a theme: all of these occasions of forty (whether forty days or forty years) - all of these are periods of trial, times of testing. They are opportunities for God's people to prove their faithfulness to God and for them to be renewed by that trial.

At the time of Noah, all of creation had become utterly corrupt and evil. And so God trusted Noah with the great task of preserving the goodness of creation as God used the great flood to wash away the sinfulness of the earth! The Lord put His creation through a great trial, a great test; and through that trial, all of creation was renewed.

This pattern continues in the life of Jesus. St. Mark says that the Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert to remain there for 40 days. Why? To be tempted by Satan. It was a time of testing, a time of trial. In these temptations, Jesus Himself did battle with Satan, the great enemy of the human race. And by overcoming the temptations of Satan, Jesus gave us an example to follow; and He gave us hope that we too can overcome every temptation. This is why, at the end of those 40 days in the desert, Jesus can then go out and preach these words: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel." In Jesus, God's grace is here for us. In Jesus, we are now free from the slavery to sin!

This is what the 40 days of Lent are for us, too - a test, a trial. Lent is an opportunity to follow the path of Jesus into the desert. In the desert, we can find the quiet of prayer and spiritual renewal. But in the desert, we will also find temptation. The spiritual disciplines of Lent are difficult for us. Spending more time in prayer is difficult. Fasting is difficult. Giving alms to the poor is difficult. If they were easy, there would be no need for this season of penance; there would be no need for the reminder: "Repent, and believe in the Gospel." And in that difficulty, we will find temptation. We might say to ourselves: "I'm tired, maybe I'll skip my time of prayer before bed." "Maybe I won't worry so much about giving up meat on Friday." "I'm not sure what to give to the homeless that I see, maybe I just won't worry about almsgiving." And these Lenten temptations will be in addition to all the normal things that already tempt us: gossip or impatience or dishonesty or gluttony or lust.

These forty days of Lent are a time of trial and testing. We will experience temptations to turn away from the path of penance. The reality of temptation is one thing we can be sure of! And this may lead us to ask, why? Why this time of testing and trial during Lent? Why all the temptations? Why would the Lord allow this for us?

This trial of Lent is but a small example of the reality of temptation. The reason why God allows temptation is that temptation is a necessary result of human freedom. God created us as free beings so that we could choose to love Him. Without freedom there would be no temptation, sure, but neither would there be true love. And in that freedom that God has given us comes the ability to choose - to choose not only what is good, but also what is evil. The trials and the tests that we experience during Lent or at any time in our life are all occasions in which we must make a choice. We can choose what is God's will - what is good and holy and righteous and what will lead us to happiness - or we can choose a different way - our own way, a way that is evil and which will lead us to pain and suffering.

If this is a good Lent for us, if we live out these 40 days in a way that is faithful to God, we will experience the joy of Easter in a much greater way. If our temptations lead us to choose what is good and holy throughout Lent, then at Easter we will rise with the Lord, stronger in virtue and united to Him in greater holiness. This is the blessing offered to us in these 40 days of Lent: deeper union with God through a life of virtue and love.

Let us pray that we may follow the example of Jesus in the desert. May we reject the empty promises of Satan that so often tempt us. And may we choose to live for love of Jesus so that at Easter we may share with Him the joy of rising to new life.