

TOUCHING THIRST

This weekend we have fascinating scripture readings. The Gospel is very short and direct. The Spirit drove Jesus into the desert. He is driven into a place with no water, the desert. After being tempted by Satan He is ministered to by angels. In this place with no water, He is in touch with thirst. In contrast, the first two readings are about the power of God using water. In the first reading, we hear of Noah. A covenant with water is proclaimed and revealed. In the second reading St. Paul references the saving through water by the building of the ark and goes on to say how this prefigures Baptism, which saves us now.

To get to the magnitude of the saving power of God's use of water we are invited to go to a place where there is no water! It is a place where we can touch our thirst. It is a place where we can be moved to longing, which intensifies when something is denied us. Jesus is driven after His baptism in the Jordan to a place of no water. His thirst invites Him to leave the desert with a proclamation that the time is at hand and we are to repent and believe in the Gospel, echoing the words we heard on Ash Wednesday.

With this as the backdrop, the Liturgy of the Word invites us to embrace the contrast and paradox. This Lent, at its beginning, invites us to seek our thirst to become more aware of God's use of water. Its power is magnified when we are presented with going to a place where there is no water. The love of God is magnified and can overwhelm us when we realize the ugliness of our sin. We know the unburdening when we feel it lifted after we bring our sin to reconciliation and experience the power of God forgiving us. This is a beautiful way to start our Lent. Go to the desert being deprived of water and touch the covenant that led Noah to build an ark; go to the desert and witness the strength of Satan's temptations, realizing God's power is even greater. This week, touch thirst.

When I was in the Boy Scouts, one of the things we could do to receive the rank of First Class was to do a tracing exercise. As a scout, we learned of signs placed in the ground, as well as formations created with branches to learn how to stay on a course in the forest. I was in grade school at the time and I went out as an individual to follow a path created for this situation. It was cold and I chose to do the tracing exercise when there were a few feet of snow on the ground along the Des Plaines River in a forest preserve. I saw the signs and marks. When I got to a clearing, there was a sign of a circle etched in the snow with a dot in the middle that meant to go home and the trail is complete. It was in the middle of a clearing in the forest. I saw the sign and waited. I was at the end of the course. The leader thought I would see the sign and go home. I thought the leader was going to be around to congratulate me. So I waited out in the cold. As time went on I began to question the signs. Did I follow it right? Was this sign meant for me? Did I get it wrong? Doubt crept in, my feet grew numb in the cold. In the shortened days of winter, the sun descended lower in the sky. I began to panic. Would I pass if I left? Would they know I completed the course? Who would check my work? Were they actually watching me and this was some kind of sick joke? Desperation began to creep in, but I wanted to pass the requirement. I wasn't sure I would pass if I left.

When I began to realize I was alone, after maybe an hour or longer, I started to go back to the starting point. I was just looking for someone to help me. On my way, a leader finally showed up in a car with my dad. By then I was lost and crying because I thought I did something wrong and wasn't going to pass. They said that the leader thought that when I reached the last sign, I would just head home to the Berwyn bungalow. I was happy to be treated to warmth in the car, but the joy of seeing my dad and the other leader, the joy of passing the course was overwhelming. Why? I think it was because I had touched and tasted what it was to be alone, lost, and wandering. The joy of that day overcame the thought of what I had experienced.

This Lent we are to do the same with our thirst for God's power to transform water into the life-giving covenant. Until we touch thirst, the magnitude of the life this water can provide can easily be missed. Absence makes the desire intensify. May the desert lead you to a thirst only God can quench.



Father John Ouper