

Heart ♥ to ♥ Heart



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First Sunday of Lent 2022

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1st Reading: Deuteronomy 26:4-10

2nd Reading: Romans 10:8-13

Gospel: Luke 4:1-13

For this Lenten season I want to creatively imagine the Sunday Gospels. When I listened to this first Gospel passage I was taken by Jesus' humanity and surprised by the amount of empathy I felt for Jesus. The Gospel begins with the description of Jesus being filled and led by the Holy Spirit to fast and enter the desert for forty days. As I try to creatively imagine the description, I ask myself: What does it feel like to be *filled* with the Holy Spirit? To be *led* by the Spirit? When you are filled with the Holy Spirit it must be such a blessing of clarity, understanding and reassurance. I imagine a moment where God's presence and call are so apparent and palpable that you could not do anything else but stop, listen and receive. Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit - He was enlivened and moved by the Spirit - and thus, inspired to return from the Jordan river to then be led into the desert. So being filled with the Spirit does not mean one simply passively receives, but is called to more, to act, to change. The Holy Spirit clearly guides Jesus to a different place and a different task or way of being for the time being.

I wonder, then, does Jesus know what trials he will face in the desert? I can only imagine he will experience loneliness, hunger, thirst and fatigue. All things that we try our hardest to avoid and hope to rarely experience. Here the Spirit calls Jesus into a very uncomfortable situation and one that most people would second guess or turn away from. But Jesus seems so willing to enter the unknown wilderness and, more likely, unforgiving and dangerous desert.

When I creatively imagined this call and directional shift, the reality of fasting in the desert sank in and there was a pit in my stomach. I also had a flashback to when I walked the pilgrimage route, *El Camino*, in northern Spain. I remembered a time in the middle of the route when I was on the plain with scattered fields of wheat and a handful of trees dotting the landscape. The July sun was beating down on me and even the air felt hot as I breathed in. There was no escape from the sun and heat, and I thanked God for my large-brimmed hat protecting my head and face. But as the day went on my feet dragged; I tripped multiple times; and even my hands were sweating, making holding my walking stick difficult. I remember asking God for support, strength, stamina and determination to continue. I looked up after hours of prayerfully and steadily walking and was overjoyed when I could barely make out a small town in the distance. That tiny glimpse of life in the middle of nowhere was all I needed to keep going.

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That town and the people that welcomed me and my group of friends were truly a blessing from God and an oasis in the desert. They joyfully welcomed us, congratulated us for getting there, and immediately offered cold and refreshing cucumber water. After delicious food, great conversation and beautiful music performed by our hosts, I thanked God for all the blessings I received that day.

I wonder if Jesus felt a similar exhaustion, thirst and despair while in the desert for forty days. But to put it in perspective, I had an oasis on my route through the “desert.” Jesus doesn’t seem to encounter a welcoming respite during his journey. On the contrary, Jesus is approached by the devil and is tempted to perform miracles, bow down to the devil, and to give up completely and rely on the angels to save him. Why would the Spirit lead Jesus down this path? What is He to learn? What is He to do? What is the point?

We ask ourselves similar questions when we face challenges, suffering and conflicts. I certainly asked myself these kinds of questions when the journey along *El Camino* was difficult, exhausting and lonely. Traditionally, we may respond to Jesus’ time in the desert as a trial of Jesus’ stamina or may argue that Jesus had to go through that experience to model for us how to overcome temptations. But Jesus was led to fast in the desert and willingly entered that treacherous journey. I wonder if this is a glimpse of Jesus’ humanity: namely, that Jesus needed time away from his friends, family and religious community in order to better understand God’s call and the revelation of his identity at his baptism. Jesus was clearly stripped of all comforts and distractions and entered the silence of the desert in order to hear, see and understand.

As I reflect on this quiet scene, the fear and doubt of entering the desert are alleviated, and I remember that hot July day along *El Camino*. I was exhausted, hot and thirsty, but I could feel God’s presence leading me and see God’s blessings supporting me. Ironically, there is joy and peace in the simplicity of walking through the “desert.” Your day consists of waking up, eating, drinking, walking, praying, reflecting and sleeping. And then you wake up the next morning and do it all over again. There is no time for TikTok, Zoom meetings, notifications, emails, timelines, carpools and other people demanding your time and attention. I wonder if the Spirit led Jesus into the desert to experience this simplicity, to get away from the distractions and noise of everyday life, and to offer time and attention to God alone.

My creative imagining of the Gospel passage leaves me with the desire to lean into the simplicity, clarity and peace of walking through the desert. During this Lenten season, I wonder how I can refocus on God and simplify my everyday life, like Jesus did. I hope that the Spirit will fill me and lead me along the path, so that I too can see clearly and better understand who I am, where I’m going and how to get there.

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